

Mark 12:41-44

Jesus sat down opposite the offering box and was watching how the crowd put money into it. Many rich people put in large amounts.⁴² One poor widow came and put in two small bronze coins, worth less than a penny.⁴³ He called his disciples together and said to them, “Amen I tell you: This poor widow put more into the offering box than all the others.⁴⁴ For they all gave out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on.”

Should Jesus Really Be Watching My Wealth?

I.

There are a lot of BSTWs in Lutheran theology—Big Scary Theological Words. Some of those BSTWs are several of God’s attributes, or characteristics: the “omni” words students learn in Catechism. Omnipresent. Omniscient. Omnipotent. Those BSTWs sound high and mighty, but they are very important words for your life as a Christian.

God is omnipresent. That means he is with us wherever we go—in prison, when service members are sent into war zones, no matter where it might be. God is omniscient. That means he knows everything we are going through—even when the doctor isn’t so sure. God is omnipotent. He is the all-powerful God who has complete control over the all the issues of life; after all, he is the Creator of all things.

Of course, there is another side to that coin. Since God is present everywhere, that means that he is behind every closet door and backseat on a Friday night. That God knows *everything* means that he knows not only the number of hairs on our heads, but also the unspoken thoughts our heads *think*. That God is almighty means that God also has the power to judge me for the times that sin has made me into an enemy of the Almighty.

Today we hear that Jesus is *watching*. Take *comfort*. The Lord who watches over you neither slumbers nor sleeps. Jesus is *watching*. Take *warning*. The Lord is watching every area of our lives—even if we don’t think he has the right to; even when we don’t *want* him to. There Jesus is. Can you believe it?

“Jesus sat down opposite the offering box and was watching how the crowd put money into it” (Mark 12:41, EHV). Obviously Jesus hasn’t learned a thing about a person’s right to privacy. It’s a sobering thought—if Jesus watched the widow give *her* offering, he is watching *our* offerings, too! Should Jesus really be watching my wealth?

II.

If it surprises you *that* Jesus sat down to watch people put their offerings into the box in the temple courtyard, it should surprise you twice as much to realize *when* he did this. It was Tuesday of Holy Week. On that very Friday he would be hung out to die on the cross. With the clock ticking down, what does Jesus do? Note the details: he *sat down* in the temple courts precisely at the place where people dropped their offerings into the box. Jesus sat down specifically so that he could *watch* the people as they gave their offerings. The Greek word is very explicit. It means to observe with sustained attention, or to be a spectator of something. Such careful watching seems more appropriate for a sporting event.

Lutherans like to be discrete when they put their envelopes into the offering plate. One member in my previous congregation didn’t want anyone to know what he was giving, so

he didn't use an envelope, just put in cash. Of course, the counters knew *exactly* what to record on his giving statement, since he gave in hundreds, and no one else would put loose hundred dollar bills in the offering plate. Yes, to Lutherans, the thought of Jesus sitting there, watching, staring, studying, makes us more than a bit uncomfortable.

Should Jesus really be watching wealth? If you and I were Jesus' personal advisors, we would say: "absolutely not! Jesus, you've got bigger fish to fry. You should watch for a place to eat the Last Supper. You should watch your step, since the Pharisees are trying to trip you up. Even more important, watch your *back*, because Judas is plotting to betray you. But watching what people are doing with their wealth at the temple? Don't do *that*! Because, Jesus, really, if you sit there watching people give their offerings, you are going to give the impression that you're actually interested in what people give to you!"

What did Jesus see as he sat there watching? "Many rich people put in large amounts" (Mark 12:41, EHV). *That's* not all that surprising. We expect that wealthier families will be big givers. After all, Jesus himself once said: "From everyone to whom much was given, much will be expected. From the one who was entrusted with much, much more will be asked" (Luke 12:48, EHV).

There is another insight which the Greek gives us. The wealthy seemed to be getting in line again and again to pass the offering box. Pomp and circumstance characterized their offerings. "Excuse me, Mr. Usher, could you run the plate by me a second time, please? I forgot to put my *other* envelope in." As he watched, Jesus not only noticed the *amount* of their gifts, but also their reasons for *giving* them.

Then Jesus saw another person. No one could have mistaken her for a big giver. Picture the scene. "One poor widow came and put in two small bronze coins, worth less than a penny" (Mark 12:42, EHV). It turns out Jesus was watching the widow's wealth, too. What surprises you about her? She was poor. No surprise there. Social Security wouldn't be invented for another 1,900 years. She put in two bronze coins, which was the bare minimum that could be offered for the so-called temple tax. Again, no surprise there.

What surprises us is something we never would have known if Jesus hadn't said something. "He called his disciples together and said to them, 'Amen I tell you: This poor widow put more into the offering box than all the others'" (Mark 12:43, EHV). This widow, this woman no one else took notice of, was the one the Lord *really* noticed. She had given more than all the others.

Can you picture the disciples scratching their heads? "You mean to tell me, Jesus, that the widow with her two bronze coins gave more than the rich who gave thousands?" It doesn't make a bit of sense. But Jesus could see what the disciples couldn't see: "They all gave out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on" (Mark 12:44, EHV).

