

November 15, 2015

Stewardship Sunday 2015

*Money Talks*

Luke 21:1-4

**Opening Words:** Did you know Jesus spoke more about money than any other topic? The Master spoke more about money than he did heaven or hell. He spoke more about money than he did love or forgiveness. He spoke more about money than he did salvation or prayer. Jesus spoke more about money than any other topic because money is important. It affects every corner of your life. Generally speaking, we only spend money on the things that are important to us. For example, I have spent a small fortune on my children, but I have never spent a single dollar on tattoos. That leads us to two important questions: How important is Jesus to you? How important is this church to you?

In today's scripture lesson, we are introduced to a nameless woman, who challenges our priorities. Annually, she reminds us that Christian stewardship is not what is given; Christian stewardship is what is kept. Her story is found in two of the four Gospels, Mark and Luke. Today, we will hear Luke's version, Luke 21:1-4. My message for today is called *Money Talks*.

**Luke 21:1-4** <sup>1</sup> As Jesus looked up, he saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. <sup>2</sup> He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> "Truly I tell you," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. <sup>4</sup> All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

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I love this story: A rich man was determined to give his mother a truly unique birthday present. He read of a bird who had a vocabulary of 4000 words, could speak in numerous languages and sing 3 operatic arias. He immediately bought the bird for \$50,000 and had it delivered to his mother. The next day, he phoned her to see if she had received the bird. "What did you think of the bird?" he asked. She replied, "It was delicious." That is a story of waste. How much money have you wasted in your life?

Several weeks ago, I was outside of Chicago. I am required annually to do a certain amount of continuing education. This year, I attended the General Board of Pensions' Benefits Academy in Bloomingdale. I was there to learn about my pension. It doesn't seem possible that I am becoming preoccupied with my pension, but I will be 59 years old next May. Let me say this clearly, I am not interested in retiring, but learning about my pension seemed wise. Can I be completely honest with you? I am extremely uncomfortable with handling money. Everyone close to me knows that is true. I am hard on myself when it comes to money and have tarnished many family gatherings for this reason. I learned in Bloomingdale, I haven't done everything wrong. As a matter of

fact, I have done some good things with my money. Years ago, I learned three things I have never forgotten. First, every month, I should save for retirement and pay off my credit cards in full. Second, money makes a horrible master but a wonderful slave. Third, satisfaction does not come from possessions; satisfaction comes from experiences. If you can agree with those three simple rules, say, **"Amen!"** With this as a background let us look at this morning's Gospel lesson.

We are in the twenty-first chapter of Luke. It is important that you know it is late in Jesus's earthly ministry. By this chapter, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday and cleansed the temple. The only things that remain are the events of Thursday and Friday of Holy Week. In other words, Jesus's time is running out. Every word counts and not a single one can be wasted. Of all things Jesus could have mentioned, he mentions money.

The story is a familiar one. Jesus is standing near the temple, as people gave their offering. In our time the plate is passed and the offering is hidden in a white envelope. To ensure privacy most envelopes are turned upside down. That means you are ashamed of what you give. In Jesus's day, the offering was more public. There were thirteen large coned-shaped boxes to collect your donation. There were no secrets. Everyone knew how much was given. Every generation assumes the rich give the largest amounts; the poorest give the smallest. That assumption is often wrong. Sometimes the rich are rich because they spend or give reluctantly. Through human eyes, the biggest givers give the most money. Through the eyes of God, the biggest givers sacrifice the most. There is a world of difference between the two. That is the case of the woman in the text. Through the eyes of mankind she gave next to nothing, two copper coins. It is a smaller amount than two pennies; it is more like two Russian rubles. Do you know what two Russian rubles are worth? It comes out to be three-tenths of a single cent. How many bills can you pay with three-tenths of a cent? The answer is, none. Through human eyes she gave nothing. However, through the eyes of God, she gave the most because she gave all she had. In verse four, Jesus said she gave all she had. No one can question her devotion. That line fills me with shame; I always keep some for myself. How does this nameless woman make you feel? Yet, in this short story of four verses, we are reminded of three important facts about money. If you are ready to look at those three facts, say, **"Amen!"**

### **Money is Important!**

This is fact number one: Money is important! The widow gave money. Jesus would not have noticed her if her money didn't matter. Don't tell me money doesn't matter. Money does matter! Just try to live without money and see how your life changes. In homes where there is a lack of money, or in homes where the money is mismanaged, everything is a struggle and everyone is unhappy. Guess what? The same thing is true at church. This is the problem.

There is not a topic in the church today more sensitive than money. It is true of both the unchurched and the churched. Regularly, I read articles about why people don't go to church. They are all different but they are all the same. AmericanPreachers.com has a list of why people don't go to church. It is typical. According to them, people don't go to church because:

1. Church is negative
2. Church is boring
3. Church is exclusive
4. Church is homophobic
5. Church is organized religion
6. Church is limiting
7. Church is time consuming
8. Churches are always asking for money

The unchurched don't want to hear about money! However, the churched, the people who do come to church, don't want to hear about money either. Experience has taught me why. Regular attenders don't want to hear about money because they like their church being poor. It is an excellent excuse for doing nothing. Try to start a new ministry to help someone in need, and everyone cries "poor". Try to raise money for ourselves, and the money can't be counted fast enough. You know it is true. People who love their church don't want to hear about money because they like a poor church. They are more interested in being comfortable than being a comfort to others. Money is such a sensitive topic! Can I be honest with you?

