

WHAT DO YOU GIVE TO YOUR BENEFACTOR?

Today's Text: Mark 12: 41- 44

Extracts:

Now Jesus sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury. And many who were rich put in much. Then one poor widow came and threw in two mites, which make a quadrans. So He called His disciples to Himself and said to them, "Assuredly, I say to you that this poor widow has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood" [Mk 12: 41-44]

I heard this story from Carl (real name disguised), a Caribbean friend and former professional colleague. He lived on a street where there was a destitute that always stretched his begging hand to him any day he drove past him to work. Fearing that he could use cash gifts for drugs or alcohol, Carl began to buy him food supplies, such as bread, milk and eggs, from a nearby food mall. That went on for some months. One day, Carl decided that, instead of giving alms to the man, he could get him engaged in a money-making activity. He gave him the chore of washing his car for a fee. To his surprise, the destitute on the very first wash charged him three times higher than he normally paid to a professional car wash near his office. Even when Carl brought that to his notice, the destitute would not take anything less.

Carl was playing the generous benefactor to the destitute who might have thanked him each time that he received gifts from him. Yet, on the one occasion that he had the privilege to do something to meet his benefactor's need, the destitute failed the test. Before we start judging him, we should first look at our own record with God, our greatest benefactor. Each day we pray to Him, "Give us this day our daily bread." In answer, He supplies all that we need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus [Phil. 4:19]. But what do we give Him in return or in appreciation? Do we behave like the destitute by taking from Him with both hands and giving back ingratitude or continuing in sin? What of even our earthly benefactors, such as parents, friends and charity? Are we under the impression that they do not have needs that we can supply or meet?

This week's study, based on the story of the poor widow's contribution into the temple treasury, should assist us to understand the matter much better.

1. Introduction: You give not because you have but because you care!

A basic assumption that we seem to make is that it is those who have that should give to those who do not have. But is there anybody that really has more than s(he) needs? A basic economic principle is that our wants always exceed our means. For example, how many of us can have a college education without taking a student loan or aid from family or bank or public agencies? How many of us can put a roof over their heads without a mortgage loan? That is why most of us live on credit cards and borrowed time! So, who are then the haves that we expect to give to the have-nots? The answer, as my wife is fond of saying, is that *we do not give because we have but because we care!*

Take the story of Nabal, a rich businessman who was Abigail's husband. He had three thousand sheep and a thousand goats. During David's sojourn in the wilderness, he and his men used to protect Nabal's flock for free. During the shearing season, David sent ten of his servants to ask Nabal for a favour of food and drinks for a coming feast day. Nabal could afford it, at least as a form of gratitude to David and his men, but he was said to be "harsh and evil in his doings." Instead of sending supplies to David, he sent insults [**1 Sam. 25: 1-11**]! Compare that with Peter's response to a lame man who begged him for alms at the gate of the temple in Jerusalem. Peter said to him, "Silver and gold, I do not have, but what I do have I give you" [**Acts 3: 1-6**]. Nabal had but he did not care. Peter did not have material wealth but he cared and gave what he had. That tells us that we are all beneficiaries and benefactors at the same time. Just as we need from others, we must meet other people's needs! God also expects us to respond to His benevolence.

You can play one or more of the following roles for others:

a) *You can be a donor*

A donor is one who contributes to a cause so as to help to relieve others' pressing needs. For example, there is a growing number of man-made and natural disasters in virtually every part of the world today. Even in your neighbourhood, there are young college graduates who cannot get their first job because of the worsening global economic crisis. It is easy not to be concerned, claiming that you are yourself more in need than others. The fact is that you may lack much but you also have much to offer that will benefit others. At least, you can give away those tired clothes, shoes and household items that you no longer use to less privileged people around you or donate them to charity.

See what the church in Antioch did during the reign of Emperor Claudius Caesar. There was a great famine throughout the world. What did the believers do? We are told, "The disciples, *each according to his ability*, determined to send relief to the brethren dwelling in Judea." They sent

help through Barnabas and Saul (Paul) [Acts 11: 28-30]. Ability here does not mean that they had but that they willingly gave; they cared.

