

Season of Pentecost Proper 27 – Year B
November 10, 2024
Pastor Jasper Sellnow



Startling Stewardship

A frightening example

A faithful example

Mark 12:38-44

³⁸ As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

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.

⁴² But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

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

The Word of God we’ll consider today is the Gospel from Mark chapter 12. Let’s begin with prayer:

Lord, may we thy bounties thus as stewards true receive – and gladly, as thou blessest us, to thee our firstfruits give. Amen.

What do you have? “What exactly do you mean, pastor? I have a lot of things...” That question is so generic I suppose you’d want a little more information. But what if the question was meant to be taken literally. What do you have? As in: it’s time to take inventory of everything God has blessed you with. Every piece of clothing in your closet, everything in your pantry and refrigerator, every piece of furniture, everything that decorates your home, everything in storage, every penny in savings, every asset, all of it. And that’s just the physical stuff and financial stuff that you have. I could ask you to take inventory of your time. How much of your time is taken up by vocational responsibilities? How much is free? How do you view your time? Plan your schedule each day, week, month? I could even ask you to take inventory of your skills and abilities. What are you good at? In what ways might you be able to use those skills and abilities to serve God and neighbor? What do you have? It’s a pretty loaded question when you stop and think about it. One that would be pretty time consuming and stressful to even sit down and figure out!

The opposite question might take a little less time, and be a little less stress inducing, although ironically we often stress out more over this question. The question is: “What don’t you have?” If we’re honest, we’re much better at answering that question. We all have that little wish list of physical things that we’d like to have, that we don’t have right now, but if we could just earn a

little more, or save a little better, or plan a little more wisely, well then maybe someday we could have them. This is true of money and possessions, but it's also true of the other things God gives us. Many of us tend to over schedule our lives and so we think, "I don't have enough time. I want some more!" Many of us are aware of the skills and abilities we have, but that as that awareness increases, so does our awareness of the skills and abilities we don't have. "What don't you have?" That question is a little easier to answer. And probably easier for us to fixate on too.

This morning, we're going to focus our attention on godly stewardship. To be a steward is to be a manager. And that is exactly how God talks about our use of time, talents, and treasures that he gives his people. Godly stewardship is godly management of all that God has given to us—of all we have. And if we're going to do that well – if we're going to be godly stewards of all we have, then we need to know *what* we have. And not only that we need to understand why a Christian is eager to be a steward in the first place, besides just saying, "Well, because God tells me I'm supposed to be a steward."

In order to think through this topic of stewardship today we'll consider the startling stewardship we see in our sermon text from Mark chapter 12. And as we do we'll note how Jesus points out a frightening and faithful example of startling stewardship that will help us to consider our own hearts and remember the heart of our God for us when we ask questions about what we have and how best to use it.

Our text begins focusing on a group of people who had so much. They were called "teachers of the law" not because they were lawyers, but because they knew what was in the law of God, they knew their Bibles... They also had plenty of wealth. And they generally had the respect of their peers and the people. But what they had wasn't enough. They always wanted more. Jesus touches on this as he describes them, doesn't he? They wanted the nicest robes to draw attention to themselves and earn them many greetings in the public square. They didn't just want a seat at church, they wanted the most important seat. They didn't just want an invitation to the banquet, they wanted a banquet given in their honor. Even in their God given vocations—in their God given callings—they were self-centered. They were the ones responsible for overseeing the estates of widows, and making sure those widows had what they needed to live on... and what did they do? They figured out ways to benefit from the assets of those widows themselves. And even as they prayed, their prayers were all show and no substance.

Wickedness like this is frightening, isn't it? Their stewardship of their wealth – physical and spiritual – was full of hypocrisy and evil. Jesus said, "**These men will be punished most severely.**" And there's a part of you that probably thinks, "Good! They've got it coming!" These men are a perfect example of stewardship that is startling for all the wrong reasons... stewardship that's focused not on managing God's gifts for the glory of God and the benefit of others, but stewardship that's focused on the self. And when stewardship is focused inwardly, that's when a person begins to focus on what he doesn't have.

But this inward focus sadly is not just something we can point out in these teachers of the law in Jesus' day. Sadly, we see it in ourselves. Whether your inventory list is as large as it's ever been, or shorter by the day, it's far easier to focus on what we don't have, than to focus on what we do have. Our selfish hearts thrive in that environment. And the devil and wicked world around us add

fuel to that sinful fire every chance they get. But when I focus on what I don't have, that's when you'll find me the least thankful... and the most selfish. Thanklessness and selfishness go hand in hand and lead to wickedness that's frightening – wickedness that's worthy of the most severe punishment – punishment in hell. Because when we forget God's blessings and fixate on having things other than God's grace and mercy as our source of joy, comfort, and security... when we fail to trust God to provide all we need for body and life... when we tighten our fist around what we have and shake it at God when he calls on us to let go... well, then we would deserve every bit of punishment we earned.

This hard truth about our hard hearts isn't fun to hear. But it is one of the reasons you come here to church. To be reminded of the truth about yourself and what God does to fix you. And that's the same thing that has been happening for thousands of years when God's people gather in his house to hear his Word. In fact, it's why we see what comes next in our sermon text.

God's ancient people Israel had one place to gather that was more special than any other, and that was at the temple in Jerusalem. There they could bring gifts and offerings, they could hear God's Word and pray to him, they could join with other believers in worship and fellowship. There's a reason King David wrote in the Psalms: **I rejoiced with those who said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD."** (Psalm 122:1) This was the place God met his people. This was the place sins were forgiven and consciences were put at peace.

