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It's a Matter of the Heart!

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TEXT: Mark 12:41-44 (ESV)

And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

There are a few hot button topics that can make any conversation get very uncomfortable – topics such as religion, politics, death. But when it comes to the most difficult conversation you can possibly have, a new survey from Wells Fargo and Co. found one clear surprising winner: money – right at the top of the list. In fact, 44% of Americans point to personal finances as the most challenging conversation anyone can possibly have. Even the topic of death, which you might expect to top this survey, came in a distant second at 38%. Philip Yancey, a Christian author that I've enjoyed over the years, confesses

Many Christians have one issue that haunts them and never fall silent. For some, it involves sexual identity. For others, it's a permanent battle against doubt. The issue that haunts me is money. It hangs over me. It keeps me off balance and restless, uncomfortable, nervous. I feel pulled in opposite directions over the money issue. Sometimes I want to sell all that I own and join a Christian commune and live out my days in intentional poverty. At other times, though, I want to rid myself of guilt and enjoy the fruit of our nation's prosperity.

I know there are some pastors who dread stewardship time in the church calendar because of this difficulty with money conversations. They're uncomfortable talking about giving and money with their parishioners because they believe, and perhaps rightly so, that people don't want to hear about that sort of thing from the pulpit. They might even sense a bit of hostility that "the preacher has gone to meddling again, talking about my money." And yet Jesus talked a lot about money and possessions and what to do with them. In the gospels, one of every eight verses deals with this subject. Of the 38 parables of Jesus, at least a dozen pertain to money and our use of material goods. Jesus understood how important this subject was and is for people to deal with.

Well, in today's story, which probably is familiar to many of you, we find Jesus in an area of the Jerusalem temple called the Women's Court, and the disciples are there with him as well, looking around and taking in all the sights. Well, in that area of the temple, there are 13 trumpet-shaped boxes; picture French horns turned upside-down. These receptacles are where people would put their offerings to support the work and worship of the Jerusalem temple. Jesus stationed himself across from one of those boxes and did some people watching. Rich folks would come, and it was quite a show they could put on: they'd put in some large sums of coins, of course. Most of them made a big clanking sound, kind of like when you take your jar coins into the bank after a long period of time of saving them and you put them in that counting machine. Quite a racket. I'm sure everyone's heads turned. These coins that the rich brought were probably tithes: 10 percent of the income as Jewish law prescribed.

But then a poor widow came to the offering box as Jesus was watching, and deposited two coins. "Ping. Ping." Didn't sound like much in comparison to the others, but it seemed to delight Jesus. He calls his disciples over and points her out to them. "Did you see that the others gave from their abundance, but she, out of her poverty, has put everything she had, all that she had to live on? She's my gold medal winner today." She was giving sacrificially to God. She gave up what was about just enough to feed herself for that day. Now, why do you suppose Jesus bothered to point her out to his disciples and commend her to them? Because he's teaching the disciples about giving, and this woman is being used as a role model.

First of all, her giving had to be an expression of love. She must have really loved God to do what she did. Showing that love mattered more than having enough money to even feed herself. You know, I don't believe that God expects you to run out and give

everything away, I don't believe that's the point of this story or what Jesus is saying. He cares not so much about the amount of money, but about the giver's heart and attitude. One biblical commentator reflecting on this story writes,

True giving is overflow – it doesn't have to be extracted painfully from our unwilling pocketbooks. It flows out of hearts that have been warmed by the Lord's love. Try chipping ice off a glacier and you will find it a fruitless task. Allow the sun to warm the same glacier and begin to melt it, and the water will flow freely from it. So it is with Christian giving.

This woman's heart has been warmed by the love of God, and she loves God with all her heart, soul, mind, and strength, which includes her possessions. Her offering reflects a tangible, loving attitude towards God, whom she knew had loved her first. I was reminded of a story by Pastor Bob Russell that he tells about sacrificial giving.

Jackie Nelson gave a moving testimony in our church years ago that I've often repeated. She said, "I'm a single mother of three teenagers. My ex-husband doesn't help. I barely get by. We really want to do our part in the three-year building campaign so our new building can get built. But when we discussed it as a family, we realized that we can't give any more than the tithe we give. So, we decided that our gift would be to pray every day for the success of this program. Now, in the middle of the conversation and discussion, my oldest son said, 'Mom, we've got cable television. We don't have to have that.' So we've decided to give up our cable TV for three years so we can give, do our part."

Giving is about love.

