

Live a Life of Startling Generosity

Exhibited by a poor widow  
Empowered by a gracious God  
Modelled by Christian parents

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup> and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. <sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

<sup>41</sup> Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. <sup>42</sup> But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

<sup>43</sup> Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup> They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

Over the past couple of weeks, the theme for our worship services has been simply, “Live Like You’ll Live Forever.” Tell me, have you thought about what those words really mean? Live, like you’ll live forever. To know that your life will not come to a crashing halt the moment you breathe your last. Rather, from that moment on, it will only get better. I mean, way better. God has lined up for you and me a life that is beyond our ability to comprehend. A life of absolute joy, peace, and fulfillment. A life that never ends. And what’s best of all, a life that is not dependent upon how well we live our lives on earth, but rather, is dependent upon the perfect life that Jesus lived in our place, the life he offered on a cross, a life that was restored to Jesus through his resurrection from the grave. How did Jesus put it? “*Because I live, you also will live*” (John 14:19). Yes, you will live forever.

My friends, that fact has a tremendous impact on how you and I live our lives right now. If I know I’m going to live forever, I don’t need all to get all caught up in whether I’m “living my best life” right now. My best life is still to come. I don’t need to worry about making sure I get everything I want “before it’s too late.” No, because I will live forever, I can use the time God has given me here on earth not to serve myself, but to serve God and others, often in ways that the world might find downright startling. In fact, that’s what our Scripture lesson for today is all about. Here we have an example of someone who knew where she was going when she died. And that fact produced in her what we might call,

A Life of Startling Generosity

As we look more closely at this text, will discover that that is a life that was:

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The account that we had before us is the record of an event that took place on Tuesday of holy week. It’s a day that is sometimes called Busy Tuesday because of all the teaching that Jesus did on that day. But what does Mark tell us the Jesus finds time to do? We read, *Jesus sat down*

*opposite the place where the offerings were put* (that would be just outside the temple in Jerusalem) there *Jesus watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury.* (Mark 12:41) Tell me, does that strike you as a bit odd? That in spite of all the things that Jesus has going on, including his impending death, he takes the time to watch what people are giving for their offerings? Doesn't he have more important things to do? Why does Jesus care about how much money people put into the offering plate? Is he worried that the temple authorities might not meet their budget that year? No, the reason Jesus is watching what people give is that he cares about people. More importantly, he cares about where people are in their relationship to God. And Jesus knows that offerings, when viewed from God's perspective, can reveal an awful lot about how strong or weak that relationship to God is. So he watched people give their offerings—just as he still does today.

And what did Jesus observe about those offerings? Mark tells us, *Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor woman came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.* (Mark 12:41-42) Notice a couple things. Notice that Jesus doesn't say anything negative about the large offerings given by some. He doesn't say that anyone who gives large gifts is just doing it for show. He doesn't say that large gifts, in and of themselves are bad. Think of how Jesus commended Mary Magdalene after she poured on his feet a bottle of perfume with a whole year's wages.

Secondly, notice that in contrast to those rich people giving large gifts, there was also a poor widow giving a very small gift. The Greek here says that she gave two lepta. A lepton is the smallest coin in the Jewish monetary system. Two of them together would be valued at 128th of 1 day's wages. Today that would amount to maybe 50 cents or a dollar. But Jesus is not concerned about the size of that gift. Rather, he was focused on what that gift represented in the life of that widow. Jesus says to his disciples, *“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on.* (Mark 12:43-44)

Now, it would be easy to misunderstand what Jesus is saying. When Jesus says that this poor woman gave “more” than all the others, it doesn't mean that Jesus thinks that little copper coins are more valuable than gold bullion. No, when Jesus says that she gave more, he's not talking amounts; he's talking percentages. The widow gave a much higher percentage of her net worth than the rich people did.

But notice the other contrast that Jesus draws. He says that the rich all gave *“out of their wealth, but she out of her poverty”*. Again, don't misunderstand that. It doesn't mean that the only God-pleasing gifts are the ones that are offered by poor people. It also doesn't mean that those who give out of their wealth, that is, a portion of their wealth, are somehow offering gifts that are less than pleasing to God. No, the whole concept of proportionate giving is very Biblical. How did the apostle Paul put it when he wrote to the Christians in Corinth? *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income.* (1 Corinthians 16:2). The Bible teaches us to return to the Lord a percentage of what he has given to us.

But now, someone might ask, yeah, but what percentage is God asking us to return to him? Are we to do what this poor widow did? The Bible says she *put in everything - all she had to live on*. Is that what God is expecting of us? To put our very last dollar into the offering plate? Is that the lesson here?

No, it's not. And how do I know that? Because that kind of lesson would contradict everything else that Jesus teaches. The Bible says that we are to use our financial resources to

support a number of different things. For example, in 1st Timothy 5, St Paul writes, *Anyone who does not provide for their relatives, and especially for their own household, has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever. (v.8)*. Or the words of Romans 13:7, where we read, *if you owe taxes, pay taxes*. The point is, God doesn't demand or expect anyone to give everything they have to the church.