And what do we see happening in our text on this day when Jesus watched the offering being given by the gathered worshippers? Mark says Jesus **watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.**

At first glance this would not seem all that noteworthy. People still come to church every week and give offerings. Some give large gifts. Others give small gifts. What's the big deal? Well, Mark goes on: **Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on."** The big deal was that those who gave large gifts were giving to the temple, to the needed budget to keep it up, to the salary to pay the priests... but they were not giving from the right place. They were giving because it was easy for them to give. If you are well off, a large gift is maybe no large sacrifice to you.

Contrast that with the widow. Her stewardship is startling for all the right reasons. Most people would look at what she had, and what she did not have, and say, "why give anything at all!?" "God certainly hasn't given you much to work with!" But this woman had not come to the temple to complain about her poverty. She is not there to scold God for taking her husband away. All she wants to do is thank him for his love and mercy... to give back to him what he has so freely given her – namely, everything.

Jesus commends her gift not because of the amount, but because of the attitude with which she gave. She gave from a heart of faith, and so she was eager to give out of even her poverty. Not to earn God's favor, or buy his forgiveness. No you can't purchase that kind of peace. God's Word is very clear about how such peace and forgiveness came to sinners. In Hebrews chapter 9 we're told

this about the temple offerings: **The gifts and sacrifices being offered were not able to clear the conscience of the worshiper. (Hebrews 9:9)** And David again reminds us in Psalm 51 that: **The sacrifices God wants are a broken spirit – a broken and crushed heart... (Psalm 51:17 EHV).**

You see, the worship life at the temple did nothing to actually clear the conscience of the worshiper, but the promises of God did! The promises of God met the broken and crushed sinners with hope and mercy. The promises of the coming Messiah gave believers a hope that they dare not have on their own. This is why the faithful gathered at the temple in Jesus' day, just as today the faithful gather to hear those promises of the Messiah that were kept by Jesus.

And when Jesus sat at the temple and watched this widow, remember what he was about to do as our Messiah. This took place during holy week, the final week of Jesus' life before going to the cross... and giving us the greatest gift of all. St. Paul described it so beautifully in our second reading today as he spoke of the work of Jesus, which is our pardon and peace for sin, and our perfect motivation for our own startling stewardship. **For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich. (2 Corinthians 8:9)**

The key to this startling stewardship in this widow's life, the key to startling stewardship in our own lives, has far less to do with the amounts of money we put into our worship offerings, and far more to do with the attitude that is found behind such giving. For the widow in our text there was a clear focus. Why would she think about herself, when she had no need to do so!? Her God was thinking of her. Her God knew her every need, far better than she did! Her God had promised to provide everything she needed for life here – and more importantly – had promised to provide everything she needed for life eternal.

In Christ, those promises are no longer just promises waiting to be kept. They are reality. In about 6 weeks we will celebrate the mystery of the incarnation at Christmas. What a miracle and evidence of God's grace! That God would take on flesh to become one of us!? He did this to live under the Law which condemns us but could never condemn him. He perfectly obeyed the Law every moment of his life even his Father's command to go to the cross for poor stewards like you and me. Jesus endured all this, as the Scriptures say, **to cleanse our consciences from acts that lead to death, so that we may serve the living God! (Hebrews 9:14b)**

And our stewardship is a privileged part of that service! It is our privilege to serve as managers over all God has entrusted to us. Begin this godly work with taking an inventory of what you have in Christ. The forgiveness of sins, Baptism's assurance, life and peace in Communion, comfort in sorrow, hope in trouble, eternal rescue and salvation – all this is yours! Keep your stewardship of God's blessings focused on all you have in Christ, and you will never have a reason to focus on what you don't have!

And then, begin to take inventory also of all that God has entrusted to you in this life. And what a blessing it is to do so! Do this and find yourself overflowing with thankfulness for the earthly riches you possess. And now you can begin to determine how best to use those earthly possessions in service to God and one another. To consider how you can give generously, and practice startling stewardship of your finances that mimic the widow with her heart of trust in God.

And what a blessing to also take inventory of your time. You only have so much each day. And tomorrow has not been promised to any of us. What a blessing to regularly ask ourselves if the way we so often use our time is actually the best use of it. You can thankfully reflect on God's gift of time and then begin to determine how best to use it as you live your faith.

And what a blessing as well to take inventory of all the unique talents our gracious God has given to you. This room is full of diverse skills and abilities! Each one needed to carry out our joint ministry of church, school, and preschool is already here. This is one area of stewardship that's fun for us to work together on. Sometimes you don't even see an ability God has given to you until someone else points it out! How encouraging when a brother or sister helps us see those gifts from God. And how encouraging it can be for others when we cheer them on in their abilities and work together for the common good of proclaiming Christ.

In fact, can you imagine what God can do through a group of individuals like us who are all good stewards of his many blessings? After all, what is a ministry like the one we share here at Grace other than a whole bunch of individuals walking together in service of God and neighbor!?

As you focus on everything our gracious God has given to you, nothing is greater than the promise of eternal life. When you live like you'll live forever, you'll find a life of generous, faith-filled, startling stewardship is a no brainer! What do you have? You have everything. May God bless everyone around you, through you, as you faithfully manage what God has entrusted to you, and as your faith clings to the priceless gift given to us by our God in Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.