
The Widow's Mite

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An Essay on Christian Giving

Mark 12:38-44; 13:1,2

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They Devour Widow's Houses

There are any number of ways to take the life savings and/or money for daily living from the old, the gullible, or those who are zealous without knowledge. Con artists, crooks, shysters, sharpies, cheats, etc. make their living by fleecing people. The tactics they use are illegal.

However, there are others who have discovered a legal way to take money from the unsuspecting. They do it under the guise of Christianity. Following are two examples:

A daily paper recently revealed that a well-known TV evangelist wrote a letter to a widow in a nursing home asking for \$200. His appeal was that if she did not have the money, she should borrow it and then send it to him. The letter was called to the attention of a reporter who published it in the newspaper. The evangelist defended his action by claiming that God had instructed him to send this letter to the widow. Unfortunately, the lady had been dead for three months.

Some years ago, an incident of solicitation by intimidation, which was reported to the police in Canada, was exposed in Christianity Today. The Executive Director of the New Brunswick Senior Citizens Federation charged that a popular evangelist in the United States took financial advantage of the sensitivity of seniors and preyed on them at a time in their lives when they are most susceptible. In his solicitation letter the evangelist warned the senior citizens that if they neglected to pay attention to what He (God) was saying, then Satan would take advantage and hit them with "bad things" and they would "wish they had

never been born." On the other hand, the evangelist stated, through the gift of prophecy he had been told that recipients could expect creative miracles: things seemingly dead in their body, their spirit, their mind, and their finances would come alive again. These tactics may be legal but they are far from Christian.

A Look at the Passages

Some pastors, and even church or mission boards, are also guilty of intimidating their congregations. Knowingly or unknowingly, they too use the Word of God deceitfully. By misinterpreting the Scriptures, they urge their people to do something contrary to sound doctrine. A perfect example is the manner in which the Biblical account of the "widow's mite" has long been applied. Misinterpretations of Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 20:45-47 and 21:1-4 create guilt and persuade individuals and entire congregations to give beyond their means. This approach, giving motivated by guilt and fear, is a direct contradiction to Paul's doctrine of giving for the Church Age in II Corinthians 8:5-15.

Using the Mark and Luke passages of the widow and her gift as illustration, some preach, "You have not given anything until you give sacrificially." Others state, "Give till it hurts"--suggesting that God is not pleased with believers unless they are suffering. What a misrepresentation of the grace of God! Because of these and similar tactics the church of Jesus Christ has become known as money grubbing. And unbelievers have found another excuse to ignore God: "All they want is my money." Sadly, all too often their complaint is accurate.

The context of the Biblical account of the widow who gave her last two mites is not meant to teach sacrificial giving. In fact, the Lord's real point is virtually the antithesis of how the passage is usually treated. The Lord here teaches the crime--one of which any false religious system is guilty--of having no particular interest in the welfare of the individual, but a great deal of interest in exploiting the giver for the system's own gain. A brief exposition of Mark 12:38-44; 13:1-2 will demonstrate the point.

The Context

The context is critical to a correct interpretation of this passage. Jesus was in the Temple teaching. He had been discussing the character and the conduct of the scribes. The scribes mentioned in the gospels were the professional scholars of their day in the interpretation of the Old Testament. (It is well to note that they had no role during Old Testament times having come into being during and after the Babylonian captivity.) They were usurpers who took upon themselves the responsibility of interpreting the Old Testament for the people. Since the priests from the tribe of Levi were God's ordained teachers of Israel (Deuteronomy 24:8; 33:10), the scribes of Jesus' day were self-appointed leaders of a superficial and apostate religion: superficial in that it emphasized only the external show of religion and apostate because it had long since left the true purposes of the Word of God.

