

24th Sunday after Pentecost
November 10, 2024
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Live a Life of Startling Generosity
Mark 12:38-44 (EHV)

He also said to them in his teaching, “Beware of the experts in the law who like to walk around in long robes and receive greetings in the marketplaces. ³⁹They love the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and offer long prayers to look good. These men will receive greater condemnation.”

⁴¹Jesus sat down opposite the offering box and was watching how the crowd put money into it. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴²One poor widow came and put in two small bronze coins, worth less than a penny. ⁴³He 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. ⁴⁴For they all gave out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on.”

Dear Friends in Christ,

I'm sure it has happened to you like it has to me. I order something at the counter, the person serves it up to me and turns the screen around for me to pay. But before I can swipe or tap my card, the screen gives me options for how much I want to tip. 20%, 15%, 10%, or zero. I thought I had this tipping figured out in restaurants. I know my normal percentage and can be generous, especially when the food and service are exceptional. But how much do I tip for a donut, a haircut, a fancy coffee (which I don't drink but maybe you do)? Am I insulting the server if I tap on zero? Are they watching me on security camera? Should I tip big on my \$3 purchase to look good in front of the other customers and the person behind the counter? Why does that screen with options for tipping cause us to pause and think and maybe even guilt us into giving more than we planned?

Maybe that is how we feel anytime the pastor talks about giving in church. He's just trying to guilt me into giving more. But that is not true at all. In fact, Jesus is quite critical of those who give for the wrong reasons. In the Gospel of Mark, Jesus is more concerned about the attitude of the giver than the amount given. So, we will focus on lining up our attitude and faith with that of the poor widow. The amount of our gifts will follow. Then we can live a life of startling generosity.

Before we get to the attitude and actions of the poor widow, Jesus warns his disciples about the opposite attitude.

“Beware of the experts in the law who like to walk around in long robes and receive greetings in the marketplaces. ³⁹They love the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰They devour widows' houses and offer long prayers to look good. These men will receive greater condemnation.”

It feels good to have people know who you are and admire you. We have this natural desire to fit in with others in our society and to be respected by important people. The Jewish experts in the law looked for this attention from others by the clothes they wore and the long prayers they prayed. They looked for this attention and honor from others in the markets, in their churches, and at the best parties. Might we have similar thoughts today? The high school student wants to be noticed by the clothes they wear or the car they drive. We want people to compliment us on the house we buy, the company we work for, the concerts we go to, our semi-famous acquaintances whose names we drop into our conversations. There is a sinful part of all of us that wants to have a life that people look at with envy and say, “I wish my life was like yours!”

Those whom Jesus warned against were not only putting on a show with their long robes and prayers. They were also using their reputation as the respected experts in God's Word to take

advantage of widows. These women who have just lost their husbands need someone to trust and help them in society with finances and property. But it seems like these men helped themselves to the finances and property of the widows under the guise of helping to protect the widow's estate. Jesus is clear about their end. "These men will receive greater condemnation."

Let this warning continually put to death the sinful desire to use our position as a respected member of society, of our neighborhood, of our company, and of our church as a way to benefit ourselves even at the expense of others. Greater condemnation awaits those who use the respect and trust of others to benefit themselves instead of serving others. Now, I don't quite understand how there can be greater condemnation than eternal death, but Jesus said it, and it is a powerful warning to my sinful nature.

Now Jesus turns to a positive example of living with startling generosity.

⁴¹Jesus sat down opposite the offering box and was watching how the crowd put money into it. Many rich people put in large amounts. ⁴²One poor widow came and put in two small bronze coins, worth less than a penny. ⁴³He 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. ⁴⁴For they all gave out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all that she had to live on."

Jesus has a big advantage over any of us in evaluating the gifts being given at the temple or in our congregation. Jesus not only sees the amount being given, but he knows the heart with which the gift is given. Therefore, as we look at generous giving today, don't think about anyone else except yourself. The amount given by someone does not clearly tell us anything about their faith in Christ. We examine our own hearts in this area today and not the hearts of others.

Sometimes our hearts may be like those who dropped in large amounts into the offering box. What a nice sound that would have made as the coins hit the other coins in the box. That noise probably made some heads turn toward the offering box and notice the giver. That would feel pretty good to be noticed as a big donor to the temple. But gifts given for the gospel ministry in order to get noticed by other believers are not praised by Jesus here.

Perhaps the rich people who gave big gifts were doing so because the law of God required them to tithe. They were to give a tenth to the Lord. They wanted to obey all of God's commands and thought that giving a large amount would win God's approval. As long as they gave enough, they would be on God's good side and get good things in life. At the very least, they would avoid God's anger because they were obeying him with their gifts. And perhaps we give out of guilt at times, thinking God is going to be upset with us if we don't. Perhaps we give with the thought that God will have to bless us in some way if we give enough. Or maybe there are times we give only out of surplus. We've got some extra money lying around and haven't been able to spend it, so we give some of it away, kind of an afterthought. Guilt based, law based, ungrateful giving is not what God wants.

Christ holds up the poor widow as the example of generous and faithful giving. What did she have in life? Obviously, her husband had died. Life was not easy for widows at that time and place in history. She could not just go out and find a job. She was likely dependent on the synagogue and her fellow Jews to support her. But she had the Lord and therefore a great love for the Lord her God. She loved the house of God, the temple. She had almost nothing and gave almost nothing in the offering box. What she gave was not going to be enough to make any repairs or improvements at the temple. Her gift was almost pointless in the eyes of the world. But Jesus noticed it and he noticed her.

Here is the beginning of generous giving. Very few greeted this widow in the marketplace. No one offered her the seat of honor at the synagogue or the dinner. No one extolled her generous support of the temple...except Jesus. He watched her carefully. He loved her. He cared for her. He came to be her Savior from sin and eternal death. He would give his life for her, a woman

ignored and invisible to so many in society. Even if this woman did not know that her God was watching her put her meager offering into the box, she trusted that her God was watching over her and would forever. She trusted that her God was good and loving and would send a Savior as he promised. She looked forward to the promises of God so much that whatever she had on earth was used to the glory and thanks of her Savior God.

Beloved children of God, the Son of God took on human flesh and blood for you. Not only did Jesus do everything to satisfy the law in your place, he gave more than he had to live on for you. He gave his very life to cover our sins, his holy precious blood to redeem us from sin and death. Jesus did not come to greet those with flowing robes and long prayers only. He did not give himself on the cross to save kings and emperors only. He came to seek and save the lost. He came for those who the world ignores as well as those whom the world extolls. He came for the rich and for those in great poverty. He came for you whether you are acting like the experts in the law or like the widow. By his grace, he came to save you.

When you drop your coins or cash or check in the offering plate, don't be consumed with guilt over the amount you are giving. Instead give generously from your heart that has been cleansed of guilt by the perfect life and innocent death of Christ. No guilt in giving. When you drop your offering in the plate or go online to give electronically, don't ever wonder if this amount is enough to get you noticed by God and blessed by God. The Lord God noticed you before time began, chose you to be his own, redeemed you by the sacrifice of his only Son, and brought you to faith in Christ. Give generously from your heart that is and will always be safe in the hands of your Savior.

I don't know what to tell you about the amount to tip for donuts and fancy drinks. However, Jesus is clear about the amount of our thank offerings. Generously given from the heart. It is all about attitude and the amount will follow. So, look at Jesus, meditate on his Word, see his love for you, his compassion for you, his sacrifice for you and the life he is preparing for you on his holy mountain. Then your heart will be ready to live a life of startling generosity.

Amen.