

**First Presbyterian Church**  
**Luke 21:1-4, “Prepared in Worship: Offering”**  
**by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/13/2017**

Imagine that your neighbor, who is not affiliated with a local church,  
strikes up a conversation with you about First Presbyterian Church.

Your neighbor says,

“Do they expect you to give money when you go to that church?

Because I can’t stand the way institutional churches  
coerce people to give money.”

What would you say?

Let’s say you respond like this,

“Well, giving is an important part of being part of the church,  
but I certainly don’t feel coerced.

I’d say people give what they feel comfortable giving  
and we trust that God will provide what we need.”

Sounds like a good answer, right?

Well, it is...but it misses the real point of your neighbor’s comment.

She is not really concerned about money.

Giving money is an expression of something much deeper  
that she is afraid of – institutional religion.

We live in a time when if there’s anything that’s agreed upon,  
it’s that our spirituality is more important than our religion.

Government dysfunction and mistrust is symptomatic.

What do Republicans and Democrats have in common these days?

They both desperately want to shed their ties to what is known as  
“the establishment” and instead ride the crest of this wave  
people are calling “populism.”

Of course they put their own spin on things – not all populism  
looks like Donald Trump’s version either on the right or on the left.

The point is simply that things associated with  
institutional life have been trashed for a long time.

Institutional life (both in government and in the church)  
has come to be seen as manipulative, extraneous, antiquated,

or needless trappings of a bygone age  
can be automatically dispensed with.

And so it is that practices like financial giving fall by the wayside.

But in writing off such practices it's ironic  
that rather than finding ourselves

*free in a wondrous spiritual field of wild-flowers and waters,*  
we find ourselves more enslaved  
to the idols of our day than ever before.

I actually agree our spirituality *is* more important than our religion.

But I push back against those who move from there toward  
a disembodied faith that has no tangible expression or community.

Contributing our wealth of talents, energies, presence, and financial resources  
are practices are the very things that free us  
from our bondage to the world  
and put us in the way of God's grace  
so that we can live joyful lives in Christ.

Today we are considering *offering*.

The concept of offering resources to God goes back to the book of Genesis,  
where both Abraham and Jacob gave to God a tenth  
of whatever they received.

These "tithes" were freely offered, not a result of God's command.

In the book of Leviticus,  
this pattern that began with the patriarchs  
became part of the civil law for all Israelites.

The book of Proverbs gives us some insight into the inner logic of tithing.

**Pro. 3:9** - *Honor the LORD with your possessions,  
and with the firstfruits of all your increase;  
so your barns may be filled with plenty,  
and your vats will overflow with new wine.*

Proverbs are not to be read like a story,  
but they are set out intentionally in groups with themes and a flow.  
And the context of this particular proverb is very important—  
before this promise of increase is laid out there,  
the teacher has already set out several preliminary steps  
on the way of wisdom:

vs. 3 -- Let love and faithfulness never leave you

vs. 5 – Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own  
understanding

vs. 6 – in all your ways submit to him

vs. 7 – do not be wise in your own eyes, but fear the Lord

With that as a foundation, we then receive the instruction to

“Honor the LORD with your possessions,  
so your barns may be filled with plenty.”

Why does this context matter?

Because a person who has submitted to the teachings in  
the previous verses is a person with trustworthy character.

They will use their resources in keeping with  
the purposes of God in the world.

Commentator Bruce Waltke puts it this way:

**“The LORD promises his worshipping covenant partner prosperity  
because such a human partner can be trusted  
to use their increased wealth to help the needy.”**

How many of us think of increased prosperity in that way?

If you got a \$5,000 raise, how many of you would think,  
“Fantastic—God is trusting me with this  
so that I can help others who are in need?”

It's a very challenging line.

If we read Proverbs 3:9-10 out of context, we miss that.

But within the context of the other teachings,  
barns filled with plenty are surely not something  
for this person to reserve for their own comfort—  
that would be trusting in their own strength  
and understanding.

