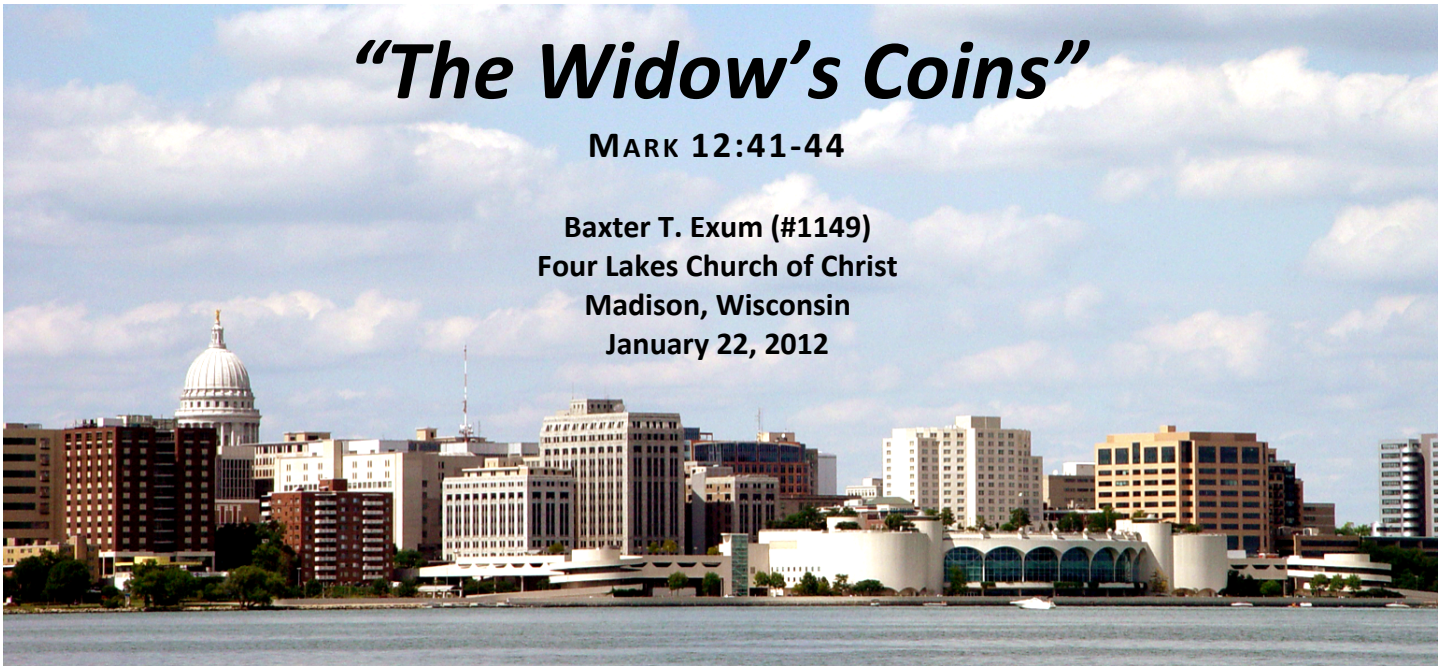


“The Widow’s Coins”

MARK 12:41-44

**Baxter T. Exum (#1149)
Four Lakes Church of Christ
Madison, Wisconsin
January 22, 2012**



For just a few moments, I would like for us to consider the value of a penny. Certainly, we understand that the value of money changes over time, and this is certainly true with the penny. Some of us are perhaps old enough to remember when we could buy a piece of gum for a penny, but that is no longer the case! We go to checkout at a restaurant these days, and we no longer see gum for a penny. Instead, we see three for a quarter, and that is a pretty good deal. Perhaps you have seen the machines at the zoo or maybe in some museums, where you put your own penny in there, and it will smash it for you—you crank the handle, and the machine makes some kind of imprint. Well, as most of us know, those machines now require at least 50 cents for the privilege of smashing a penny! The value of a penny has changed over the years, even to the point where some people will no longer stop to pick one up off of the sidewalk. In our family, we stop. There is no shame in picking up a coin. Someone pointed out to me several years ago that our coins in this nation are still printed with God’s name on one side. So, with that in mind, I will always pick up a coin in order to keep God’s name from being disrespected.