Yet, if that's the case, then why does Jesus call attention to this woman, who really did give everything she had to the church? Why would Jesus point out such startling generosity? Because he wants us to focus on what allowed her to make such a sacrificial gift. In its essence that gift was an incredible expression of faith. That woman trusted that God was going to provide for her needs. Even if she gave her last dollar, she believed that somehow God would make sure that she was going to be all right. Just like the widow at Zarephath in our Old testament reading, who gave her very last meal to the Prophet Elijah, trusting the Lord's promise that he would provide for her. Just like the Macedonian Christians in our epistle reading, who in the midst of extreme poverty, gave themselves to the Lord and to Paul, showing rich generosity, and as Paul said, "gave even beyond their ability." (2 Cor. 8:3)

In all these cases, their faith produced some remarkable generosity. I don't know about you, but personally I have a hard time reading through this section without thinking about my own giving. It forces me to ask, "Why do I give the amount I give? Do I give simply out of habit?" You know, "I've always given something; so I'll keep on giving something." Do I give out of my wealth, that is, out of my surplus? You know, "this is how much I can afford to give after I've paid all my other bills." Or is my gift truly an expression of my faith in God's ability to provide for my needs?

You realize, a person doesn't have to give everything they own for their gift to be an expression of absolute trust in God. I mean, just give yourself a little test. At what level would your weekly offering, be it \$5, or \$50 or \$500—at what level would it be a tangible expression of your trust in God's ability to provide for you? In other words, at what point would your gift go from "No sweat, wouldn't even miss it" to "Whoa. I'd have to think about that. I'd have to pray about that. I'd have to trust that God would help me rearrange my spending habits and adjust my priorities. That would take some real faith in God's ability to make ends meet." My friends, that's the kind of faith that Jesus saw in this poor widow, a faith that was expressed with startling generosity.

But now someone might ask, "Yeah, but where does that kind of faith come from? How can I develop the faith that produces such startling generosity in my life? Actually, we don't develop it. God does. And really, that's our second point. A Life of Startling Generosity was not only: I. Exhibited by a poor widow. It's also II. Empowered by a gracious God.

Just for a minute, think about all the possible reasons a person might have for being generous with their financial treasures, whether it's giving to church or giving to the poor or giving to some other charity. There are plenty of wrong motivations for giving. You know, to earn brownie points with God, or to feel good about ourselves, or to impress other people, or get something in return—those are all the wrong reasons to give.

So, what motivates a Christian like you to take your hard-earned money and basically give it to other people? What empowers your generosity? At its very core, it's God's grace, the undeserved love he has shown to you, starting with the grace that God showed you by sending it son to die for you, the grace that he showed you by planting the seed of faith in your heart through word and sacrament, the grace he showed you by making you a member of his family and giving you a new man and a new identity in Christ and guaranteeing that you are going to

live forever with him in heaven.

And then on top of all those undeserved spiritual and eternal gifts, he also, in grace, entrusts into our hands all our God-given time, talents and treasures. And he says, “Christian, now manage these gifts. Manage them in a way that provides for your needs and the needs of others, both physical and spiritual.

You might say that God gives everyone of us a pie. A pie that represents all the gifts God has given us. Now, a lot of people think that pie is what is referred to as “a zero-sum game.” In other words, there is only so much pie. The more pieces I give away, the less pie I have for myself. But you see, that’s not how God’s pie works. Why not? Because God is the maker of the pie in the first place. And he can always make our whole pie bigger. The pieces you give away can do even greater things. In fact, isn’t that the promise that God makes in 2 Corinthians 9? <sup>10</sup> *Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and **increase** your store of seed and will **enlarge** the harvest of your righteousness.* <sup>11</sup> *You will be **enriched** in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.*

Isn't that the truth? By his grace, God is given us the ability to be generous. I mean, generous in a way that the world would find shocking. That's the startling generosity that was: I. Exhibited by this poor widow. It's II. Empowered by a gracious God. And now it's III. Modeled by Christian parents.

When I was a boy, my father taught me the principles of Christian stewardship, not by putting one of his dollars in my offering envelope and having me put that in the offering plate. Rather he gave me a weekly allowance for doing chores around the house like setting the table and clearing the dishes. My weekly allowance was—brace yourself—35 cents. One dime and one quarter. And then we talked about how I might use the gifts that God had given me through my parents. And we decided that I would give the dime to Jesus and keep the quarter for myself. When I got my first job picking sweet corn at \$1.10 an hour the percentage shifted a bit. Then it was Jesus received \$1 for every \$10 I earned. It made for easy math. And the reason I did that was because that's what I saw my father do. I can still remember seeing the amount that he wrote on the offering envelope and I thought, “Wow. That's a lot of money.” I look back on that and I realize that offering was simply an expression of my father's faith. And it was a model that has had a tremendous impact on my personal giving to this very day.

I share that not to put myself up on a pedestal (although as Pastor Gawel reminded us a few weeks ago, all the pastors preach from a pedestal). No, I share that to underscore the importance of the role that you parents and grandparents play in helping your children learn to manage the gifts God has given to them. We're setting an example. And they are blessed when we put our faith into action.

The bottom line is this: When you know where you are going when you die, when you know that you are going to live forever, when you know, as St. Paul puts it, *the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich*—when you know that, it changes how you live your life. God has given you the freedom, the reason, the privilege of living a life...of startling generosity. Go, enjoy your freedom, for Jesus' sake. Amen.