As a pastor, I have never struggled with raising money. I don't really care about what the unchurched say. They will just find another excuse not to come. Like, the minister is too handsome (smile). I don't really care what regular attenders say about money. I am not an activities director of some social club, where everyone must be happy. God has called me into the ministry and I only care about one person's opinion, Jesus. The Master spoke more about money than any other topic. Why? Because, money is important. The widow gave money. If you will admit money is important, say, "**Amen!**"

### **Money is Limited!**

This is fact number two: Money is limited. The widow gave it all. In 1985, Evelyn Adams won the New Jersey Lottery, twice. Her total winnings came to \$5.4 million. Today, her money is gone and she lives in a trailer. Adams said, "*I won the American dream but I lost it, too. It was a very hard fall. It's called rock bottom. Everybody wanted my money. Everybody had their hand out. I never learned the simple word in the English language that could have saved me -- 'No.' I wish I had the chance to do it all over again. I'd be much smarter about it now.*" By the way, she didn't just give it away. She also lost one million dollars at the slot machines in Atlantic City. Is anyone here going to Hollywood Gaming after church today, hoping to hit it big? I hope you never forget this fact. It doesn't matter how much money you win or earn in life; it is possible to run out. Money is limited. How comfortable are you with handling your personal finances?

If that question makes you think, say, **"Amen!"**

### **Money is Revealing!**

This is fact number three: Money is revealing! October 13<sup>th</sup> of this year was not a good day for Lamar Odom. You remember the story. He was having a bad time. He was in the middle of a divorce to Khloe Kardashian. He found himself at the Love Ranch. It is a brothel in Crystal, Nevada. While at the ranch, he spent \$75,000 in one day. You can get a lot at the ranch for \$75,000, including a surplus of Viagra and cocaine. Maybe he had too much fun? By the end of the day, he suffered several strokes and kidney failure. His worst mistake was marrying a Kardashian. Strange things happen to men who marry Kardashian woman. If you don't believe me then ask the person formerly known as Bruce Jenner. If you had an extra \$75,000, what would you do with it? Lamar made some bad choices and revealed to the world his true character. Money is revealing.

The numbers don't lie. According to this year's giving, here at Western Reserve:

12% (33 families) of us don't care at all. They have not given a single dollar to this ministry.

33% (90 families) are curious about this ministry. They have given between .01 and \$9.99 a week or less to this ministry

18% (50 families) are interested in this ministry. They have given between \$10.00 and \$19.99 a week to this ministry

15% (40 families) have given between \$20.00 and \$39.99 a week to this ministry

12% (34 families) have given between \$40.00 and \$74.99 a week to this ministry

10% (29 families) give more than \$75.00 per to this ministry

All of those numbers are based on 266 giving units, over the first 39 weeks of this year.

Do you remember the Gospel reading for today, the widow's offering? Real Christian stewardship is not what you give; real Christian stewardship is what is kept for yourself. How much money do you spend on yourself? Never forget, we spend our money on what is important to us! How important is Jesus to you? How important is this church to you? Money is revealing. And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**

When I was in seminary, I was more than a poor seminary student. I was a destitute seminary student. Through my years in Kentucky, I had all kinds of jobs. For a while, I cleaned office buildings late at night. For a while, I worked at the local newspaper. For a while, I worked maintenance at the school. Through all those years, I served as the pastor of the Pleasant Grove Christian Church in Lancaster, Kentucky. The church was dominated by one family, the Sharps. They hired me to work on their tobacco farm.

The farm was owned by the father, Allen. The farm was run by his three sons, Horace, Fred and Lee. I know more about burley tobacco than anyone else here today. I have seeded tobacco beds, pulled tobacco plants, set tobacco plants, sprayed tobacco plants, cut tobacco plants, hung tobacco plants and stripped tobacco plants. Several times, I went to market to sell the tobacco. It was hard work. Prior to the Civil War, slaves did that work. In my time, they hired poor destitute seminary students to do the work. I learned a great deal about burley tobacco, but one thing still amazes me. All the money that it took to raise the tobacco for the year was borrowed. They hoped to pay it back once the crop was sold. On the Sharp farm, all that borrowed money was held in a checking account with a green checkbook cover.

I worked hard but I was still destitute. One semester, I couldn't pay my bill. I think I still owed \$300 from the past semester. If I didn't pay it off, I couldn't register for the next semester. There was no one to call for help. I couldn't call my parents or anyone else. They didn't hear my calling into the ministry. They thought I was making a mistake. I couldn't call anyone within the United Methodist Church because they hadn't accepted me yet. There was no one; I was alone. To this day, I still don't know how the Sharps found out, I never said a word. One day after church, Horace stayed behind. I was locking the door of that ancient church, when Horace said, "I want to give you something, boy." He pulled out that green checkbook and pulled out a check. He handed it to me and said, "Here." It was made out to me for the exact amount I owed. I said, "I can't take this, it is borrowed money." He smiled and said, "Shut up, you stupid Yankee. Take it, study hard and make us proud." That check saved my future.

Don't tell me money isn't important. Don't tell me money isn't revealing. Don't tell me money doesn't talk. That check told me the Sharps believed in me and it gave me the courage to face another day. If this church has gained anything positive from me, it is because of them. How you handle your money says a great deal about you. What is your money saying to your world? How important is Jesus to you?

Will you pray with me?