Of course, in our nation, there has been quite a discussion concerning whether we should continue making pennies. The last I heard, it costs the government more than a penny to make a penny! So, as you can imagine, that cannot go on forever. Back in 1982, they started using zinc instead of copper. But, as I understand it, even with that change in order to save money, the metal and certainly the labor involved in making a penny is now worth more than a penny. Times have changed!

As I was preparing for this lesson, I went online to try to see whether I could buy something for a penny. And yes, there were a few Amazon Kindle books online for a penny, but I’m not sure whether I would really want to use my time reading a book that only cost a penny! But beyond that, I remembered something my son taught me a few years ago. You know on Amazon when you make an order and you get free Super Saver Shipping on orders of at least \$25? What do you do when you just miss it? What do you do when the order comes to \$24.99, for example? Do you pay \$7-8 in shipping? No! In fact, there is a website that will find you some useless little item to just barely get you up to the minimum for free shipping. If you want to find it yourself, I would suggest that you do a Google search for “Amazon cheap fillers,” and they will find you something on Amazon that is just cheap enough to get you the shipping. And as of Friday afternoon, the cheapest thing on Amazon.com is a “3 cent nylon cheese head slotted metric machine screw.” So, if your Amazon order were to come to \$24.97, you could also order that 3-cent screw and get the free shipping. And

from there, they have pages upon pages of insignificant little items, arranged in order of cost. But I guess the point is: Other than that, few people truly appreciate the value of a penny.

This morning, however, I would like for us to consider a scene from the life of Christ, where the Lord taught a valuable lesson based on two small copper coins that when added together still do not add up to the value of a single penny. I am referring to the contribution made by a poor widow in Mark 12 (p. 1583).

So that we understand what the Lord is talking about in this passage, so that we can try to see what He saw, I would like to pass around a museum-quality replica of the coin that He refers to (in Greek) as the **“lepton.”** That word goes back to a Greek word referring to something “thin, fine, small, or light,” something that is like a sliver, something peeled or scrapped off of something else. The root of the word literally refers to a scale, as in the scale of a fish. By the way, as you can hear, the word “lepton” is based on the same root as the word “leprosy.” We remember that leprosy was a disease that appeared as little scales on the skin. So, if you can imagine the scale of a fish, or if you can picture peeling a carrot, if you can imagine a coin with roughly that thickness, that is what we are talking about this morning. The lepton, in fact, is commonly understood as probably being the smallest, the lowest denomination coin ever minted, at any time in history, by any nation. It was so small, in fact, that it could not handle the impression of a face. You know that most coins have the face of a king or some kind of ruler. The lepton, though, was unique, in that you could not make the recognizable impression of a face on it (at least with technology as it was 2000 years ago). It could only handle a very basic design or pattern. It was that small. It was so small and so thin, in fact, that very few actually exist today. The lepton was literally just a sliver of copper, and over time, most of them have basically just disintegrated. Well, when I pulled it out of my drawer the other day, I thought to myself, “Well, it’s not that small.” But then I pulled out a penny. A penny, our smallest coin, is several times larger than a lepton, and from what I have read, the museum replica is probably quite a bit thicker than the original lepton—they had to make it thicker just to stamp it legibly on both sides. So, when I pass around the lepton this morning, I will also pass around a penny, and I would encourage you to very carefully compare the two.

So that we understand how important this account really is, I should mention that all of this takes place at some point during the very last week of our Lord’s life, one of the last times that the Lord would ever teach His disciples in public as a group. The passage is found in Mark 12:41-44. There is a parallel passage in Luke 21, but the accounts are virtually identical. We might refer to Luke’s account a time or two, but our thoughts this morning will be focused on Mark 12:41-44. If you will, let us all show our respect for God’s word, starting in verse 41,

⁴¹ And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. ⁴³ Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; ⁴⁴ for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.

