

# Hanging Out With Jesus: How Jesus Looks At Generosity

*Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4*

Good morning, men! Let's go ahead and do a shout out. This is going to be a fun one, it's a group called the Sports Barn. They meet in Bennington, NE. The leader is Michael Bliss and they're 25-30 guys that get together weekly and have been doing so for six years. They have a van that brings a bunch of homeless men in at 5:30 am. They have a time of prayer and then they run the Bible Study from 6:15-7:15. They close by getting in groups of two to three men and praying for each other. It's just a real honor to have these men be a part of our Bible Study, so I wonder if you would join me in giving a warm Man in the Mirror Welcome to the Sports Barn. One, two, three, hoorah! Welcome guys, we're glad to have you with us!

We're in this series called *Hanging Out With Jesus*. My wife and I took our daughter in law and two of our grandchildren right over here to the Castle Park. Great park by the way, if you have little ones. Mom was in the back seat with two car seats, one on either side of her. The boy is three years old and said he was hungry. My wife being the smart grandmother she is packed snacks, but apparently it wasn't the right snack because she packed organic fig bars. Stone ground whole wheat fig bars. I think she gets them by the box at Costco. So anyway, she says to our grandson here try this. He takes a big bite out of this organic whole food fig bar and he made the biggest grimace that you've ever seen in your life! We all just cracked up, almost drove off the road we were laughing so hard! Then with a serious expression far beyond a three year old's years, he said it's not funny! I'm thinking oh yes it is! So then my wife turns to our granddaughter who is five years old and says here would you like one? Our grandson looks over and says it's yummy!

So we want to talk about Jesus' point of view on generosity this morning. The name of the message is *How Jesus Looks At Generosity*. I don't think the kind of generosity that my grandson had in mind is what Jesus had in mind! Let's take a look at what's going on in this text we'll be examining today. Mark 12:41, and as we get into this, which do you think will go farther and do more good: a \$100 offering or \$10,000 offering? It should be obvious that \$10,000 would go farther and accomplish more, but the question in this text that we're going to look at is a different question. Which is a more valuable gift to God? Which is more pleasing, more generous? There is no specific one answer to this. We're going to learn about the relative size of the gift and the impact that it has in this text.

## **What Does This Passage Tell Us?**

Let's look at the passage. Verse 41:

Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.

It's Tuesday, before his crucifixion. He's been at the temple all day long answering questions of religious leaders. He's just pronounced these woes on the hypocrites, and the last thing he does before he leaves

the temple is he sort of leans against the wall and watches people as they're putting their offerings into the treasury.

Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents (probably an hour's worth of work as it turns out).

Calling his disciples to him (for he saw this as an opportunity to teach), Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth (really, their surplus); but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."

Wow! This is a very interesting text! One of the most important things in doing exegesis or studying of the text, is to make sure you don't make the text say more than is really there. The first thing I want us to take a look at is what this text is not saying. This text is not saying that the rich people were not cheerful nor generous givers. Notice that it says the rich people put in large amounts of money. Jesus is definitely making a comparison between these two but he's not making a point about the generosity of the rich people, he's making a point about the generosity of the poor widow. As to the generosity of the rich people, they may have done it for right or wrong reasons, cheerfully or not, but that's not the point!

In this text, what he's doing is he is commending this poor widow. He is not indicting these rich people. When you interpret scripture, you could use a sanctified imagination to talk about the text, but when you do, be very careful that you don't communicate that your interpretation is necessary one, but merely a possible or probable one. Just use your own sanctified imagination here, that if these people were putting in large amounts, they were probably doing it for the right reasons. They were probably cheerful givers.

Another thing that this text is not doing is that it is not making the idea of giving your last dollar the norm of a Biblical Christian experience. It's an observation, it's not the pronouncement of a normative practice. In other words, he commends her but does not say this is the norm. He doesn't say anything other than she has given more than everyone else.

What was it about this one poor widow that attracted the attention of Jesus? Do you think she was the only widow there that day? Do you think she was the only widow making an offering? Probably not. He probably was watching lots of people from all walks of life going in and out, putting their gifts into the temple treasury. But what was it that attracted his attention to this one particular widow? Let's think about who she might have been. Was she an old woman? Was she a young widow? We don't know! The only thing we really know about this woman was that she was poor. Did she have a job? Did she have a menial job? Was she completely unemployed, destitute, dependent on the largess of the synagogue? Did she have children? How long had she been a widow? Was she in a state of grieving? Was she sad? Was she joyful when she was there? We know none of these things. But use your imagination and just think about who this widow might have been today. Maybe it's a woman whose husband died without life insurance; a husband who was so interested in his own self when he was living that he didn't make a provision for her when he was gone. So now she either has to depend on welfare and food stamps, or maybe... Maybe many of you will go to breakfast after this meeting this morning and you will be waited on by a sixty-seven year old woman. Why do you think she's in there waiting tables at her age? Why isn't she playing with her grandchildren? Good chance she was married to a man who left her as a poor widow, and now she's fighting off destitution. That's why you ought to tip 25%, that's why you ought to sometimes drop her a \$10 bill. Just my opinion, that's not in the text anywhere.