Look around the congregation in your place of worship or fellow workers in your place of work or students in your place of study. Do you know how much anguish has been covered up by the wry smiles they are wearing? Do you know that some of them may have been evicted from their homes for not paying their rents and are now living in shelters or in their cars or with friends or family? Do you know that some of your colleagues may not be able to write their exams because they owe school fees? They will only confide in you if you care. You may not be able to help materially but you can lend them your ears and time or give useful spiritual advice and guidance.

There was a Jewish slave girl, a war captive who served as a maid in the home of Naaman, the Syrian general who had leprosy. She might have overheard his wife bare her pains to close confidants that came into their home and kitchen. Ordinarily, what could a maid do about such things? Not that girl. She volunteered vital information to Mrs. Naaman, saying to her mistress, "If only my master were with the prophet who is in Samaria! For he would heal him of his leprosy." Naaman followed up on her word and received his healing [2 Kgs 5: 1-14]. She had no gold or silver to give to her benefactors but she gave them what she had- vital information.

b) *You can simply share!*

Sometimes, what you have may just be enough for you alone but you can still share it with those who have nothing at all. Unfortunately, the poor and needy hardly share with their colleagues. You need to see the degree of competition among the destitute if you visit their stations, whether in downtown Los Angeles (USA) or Lagos (Nigeria) or Mumbai (India). They fiercely guard what they receive from benefactors and hardly share with the less fortunate among them. See, for example, the story of the lame man that Jesus met by the Pool of Bethesda in Jerusalem. In the place "lay a great multitude of sick people, blind, lame [and] paralyzed" who each year at a particular time waited for an angel to stir the water. Whoever stepped in first got healed. This man had been coming there each year for thirty-eight years and did not have the privilege [Jn 5: 1-5]! How come those who used to be like him and had been healed did not come back to help one of their colleagues? How come no one saw the necessity to allow that 'veteran' to get healed first before them? Indeed, the poor and the destitute are less likely to help one another than benefactors are likely to help them.

Compare that with the attitude of Tabitha, also called Dorcas, a disciple at Joppa who "was full of good works and charitable deeds which she did."

She fell ill and died. When the other disciples heard that Peter was nearby, they sent for him. When Peter arrived, “all the widows stood by him weeping, *showing the tunics and garments which Dorcas had made while she was with them*” [Acts 9: 36-39]. Her sharing and charity among the widows spoke for her before Peter who called on God and she was restored to life [v. 41].

c) *You can invest!*

You may think that those people who have more than you do and have been charitable to you do not also have needs. For example, it never occurs to some children that they can do something for their parents. Some younger siblings are forever receiving without thinking of what they can also do for their older siblings. Some poor people are forever on the receiving end without thinking of what they can do in return. What they seem to ignore is that what you can do for your benefactor is a form of investment.

Take the example of King Solomon of Israel and the Queen of Sheba. Solomon was so rich that he “made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones” [1 Kgs 10: 27]. Therefore, you could conclude that he did not need anything from anybody. The Queen of Sheba came to visit him. By all definitions, she was from a poorer kingdom. Did she come empty-handed? No! We are told that she gave the king “twenty talents of gold, spices in great quantity, and precious stones.” The quantity of spices that she brought Solomon became a record in Israel [v. 10]. That was an investment because she had heard of Solomon’s wisdom and had brought tough questions for him to solve for her [v. 1]. In response to her generosity, Solomon gave her “all she desired, *whatever she asked, besides what Solomon had given her according to the royal generosity*” [v. 13].

From the foregoing, we can conclude that your benefactors will sincerely appreciate whatever you can do for them because they also have needs that you can meet. You are filling up for them what they lack, where they are poor, so to speak, and “he who has pity on the poor lends to the Lord, and He will pay back what he has given” [Prov. 19: 17]. That is even more important in our relationship with God, the Benefactor who owns the world and all of us that dwell therein [Ps. 24: 1]. You may think that you have nothing to give Him because He owns everything. Yet, He has said, “Offer to God *thanksgiving, and pay your vows* to the Most High. Call upon Me in the day of trouble; and I will deliver you, and you shall glorify Me” [Ps. 50: 12-15]. If you can give to God, you can also give to your earthly benefactors. It is a great investment and it is for your own good. That is the message of the story of the widow’s mite that we shall now examine.