This morning, as we allow ourselves to be changed by God’s word, I would like to point out several very basic ideas, ideas that will hopefully deepen our love for God.

- I. **And the first very basic idea I would like for us to consider this morning is the fact that JESUS PAID VERY CAREFUL ATTENTION TO WHAT THIS WOMAN WAS DOING.**

Have you ever spent any time people-watching? Have you ever gone to the mall or maybe to the airport, and have you ever just sat there for a while observing what people are doing? Sometimes we go through this life just focused on our list of things to do. Sometimes we go through life looking at nothing but the phone in front of our own face. But there is a value to taking some time to notice what is going on around us, and that is what it seems that Jesus does here. In verse 41, we find that Jesus ***“sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury.”*** In the temple, there was an area where the people could donate, and as I understand it, there were several large containers for the various funds. We have a description from the First Century concerning the mouths of these containers as being shaped like “trumpets.” I am not exactly sure what that means. In my mind, I picture a large spittoon—a large metal urn with a rather narrow neck, which is then flared at the top. In my own mind, I think about those things they used to have at the mall where you could launch a coin down a ramp, and it would go around, and around, and around, until it finally fell in at the bottom. That is probably not the way it really was, but that is the way I see it! The point is: If you had a really big contribution, it was possible to make a big deal out of it.

But then we find that Jesus sits down with His disciples, and as He sits there, He watches. He observes. He pays attention to the giving that is going on. Now most of us would probably be at least a little bit concerned by this. Today, of course, we are observed a lot more than we think we are being observed. It has been estimated that the average American is caught on camera an average of 70 times every day. Here in Madison, that is probably a low estimate. Just walking into a discount store, we find ourselves being recorded on dozens of cameras. We fill up on gas—cameras. We go to the bank—cameras. We walk into a restaurant—cameras. It makes us a little uneasy, sometimes, to think about people watching us. But here we find that Jesus is paying special attention to people as they are giving. And again, wouldn't that be just a little bit strange? Imagine if the one who passes us the basket this morning stares at what we are doing. Imagine if he were to make a note of it. Imagine if he were to maybe unfold the check or unroll the bills, and imagine if he were to make some kind of a comment about the amount that we have given. We might say, “That is an invasion of my privacy!” We might say, “That is not fair!” And yet that is pretty much what the Lord is doing here. He is paying attention.

However, let us understand that God has always paid attention to sacrifices that are offered. This goes all the way back to the sacrifices given by Cain and Abel. God paid attention. Abel's sacrifice was pleasing, and Cain's was not. In the early church, when the sacrifices were more financial in nature, God also paid attention. We remember what happened with Ananias and Sapphira. They lied to God about the amount of their contribution, and God killed them right there on the spot for how they had conspired together in their giving. God, therefore, pays attention to giving as an act of worship.

But even more than paying attention to what can be seen with the eye, God also pays attention to what is going on behind the scenes. Did you notice that Jesus somehow knew that this woman had been married, but now she was a widow? How did He know that? He also noticed that she was poor. Okay, well, He could have known that because of what she was wearing. But also notice that Jesus knew that this woman had just given everything she had to live on. How in the world did He know that? It seems, therefore, that Jesus knew everything about this woman, even more than could be seen on the outside.

As we bring this over into our situation today, let us take a few moments to remind each other from this passage that Jesus still pays attention to our giving. And the Lord knows not only what we give, but He also knows everything about us. He knows what we are going through. He knows our financial situation. He knows our struggles. He knows what we are thinking. He knows our concerns about the future. Jesus knows everything about us. As I was preparing for this lesson, I was reminded that Jesus also knows what else we

spend our money on. Is that not an accurate statement? Several days ago, I logged in to our account history and printed up just a summary of pretty much everything our family has spent over the past 30 days. We use a debit card for just about everything, so it is pretty much all there—the \$4.63 that my wife spent at McDonald’s on her way to work the other morning, the \$57.37 we spent at Copp’s last week, the \$33 for gas at PDQ, the \$7.88 for light bulbs at Home Depot, the \$17 we spent on the movie, the \$16 we spent on popcorn, the \$44 we sent to MG&E. It is all there—more than 100 transactions over the past 30 days. I know we sometimes think this stuff is private, but it is not. In fact, it is safe to say that God understands our finances even better than we do, just as He also understood what was going on in the life of this widow. First of all, then, when it comes to our giving, let us understand that the Lord is paying attention. He pays attention to the act of giving itself, and He also pays attention to everything else.

