

# But it's only a story

Why Jesus told stories about money  
and why we should too

## Stories of generosity: Proportional, intentional and sacrificial

*I have held many things in my  
hand, and have lost them all; but  
whatever I have placed in God's  
hands that I still possess.*  
– Martin Luther

### Dwelling in the Word – Mark 12:41-44

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

#### Monday

Read Mark 12:41-44

In this week's Gospel story, Jesus observes people making financial contributions as they enter the temple. He calls his disciples to him and points out that a poor widow has contributed all she has to the offering. He uses her as an example of someone who makes a true sacrifice to God.

We see that Jesus has a way of turning everything in his world on its head to explain God's perspective. We see that God's "economics" are drastically different from those of the culture at large. In this Scripture, we are told that God looks at what we give compared to what we actually have. Yet, in Jesus' time, as in our own, most of us look at the size of the contribution alone. Jesus seems to be asking us to rethink our definition of generosity.

It is often difficult to consider how different the life of a widow in Jesus' time was from most widows today. There was no financial safety net of Social Security, Medicare, food stamps or heating assistance, and no church agencies to help. There was no pension system for widows, built up over years of work or a pension from a deceased husband. Widows were absolutely at the mercy of their sons, if they had sons, and older community members. It is possible that there were certain levels of assistance made available from a temple widows fund of that day, but those amounts would have probably been quite limited given all the needs that would have been present.

**For your reflection**

- What words, ideas or themes stand out to you as you dwell on these?
- Do you know of any truly needy people in your community?
- How are widows cared for in your congregation and community?

*Tuesday***Read Mark 12:41-44**

Who are the people in your life that have modeled giving in spirit and in practice? Sometime back true life stories of giving and generosity were gathered by the leadership of Mennonite Church USA. I hope they inspire you even as the woman from Mark 12 does for many of us today.

Dwilyn and Janelle Ebersole live in the western part of Lancaster County, Pa., in an attractive 1,200 square-foot house along Donegal Springs Road. In the driveway sits a Camry with quite a few miles on the odometer.

They give generously and yet with a disciplined structure. Their agriculture-based business sends them a monthly salary check, which they tithe. Actually, in recent months, it's been about 14 percent. This money goes to their home congregation. Their plan consists of five boxes, each of which is designated for their 14-percent tithe along with additional offerings to favorite church agencies and charities.

Below is a typical month's division of tithes and offerings.

- **Box one:** The Sunday offering of \$13,526.
- **Box two:** A tithe to their conference (\$1,352.60).
- **Box three:** \$2,800 for "Erb Mission" which included specific missionaries and designated projects.
- **Box four:** \$7,600 for congregational finances, including staff salaries, utilities, supplies, etc.
- **Box five:** Discretionary gifts to agencies of congregational interest.

Janelle speaks fondly of her grandmother who modeled gift giving. She remembers her parents carefully calculating the tithe when writing out the Sunday morning check. And, when she took her first job at a bulk food store, her mother counseled that she was supposed to give.

Similarly, Dwilyn's parents were disciplined givers. Upon getting his first job on a local farm at age 11, Dwilyn was encouraged to begin giving. He set aside his tithe in a special envelope when cashing each check.

Their giving now opens what feels like a personal link – not only to the congregation, but also to missionaries, as well as local charitable organizations. The Ebersoles do not see giving as just a command but as something very enjoyable. To read more of the Ebersole's stewardship story and others like it go to [www.mennoniteusa.org](http://www.mennoniteusa.org).

**For your reflection**

- Who were your early models when it comes to giving?
- Who is watching and learning from you when it comes to giving? What single thing would you like to be sure you convey to the next generation through your generosity?

*Wednesday*

## Read Mark 12:41-44

This story about the widow making an offering in the temple is related to the previous passage (Mark 12:38-40) in which Jesus condemns those scribes who exploit widows. Whereas the scribes (leaders in the temple) were criticized, this widow is praised.

