

BE LIKE THE WIDOW

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen*

Materials you may want

Bible, open to Luke 21

Note pad for yourself *(optional)*

One easel or large board for someone to take notes during the group discussion *(optional)*

Hymn

“Canticle of the Turning” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 723)

Focus verse

LUKE 21:1–4

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

This month, we turn our attention to a story that is commonly called “the widow’s mite.” Before you read the verses in the Bible, is there anyone in your group willing to tell the story in her own words? If someone else has a different version in mind, she is welcome to share, too.

When you’re ready, ask someone to read aloud from Luke 21:1–4. We’ll use Luke’s version for our

study. It’s similar to the version in Mark 12:41–44. If you like, read this version, too.

Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you’re a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

1. What rule about giving do we often take from this passage?
2. How do you feel about this rule?
3. Do you follow it?

Using and misusing the text

Many preachers and teachers use this story to encourage sacrificial giving, to say that Jesus wants us to give more of our resources (money, time, skills) to the church, just like the widow.

Sacrificial giving is about justice, they say. If the widow can give everything she has to live on, it’s only just that you and I, who have more, give more of our abundance.

In an article called “Widow’s Mite or Widow’s Plight,” André Resner says this story is a good example of a common problem in biblical interpretation. Our traditional use of a text can blind us from seeing any-

thing other than what we've always seen (*Review and Expositor*, Fall 2010).

What if Jesus is pointing to a bigger injustice? In a society where widows were to be cared for, what if Jesus is mad that the widow would give up everything she has—and that the temple would allow it to happen? What if *that* is the injustice?

In this month's Bible study, we'll take a cue from Resner and consider what we may be missing because of our preconceived notions about this story.

When and where

READ AGAIN LUKE 21:1–4.

In the Gospels of Luke and Mark, this story appears during the last week of Jesus' life. It is set a few days after Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to the crowd's cheers of praise.

Within the week, he would be arrested and put to death after sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. Until then, he spent his days going to the temple, teaching his disciples and others who gathered with them. That's where we meet him in this story.

For Jesus and his fellow Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was arguably the most important place on earth. Individuals and families brought their sacrifices, and the priests carried out the ritual actions required to make those sacrifices satisfactory to God.

The temple comprised a massive complex of gathering spaces, marble walls, columns, and staircases. Jesus would likely have been teaching in these outer areas of the temple complex. Women were only allowed to go as far as the Court of Women, which contained the treasury where people deposited coin offerings into dedicated receptacles. This is where Jesus encountered the widow.

The timing of this story is also important. It is the festival of Passover, arguably the most important and busiest time of year in the temple. Thousands of Jews would have come from throughout the Roman Empire

to bring sacrifices and enjoy the party. For those who wanted to celebrate Passover to its fullest, Jerusalem was the place to be.

Jesus was practically guaranteed a good crowd when he showed up to the temple each day during the Passover week. His message, however, was a direct challenge to the pomp and fanfare around him. His teachings during that week were highly critical of the temple and the religious authorities. Passover was their time to shine, but Jesus was not playing along.

Tensions are high

The story of the widow's mite follows a series of tense interactions between Jesus and the religious authorities. Luke writes:

Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard. (19:47–48)

Among his more provocative remarks, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). He then makes a big scene when he flips over the tables of the moneychangers (Luke 19:45–46). (John puts this scene near the beginning of his gospel). Then he tells a parable that seems to be critical of the temple authorities (Luke 20:9–19). They try multiple times to trick him into saying something unlawful so they can have him arrested. Jesus doesn't fall for it. Then, Luke writes:

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on."

What the text says and does not say

Our goal in this Bible study is to see how our precon-

WHAT THE TEXT TELLS US

1. Jesus sees rich people and a widow making offerings.
2. He explains that the widow has just given up everything she has to live on.
3. He says this is different from the rich people giving out of their abundance.
4. He says that the widow has given “more” because her gift is a greater proportion of her assets.

WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

(add your/your group's thoughts to this list)

1. How Jesus feels about the widow's actions.

ceived notions can keep us from seeing what's actually there.