When Jesus watched Jerusalem's givers, he saw the rich give out of what was left over. They gave their thousands, but they had thousands left over. They went home to a warm house, a full fridge, and a cozy bed. They gave big gifts, but there was precious little sacrifice behind those gifts. They gave some of the frosting on the cake, but they still had both cake and frosting that was left for themselves.

The widow was different. She didn't give some frosting from the cake, because she didn't have any cake at all. She gave her daily bread. She gave her milk money, her bread money, her egg money—everything she had to live on. She gave less than a penny, not thousands. The amount of her offering was tiny, but her sacrifice was total. She gave until she had

nothing left—and yet she had absolutely everything. She had her Lord. She had God’s promises and God’s gift of faith to trust those promises. The big point today is that she gave even beyond her ability because she trusted her Lord’s ability to care for her.

III.

If *you* were sitting in Jesus’ seat watching the widow give her offering, what would *you* have told her? “No, dear, God knows your heart. He knows you have less than nothing. He knows you’ll give someday—if and/or when you have it. Here’s \$10. Go buy yourself some coffee.” I wouldn’t be a bit surprised if we would have done our best to talk the widow out of making her offering. In so doing, we would have talked her out of doing the exact thing Jesus commended her for.

Could it be—just every now and then—that we are far too eager to make pious-sounding excuses *not* to give and not nearly eager enough in encouraging one another on toward godly generosity? Why is that? We have an ongoing suspicion that giving has to do primarily with the wallet, when what Jesus is really watching is the attitude of our hearts and the actions that follow. Simply put: do we trust God, or don’t we? That’s a simple “yes” or “no” question. When was the last time we opened up our hands and gave sacrificially—gave as if we really trusted in God and staked our futures on his promises?

Why is it easy to send thousands of dollars to Fidelity, Vanguard, Edward Jones, or Charles Schwab every year? Because we *trust* that these financial institutions will make our money grow. But have you noticed that *none* of these make any promises to us? In the fine print, or the part of the commercial where they talk really fast with the legal mumbo-jumbo, they always say something like: “Past performance is no guarantee of future results.”

God *does* make promises. “You will be made rich in every way so that you may be generous in every way, which produces thanksgiving to God through us” (2 Corinthians 9:11, EHV). Paul was telling the Corinthians that God promises to give them enough to give their offerings and live their lives, as well as making them spiritually rich. Why are we tempted to trust earthly financial advisors more than our faithful Father? Why do we take comfort in our investments, but fear giving to the Lord as a net loss? Jesus is watching our attitudes and actions. What does he see?

Would we say today that it is a great act of faith to pay the electric bill every month? Would we say it is a great act of faith to pay the gym membership every month? The answer is likely a resounding *no!* There is no faith involved in paying a gym membership or the electric bill. Yet many Christians give far less in their offerings than a gym membership or their electric bill. Does that even make sense? We certainly have families in our congregation who have additional needs. We help them with our gifts to the Care Committee. But there aren’t many who receive that kind of assistance among us. Jesus is watching. What does he see?

IV.

There is only one reason we fail to give God our firstfruits. Simply put, he isn’t first in our hearts. There is one overriding reason we don’t practice the principle of proportionate giving—we have forgotten that God is always the Ultimate Owner of *everything*. We fail to practice sacrificial giving because we don’t believe God will truly care for us as reflected in Jesus’ ultimate sacrifice for us.

How do you think the widow’s story ends? Mark’s gospel doesn’t record the “rest of the story,” as Paul Harvey would have said. Knowing what you know about the faithfulness of the Father and the sacrifice of the Son, do you really think Jesus let the widow go home and

starve to death? Do you get the impression that after commending the widow's gift that Jesus was ignorant of what the widow needed? The widow gave her all trusting in the God who gave his all, his everything, his Son, for her.

God has also offered his all, his everything, his Son, for *you*. He didn't offer two small coins for your salvation, but the double treasure of the perfect life Jesus lived for you and the innocent death he died for you.

Jesus knows all about coins. When Satan tempted him with the wealth of the world, Jesus answered him: "It is written: 'You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him only'" (Luke 4:8, EHV). When the money-changers were fleecing the flock in the temple courts, he made a whip and drove them out. This was a house of prayer, not a place of profit.

Days after sitting and watching the widow, Jesus would be kneeling and praying in Gethsemane—sold for coins of silver by Judas. Jesus never once thought a greedy thought, but human greed led directly to his crucifixion. On that cross, Jesus bled and died to forgive the very hearts that loved bronze more than Christ, silver more than the Savior.

Jesus knows all about widows and their needs. Days after watching this widow bring her offering, Jesus looked down from the cross on another widow—his mother. Even with his hands nailed to the wood, he opened his hands and provided for her future needs. To this day, he opens his crucified hands and fills our desires with good things.

Jesus knows what it means to commend someone, as he commended the widow for her gift. He also knows what it is like to be forsaken by someone, as he was by his heavenly Father for our greed, for our doubting his care, for our disregard of God's Words about worldly wealth. Jesus' hands were poked with spikes so our hands could be completely cleansed of their death grip on the bronze coins of this world.

In him—in Jesus—both we and the widow have the forgiveness we crave and the motivation we so desperately need to open our hands and give in a way that glorifies God and cares for our neighbor.

Jesus is still watching his people's wealth. What will he see? A tip? God forbid! Or deep-seating trust? May God give it! Your Lord is faithful, and he will do it. Amen.