
The Widow's Offering

SCOTT HOEZEE

Sometimes it happens in life that what we thought something meant turns out to be quite wrong. Maybe it is something simple like a mistaken song lyric. You thought the singer sang “just let me staple the vicar,” but it was really, “just let me state for the record.” Or maybe it is the meaning of a whole story. Take the story of the widow’s mite, for instance. Many of us have thought all along that this is a story that commends generous giving to God, and that is it; it is a story to showcase the importance of sacrificial tithing and offerings; but what if the story also means something more? Today on *Groundwork*, we will ponder that story from the Bible. Stay tuned.

DAVE BAST

From Words of Hope and ReFrame Media, this is *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and Dave, this is now program five in a seven-part series that we are doing that we have designed to be across the season of Lent; and we are in...throughout this series, with the exception of the final program, all of the six programs, including this one and the next one, have been between Palm Sunday...Jesus entering Jerusalem...and his crucifixion.

DAVE BAST

Right; the last teachings of Jesus are what we are calling this series. We often, as we plan series, think about it in terms of Sundays. There are six Sundays in the season of Lent, so we planned six programs looking at those things that he said and did on the very last days of his life. We cannot cover all of them because there are more than six incidents; but then, the last program we will plan for Easter, and it will be actually something Jesus taught after his resurrection. So, that is kind of the outline.

Today, as you said, Scott, we are in Mark Chapter 12, and before we get to the incident that you mentioned at the top of the program, the story of the widow’s mite, which comes, of course, from the King James translation of the Bible. It is really the woman who gives this very small amount of money—a mite, in King James English—to the Temple; but before we go there, we want to look at another encounter Jesus had. In our last program, we looked at some gotcha questions...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Some interactions that Jesus had with his critics, even, you could call them his enemies, where they were trying to discredit him; but here he has an interaction that is much more positive, isn’t it, with one of the teachers of the Law.

SCOTT HOEZEE

We are going to look at it. It is Mark 12:29-34, and we are looking at this because this precedes the widow giving her offering, which will really be the focus of our program; but this kind of sets the stage for us because it gives us a needed reminder of what is really important in the life of faith.

²⁸One of the teachers of the Law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked Jesus, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” ²⁹“The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Here, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength;’ ³¹and the second is this: Love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these.”

DAVE BAST

³²“Well said, Teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To love him with all your heart and with all your understanding and all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to the teacher, “You are not far from the kingdom of God,” and from then on no one dared to ask him any more questions.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, this is a curious exchange. This one is more positive. We just saw the gotcha questions in the previous program that were negative. They were trying to trip Jesus up; but here is somebody who seems to have a genuine question; and ironically, he ends up trying to teach Jesus more than he is taught by Jesus. He kind of pats Jesus on the head and says: Good job, Jesus...

DAVE BAST

Yes, good answer.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Good answer. That is right. Then he kind of goes on a little bit, but he goes on to say something very, very important, and that is that love matters more than anything external to our life, or even to our worship.

DAVE BAST

Right, exactly; and of course, this is a very famous passage; and Jesus’ summary of the Law in articulating these two commandments that are often telescoped into one and called the great commandment: Love the Lord your God with everything you’ve got and love your neighbor as yourself. So, all the Law is summarized in that great commandment; and we have actually done a couple of *Groundwork* programs that have broken that out and asked what it means to love God and what it means to love neighbor; but here the interesting thing is, as you said, the teacher’s comment to Jesus.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; where he makes the connection; and it is a very deep Old Testament connection that love is more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices in the world; and that brings you right back to the Old Testament prophets; to prophets like Amos and others who made it clear that although...and we will talk a little bit about this later in the program...although there is no question that Israel was mandated by God to offer up sacrifices to forgive and atone for their sins...that was important and it was being deeply regulated...but Amos and the prophets said: You know, the problem with Israel in our day is that it is offering sacrifices with no love behind them. Their hearts are cold as stone. They are not taking care of the poor. They are not honoring God in how they live the other six days a week; and the minor prophets said when an offering...a burnt offering...is made to God by someone with no love in their heart, it does not smell good to God; it makes him sick; it nauseates God when worship and sacrifice take place in the context of injustice.