Who is this poor widow today? Maybe she's a young single mom, a practical widow because she's been abandoned. My father-in-law and I go to lunch we've been doing this every Monday, and we have two waitresses, both of which are single moms. Both of them are scraping together money to pay for child care, transportation, and rent. One lives with her parents because she can't afford her own place. She could very well be like one of these poor widows. So this is the kind of woman we are talking about.

So what is the point that Jesus is trying to make here? Jesus has an altogether different way of thinking about generosity than most people do. Jesus makes a distinction between the amount of money given and the spirit in which it is given. A distinction between dollars, the amount, and donors and the donor's attitude. Did you see it? I tell you the truth, this poor woman has put into the treasury more than all the others. They gave out of their surplus but she out of her need put in everything, all that she had. His point is that she spiritually has given more than the rich. Some people would interpret it as more than all the others put together. I don't see it, but maybe it is. So even though they put in large amounts and she only put in a small amount, she put in more. The guy who puts \$100 into the offering may not be noticed like the guy who puts \$10,000 into the offering, who gets a special letter, gets a special luncheon, and gets special attention, but in the eyes of Jesus, the man who gave the \$100 may have given more than the other because of the spirit in which it was given. So I want you to see today for your own giving whether you are in surplus or in need, how Jesus looks at generosity. The Big Idea is this: **You don't have to give a large amount to give a lot.** Many people who donate to our ministry small amounts do so apologetically. I've never understood this, but it's a cultural phenomenon not a spiritual one. It's not a Christian idea. A long time ago we got a letter from a woman who was giving us \$10. It was probably like the widow in this text, and I knew in my spirit that the \$10 she was giving us was more than the \$100,000 that we were receiving from a major donor who was giving out of his surplus. He was a cheerful and generous giver, you don't give \$100,000 if you're not generous, so don't indict the rich for being rich, bless the rich for being rich, but understand that you don't have to give a large amount to give a lot. Does a large amount go further? Accomplish more? You bet! Is it more valuable, pleasing, and more righteous to God? Not necessarily!

### **What About Us?**

Turn with me to Proverbs 21:20. The next thing I want us to look at is what about us? How does the story of this poor widow relate to us? One question that would come to mind if you were thinking about it for a few minutes is should I give everything? Should I be like this widow? I'm in need, should I just give everything to God? Well, you don't know if she was getting another big paycheck the next day. She gave everything that she had at that particular moment, but you don't know what her future was. In contrast to that, also a scriptural principle is Proverbs 21:20 which says in the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil. Today we would say money in your IRA account or something like that. So providing for your future is normal, healthy and required of somebody who wants to be a good steward. It may be that 1/100 or 1/1,000 or who knows how few it would be, but somebody, because their need is so great and they are so desperate for God to intervene, and they have so little, that they just give it all, and that's very generous, very pleasing to God. On the other hand, for most of us, it's not normal to do that.

Now turn with me to 1 Timothy 5:5. The widow who is really in need and left all alone puts her hope in God and continues night and day to pray and to ask God for help. Are you in need? This text, the first time I read it gripped me so much. I realized what this widow had, this is what I wanted. At the time, I was in the throes of materialism! I was sucked up in worldly ambition, and I read this. The widow who was really in need and all alone, she's the one who puts her faith in God! She's the one who continues

night and day to pray! She's the one who asks God for help! Do you want to do that? Do you want to ask God for help night and day? Do you want to put your hope in God? You want to do that but you find yourself resistant to do that? What I did was I decided to make a prayer. I don't recommend it. I prayed, and have continued to pray, and even prayed this week, God would you be gracious enough to always keep some major unmet need in my life so that I would remain utterly dependent upon you. Man I hate that prayer! But he has been faithful! So if you are in need, God will tell you what to do. If you want to make an offering to him to express your love and your affection to him, then go ahead and do that, but don't do it expecting something in return. If you notice in the text we looked at, it didn't say what happened to the widow. We know from other scriptures that God provided for her. I'll give you an example. One of my friends, Gary Ford, was the chairman of the board of Promise Keepers Canada. Last May he sent me an email asking for prayer and it said that it looks like because of a bad decision that in 24 hours he was going to have to declare bankruptcy. So I've tried to keep track of things since with him, and at the New Year I sent him an email to see how he was doing. They did lose their house, they almost lost their business, and I just want to read to you the response. Pat, 2013 was the hardest year of our life but it taught us to walk depending on the Lord more closely. Many times when it seemed that taking a loan would be the solution, the Lord seemed to say does that mean you don't trust me to provide? So far we have been able to walk accordingly and we appreciate your prayers and support. So if you're in need, take heed.