Jesus' opinion of the scribes can be seen in His own discourse concerning them:

Mark 12:38-40, "And He said unto them in his doctrine, Beware of the scribes, which love to go in long clothing, and love salutations in the market place, and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the uppermost rooms at feasts: Which devour widows' houses, and for a pretense make long prayers: these shall receive greater condemnation"

Two important points need to be made from the above text. The Greek words *blepete apo ton grammateon* are literally translated "you see from the scribes," interpreted: "you see with understanding by the way they dress, want to be noticed, how self-centered, and self-important the scribes are." The Greek word *apo* from which the word "from" is translated means "away from," "turn your backs on them." This is the alternative to practicing their religion. Our Lord was teaching that God's people should not follow the way of the scribes and their teachings. The authority of the scribes should be rejected. In addition, they were guilty of shameful conduct: "They devour widow's houses."

The Illustration

Jesus continued His condemnation of the scribes by the graphic illustration which follows in verses 41-44. Jesus was sitting opposite the trumpet-

shaped chests into which the people threw their Temple offerings. He observed how the people cast money into the treasury, and the "rich cast in much." Then Jesus continues, "And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing" (v. 42). The text continues to detail the financial condition of the widow and to show the difference between the offering of the rich and her offering.

Mark 12:43b-44b, "Verily I say unto you, that this poor widow hath cast more in than all they which have cast into the treasury...all her living".

The rich would not miss what they gave, but the poor widow had given away all her living. She had given all she had to the apostate Temple worship of the Jews, while the promised Redeemer sat but a step away.

There is an unfortunate chapter break at this point in the narrative, which interrupts the thought both here and in Luke's gospel. (Chapter breaks are not in the original text but placed by the translators.) The context continues in Mark 13:1-2 as one of the disciples, obviously not understanding Christ's lesson, urged the Lord to observe the impressive outward appearance of the Temple buildings surrounding them. And at that point, Jesus prophesied the destruction of the false religious system to which the poor widow had given her all.

Mark 13:2b, Jesus said: Seest thou these great buildings? There shall not be left one stone upon another that shall not be thrown down.

The buildings of the Temple area with all their splendor, along with the corrupt religious system which centered in them, would be destroyed, and those who had rejected their Messiah in favor of the false religious system would perish with it. Jesus' prophecy came to pass in 70 A.D. when the armies of Rome under Titus leveled Jerusalem and the Temple area, thus destroying the arena for the Jews' false religious practices.

The most pathetic part of this account is that the misguided widow could have had eternal life had she turned from the false, put her money in her pocket, and embraced the Savior who was sitting nearby observing.

Matthew 23:37-38, "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the prophets, and stonest them

which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate."

The tragedy of life is always that Jesus is so near with the gift of life, but people seek either to buy or to work their way into heaven.

The widow gave all she had under the misguided impression that she was serving God. This is why the Lord said (v. 40) that the scribes were guilty of devouring widows' houses. The scribes, with no apparent pangs of conscience, actively promoted the kind of extreme sacrifice exhibited by this poor widow. And Jesus clearly is teaching that the coercions and intimidations practiced by the scribes were evil. A further irony--the most tragic of all--is that the scribes of Jesus' day promoted such a heretical doctrine while this unfortunate person, as well as the rest of the nation of Israel, headed for destruction.

Observations

- Jesus was teaching his disciples. (Luke 20:45).
- The context is a discussion of the superficiality and malpractice of the scribes.
- The account of the widow's mite was an observable demonstration of one method whereby the scribes devoured widow's houses.
- The religion which she supported was replaced by the gospel of grace. The Temple and system to which she gave was destroyed in 70 A.D. and was replaced by the Church of Jesus Christ.
- All her sacrifice was for nothing.
- The widow could have received eternal life freely had she turned to Jesus.
- Preachers who would follow the example of the scribes are not true to the Word of God.
- Only a false, uncaring religious system would ask members who could not afford it to donate to their cause.
- The widow's mite does not teach giving: A better application would be, "Look out for the scribes and Pharisees in our own time."

- If the work is of God, God will supply: if it is not God's work, let it die.
- Do not give if it hurts; God does not want--or need--that kind of giving.

