

## WITHOUT LIMITS

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Mark 12:41-44

It was the end of the year and this pastor stood before his congregation and told them the church needed some extra money to pay its bills. So, he asked the people to consider placing a little more than usual into the offering plate. And he promised that whoever gave the most would be given the opportunity to pick out three hymns.

The offering plates were passed and brought forward and the pastor saw that someone had placed a \$1,000 bill in the plate. He was so excited that he immediately shared his joy with his congregation and said he'd like to personally thank the person who gave that money.

A very quiet, elderly, saintly-looking lady all the way in the back shyly raised her hand. The pastor asked her to come to the front. And slowly she made her way to the pastor. He told her how wonderful it was that she gave so much and in thanks asked her to pick out three hymns.

Her eyes brightened. She looked out over the congregation. She pointed to the three most handsome men in the room and said, "I'll take him and him and him."

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Pastors have to be careful preaching about money. We don't want to turn people off. We don't want to perpetuate the stereotype of the money-grubbing church. I don't ever want to overhear anyone say of me: "That preacher, all he ever talks about is money."

Some of this caution is based on the fact that, yes, there are some churches that are actually small businesses and are owned by the pastor. Any profits from the church go into their pockets. The more donations, the greater their income. It becomes in their best interest to encourage giving.

Fortunately (and thank you, Lord), that is not the case in this church. This congregation is overseen by the Session and I receive a set salary. Our finances are as transparent as we can make them. Our budget is available for any of you to see. Your individual giving is kept confidential. Everything else is open for review. Do you want to know how much we spent on coffee last month? Call the office.

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I've got another story. A man in a congregation had a heart condition. When he inherited ten million dollars, the minister was tasked with informing the man. Everyone was afraid the shock would give him a heart attack. So, the minister goes to the man's house and says, "Joe, what would you do if you inherited ten million dollars?" Joe thought for a moment and said, "Well, pastor, I think I would give half to the church." At which point, the pastor clutched his chest and died.

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Our scripture reading for today comes from the gospel of Mark. The story takes place in Jerusalem on the grounds of the temple mount. The temple was not simply a single building, but a sprawling campus. One location on this campus was the treasury where the valuables of the temple were stored. The treasury was also the place where the faithful brought their monetary offerings.

It would seem that the treasury was also a popular place for people-watching—specifically watching people delivering their tithes and offerings. And this is exactly what Jesus and his disciples are doing. We read, *Jesus sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Among those making their offerings were rich people who deposited large sums.* How do we know these were large sums? Most likely by the sound. In that day there were no checks or paper money. It was all coins. And coins make noise, especially when dropped into a large ceramic or metal container.

It is also possible that some of the rich people that Jesus was watching made a spectacle of giving their money by pouring their coins into the treasury with as much a fanfare as possible. Remember, there were people watching all this. What's the point of being rich if you can't show it off?

So, Jesus and the guys are watching this parade of patrons when a woman approaches. She is identified only as a *poor widow*. She goes to the treasury and places two small copper coins—worth ridiculously little—into the treasury. I imagine that when the disciples heard the pathetic sound of the two little coins, they snickered. But Jesus says to them, *I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.* I'm sure the disciples looked him with some skepticism. What he says doesn't make sense. That woman put in only two *lepta*. *Lepta* were the smallest value coin in circulation in Judea. Two of them were worth a *quadran*, which was the smallest Roman coin in circulation. It was pocket change.

Jesus goes on to explain his counter-intuitive economics by telling his disciples, *All the wealthy people have contributed out of their riches, but she out of her poverty has given in everything, all she had to live on.*

To be honest, what this woman does is, financially speaking, extremely unwise. We don't know her story. We are only told that she is a widow and she is poor. She could have been very old or she could have been very young. Either way, she was part of an extremely vulnerable population of people. As a widow, without a husband, she was dependent on family or friends for financial support. There were no social safety nets for her. Yet, she gives to God not just all she has, but all she had to live on. She gives everything. And that is Jesus' lesson here. While we are impressed by large, extravagant gifts, God cares more for our hearts. If someone has two million dollars and they give away one million, they are not going to suffer. They gave out of their wealth, their abundance. They will survive.

The woman's two coins may not sound like much to us, but they were valuable to her. They may have allowed her one more meal or loaf of bread.

Jesus lifts up this woman as a model for us because she is unique. She acts differently than everyone else who came to the treasury that day. She doesn't give more than the wealthy people as Jesus tells his disciples. She *put in more than all those people contributing to the treasury*. She acts without limits. She doesn't do the familiar calculus of 'how much do I have, how much do I need, how much do I have leftover to give to God.' She gives without limits. She gives all. Financially, what he does is foolish, but spiritually it reveals how rich she really is.

That is how we, as people of faith, should seek to live our lives. When it comes to our relationship with God, we should live without limits, we should love without limits, we should *give* without limits.

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Another story. It was Sunday night at the Baptist church and it was testimony time. A well-heeled businessman stood up and said, "When I was a young man, I came to this church. I was down and out. I had only ten dollars in my pocket. I had nowhere to live and I was hungry. But the sermon so inspired me, that I took that ten-dollar bill and I put it in the offering plate. I gave everything I had to God. And because of that, God has blessed me with abundance, and I am now a wealthy man. And all because I gave everything I had to God."

Behind him an elderly lady reached out and tugged at his sleeve and said, "I dare you to do it again!"

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Here at FPC, we are in the season of stewardship. You have received a letter in the mail with a pledge card for 2022. We would like to have all pledges in by December 5.

Why do we have this practice of pledges? First of all, pledges help the Session and the Finance Committee better plan for the coming year. Pledges provide them an approximation of the church's income for 2022.

Another reason to have pledges is that pledging is a discipline of commitment. This year, in 2021, when you pledge, you are saying that you commit so many dollars to God in the future. You're not going to wait until next year and then calculate how much you have left over. No, you are making a commitment now. In doing so, you become like the widow. You are giving without the certainty of how the future will unfold for you. By pledging, you are placing God first in your life. Like the poor widow, you are spiritually rich.

It would be perfect if every household pledged. Our goal this year is that 35 households within the congregation will make a pledge. I pray that your household will be one of them.

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A little girl became restless as the preacher's sermon dragged on and on. Finally, she leaned over to her mother and whispered, "Mommy, if we give him the money now, will he let us go?"

Amen.