

In May of 1982, President Reagan appointed Lee Iacocca to head the Statue of Liberty-Ellis Island Foundation. This Foundation was created to raise funds for the renovation of the then deteriorating Statue of Liberty. As Iacocca chaired the fund-raising effort to refurbish the Statue of Liberty, he told about some of the unusual gifts and givers. One woman in her eighties sent a letter and a check for \$10,000. She added a P.S., asking for a free copy of Iacocca's book because there was a two-month wait at the library. Iacocca said, *"Now there's a woman after my own heart. She'll give 10 grand for the statue, but she isn't about to go to the bookstore and spend \$19.95 just to read about some Italian kid's ups and downs in the car business. Talk about having your priorities straight!"*

Another 87-year-old lady sent \$1,000. They sent her a nice thank-you note. She must have appreciated the note; she sent another check for \$50,000. After that, Iacocca called her to say thanks again, and he invited her to visit Liberty Island with him, but she said she had to clean her house. On two other occasions when he was in New York, Iacocca called her, but she was always too busy. But the last time she refused his date, she said she was sending another "little envelope." When it came, there were three checks—one for \$25,000, one for \$50,000 and one for \$75,000. All he did was try to say thanks for \$1,000 and he ended up with \$201,000! He said, *"There's no telling where we'd be if we'd also sent flowers!"*

Perhaps though the most touching gift came from 78 homeless Vietnamese refugees, living in a camp in Thailand. They passed the hat and came up with \$114.19. These were people who'd lost everything but hope but were willing to give what little they had for that symbol of liberty. They were big givers. They didn't give out of their abundance; they gave out of their poverty. Their gift was probably most like that of an anonymous widow whom Jesus commended. Please turn in your Bibles to Mark 12:41-44 (p. 849). Most of us, I know that I usually do, give out of our abundance, our surplus. Did you know that **God's loves big givers best?** Among the throngs of worshipers in Jerusalem that Passover week, Jesus singled out this one poor widow as the outstanding example of a big giver. Haddon Robinson said, *"The gold-medal giver in the New Testament turns out to be a woman who contributed less than a nickel."*

To be honest, I don't know that I know what it is to be a big giver. Most of us don't. I know that we have some heroic givers here at Grace. I've met them in every church I've been part of. Their generosity always astounds me, leaving me speechless. They also put me to shame. My giving seems so insipid in comparison. That's who we want to talk to and talk about today. You see, it'd be easy to think that if you can't give thousands or tens of thousands, or even hundreds to our **Building Changed Lives Together Campaign**, that your gift doesn't matter, that it doesn't really count. And this wonderful account in Mark 12 shouts from the rooftops that it's not the amount of the gift; it's the heart of the giver that makes a gift big.

These small copper coins or *mites* she dropped into the treasury box were each worth one sixty-fourth of a denarius. A denarius was a working man's daily wage but this was a fraction of a denarius. These coins were called "*lepta*," which literally means "*peeled*," because they were such thin coins. But they were "*all that she had to live on*" (vs. 44). This poor widow was emptying her bank account out. Her sacrificial giving so pleased

Jesus that He holds it up as an example to us for our giving.

I doubt any of us has come close to giving as much as this widow gave. Sometimes people say, *"I'll give my mite,"* but they miss the point. We haven't given our *"mite"* until we're down to our last nickel and we still give it. In looking at this incident, most of us are standing near sea level looking up at this woman on Mount Everest. While we may never get there ourselves, we can learn so much from her that will help us please the Lord with our giving. Let me suggest **three lessons** from this wonderful account.

**1. The Lord Jesus observes our giving.** Jesus watched the rich and their large gifts and He saw this poor widow and her two coins. Jesus still sees every giver and gift!

**a. Jesus observes the givers.** There were thirteen boxes with brass trumpet-shaped openings, narrow at the top, wider at the bottom, where worshipers could give. There was no paper money, so you could hear the sound of the coins clinking into those boxes. There was the sound of the average giver: "Clink, clink, clink." Every once in a while, a well-dressed scribe would walk up, look around to make sure he was being watched, and then dump in a whole bag full of coins: "CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK, CLINK." But then this poor widow came up. No one noticed her, except Jesus. You had to strain to hear the faint, "Plink, plink."