Mark describes a widow making an offering in the temple. Rich people make a great show of giving large amounts while this woman gives only a tiny sum of money – all she has, probably. Who has given more? Jesus argues that the widow has given the most because while the rich have only given from their surplus, and thus have not sacrificed anything to God, the widow has indeed sacrificed greatly. She has given “all she had to live on,” suggesting that she may now not have money for food.

The purpose of the passage may be to explain what “true” obedience as understood by Jesus was: being willing to give everything you have for the sake of God. Those who merely contribute from their own surplus aren’t sacrificing anything, and therefore their contributions will not be considered as a significant gesture by God.

This incident is connected to more than this previous passage. It parallels the coming passages in which Jesus is anointed by the woman who gives all she has, and it is similar to the discipleship of other women described later in the book of Mark.

**For your reflection**

- What is the relationship between discipleship and stewardship?
- One definition of stewardship that I have been challenged by is: “Stewardship is everything you do after you say you believe.” Do you agree with this statement?
- What next step in your stewardship journey would give witness to your trust in God to provide?

*Thursday*

## Read Mark 12:41-44

What do you think motivated this woman to give as she did? What is it that motivates you to give? Dr. Kennon Callahan has been a highly regarded consultant to churches for decades. He specializes in the area of stewardship and church finances. In his book, *Giving and Stewardship in an Effective Church* (Jossey-Bass, 1997), Callahan identifies compassion, community, challenge and commitment as the four main catalysts for giving. Too often congregations attempt to instill the importance of giving in the Christian’s life by appealing to challenge and commitment. That unfortunately is not as effective as drawing on the values of compassion and community.

People want to give to people – not programs and projects. All ministries of the church ultimately are about people and that’s what we should highlight, especially with new and young believers. A building program is mainly concerned with being able to better meet the needs of people – not about acquiring more bricks and mortar on the property.

After the earthquake in Haiti, millions of dollars were collected in a relatively short period. People felt compelled to do something out of compassion – even people who were not part of a faith community. Can you think of other times the broader community comes together to help meet the needs of the less fortunate or those faced with unexpected losses?

Perhaps the widow gave because she knew other widows who did not have even one penny. It was also the result of an instruction she received that, in giving to God, we recognize that ultimately God provides for our needs, and God can be trusted to meet our needs.

### For your reflection

- Identify a time when you were very motivated to give. What was it that caught your attention? Was it related to compassion, community, challenge and commitment?
- What happens to you when you make a decision to think beyond yourself and give to someone or something beyond your own needs and wants?
- How does the faith of the widow inspire you in your own practice of giving?
- Have there been occasions when you were the recipient of a gift that came just in time? Describe the miracle.

### Friday

#### Read Mark 12:41-44

Where did this woman learn to give? For most of us giving from our excess is one thing but sacrificial giving is something else entirely. Did her parents model this kind of trust in God to provide? Did it come from the spiritual leaders of her community? That seems difficult to believe given how harsh Jesus is on the leaders of the temple.

I recently visited with a group of pastors in the South to share the theme of Ministry and Money. It was here I heard a story from a pastor who serves in a congregation predominately made up of Native Americans. A single grandmother who is the sole breadwinner for the family cares for her daughter and two grandchildren along with several other family members who will come and be part of her home from time to time. She expresses the very spirit of generosity in spite of living with very limited financial resources.

This congregation has a practice in which members bring their offering forward each Sunday. One Sunday morning, the pastor stood with a basket receiving the gifts of the people when the woman came up to him with a smile on her face and a one hundred dollar bill in her hand. She whispers to the pastor that she found the bill in her Bible and didn't know where it had come from, but decided that she was to give it in the offering that morning.

As the pastor told the story, he was still emotional even though this had occurred sometime in the past. He knew very well her needs and that she lived on barely enough to survive as it was. The woman's ability to offer this money as a gift to God was true to all the other expressions of generosity she lived every day among her family, friends and church community.