In the New Testament, the concept of sacrificial giving  
to further God's work is strongly upheld.

The particular amount of 10% is neither mandated nor set aside.

Since the Law has been perfectly fulfilled in Christ,  
we are no longer under it.

Instead, as the Spirit makes us like Christ,  
then we graciously take on the character and behaviors of God—  
and generous giving is certainly one of God's characteristics.

Therefore the civic and ceremonial laws of Israel  
are not things we maintain,  
while the moral Law of the 10 commandments  
(which reveal God's character),  
are clearly part of God's will for his people.

As an example of this,  
Jesus showed that merely keeping  
the civil laws of the Old Testament  
did not secure right relationship with God.

Matthew 23:23

**“Woe to you, teachers of the Law and Pharisees, you hypocrites!  
You give a tenth of your spices — mint, dill and cumin.  
But you have neglected the more important  
matters of the law — justice,  
mercy and faithfulness.**

**You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”**

It's not that tithing is bad—it's just way less important than the character of your heart.

That leads us to the story we read earlier from Luke 21.

This is a very brief story that is fairly well known, but actually has considerable depth to it.

In fact, I'm going to share with you two radically different interpretations of the passage, and let you wrestle with which approach you feel is most faithful. I guarantee you that whichever interpretation you go with, there is a significant challenge for you.

The story begins with Jesus and his disciples in the Jerusalem Temple courts.

He's been interacting with a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, and a crowd of people seems to have gathered around to listen in on their conversation.

After Jesus finishes his interaction with these leaders, he looks up and sees rich people giving to the temple treasury.

The temple treasury was a square court 200 feet by 200 feet within the temple bounds.

Inside this court there were 13 large metal containers that were narrow at the top and wide at the bottom, so that they were shaped like trumpets, and in fact they were called trumpets.

Each container had an inscription on it indicating the kind of offering that would be collected in that trumpet.

Nine were for collection of what was legally due from worshippers, and the other four were for voluntary contributions.

The rich people Jesus sees would have been very visible in the court,  
as would the container they were placing their gifts in.

We don't learn from Luke which category of offering the rich  
were giving, and we don't learn how much they gave.

The detail Luke offers was that what they gave came out of "their abundance,"  
or out of "all their wealth."

At the same time, Jesus sees a poor widow. We do know what she puts in –  
two small copper coins called "lepta."

A worker in those days would be paid around 130 lepta  
for a day's work. This woman gives 2 lepta.

In our day, that's like \$1.25.

Seeing all of this, Jesus offers an insight to his disciples  
and anyone else who was listening in:

"This poor widow has put in more than all the others.

All these people gave out of their wealth;

but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

The first interpretation of the story understands Jesus as making a comparison  
between the rich and the widow that goes like this:

The rich gave well, but the widow gave better because her offering  
required more personal sacrifice.

Surely the sound of the coins deposited in the trumpets by the rich was greater  
than the sound of those two lepta.

But \$1.25 could buy the widow a bit of bread, or maybe some soup.

It was all she had to live on. Even so, her love for God,  
the dedication of her faith was so great that she gave  
out of her poverty.

Most of us say, "Well, this year we've made so many thousand dollars,  
we had to pay for rent or mortgage, we had health insurance costs,  
there's taxes to be paid, there is food to be eaten,

there are gifts and vacations.  
When it's all said and done, we might have \$1,000 or \$10,000  
or a few hundred dollars to give toward God's work through the church."

But imagine this. Imagine beginning your evaluation of things by saying,  
"I'm going to offer as much as we can, and trust God to figure out the rest.  
Whatever we have, whatever we can get our hands on, we're giving it.  
The rent, the mortgage, health insurance, even food –  
that stuff will all be figured out later."

Can you imagine? If you really are trying to imagine this,  
I bet your anxiety levels are rising just thinking about it.

Now, Jesus' point is not that everyone should give everything that they have.  
Rather, his point is that the value of your gift isn't measured as much  
by the number of digits on the check, but by the level of impact  
it has on your own approach to life.

