

FIRST LESSON: Proverbs 11: 24-26; 28
SECOND LESSON: Mark 12:38-44
November 7, 2021

“God or Money?”
Sermon © Lisa C. Farrell

A 50-year-old lawyer who had been practicing since he was 25 passed away and arrived at the Pearly Gates for judgment. The lawyer said to St. Peter, “There must be some mistake! I’m only 50 years old, that’s far too young to die.” St. Peter frowned and consulted his book. “That’s funny,” he said, “when we added up your billable hours you should be at least 93 by now!”

Who are these men who “devour” widow’s houses? They certainly dress in style. They walk around in flowing robes, clearly not designed for any kind of physical labor. The fabric is top notch. Their academic and religious qualifications are on show for all to see. It’s obvious that they are “important.” And these important men have the best seats in the synagogues. They sit at the front and look out on the congregation, more to be seen than anything else. Shopkeepers defer to them and seek their business. They are seated in places of honor at banquets. But where exactly does all the wealth and influence come from?

The men we are talking about were scribes, and among other things, a scribe **was a lawyer**. Have I said enough already? Scribes gave legal advice. They helped draw up documents and written agreements. They advised people. They were not supposed to charge people, but of course they found ways around this. A vulnerable widow, unaware of the intricacies of the law or exactly how much services cost, was an easy mark. A widow would believe this respected and highly educated man of God when he said the payment of large fees were necessary, or steered her in dubious directions in her investments. For Jesus to specifically mention devouring widows houses it must have been a grievously common abuse of power.

Jesus was sitting directly opposite one of the large trumpet shaped metal containers set up for donations. They were extremely heavy. No one could just abscond with one. While he watched many rich people came and put in large amounts of money. This was a very public act. It was all coinage so it was loud. Paper money is a modern invention. Everyone would see the generous donations these men were making. And no doubt some of the men were the very scribes Jesus had just mentioned, the ones who stood in the synagogue proclaiming long prayers out loud so everyone would know how holy they were. A poor widow came at the same time and put in two small coins. Our translation says they were worth a few pennies, but in today’s money it is more

like a few dollars, enough for a very cheap lunch. Apparently, it was all she had.

There are a lot of different directions we could go with this text. In fact, some preachers have taken a page out of the scribe's rule book and used it to their advantage. They argue that the widow gave everything she had, so their target audience should give everything too, preaching to their congregations that unless it hurts it doesn't count! I think we have all noticed that none of these rich men and women are particularly hurting financially themselves.

Beware of the scribes. They might pretend to be your friend, but they have billable hours. Beware of those who make public displays of their piety and generosity. They do not act out of love, but out of conceit. The example of the widow does not tell us that we must give everything we have. It says that we should fully trust God to take care of us. Jesus commends this woman for her faith and trust in God. And he equally condemns those who give in order to gain renown and public praise. They have already received their reward.

Patronage has been part of every culture since the beginning of time. The wealthy pay for a grand building for public use. In Rome it was a way of reminding people who they should be loyal to. The very rich at that time also sponsored large and expensive public entertainments. Corporations sponsor the Olympics and sporting events today. The donors who give millions have their names on hospital wings, university buildings and public theaters. They have gotten what they at least partially set out to get—public recognition and praise. And it's not that these contributions are wrong. Many of these institutions do wonderful things. God wants us to give, but God wants us to give anonymously, not so we should receive public acclaim.

Churches have a bad track record in the court of public opinion when it comes to asking for money. And some of it is deserved. In the 19th century churches often charged pew rents because they couldn't depend on offerings. Some of the predecessor congregations of this congregation did so. The better seats cost more and therefore everyone knew who gave what. Others published the names of large donors. In the 20th century charismatic preachers started making demands on people to give generously at large events. Once technology advanced, things got worse. In 1987, Oral Roberts made the news by claiming that God told him if he didn't raise 8 million dollars in the next three months he would die. He was trying to bail out his failed medical center "The City of Faith Medical and Research Center." Roberts got 9 million dollars from gullible people, but the "City of Faith," a very ill-conceived venture in the first place, closed in 1989.

While we all know about the exploitation of the modern televangelist, ordinary congregations can have their issues too. There are some churches today that make their offerings very, very public by asking people to come forward and put their money in the plate. That way EVERYONE sees what you are giving, and not getting up at all results in being the target of some pretty nasty gossip. There are even congregations where the first rows in the church are roped off and reserved for the biggest givers. If we tried that in the Presbyterian Church we'd have to rope off the back rows! Online giving has taken some of the pressure off, but I'm sure someone will figure out a way to manipulate that too.

Yes, God wants us to give. And yes, I have preached an awful lot on money this fall, but don't blame me, blame Jesus. We're going through the gospel of Mark and he talked about it a lot. Jesus talked about money because we have a problem with it. Money usurps God in our lives faster and more effectively than anything else. Having money makes us feel secure. Not having money makes us feel panicked. And most Americans are not far from panic. The car dies. A major appliance breaks. The house gets flooded and there is no flood insurance. Someone in the family loses a job. Disability. Divorce. The death of a spouse. Major health issues with large medical bills. The pandemic and being unable to work. It doesn't take much. Most of us don't have much in the way of savings. A lot of us have used credit cards too freely. Younger Americans have crippling student loan debt. If we lose our job and cannot quickly find another one, or can only find a low paying job, how will we pay the mortgage or the rent? How will we pay the power bill? I know of senior citizens in our community who have had to move from homes that were fully paid for because they could not afford their property taxes when they retired.

Money—or lack of money—consumes a lot of our attention. And fear about not having enough money causes us to hold back. It makes us a prisoner of money. We can become stingy and selfish over time. But God gives to us to the degree we give to others. I do not mean this in a foolhardy way. Generosity is not defined as giving away absolutely everything we own. But Proverbs says, “One person gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.” And Proverbs also includes a warning about not trusting in money. “Those who trust in their riches will fall, but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.”

God doesn't want us to live absorbed by either greed or fear. God does not want us to give in order to gain the praise of others. Nor should we ever let anyone use guilt or shame to coerce us to give. God wants us to trust that our needs will be met in times of abundance and in times of poverty, and God wants us to give responsibly, compassionately and with gratitude in our heart. Amen

Proverbs 11: 24-26; 28

- 24 One person gives freely, yet gains even more;
another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.
- 25 A generous person will prosper;
whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.
- 26 People curse the one who hoards grain,
but they pray God's blessing on the one who is willing to sell.
- 28 Those who trust in their riches will fall,
but the righteous will thrive like a green leaf.

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.”