II. **There is a second very basic idea we need to notice in this passage, and that is: THE AMOUNT THAT WE GIVE IS NOT ALL THAT MATTERS.**

In fact, it would be safe to say that when it comes to our giving, things are not always as they seem. ****PPT**** Perhaps some of you have seen a few of the pictures that have been going around the Internet lately—upside down pictures that have been altered just a little bit. Most of these look pretty normal, right? But, they have been altered in a way so that when you turn them right side up, the problems become rather obvious. Perhaps we could say something similar about our giving. What may look good with one quick glance may not look so good when viewed from a different angle. And so with that in mind, let us please notice that the amount of our giving is not all that really matters.

And for this, we really need to look very carefully at the context, the verses that come right before what we just read. We started in Mark 12:41, but we need to go back to verse 38. Let us please notice what leads up to the lesson from the widow’s two coins. Starting in verse 38, the Bible says,

³⁸ In His teaching He was saying: “Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places,³⁹ and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets,⁴⁰ who devour widows’ houses, and for appearance’s sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation.

And then He sat down to observe the treasury and saw a poor widow put in all that she had to live on! What a contrast here! The amount that we give is not all that matters. On one hand, we have the wealthy religious leaders making a big deal out of their huge contributions, and then on the other hand we have this poor widow putting in all that she had to live on! On one hand we have many rich people putting in **“large sums”** (according to Mark), and on the other hand we have a widow putting in two of the smallest coins known to man! From a worldly point of view, the rich were giving much more, but things are not always as they seem, because when it comes to God, the amount that we give is not all that matters. Yes, Jesus notices WHAT we give, but He also notices HOW we give. We remember what the Lord said in Matthew 6:2, **“So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.”** Yes, they might have given to the poor, and that is a good thing, but they did it in the wrong way. They did it with the wrong attitude. They did it with the wrong motive.

God, therefore, looks at the gift, and then He calculates its value using heaven’s standards, because, as Jesus said, **“Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury.”** Notice: Her gift was **“more.”** Her gift was larger than all the others. God, therefore, considers our ability. God considers

our willingness. God looks at the heart. This woman's gift had value beyond dollars. This woman's gift had value that could not be calculated by human standards. There is no button on a calculator for this. It was a sacrifice.

In fact, it might be accurate to say that God not only looks at the amount, but He pays special attention to what we have left. He pays special attention to the heart. He notices what we are holding back. He notices what we think as we give. As Paul said in 2 Corinthians 9:7, ***"Each one must do just as he has purposed in his heart, not grudgingly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."*** God looks at the heart. A week ago, our family wrote what we consider to be a rather large check made out to the United States Treasury. For those who are considered to be self-employed, for those whose employers do not withhold taxes from each paycheck, the government says that you must mail in your estimated taxes four times throughout the year. That check was due this past Tuesday. And you know, when we write that check, the IRS does not care about my heart. The federal government does not care whether I write that check cheerfully. The Social Security Administration does not care whether that check is a sacrifice for me. All they care about is the amount. All they care about is whether that check clears the bank. But when it comes to our weekly contribution, the amount is NOT all that matters. When it comes to our weekly contribution, our hearts must be involved in that sacrifice. According to God's word, our weekly contribution must be thought out, it must come from the heart. Otherwise, it is actually possible to offend God with our gift. It is possible to offend God with a LARGE gift. As the Lord said, some people gave ***"out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty."*** And this is what really impressed the Lord. She was not giving her leftovers, but she was giving out of her poverty.

