

“Mite We Be Wrong About the Poor Widow’s Gift?”

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Scriptures

Mark 12:37b - 13:4

37b And a huge crowd was listening to him with delight.

38 During the course of his teaching he said, “Look out for the scholars, who like to parade around in long robes and insist on being addressed with respect in the marketplaces 39 and prefer to have the most important seats in the synagogues and the most honorable couches at banquets! 40 They are the ones who prey on widows and their families and recite long prayers just so as to put on airs. These folks will get a stiff sentence.”

41 And then he sat down opposite the treasury and observed the crowd dropping money into the collection box. And many rich folks dropped in large sums. 42 Then a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which is a pittance. 43 Then he motioned for his disciples to come over and said to them: “I swear, this poor widow has contributed more than all those who dropped something into the collection box. 44 After all, they were all donating out of their surplus, whereas she, out of her poverty, has contributed all she had, her entire livelihood.”

13:1 And as he was going out of the temple area, one of his disciples said to him, “Look, Teacher, what magnificent masonry! What wonderful buildings!”

2 And Jesus replied to him, “Take a good look around at these monumental buildings! You can be sure that not one stone will be left on top of another! Every last one will certainly be knocked down.”

3 And as he was sitting on the Mount of Olives opposite the temple, Peter would ask him privately, as would James and John and Andrew: 4 Tell us, when are these things going to happen and what will be the sign to indicate when all these things are about to take place?”

Sermon

The traditional interpretation of this passage places the focus of this story on the piety of the widow and her personally costly gift.

Her willingness to give everything she has is of greater value than those gifts given by the wealthy.

But might we be missing Jesus’ real point?

After all, what sort of society, what kind of religion allows for, or perhaps even encourages such impoverishment of widows?

Was the fact that this widow gave the her last two pennies to the Temple an act of personal piety to be celebrated, or rather an act of coercion and corruption that Jesus was actually lamenting?

Immediately prior to his observations Jesus had just given

a harsh and fairly dramatic warning to his disciples that the religious establishment was not to be trusted.

“Look out for the scholars, who like to parade around in long robes and insist on being addressed with respect in the marketplaces 39 and prefer to have the most important seats in the synagogues and the most honorable couches at banquets! 40 They are the ones who prey on widows and their families and recite long prayers just so as to put on airs. These folks will get a stiff sentence.”

And then, as if on cue, planted in order to provide a provocative object lesson for his disciples, appears this poor widow forking over her last two pennies.

It was bad enough that such a woman existed in Jerusalem since the laws of Moses had laid out specific rules just so that, at least the total dissolution of the poor could not happen.

God had also repeatedly sent Israel prophets who had both constantly reminded Kings and critiqued Judaic practices, for their failure to take care of the poor.

And we know that widows were always part of that formula, who were always included other vulnerable groups, usually the orphans, but sometimes “the foreigner” and lepers. They were of course shorthand for the most vulnerable of the vulnerable that the socio-religious establishment was not, I repeat NOT, allowed to fall into poverty.

But alas, here she is, entering the very holiest place of Jewish religion and not only is she already impoverished, she then gave even what little she had left.

Those Temple guardians, the scribes, were not seemingly satisfied with impoverishing her but they needed every last penny.

Mark provides us Jesus’ words, but we do not know his tone of voice. Was he just matter of factly repeating a common saying? Or was he perhaps outraged at the injustice he saw? Or, as I mentioned earlier, was he lamenting the fact that not only has this widow fallen into poverty, but now she was left with absolutely nothing to live on.

Last week I talked about the practice of *korban*, where the wealthy were allowed to preserve their wealth

by consecrating it to the Temple.

It sounded like a very religiously pious thing to do but it also absolved them of caring for their aging parents. Jesus had attacked these same scholars, claiming that *korban* was merely a human tradition which invalidated

God's law that children were to honor their mother and father. The intention of God's laws were to be a blessing but the religious establishment had turned it into a curse.

So, if the religious establishment were willing to go to such great lengths to circumvent God's law and thus put the elderly in the poor house what makes us think they wouldn't find ways to screw widows? And that is exactly what Jesus was referring to when he claimed that the scribes actually "preyed" on widows and their families, while they performed lengthy "prayers!"

In honor cultures, such as was the case in Palestine of Jesus' day, privilege and status bought one social power.

And Jesus gives us a ruthless, and perhaps a bit over the top, caricature of how the scholars went about accumulating this; they wore long robes, demanded being shown their privilege in public, they made sure to get to synagogue early in order to get the best seats, and made sure to take the most prominent seats at banquets.

This kind of status was of course, shallow, according to Jesus and their wealth was derived from taking advantage of the vulnerable.

In that highly patriarchal society, women could not be expected to handle all the complexities of her husband's estate upon his death. But fortunately, the religious establishment had found a solution. "Scribal trusteeship" could manage all those details for the widow and her family while charging only a wee percent.

And since the scribes were well known for their public piety they were considered reliable men who could be trusted. But the actual practice was notorious for abuse and embezzlement. And so, those supposedly trustworthy guarantors slowly dispossessed the widow of her livelihood.

So just like *korban*, in the name of pious religion, once again the most vulnerable were forced into poverty.

Mark's play of words for "robbery" and "prayer" come out in translation; As the scholars "prayed" at length, they actually "preyed" on widows.

Only a few chapters prior to this, Jesus had stormed into the Temple, claiming that God's house was supposed to be a place of prayer, but now it had actually become the site of robbery.

And he was furious that the very lives of the poor had become true cost of maintaining this site of corruption.

So, enter then stage right, an already impoverished widow who gave her last two pennies to that corrupt den of thieves.

For their evil that scribal institution will be harshly punished. But in fact, Jesus is also sitting in judgement of the entire corrupt Temple system.

The cost is far too high to maintain and its corruption so deep, that in the end that system was unredeemable.

We know this because Mark informs us that Jesus "sat down" (similar to a judge?) "opposite" the Temple treasury, where

Mark says, he sat "scrutinizing" what was going on.

Was he pronouncing judgement on an institution that was victimizing the very people it was supposed to go out of its way to help.

Instead, in order to preserve the wealth and privilege of a few the Temple establishment was actually willing to impoverish many.

Jesus, I do believe, was lamenting, crying out against a system, that not only victimized such women, but had also so thoroughly conditioned folks such as her, that they were willing to hand over every last cent they had to maintain such corruption.

In Chapter 13, Jesus did in fact pronounce his judgement on the Temple;

*"Take a good look around at these monumental buildings!
You can be sure that not one stone will be left on top of another!
Every last one will certainly be knocked down."*

But I am still haunted by what kind of religion would do such a thing?

What kind of institution not only impoverishes folks,
but is not satisfied until it get every last cent?

What kind of society would structure itself in such a way?

Certainly, such a society would not be allowed to exist

in a democratic nation such as ours.
Certainly not the religion known as Christianity,
which claims to follow the teachings this same Jesus
who clearly condemned such practices.

Well, fortunately institutions are not people.
No institution or system, either good or evil,
will last forever. All seem to pass away.
God's truth, however, remains for eternity.
God's truth and not human inspired traditions persevere.
It is, fortunately, that which we confess.

It is this that remains, as either a judgement upon us
or as a source of our hope.

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