### For your reflection

- How do stories like this stir your soul?
- Why is it that people with so little can so often be the most generous?

## Learning together

What is the tithe? Traditionally, it has referred to the giving of one-tenth as an offering to God; this first appears in Scripture in Genesis 14:20. The Old Testament has multiple references to the practice of tithing, but there are only passing references to it in the New Testament (Matthew 23:23; Luke 11:42, 18:12; Hebrews 7:5-9).

As the term is used today, it often takes on a more general meaning of whatever a person determines to give as an offering, which may be less or more than one-tenth of one's income. The New Testament has other ways of talking about generosity. Specific percentages are not referenced but we are clearly called to give bountifully (generously), intentionally, sacrificially and cheerfully (1 Corinthians 9:6-8).

### For group discussion

- What principles for giving have you found helpful?
- Who are your models when it comes to tithing?
- How do you interpret the term tithe? Do you find this term helpful today as we talk about the giving and generosity? Are there better terms we might use today?

There is discussion in certain circles as to whether the tithe was an Old Testament practice and thus not intended for followers of Jesus and not specifically taught in the New Testament. Whether we take our cues from the Old or New Testament there are clear teachings on intentional, proportional and generous/sacrificial giving throughout Scripture.

Below is an overview of key texts and teachings you may want to review and discuss as a group. The Old Testament actually teaches about (at least) three separate tithes. Some were to be given each year, others every 3 years. Depending on the year, a household's annual "tithe" could range between 20-30 percent.

Read aloud the following verses and discuss the key concepts concerning the tithe and generous living from both Old and New Testaments.

Text	Teaching
<b>Deuteronomy 14:22-23</b>	The tithe was to be <b>shared and consumed</b> with others (the potluck tithe!).
<b>Deuteronomy 14:28-29</b>	Tithe <b>for the poor</b> collected every three years intended for the poor and foreigners.
<b>Numbers 18:21</b>	Support <b>for the Levites</b> who work in the tabernacle and later in the temple.
<b>1 Corinthians 16:2</b>	Give <b>intentionally</b> – set aside weekly offering.
<b>2 Corinthians 8:2-4</b>	Give <b>sacrificially</b> – beyond your means and comfort zone.
<b>2 Corinthians 8:12</b>	Give <b>proportionally</b> – according to what one has.
<b>2 Corinthians 8:13-14</b>	Give <b>generously</b> – like the Macedonians who gave in spite of their poverty.

I recently saw an artist's depiction of the Mark 12 widow's mite story. He depicted the widow as a young woman carrying a child on her hip. Scripture doesn't say if the widow was young or old. For some reason we assume she is an older woman, but Scripture doesn't mention her age or stage of life. How does this change the meaning of the story if it were a young widow with children?

The stories of the Scripture are for more than entertainment. They are more than nice lessons to recite to our children. The parables and references to Jesus' interaction with the people he met are there to help explain the Kingdom of God and provide us with instruction for how we are to live. There are few biblical themes that get to the basics of discipleship like those of stewardship. The question now is how do we respond to these teachings from Scripture and from our own experiences?

During the first week, you were encouraged to write your stewardship story. You now have a chance to write additional chapters. Hopefully, you have been inspired from the stories of contemporary disciples as well as first century disciples.

### Discussion questions

- But these are only stories – does Jesus really expect us to take them seriously today?
- Write down two or three specific next steps you want to take in your stewardship journey.
- To what new place does God want to move you in supporting the ministry of the Kingdom of God with your time, talent and treasure?
- What kind of accountability would be helpful for you as you make these new commitments?



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Everence helps individuals, organizations and congregations integrate finances with faith through a national team of advisors and representatives. Everence offers banking, insurance and financial services with community benefits and stewardship education. Everence is a ministry of Mennonite Church USA and other churches.

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