Principles of Giving

Some years ago I was much impressed with the manner in which the offering was taken at Grace Bible Church in Dallas. Dr. Dwight Pentecost, the pastor at that time, reminded the people that it was a privilege to give. He explained to the congregation that giving to God was reserved for believers and asked the unsaved not to give. He then went on to explain the gift of salvation and extended an invitation to the unsaved to accept the free gift of salvation provided by God. There was no pressure exerted toward believers to give. They were simply asked to give as God had prospered them. They were not asked to tithe nor to give till it hurts. They were not intimidated nor made to feel guilty for not giving. That church employed the New Testament method of giving.

We are concerned that Christianity has lost sight of God's purposes for giving. Surely God is not so destitute that His work depends on us. He could supply in an infinite number of ways were that the only consideration. He has chosen personal giving. Why?

The Apostle Paul teaches New Testament giving in II Corinthians 8 and 9. In these chapters he sets forth the purposes for which believers should give, the method of determining how much one should give, and the blessings received by proper giving.

The occasion for writing II Corinthians 8 and 9 was the taking of a collection for the poverty-stricken saints in Jerusalem. From its very earliest days the church at Jerusalem had been confronted with the problem of poverty coupled with persecution. During the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15:22, Paul says that James, Cephas (Peter) and John reminded them that we should remember the poor (Galatians 2:10). Yet another reference to the collection for the relief of Christians at Jerusalem is in I Corinthians 16:1ff.

The Macedonian churches had responded with great generosity when Paul appealed to them on behalf of the Judean Christians. Although confident of the response by the Corinthian believers,

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Paul encouraged them to give by noting the example set by the churches in Macedonia. That example consisted of three parts.

Grace

The whole activity of their giving is characterized by the repeated use of the word grace. It appears seven times in II Corinthians 8. The grace given to the churches of Macedonia was apparent because of the circumstances under which they contributed. Being poor, they nevertheless gave with joy and abundance. There was a two-fold grace granted to the Macedonians: joy and generosity. Their liberality on behalf of their fellow Christians at Jerusalem was a manifestation of the joy the grace of God was producing in their own lives.

Paul points out to the Corinthian church that the Macedonian Christians "first gave of their own selves to the Lord" (II Corinthians 8:5). It was then that they gave "unto us by the will of God" (II Corinthians 8:5b). Paul then admonished Titus, his messenger to the Corinthians, that "he would finish in you the same grace also" (vs. 6). Believers in this age of grace can have the same joy by exercising their generosity, but they should do so without pressure from greedy leaders.

Jesus was Paul's example of giving. "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (II Corinthians 8:9). Paul is not pointing the Corinthians to Christ's example to ask them to give to the point of becoming poverty-stricken. He is merely saying that the offering of Christ for the sins of the world was a work of grace motivated by love and that the giving of the Corinthians to the believers in Jerusalem was to be a similar work of loving grace in their thinking and attitude.

Commenting on this subject Hughes writes: "There is, however, no harsh note: he affectionately addresses them as his brethren, and he speaks not of something which the Macedonians have achieved, as though by some superior quality of character, but of the grace of God which was given and which, rather than any personal quality, was the mainspring of their generosity. There is no question of human resources, but only divine grace; and that same grace was equally available to the Christians in Corinth." (Commentary on II Corinthians by Philip E. Hughes, Wm B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., Grand Rapids, page 287)

While the purpose of the Macedonian and Corinthian giving was to relieve the poverty of the saints in Jerusalem, and Paul used the occasion to teach the early Church how God employs His grace in this area, the practice of grace giving has other spiritual reasons for our involvement. If properly practiced there is blessing both for the giver and the receiver.

Fellowship

Fellowship means sharing, being a partaker with. This is the same word that is used in Acts 4:32 where it is said that the early church had all things "in common." In Paul's first letter to the Corinthians the Church was likened to a body, and he states: "Whether one member suffereth, all the members suffer with it; or one member is honored all the members rejoice with it" (I Corinthians 12:26). There is to be a sharing within the body of Christ which draws the body together into a cohesive unit, with one purpose, one accord, and blessing for all concerned.