DAVE BAST

Speaking through Isaiah, God says: Take away these burnt offerings. They are making me sick to my stomach. The point is, really, you know, God does require some sacrifices from us—some offerings that he asks us to give; and in the Old Testament the key thing with the animal sacrifices, which were meant to be offered as an expression of forgiveness of sin or atonement for sin—the individual had to buy the animal—they had to provide the animal. In our culture, it is offerings of money that God requires of us, and

that is right and good. We should give. It is the right thing to do; but the easy thing is to think that we have bought God off, then. If we have made an offering...if we have given money...even if we have given sacrificially or generously...why, that makes us good to go. Then it doesn't really matter how we live; and God says: No, no, no. The offering is great, but what I want even more than that is your life committed to justice and to love and to peace and to treating other people right. You say you love me, but it is going to be proved by how you treat others.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which is exactly what this teacher of the Law says to Jesus. Again, it is sort of ironic. He probably does not know it, but he has the Son of the living God standing in front of him and he is lecturing him; but then Jesus says: That is so right. You are not far from the kingdom; which tells you, that for Jesus... We often wonder: What is the kingdom of God? What do we mean when we talk about the kingdom of God? Well, here is a big, big hint. Jesus says hearts of love; hearts of love for God, hearts of love for neighbor, living lives of mercy and justice and service and compassion. That is the lifestyle of the kingdom. This teacher of the Law is correctly pointing to all of that, and so that is...

DAVE BAST

So, he is close.

SCOTT HOEZEE

He is close.

Dave Bast: Jesus says: You are getting close. You maybe are not there yet because so far all you have done is talk...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

But if you start to live this way you will actually be living in the kingdom...you will be living out the kingdom values.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; but again, Dave, the reason we are looking at this is this comes just before the story of the widow's mite. This is the context Jesus is establishing, and that is going to be important for reasons we will see in just a moment.

Segment 2

DAVE BAST

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Dave Bast.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee, and we are in Mark 12 today, Dave, in this program number five in our last teachings of Jesus series, looking at the things Jesus talked about the final week before his crucifixion; and we have just seen the passage, an encounter with a teacher of the Law that established that to Jesus' mind, the essence of the kingdom of God is the great commandment: Love for God and love for neighbor. That, the teacher of the Law pointed out, is more important than all the sacrifices and offerings in the world, and Jesus said: That is correct.

DAVE BAST

And now we see this happened, so we are picking it up at Mark 12:41: Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the Temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts, ⁴²but a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins worth only

a few cents. ⁴³Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

SCOTT HOEZEE

So there is the scene. We are at the Temple. Again, it is Passover week, so let's picture a packed scene. Jerusalem is full of tourists and pilgrims who are there for the Passover; and for some people, of course, they maybe only get to the Temple once a year. They do not live in Jerusalem, so it is time to give their yearly offering; and so Jesus and the disciples are situated somewhere where they can see the offering basket. Some rich people are putting in lots. You can hear lots of coins hitting the bottom...lots of shekels...lots of denarii...

DAVE BAST

Big fat purse, and they open it up.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes, there they go, and they make quite the clatter; but then, some obviously poor woman...and somebody who's...we think maybe her attire...there may have been certain garments that widows...

DAVE BAST

Sure; widows' weeds, as they say.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I don't know why, I have always pictured this widow as sort of a small, hunched over figure. Somehow I picture Mother Teresa, I don't know why; but she kind of shuffles up in her poor garments, and throws in two coins, which we are told by Mark were together less than a penny. I mean, they are a couple of copper coins. You could not even buy a gumball with what she put in there. Jesus sees it, calls the disciples, and says: Well, there you go. She actually put in more than the rich people because she gave everything; and typically we think this is only a passage for like Stewardship Sunday or something, to encourage generous giving, right?

DAVE BAST

Right; well, and certainly there is something here that Jesus is suggesting, that the amount that you give is not simply determined by the number on the check...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

It is determined by the level of sacrifice that you go to. I mean, there are a lot of people who give tremendous amounts of money and they never miss it—they never feel it. Is that really giving, or is it only giving when it really causes a squeeze in your budget? So yes, there is some of that there, and certainly Jesus, I think, is commending what the widow did. Throughout the Gospels you see Jesus approving of generosity, even extravagant generosity. You think of the woman who poured precious perfume on him just a few days earlier, anointing him for his burial, the Gospel says; and the disciples grumble about that, but Jesus says: No, leave her alone. She has done a beautiful thing. So, what this widow does is a beautiful thing, but there may be a little more to it. I find myself thinking about the fact that she gave everything—all she had to live on. Is that really good?