So, let's make a chart (See above). On one side, we'll put what the text is clearly telling us, based only on Luke 21:1–4. On the other side, let's put what we do not know.

In these four verses, Jesus does not tell us whether he likes the widow's offering or the rich people's offerings. Popularly, we assume that he is praising the widow when he says that she has “put in more than all of them.” This, however, is a preconceived notion that we bring to the text.

From these four verses, we don't know if Jesus is pleased with the widow's offering. However, if we accept the idea that he is pleased, then we have to accept this conclusion: Jesus likes the idea of a widow giving up everything she has to religious authorities, even when that gift makes her destitute.

Talk about it

Are you comfortable with this conclusion? Does it match your understanding of Jesus? Based on Luke 21:1–4, do you see any evidence that Jesus wants us to

follow the widow's example?

We've considered that these four verses may provide little evidence that Jesus admires the widow or wants us to follow her lead. Yet, is there any evidence that he dislikes the widow's offering?

We find some important clues by going back two verses in the story. Recall what happened earlier at the temple, during Jesus' tense back-and-forth with the chief priests and scribes. Having failed to get Jesus arrested, they presumably gave up. Luke says, “they no longer dared to ask him another question” (Luke 20:40). Jesus, on the other hand, would not let it go. He turned to his disciples, and without lowering his voice, made a bold statement about his challengers. You can almost hear the derisive tone in Jesus' voice:

Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. (Luke 20:46–47)

This is the moment when Luke says, “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the

treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.” Then, as if to underline his point about the scribes, Jesus says,

“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:3–4)

Here, the repeated reference to widows deserves our attention. Just seconds before seeing the widow in the temple, Jesus was blaming the scribes and priests for devouring the house of widows. Then he looks up and sees the widow making her offering. Could it be that her offering is the perfect illustration of what he was just saying?

The widow’s plight

Widows were among the most vulnerable people in Jesus’ place and time, though some had means (e.g., John Mark’s mother in Acts 12:12-13). When Jesus identifies the widow as “poor,” he uses the Greek word *ptoche*. This was a word used for those whose poverty reduced them to begging. In the social structure of the time, a woman’s family relationships determined her social status, where she lived, how her household earned a living, and what assets she had to spend. Widows and orphans, deprived of vital family relationships, were especially vulnerable to losing the social and material supports they needed to survive.

In light of this need, Jews and early Christians were known for placing a high priority on serving the poor. In last month’s Bible study, we looked at the spiritual practice of almsgiving. It was based on the Jewish belief that God was incarnate among the poor, so much so that many Jewish writers said that giving to the poor was equal to bringing a sacrifice to the temple.

This idea was reinforced in the early church. The book of James says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans

and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27).

In saying this, James echoed a long Jewish tradition of placing alms at the center of Jewish practice. Jesus’ own ministry seems to reinforce this worldview in which interacting with the poor is the best way to please God. Recall from the June Bible study Jesus’ final words to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. He says in no uncertain terms that God will judge them based on whether they feed the hungry, heal the sick, and visit the prisoner.

Pleased or disgusted?

The popular reading of the widow’s mite says that Jesus was pleased by the widow’s offering. Yet, when we consider how Jesus felt about serving the poor, especially widows, we can imagine that the sight of the widow giving her last coin was not pleasant at all. We can imagine that it may, in fact, have violated Jesus’ ideals about how the temple should function.

Let’s review the scene. Jesus is teaching in the temple during Passover. The scribes and priests are trying to have him killed. He can hardly stand the sight of these hypocrites, parading around in their long robes, expecting everyone to treat them with respect while they take from widows and allow the temple to violate one of the central tenets of the Jewish faith: care for the widow and orphan. Then, as soon as he’s said all this, Jesus looks up and sees exactly what he’s been talking about—a poor widow giving away everything she has to those same priests.

Could it be that Jesus is mad at the widow for giving it away? We don’t know. What Luke tells us is that Jesus is furious at the religious leaders who perpetuate a religious system in which it would be acceptable for a widow to lose everything she has for the sake of the temple.