2. A widow gives her all to her Benefactor!

In today's Bible text, Jesus had been teaching in the temple in Jerusalem during the last week of His earthly ministry. He sat opposite the temple treasury and saw how people were putting money into it [Mk 12: 41]. This was not a tax to the Roman authorities. Rather, it was paid for the upkeep of the temple. You paid not out of necessity but according to what your heart was *able and willing* to give. For example, following the return of the first exiles from Babylon centuries earlier, "some of the heads of the fathers' houses, when they came to the house of the Lord which [was] in Jerusalem, *offered freely* for the house of God, to erect it in its place; *according to their ability, they gave to the treasury for the work*" [Ezra 2: 68-69]. Therefore, Jesus was not looking at how much each person put into the treasury but what was in each person's heart "for the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart" [1 Sam. 16: 7].

The rich people put in much as expected. However, a widow came and threw in "two mites, which make a quadrans" [Mk 12: 41-42]. To give you an idea of how much her contribution was worth, let us put it in terms of the Roman currency of the time and its modern equivalent. According to Bible scholars, a denarius was a soldier's daily wage and it is less than fifty cents (US). A quadrans was about one-sixteenth of a denarius, that is, about three US cents. The widow put in less than a nickel (5¢) which could hardly pay for anything but Jesus put a higher spiritual value on her contribution for the following reasons:

a) *The widow gave in spite of her poverty*

Jesus noted that the others gave out of their abundance but that the widow gave out of her poverty [v. 44]. That tells us that giving is by all, not necessarily by those who have. *Giving is by those who care, not necessarily by those who have or can afford it.* The widow was giving for a richer purpose than her poverty could afford but she believed that she could contribute and she did.

The lesson there for us is to find your giving niche wherever you find yourself. For example, you may not be able to buy a pulpit for your church but you should be able to clean it. You may not be able to pay for your mother's groceries but you can help to bring them home. The destitute in our opening story could easily have washed Carl's car for free or at a much reduced price. *No one is too poor to give.* You may only be poor in material terms but very rich in spiritual integrity.

b) *She gave all that she had!*

Jesus rated the widow's contribution higher than those of the rich because, while others gave out of their abundance, she "put in all that

she had, her whole livelihood” [v. 44]. That suggests that *God measures your giving by what you have left for yourself after giving*. The widow had nothing left after throwing in the two mites that she had. The rich had much to go back to thereafter. You will recall that, on one occasion, when Jesus asked a rich young man to sell all that he had and give to the poor, he went away sad because he could not do it [**Matt. 19: 20-22**]. He trusted his riches more than he could trust God. That is called idolatry. On the other hand, this widow trusted God totally. That is called faith. Without faith, no one can please God [**Heb. 11: 6**]. Consequently, God ranked her above the other contributors!

From that story, we learn a few general principles in our relationship with our benefactors. Firstly, your benefactors also have needs but they may not be of the type they meet for you. It is your responsibility to find out which of them you can meet. If you care about the future of your relationship with them, you need to make the relationship a two-way street. Secondly, *God measures the value of your contribution not by how much you give but by what you withhold*. What you withhold is determined in your heart. A tight-fisted person is called a miser. *Therefore, the less you keep for yourself, the more God sees you as trusting in Him*. Finally, God is your best benefactor in that He gave His only begotten Son to die in your place [**Jn 3: 16**]. What can you give back to Him in appreciation?

3. Conclusion: Give your all to God also!

The widow gave less than five nickels but God rated her contribution more highly than the much by the millionaires. She gave not because she had but because she cared. She gave all she had, the same way that God gave to you all He had, His only begotten Son. In return, God has needs that you can meet. For example, He is looking for labourers in His vineyard because the harvest is ripe but the labourers are few [**Matt. 9: 37-38**]. He is looking for apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers [**Ephes. 4: 11**]. He is asking for your total obedience [**1 Sam. 15: 22-24**], especially in such areas as thanksgiving and payment of your vows [**Ps. 50:12-15**], especially tithes [**Mal. 3: 8-10**].

Like the widow, God expects you to surrender all to Him, that is, to put your trust absolutely in Him. So, the next time you sing in your church, “I surrender all to Jesus,” you had better mean it or else you are a hypocrite!