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; she is at the end of her rope now, and who might do something about that? So, there is a line of interpretation...a number of commentators along the ages have picked up on this. You know, we are never

told in the Bible *how* anybody says anything. We are not always told, you know, he said *loudly* or she said *jokingly*. It is just said, said, answered, replied. So we do not know *how* Jesus said this here, but it is possible that he answered with a little hint of indignation in his voice, and we will say why in a minute; but maybe Jesus called the disciples over and said: Did you see that?! That woman put in everything. Everything! It is all she had to live on! Oh, no! Can you believe it?! Now, why might that be a possibility, that Jesus is upset? Well, because he is critiquing the Temple system of his day, which does not have a heart of love for the poor and the alien and the widow, which is what Jesus had just talked about a few verses earlier with that teacher of the Law; and in fact, you know, this is a very short incident; and in our Bibles it is always carved out underneath its own subheading of the widow's offering...

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But if you back up one verse, to Mark 12:40, Jesus warns his disciples against the teachers of the Law and the Temple establishment; and he says: They love to wear flowing robes; they love to get all the attention; but the problem is, and this is what he says in verse 40: *They devour widows' houses*; and that is the verse before this widow shows up as an example. In other words, nobody is taking care of this woman. She has now given everything, and what? Is she going to go home and die? Because the Temple establishment—the religious authorities—are not taking care of her the way God's Law says. They have to make extra provision for widows, so Jesus is angry...not at her. She did a beautiful thing; but he is angry at a system that is not taking care of her. She should not have had to give her last penny. Somebody should be taking care of her!

DAVE BAST

Well, I mean, beyond that, she ought to have more than a penny to live on...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DAVE BAST

I mean, all she had to live on wouldn't buy a gumball, as you said, Scott. That is not right. There is an almost savage note to what Jesus says around this incident, and he is critiquing the hypocrisy. He talks about the pretense of their religion...these people...including, no doubt, many of the people who are pouring all of those large amounts into the Temple coffers. It is a pretense. Again, they think they are buying off God with their sacrifices, with their offerings, and then they can go off and live completely for themselves, and do whatever they want, and they are good with the Almighty, you know. Me and him, we are like this, you know, crossing their fingers; and Jesus is saying no, that is not right. The purpose of much of this money is not just to put on show and have these flowery offerings and sacrifices and the smoke going up. It stinks in God's nostrils if we are not caring for those whom God cares about—the poor and the defenseless and the helpless. So, what is wrong with this picture? What is wrong? One of the things that is wrong is the hypocrisy...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DAVE BAST

Of the wealthy; the other thing that is wrong is the plight of the widow.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; somebody is supposed to be taking care of her; and the Old Testament law says you make *extra* provisions for widows and orphans and aliens. They get even more than other people get in terms of ministry from those whose hearts are loving, as Jesus had just commended: Love for God and love for neighbor. So,

something has gone off the rails in terms of the worship. We actually saw some of that in the first program in this series when Jesus cleansed the Temple, and he said: There is something wrong with the Temple here. You are using it as a cover for your sinfulness instead of the place to get yourself right with God. Something like that is happening here.

DAVE BAST

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

So, the widow did the right thing, but the fact that she is now at the end of her rope and nobody cares, that has Jesus powerfully upset. When worship of any kind takes place in the absence of justice, it is not good; and the question we want to take up before we finish this program is does it ever happen even today? We will think about that in a moment.

Segment 3

DAVE BAST

I am Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*, where today we are looking at the story of the widow's mite. It is Passover week, the city is crowded, and people are coming up—they are rolling in—to make their annual contribution to the Temple; and here is this poor woman who has almost nothing, and she gives her all to the Temple, which is a beautiful, generous thing to do, but maybe she should not have been put in that position, is what we are suggesting.

SCOTT HOEZEE

You know, one of the most important lines God ever conveyed in the Bible comes up again and again in the prophets, and it essentially came up earlier in Mark 12, with the encounter with that teacher of the Law who asked Jesus about the greatest commandment; but God says again and again: I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I desire mercy, not sacrifice. Now that is not to say sacrifice is not important. I mean, a lot of the Old Testament and the book of Leviticus is all about regulating sacrifice for different kinds of sins, and different types of offerings: grain offering, offering up pigeons and lambs and bulls; and you know, it is all very complicated. In fact, I suspect that if most of us modern-day Christians could get transported back in time to the Temple of old, it would look more like a slaughterhouse to us than a church. We would probably be a little nauseated with all the blood and yuck! But, sacrifice was important; but what Israel forgot over time is that love was always more important.