Jesus expressed this anger immediately before he sees the widow (Luke 20:46–47). The anger is confirmed by

what he says after the widow makes her offering.

READ LUKE 21:1–4 AGAIN, THIS TIME CONTINUING ON TO VERSES 5 AND 6.

He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.

When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”

Seen in this context, it seems likely that Jesus is not advocating for anyone—rich or poor—to give *more* to the temple. Instead, he is questioning the very premise that the temple is worth supporting at all, at least in the long run.

In fact, by centering on the widow as the focal point of this story, have we missed Jesus’ point entirely? Could it be that Jesus is far more concerned about the bigger picture—a religious system that has turned its back from its primary obligation to care for the poor? Could it be that the widow is not a role model? Could it be that Jesus is more concerned with changing how the church treats the poor, and less concerned with how individuals give to the church?

Talk about it

How do you feel after hearing this interpretation of the widow’s mite?

If you accept that the widow is not a role model, what do you lose? What do you gain?

What about the widow?

If the widow is not a role model for us to follow, then what do we do with her? Do we pay less attention to her?

To the contrary, Jesus seems to be saying that we should pay more attention to the widow. If this passage has anything to say to us today, it is calling us to pay more attention to the most vulnerable, to those without rights and resources. It calls us to take notice of how they are impacted by churches and other systems in which we have power and influence.

Yet, the attention Jesus calls for is not to turn the widow’s story into a generic message about our giving behavior. When we do this, we turn our attention away from the widow’s situation and instead start worrying about our own generosity. We start to ask ourselves, “Are we giving enough?”

What if Jesus’ message is this—pay far less attention to whether you qualify or are recognized as generous, and far more attention to meeting the needs of the poor? Jesus seems to want religious communities in which those with abundance give enough that the community can and does care for the poor and vulnerable.

If we want to follow Jesus’ example, we will show up where decisions are made and where our faith is proclaimed, just as Jesus showed up in the temple during Passover, and demand that sufficient resources go toward serving the poor and vulnerable.

In this way, Jesus calls us to focus even more on the widow and those she represents. We are not, however, to turn them into stories that inspire us to be better people. We are to see them as they are when they are suffering to the point of destitution. And, we are to see ourselves as we are, inspired and called by faith to demand justice, especially from our churches and religious leaders.

What about sacrificial giving?

If the widow is not a role model for sacrificial giving, does this mean that Jesus does not want us to give more of ourselves to the church, including time, talent, and money?

No. It just means that we can’t use this story to

make that point. The Bible gives us many other verses that offer specific, if competing, opinions about how much we should give away.

Consider just a few:

- A rich man asks Jesus what he must do to obtain eternal life, and Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. (Mark 10, Matthew 19, Luke 18)
- Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for not being able to care for their parents because they've given all of their property to God. (Mark 7:10–13)
- Paul tells the Christians in Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. (Romans 12:1)
- In Acts, Paul tells the church leaders at Ephesus to practice a trade and earn their own income so that they don't depend on charity but can instead offer charity to the weak. (Acts 20:35)
- The Old Testament introduces the concept of tithing, or giving a portion of income to serve the larger community. (Deuteronomy 14:22)

An entire Bible study series could be devoted to exploring the different opinions about sacrificial giving in the

Bible. Our experience with the widow's mite should remind us, however, to be cautious about coming to quick conclusions.

For now, the important consideration is this: The story of the widow's mite may not be a call to sacrificial giving. It may be a revelation of how mad Jesus gets when the temple does not serve the poor. If we make it a story about personal giving, we fail to see that Jesus is talking about community accountability. We fail to see that Jesus is far less concerned with who gives enough, and far more concerned with how the religious community uses what it receives.

Prayer

God, our creator, you reveal yourself in anger and encouragement. Open our hearts to accept your challenge of seeing the poor and vulnerable as they are, and seeing our churches and institutions as they are. Give us the courage to be angry and the energy to help bring about change. In your name, Amen. 🌿

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