What about if you are in a surplus? Maybe you have far more than you need for your daily life. What do you do with that? No one else can tell you what God's will is for your life on anything unless it is specifically commanded or prohibited by scripture. God doesn't tell people how much money to keep, you have to figure that out. You're the one. What he does say is do not store up treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy, and thieves break in and steal. Rather lay up for yourselves treasures in heaven where neither moth nor rust destroy, nor thieves break in and steal, for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. Matthew 6:18 and following. You have to decide if you have a surplus of money whether you hoard it or try to control it, or feel like you might run out. One time a while ago a man with a five million dollar net worth was asked to make a donation to our ministry. He said no I can't do that. I said why not? He said I'm afraid I might run out! Christian guy! Okay, that's what he's working on. So what is it for you? Do you have a surplus? Do you have more than you need?

Now turn to 2 Corinthians 9. One of our former board members, a current advisor, and one of our biggest donors, Kyle Van, has recently become chairman of the board of Generous Giving, which is a national ministry. So I asked Kyle to give me some feedback from the Generous Giving perspective and he pointed me to their primary text for speaking into the lives of those who have a surplus, and it's 2 Corinthians 9:6 and following. It says:

Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly...

So the Big Idea today is **You don't have to give a large amount to give a lot** but if you have a large amount and you don't give a lot, it says whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly. It also says whoever sows generously will also reap generously. So giving a large amount isn't necessarily giving a lot any more than giving a small amount is necessarily giving a little. This is the economy of God we're talking about here this morning.

**What About Them?**

Finally, what about them? What about all those people out there who have a surplus? Do I look down on them because they have a lot of money? If I look down on them because they have a lot of money, it's probably because I'm jealous. If I had a lot of money, what would I do? I would probably look down on those people who didn't have as much money. Like it's their fault. But I'll tell you another problem in addition to that, it's giving undue favor to those people. Favoring the rich. Somewhere in James 2 I think, it talks about showing favoritism to the rich man. Don't do that! The reason is because giving a little in the eyes of God may be more than giving a lot! So don't favor the rich.

There's this great article in *The Atlantic* about why the rich don't give to charity. It talks about these 100 million dollar plus gifts that many have given, but with the giving of these large amounts of money there's these great publicity machine that goes into place. Zuckerman gave 200 million dollars to Columbia University and it was attended by a press conference, two Nobel laureates, and the president of the university, the mayor, and journalists from New York's major media outlets. I'm just here to say that the young single mom who put \$10 into the offering plate last Sunday, in the eyes of Jesus, may have given more. **You don't have to give a large amount to give a lot.** The top 20% of the richest people in our country give 1.3% of their income to charity, whereas the bottom 20% give 3.2% of theirs and they can't take advantage of the charitable tax deduction for the most part! Basically the bottom 20% is twice as charitable in terms of the percentage. So be careful about how you favor rich people because they may not be as generous as you think they are. Who knows?

I am dependent on rich Christians who have generous hearts. Our ministry depends on that. Actually, I'll take that back. Our ministry depends on God! But God has chosen for us to primarily have a major donor strategy at the headquarters. But now that we have these Area Directors out in the field, it's moving more and more to a small donors strategy. We recognize that **you don't have to give a large amount to give a lot.** Those people are giving a lot, in some cases more spiritually than the high dollar givers.

Lastly, what about the poor? How do you look at the people who are in need? Do you look down on them? I don't think I will ever bring myself to give money to people who are disengaged from the systems that are available, and yet every now and then I find myself running into somebody and the spirit prompts me to give \$10 or \$20 or to buy a meal. Some of you are very involved in working with these people who have less and are in need. You know what? It's not just them, it's also middle class people, some of you right here who are in just as great of need. So the principle, if you're still at 2 Corinthians 9 drop back to chapter 8, verse 13:

Our desire is not that others might be relieved while you are hard pressed, but that there might be equality. At the present time your plenty will supply what they need, so that in turn their plenty will supply what you need. The goal is equality, as it is written: "The one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little."

If you see somebody in need and you have a surplus, the Biblical ethos, the principle is to help meet that need.

Another friend of mine named Dan sent an email at the New Year. They went downtown, handed out 100 bag lunches, socks, sweaters, footwear, etc. Quoting him: Of course God had special plans that day, not for the homeless, but for me. I was taught that the homeless will not take more than they need, but we who have lots are greedy. Man was that a humbling experience and lesson learned! The Big Idea today: **you don't have to give a large amount to give a lot.** Let's pray!

## **Closing Prayer**

Our Father in heaven, thank you for showing us how you see other people so that we can see the way you see them. Thank you for helping us to see your views on generosity and how you look at the gifts and offerings that we make. Lord, help us to understand that giving a large amount isn't necessarily giving a lot any more than giving a small amount is necessarily giving a little. I pray that you would help each of us to be calibrated like a precision instrument to the truth of your word when it comes to every other issue. We ask this in Jesus' name, amen!