Giving out of your wealth is good, but it's also perfunctory. It doesn't necessarily  
change who you are. But this poor widow gave in a way that dramatically  
changed her available resources for the challenges she faced in life.

Our summer series is focusing on why we do what we do in worship,  
and how these practices shape us for real life, everyday life.

According to our first interpretation, we collect an offering both to support  
the operation and ministry of the church, but also to cause the giver  
to re-evaluate what matters in our lives,  
to make us express with our financial decisions  
the faith that we express in our worship.

Offering shouldn't just be about, "how much do I need to give  
in order to make the things that I like happen."  
That's simply shopping at church.

The insight of the widow's gift is that when we collect the offering, we're saying, "my life is going to need to be ordered differently as a result of this gift."

Challenging? It's challenging for me.

Now we come to the second interpretation.

Remember the conversation Jesus was having  
with the Sadducees in the passage before this one?

What Jesus said at the end was, "Watch out for the teachers of the law  
with flowing robes who love to be greeted with respect  
and have the best seats, and be honored at banquets.

*They devour widows houses  
and for a show make lengthy prayers."*

Did you hear that? The religious leaders, according to Jesus',  
eat up the homes of widows. A terrifying and disturbing image.

What if Jesus was comparing  
the teachers of the law who make much of themselves  
to the rich who are giving out of their wealth in the court that day?  
And what if he was comparing the widows whose homes are devoured  
to the widow who was giving all that she had that day?

If we read Jesus' teaching at the end of the last passage  
together with Jesus' observation in the passage we're looking at  
we arrive at a very different interpretation of the widow and her gift.

If we emphasize the effect of religious elites  
and the "devouring" of widows' homes,  
then the widow's offering is not an example to be followed!

Instead, it is an object lesson used by Jesus to further condemn a system  
that benefits the rich (who give out of their wealth)  
and still expects a widow who has almost nothing  
to give all that she has.



In some way, these privileged people were feeding themselves  
on the little bit that was available to others.

It doesn't take too much imagination to draw similar connections  
in our own society today, and I'm not just talking at large,  
I'm talking about inside the church.

With this interpretation, the challenge is not to give sacrificially,  
but to take up an offering that genuinely benefits those who are in need,  
rather than fattening those at the top at the expense  
of the good-hearted giving of disadvantaged people.

This second interpretation is a challenge to our institution and our leadership,  
and a call for accountability in our finances.

Here we connect more directly with the concerns of our neighbors  
who have become disillusioned with institutional life and include  
the church in the "problem" category, rather than "solution."  
Is it possible that Jesus was one of those people as well?

Is that challenging?  
It is to me.

Which interpretation do you choose?

I'm here to say, I don't care. But I hope that whichever you go with, you act on it.  
If the widow's offering is an example of deep sacrifice for the purposes  
of God, then find the places in your life and in your budget  
that you can make a deeper sacrifice.

And if the widow's offering is an example of religious exploitation of the poor  
for the benefit of the rich, then follow the money you give.

Look at the budget of our church as a moral document.  
Does it reflect our values?

Does our expenditure on staffing and our building  
translate into good news for the widow of our day?

For the migrant worker of our day?

I pray that it does, and I work with that goal in mind.

But I'm not so naïve as to think that I'm exempt from this critique.

I hope you'll find some connections between Jesus' commentary on the rich and the poor offering their money and this quote from Jeffrey Greenman in Pedagogy of Praise:

"The weekly practice of offering our money to God's service trains us in the peculiar habits of whole-life discipleship.

We learn that what we do with our money is really a matter of worship, and indicator of our allegiance to God.

In fact, one of the best barometers of our spiritual health is what we do with our money in all areas of life.

And if that is true, then what we do with our money on Sunday has tremendous significance."

Again, the significance is not merely with regard to the kinds of staffing and ministries and building improvements that we have at the church.

The significance is also in you.

We take time to give our money because doing so with integrity shapes our personal lives and our institutional life in the likeness of Christ.