Fellowship and communion are both translated from the same Greek word, *koinonia*. Just as the taking of the elements of the bread and wine, which symbolize the body and blood of Christ, is real communion of the worshippers one with another and with Christ, even so is the taking of the offering. It is a communion or fellowship of believers one with another and with Christ in giving toward a common purpose, in order to accomplish shared goals. Thus, giving done apart from its true meaning of fellowship and sharing loses its purpose and results in the loss of spiritual benefit and blessing.

This fellowship in giving finds its source in the spiritual condition of the believer and can never be coerced. It begins in the mind and is carried out through an act of the will. Paul says: "For if there be first a willing mind . . ." (II Corinthians 8:12a). A believer in fellowship with God will have a mind willing to give, whether or not he holds much in his hand to offer. This is what God desires.

II Corinthians 9:7, "Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver".

There must be real freedom in Christian giving or the mind and will react negatively. Each individual must make a personal decision as to how much to give. To give to Christ and then to grieve over or begrudge the loss robs one of the blessing of fellowship derived from giving. Grudge giving is outlined in the story of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5:1-9. Genuine, free, and cheerful giving is the only offering God really accepts and blesses, no matter the amount.

Equality

Paul also teaches equality in giving. The Apostle is careful to explain to the Corinthians that it is not God's intention to relieve the Jerusalem believers by making it hard on those of Macedonia and Corinth. This time the Corinthians were to give because they had an abundance. Later the Corinthians may be short and other Christians will come to their relief. And so, by this spirit of reciprocity, a principle of equality should operate in the universal body of Christ.

II Corinthians 8:13,14, "For I mean not that other men be eased, and ye burdened. But by an equality, that now at this time your abundance may be a supply for their want, that their abundance also may be a supply for your want: that there may be equality."

According to Lenski:

"It is not at all a matter of giving as much as possible to others even to the point of impoverishing ourselves - as though the virtue of giving lay in that. But this is entirely a matter of equality or equalization. In Christian giving the matter of the giver and those to whom he gives is always made even, we may say, is balanced." (The Interpretation of I & II Corinthians, R.C.H. Linski, Augsburg Publishing House, Minneapolis, 1963, page 1144).

The combination of freedom and equality in turn strengthens the fellowship and "a three-fold cord is not quickly broken" (Ecclesiastes 4:12). All are a result of observing God's method of operation for the Church Age: grace. We operate on faith that grace will work because God's Word directs it.

Method of Giving

Paul instructed the Galatians, too, in the proper method for Church Age giving:

I Corinthians 16:2, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store,

as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come."

The Old Testament tithe or tax is not for believers in the age of grace. The tithe was regulated because they were under Law. (They did have free-will offerings however.) There are times when a person's entire income is needed to meet personal expenses. School supplies for the children, medicine for a sick widow, food on the table, emergencies of all kinds sometimes limit a person's giving. Granted, to hide behind one's expenses to avoid giving is a way of lying to God, but to make a show of prosperity in times of want is equally false. The tithe, practiced as it is today, is an ungracious way of putting God's people in a strait-jacket, a form of legalism that destroys the individual's freedom before God and causes division in the body of Christ. (In some churches tithers are promoted as the elite of the congregation.) Grace giving should be voluntary, given on a weekly basis as God prospers and not subject to man's approval or disapproval.

Conclusion

Because New Testament giving is not practiced in many churches, the blessings of grace, fellowship, and equality are sadly lacking. The church has projected a reputation of they just want my money.

True Christianity gives, but it gives from the principle of grace--lovingly, not legally; freely, not through coercion; not to gain favor but to impart it, having received bountifully from the Lord. "God so loved the world He gave..." (John 3:16a). Jesus gave willingly, lovingly, and generously. Let us give first of ourselves: (like Jesus) freely, graciously, bountifully, and there will be equality in the body of Christ. Before the Lord, dare we do less?

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