It's also about faith as well, we see that today in the story. Again and again, we see Jesus impressed by people's faith in the gospel stories, don't we? And he points it out. That's what's going on here. The rich gave from their abundance, but do not sacrifice their abundance. They still have plenty to enjoy and live on as they walk away from the offering box. Ten percent of rich still leaves one quite rich. For instance, 10% of \$100,000 still leaves \$90,000 to live on, and there's not much faith needed there, right? But the poor widow shows radical trust in God to provide for her, and gives what she needed to live on – to God. And Jesus appears to be applauding her deep faith in God's providence and faithfulness as he excitedly pointed her and says to his disciples, "Mark her out. She's someone special. A role model of Christian stewardship." When I talk about that word "stewardship", that means managing the resources God's blessed you with. And Jesus seems to be saying here that there's something important for us to learn from this woman.

When I was serving congregations in Winona, Minnesota, and after Lakeland, Minnesota, there was a stewardship statement that I taught my congregation each year about giving (and whenever else I could.) It's not original. It was passed on to me, and for that, I'm most grateful because it sums this subject of stewardship and giving so well. "We give out of love to Christ in the area of our faith" is the statement. We give out of love to Christ in the area of our faith. Christian giving is not like paying dues or paying admission to a movie or sporting event or a way to save on paying taxes or fundraising to keep the lights and heat on in the building. And it's certainly not a way to earn your way into Heaven or to bribe God to pay you back with blessings tenfold. It's a personal action of giving a gift. It's a love gift to Christ Jesus – a tangible expression of our devotion to God in Christ who has rescued us and made us his own. It's all based on a personal relationship: you trust in Christ for salvation. So, I've always told people in my congregations and I'm telling you: if you don't have that relationship, don't give. It's silly to consider giving to him. You're not a part of the missionary force, you're a part of the missionary field. God's are not after your money. He's after your heart. We give out of love because our heart's been captured by his love for us. So, I want to love him back. It's a tangible way of doing that. It's a privilege and an honor.

Years ago, I came across this wonderful commentary on stewardship from a church newsletter, and I clipped it out. It goes as follows:

If I give so that I'll be rewarded, God is Santa Claus.

If I give so that I can claim an exemption on my tax form, God is a CPA.

If I give so I can impress my friends, then God is my PR agent.

If I give to avoid punishment. God is a bandit.

But if I give so that I can express my love and so others may hear the gospel. God is God.

Scripture teaches us that we love because he first loved us. It's important that we stop and consider at this point, why is Jesus even in Jerusalem at this time? It's because he's about to make an even greater sacrifice – to give up his life, to rescue you and me from sin and death. The Apostle John writes in his letter. "In this, the love of God was made manifest among us – that God sent his only son into the world so that we might live through him. And this is love. Not that we have loved God, but that he has loved us and sent his son to be the perpetuation, the sacrifice for our sins." Jesus laid down his life out of love for you and me just a few days after watching that woman. And he did it to rescue us for eternity. I invite you to ponder that and revel in it. You have been

loved! Friends, that that truth thrills my soul. Where would I be without God's love and grace showing in his son? Jesus Christ, I'd be lost. I'd be dead forever. That's why I can sing, "Oh, how I love Jesus, because he first loved me."

The stewardship statement also goes on to say "We give in the area of our faith." In other words, we give trusting in God's promises to provide for our needs, like that woman. Jesus taught us, "Look at the birds of the air and how God provides for them. Fear not, you have more value than many birds. Trust God to take care of you." Giving away my money to God says "Lord, I believe in your promises, I know you're faithful." And think of what your giving does when you give to the Lord. It brings the gospel of salvation to the world. It feeds hungry souls with the good news of God's love in Jesus Christ. I can't think of anything better to invest in, can you? I believe that Jesus is still standing over us and watching each one of us as we bring our offering. The question is, what is he seeing when he looks at us? I hope it's love and faith.

Let me close with this story about giving with real attitude. A Presbyterian missionary in Ghana told an interesting thing about the Presbyterian Church in that country. Now, the Presbyterian Church was established over 100 years ago by Scottish Presbyterians, and their worship service is very much like traditional Scottish Presbyterian services. Recently, though, they have allowed the African traditional experience into the worship service at the offering time. At the offering, they let the people dance. That's a part of the African culture and religious spiritual worship, so they let the people dance as they bring their offerings forward to the altar. And they really get down. The music is going and they individually turn it into a production as they bring that offering to the plate up front. And they take their time. The offering could go on for a long time because they're dancing all the way down that aisle. "It's the only time in the service when they really smile," the missionary said. How interesting. The only time in the service when they smile is when they're giving their money. Makes me wonder if that poor widow was smiling that day as Jesus was watching.

So, the next time the offering plate comes around and you're putting in your offering envelope, or you're at home writing that check for the offering, or setting up that automatic account with the church, or bringing that annual stewardship pledge to your church so it can do its ministry of bringing the Gospel of Christ to the world, I encourage you to do it with a smile. Enjoy it. Make your giving a time of personal worship, which declares, "I love you, Lord. I love you." Amen.