This week, then, I would encourage all of us to take a few moments to think about our giving. Let us sit down with our families and have a discussion. Are we giving from the heart? Are we giving sacrificially? That is, what are we giving up so that we can give as we should? Are we giving cheerfully? And I will make another plug for the kids here: Parents, if you are not giving your young children an allowance, start immediately, even if it's only \$1. But do not give it as a dollar—give it as coins, so that the kids can make their own decision concerning what they will do with that money. Years ago, we made the decision that we would give our children a dollar for every year they are old. That way, there were automatic increases built in. That sounded great when they were 1 and 4. Of course, now they are 11 and 14! But it is so important that kids learn this from an early age—not only how to handle their money, not only how to save, but especially the importance of giving as they should. So, first of all, God pays attention to our giving, and secondly, the actual dollar amount is not all that matters.

III. As we close, let us please notice one other very basic idea in this little paragraph, and that is: THIS WOMAN'S GIVING WAS TRULY AN ACT OF FAITH.

In verse 44, we find that this woman ***"...out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."*** Literally, she put in her "holos + bios," her ***"whole life."*** We know the word "bios," we see it in English as the basis for our word "biology," the study of life. When this woman put those two small coins in the temple treasury, she put in her ***"whole life."*** She put in everything she had to live on.

And what makes this even more dramatic for me, at least, is that this woman had two coins! In other words, it wasn't as if she had only one coin, where she had to decide between giving one or giving nothing, but with two coins the decision becomes even more meaningful. After all, with two coins, she could have given one and kept one, and that would have been amazing. To only have two coins and to give one would be a rate of 50%. How many of us give 50% of everything that we own? That right there would have been impressive. That

would have caught the Lord's attention. But as it is, she gave both coins—100%, her whole life, all that she had to live on.

As I read this account, I'm a little bit curious about what happens next, aren't you? When we leave here this morning, many of us will go out to eat somewhere. The rest of us will go to various homes to share in some delicious food. But what did this woman do for lunch that day? What happened after this? I don't know. As far as we know from the Scriptures, she gave all that she had to live on. Do you think that this woman starved to death? As far as the text itself is concerned, we do not know. However, knowing what we know about the Lord, I do not think that this woman starved to death. We remember what King David wrote in Psalm 37:25, "***I have been young and now I am old, yet I have not seen the righteous forsaken or his descendants begging bread.***" I would like to imagine that this was a turning point in this woman's life. Perhaps she found some way to make a living. Perhaps she found a husband. Any number of things could have happened. But what we do know is that this woman's giving was an act of deep faith.

Can you imagine those wealthy men counting the collection at the end of that day? As they tallied all of those large, gold coins, and then the silver, and then all of the various sizes and denominations—at some point they would have come down to those little slivers of copper—coins so small that they were named for the scales on a fish, coins so small that they were hardly worth counting...and yet they were counted in heaven as being the greatest contribution made on that day.

Who will give the most to the Lord's work here in Madison during 2012? I do not know. I have nothing to do with counting the weekly contribution. But I do know that the one who gives the most will be the one who sacrifices the most. Let us, then, consider it a great blessing to support the Lord's work, and let us have faith (as this woman did) that God will take care of our needs. The widow's gift was an act of faith.

Conclusion:

I am looking forward to meeting this woman someday! Because of her example, I know that Jesus pays attention to our giving. Because of her example, I know that the amount we give is not all that matters. And because of her example, I know that our giving is really an act of faith. And all of this for less than a penny!

If you are not yet a Christian, we as a congregation would like to take yet another opportunity to invite you to obey the good news. The good news is that Jesus died for our sins. We accept His sacrifice by turning our lives around, by turning away from sin. And then in the ultimate act of faith, we put our trust in the blood of Christ as we allow ourselves to be briefly buried with the Lord in baptism. At that point we are born into the family of God. If you have any questions or concerns, let us know. If you have something we need to pray about as a congregation, we would invite you to write it down and bring it to the front. But if you are ready to become a Christian right now, you can let us know as we sing this next song. Let's stand and sing...

To comment on this lesson: foullakeschurch@gmail.com