DAVE BAST

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

The pure heart was more important because a wonderful sacrifice made with an impure heart and unclean hands, as we said earlier, nauseated God.

DAVE BAST

You know, Scott, as you were just saying that I thought of my old friend, Bob Heerspink, with whom I started these *Groundwork* programs so many years ago, and he has been with the Lord now for a number of years; but he had a saying that he used to repeat that he loved. He said let's reject the tyranny of the *or* for the glory of the *and*. So, mercy and sacrifice. It is not either/or. Let's reject the tyranny of the *or* there. Let's say *and*. Let's say they are both important. It is important to make our offerings to God, to make this tangible response to him for his goodness to us, to offer him our worship, but what he really wants is mercy and practical love of neighbor, and if we try to present the one without the other we are robbing him of something.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Which leads to some uncomfortable questions all of us, myself included, can ask about ourselves and our own churches today. We do not sacrifice pigeons and bulls and grain offerings anymore, but we offer up a sacrifice of praise, as we say. We sing songs. Our choirs sing, our praise teams sing. We have sermons in church. We give of our offerings of money; and if all of that happens in the context of a congregation and individual members of the congregation who are loving, who are taking care of the poor in their area like this widow in this story, that is wonderful, and God-glorifying; but, if we also get distracted in the church, if we focus on the wrong things, if we are more enamored with how beautiful our music is than whether we are taking care of the poor the rest of the week, maybe also our worship is taking place in the absence of justice and mercy in ways that also do not turn God on, but maybe turn him off.

DAVE BAST

Yes; we all are tempted to believe that what we give to God...whether that is financially or esthetically...that what we give to God surely must please him, and sort of make us good with him, and give us this sense of wow, I am doing pretty well. You know, I go to church every Sunday. Sometimes I even go on Sunday night. I sing the hymns. I put my check in the offering plate. I even give electronically to make sure I am giving ten percent; and then we think: Yes, what more does he want? What more could he ask for? It is all good. It is all good with me and the Almighty. And then comes a message like this that reminds us—that maybe hits us in the head. We can never buy God off, really, with our offerings; and he wants more.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; as God said to Samuel one time: People look on the outside; I look at the heart; and the heart is what matters; and so, we can have the most beautiful sanctuary in the world, the most practiced, professional choir in the world, we can have a preacher who does just fantastic sermons, but if the congregation is not loving towards its neighbors, none of it really matters; and it is so easy for us to get distracted, as apparently the Temple establishment did in Jesus' day. They too were focused on some of the wrong things and they were not even noticing. Jesus notices this widow. He always did, right? Do you think too many other people in the hustle and bustle of the Temple that day even noticed that little widow? Probably not.

DAVE BAST

Get out of my way! I've got more money to give here. I am more important than you are. What are you doing? You could just hear that.

You know, at the same time, I do not think we should be too hard on our churches and their worship. I mean, it is easy to think that if you only provide the very best then God will be pleased, but if your worship is kind of slapdash and amateurish and, you know, the people who get up and sing a solo, they do not have the best voices in the world, then there is something wrong with our worship. God does not view it that way, I don't think, Scott. I mean, I don't think even the very best...you can have Bach every Sunday if that is your thing, or a professional rock and roll band in worship, and it is all one to God. What he really is looking for is sincerity.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; no church is perfect. None of us are pure. We all have sins to confess every week, but we have to be striving to follow Jesus. We have to be striving to notice the people Jesus noticed, like this widow, and take care of them all week long. When that happens, then our hearts are...we are not far from the kingdom...maybe we are actually in the kingdom by grace; a kingdom where we love God and neighbor above all.

DAVE BAST

Yes; I mean, we have the head knowledge. We know what the great commandment is. We have Jesus' example. We have Jesus pointing us toward the widows of this world; so all we have to do is begin to live it out, right? And we will find that we are part of the kingdom of God.

Well, thanks for listening and digging into scripture with us today on *Groundwork*. We are your hosts, Dave Bast, along with Scott Hoezee, and we hope you will join us again next time as we study what Jesus considers imperative to teach his disciples regarding the end of the world and his own personal return. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to let us know what scripture passages or topics you would like to hear discussed on *Groundwork*.

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Printed on November 21, 2024

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