

Giving 24 October 201 St John's
A talk given by Rev David Eastwood
Mark 12: 41-44

A door-to-door collector for charity was told by a householder, 'I'm sorry, I can't give anything, our dog ate the envelope you left.' That's alright', replied the collector, 'I've got a spare envelope here.' 'That's no good', said the householder quickly, 'He'd only eat that one too.'

Some people will go to considerable lengths to avoid giving anything at all.

Not so the widow in our reading.

Today we are considering our money, and our giving to God.

But it begins with something else – our hearts and our lives being set free.

I want us to think about this – how we can live free every day?

Jesus is in the Temple courts. There's a large crowd. And Jesus goes for it in confronting the Pharisees. He's arrived in Jerusalem for the last time. He knows he will soon be crucified.

And he now takes the battle to his religious enemies.

He attacks them and undermines them - these people who held such power over the people. Placing such heavy burdens on them with their laws and restrictions.

And Jesus says – 'Watch out for the teachers of the law' (v 38)

Why is Jesus so critical? Because he was bringing a gospel whereby everyone can stand without fear, without shame, and without any condemnation before God.

The teachers of the law had no such good news.

They continued in their fear, their shame and in their guilty self -condemnation, knowing that however much they strove to keep all the laws they had made, they would miss the mark. Deep down in their hearts, they knew they couldn't keep all their laws.

But instead of recognising their guilt, their need of God, of recognising their broken, messed up lives, they covered it up, because they needed the approval of others.

They knew they couldn't convince God they were holy. But they hid it.

They hid their sin, and presented themselves as if they were right with God, that they didn't need the forgiveness of God. And that's a terrible condition.

King David, in contrast, in Psalm 51, after committing adultery and murder, comes to God – recognises his guilt and pleads with God - 'Have mercy on me, O God,

wash away my sin, against you only have I sinned....Create in me a pure heart, O God.....'

And so the Pharisees, not accepting they were broken people and in need of God's forgiveness, their hearts became hardened and harsh, and wicked towards others - they devoured widows' houses. Widows who couldn't pay the rents, the most needy in society, were made homeless.

And all for show, these men made long prayers in public.

Meanwhile, this widow, the one who gives away everything, shows us something very different. She is so free in her generosity, in her life, in her dealings with others.

She gives away 2 small coins, all she had to live on, worth maybe a fraction of a penny.

What's the difference between the widow and these teachers of the law? -

The understanding of condemnation.

It's only when a person realises that whatever they have done is forgiven, that they are free to be honest about how broken they are.

Be clear, there is NO condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus.

There is no condemnation for sins in the past, for the sins of yesterday, and for the sins you may commit today, there's NO condemnation.

It's all been paid for, it's all covered - you are not guilty.

We hear this as a salvation message, but we rarely hear it as a message of spiritual maturity.

To know you are a sinner, and to know you walk free of condemnation, and being free of condemnation, you are free of the greatest burden in your life -

You are free!

Free to look at a generous God who has given you the greatest gift you could ever receive.

And if he has given that great gift, why would he withhold such a small gift of daily provision?

The widow was completely free. She knew God was her provider, and so she didn't worry.

The religious leaders were hiding their true lives, putting on a show, because in their hearts they believed they were condemned.

They couldn't believe that God could ever declare them free of condemnation without any work being done by them at all, they couldn't believe it was all about God's grace, what God has done for us in Jesus.

The truth of the gospel is this – not a single thing you do, will add to God's commitment and desire to declare that you are free of condemnation.

There is no guilt that you now carry.

And because of that, you can live free today and know the Spirit working through you.

Romans 8:1-3 'Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering.'

So our giving is in response to all that God has done in our lives.

It's about our hearts.

The widow put in a penny – all that she had, she held back nothing.

The teachers of the law put in large amounts, but held back plenty.

So Jesus doesn't care about the amount, but the proportion.

The widow gave 100%.

The teachers of the law gave a tiny proportion.

What proportion should we give?

10% was the starting point in the Old Testament.

It's mentioned for the first time in Genesis 14 when Abraham gave a tenth – before it was a legal obligation – it was something written into his heart.

And the tithe, 10%, is endorsed by Jesus – Matthew 23:23-24, Luke 18:12.

So how much should I give?

I think there is a strong biblical reason for giving a tithe, 10% of our income (Malachi 3).

But in fact every New Testament example of giving actually goes beyond 10%.

This poor widow gave 100%, Zacchaeus gave 50%.

So how is your giving? How is mine?

A big thank you to all those who give regularly to St John's, and to all of you who have given to the various appeals we've had for money.

But does your giving need to be reviewed?

It's good to give in a planned way – to work it out each year and to commit to it.

The Parish Giving Scheme is really good – standing order to the church – this helps the church so much as it means we can budget better.

See me or Colin or Francis about this.

For some who have not started to give, 10% may be too much to begin with.

You may be in debt, owe lots on credit cards.

Bring this to God – ask him to help you.

For some you may need some external help with debt - CAP (Christians Against Poverty)

Speak to me.

For some 10% is too little.

This poor widow is a wonderful example to us. She was free.

Free of fear, free of shame, free of condemnation.

She knew the forgiveness and the love of God.

She saw God as her provider.

She recognised it all came from God.

God had touched her heart.

And she understood the words of Jesus – 'Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness and all these things – food and clothing (and other things), will be given to you as well.' (Matthew 6:34).

It's by GRACE we have been saved through faith. We have been set free!

May the Widow's example here motivate us, to be generous with our money.

AMEN