The Greek word used for Jesus' watching means to gaze or look intently. There were many Passover worshipers coming into the Temple that day, dropping their donations into the boxes. Probably none of them noticed Jesus sitting there, but He noticed each one of them, including this anonymous widow. She didn't know Jesus was watching her until she got to heaven, where she was richly rewarded. Jesus not only knew how much she gave, but in His omniscience, He knew it was all she had to live on.

That's still true today. Each time we give to the Lord, He's watching. He doesn't miss a single gift, big or small. He knows every giver, rich and poor. People may give anonymously, unnoticed by human eyes, but the Lord Jesus knows each one. Most of us are very guarded about sharing our personal finances with others. Asking someone, "How much do you make?" or "How much do you give?" is kind of like asking, "How's your sex life?" It's a very confidential matter. But Jesus knows every dime you make and where you spend it. *"The eyes of the Lord are in every place, watching the evil and the good"* (Prov. 15:3).

Years ago, well-known Southern Baptist pastor, Dr. John Broadus, wanted to impress on his congregation the fact that Jesus knows what we give. One Sunday he came down off the platform and walked beside an usher as the offering was being taken. Pastor Broadus went up every aisle and watched as each person either gave or passed the plate by. Some were angry; others were confused or ashamed. All were surprised. Then, he returned to the pulpit and began his sermon on this story. He concluded with this, *"My people, if you take it to heart that I have seen your offerings this day and know just what sacrifice you have made—and what sacrifice you have not made—remember that your Savior goes up the aisles with every usher and sees every cent contributed by His people."* So the first thing to remember then is that Jesus sees those who give. You can't please Him with your giving if you forget that He's always watching.

**b. Jesus observes the amounts given.** Mark 12 tells us that many rich people were putting in large sums. This widow put in two small copper coins. And Jesus saw how much each one gave.

What difference did her two coins make toward meeting the temple budget? None!

Perhaps the treasurer muttered under his breath as he counted it, “Why do people throw such small coins into the treasury? They’re more of a nuisance to count than they’re worth!” Yet, whatever amount we give, we need to consider **three important concerns**:

\* **Our Focus**: Whatever we give should be out of love for the Lord, not for self-gratification. We don’t know for sure why this widow gave those two coins that day; the text doesn’t tell us. It’s obvious though that the Lord wants us to see a contrast between her and the scribes whom Jesus has just denounced. They’re *doing* their religion to impress others with how spiritual they are, but she’s quiet, unknown, and not trying to impress anyone. She may have even been embarrassed by her small gift. They, on the other hand, were giving out of pride, for selfish recognition. She was giving in worship, out of love for God. Whatever amount we give, we should always give out of a heart of love for God, and never for personal recognition or other selfish reasons. Only God knows our hearts. It’s tempting to give so we feel better or even for self-gratification, than out of love for God and lost souls. The best gifts are love gifts, love for Jesus.

\* **Our Faith**: Whatever we give should be given trusting God to supply all our needs. Not many of us are as poor as this woman was. Giving away what she had to live on forced her to trust God to meet her needs. Yet, even when we have plenty in the bank for future needs, we should give in faith, looking to God to meet all our needs. Have you ever had the experience of giving to the Lord’s work money you’d set aside for some personal need or nicety? Then you prayed, “Lord, would you please provide this item for us?” When He does, it brings such wonderful joy to know that you gave in faith and God provided in a way that you never could have imagined.

\* **Our Faithfulness**: We should give faithfully, no matter what our circumstances. Somehow I don’t think that this widow was giving because the chief priest got on his TV show and pled, “If you don’t send in your checks, the Temple will go under.” She wasn’t giving because of pressure or impulse. Rather, she gave out of routine faithfulness. When she went to worship at the temple, she gave as a matter of “holy habit.” Her gift dislodges the excuse, “We’ll give when we have enough money.” No, you won’t! Giving is a mind-set. If you don’t figure out ways to give faithfully when you’re poor, you won’t give when you’ve got more. You can always find some way to give something if you have a mind to be faithful to God. Let’s be honest. The reason most of us don’t give faithfully isn’t because we don’t have the money. It’s because we’ve squandered the money the Lord provided on frivolous stuff that we could easily live without. We run up our credit cards to support a lifestyle we can’t afford and then rationalize, “I can’t afford to give.” The truth is, we don’t give and we’re in debt because we aren’t managing God’s resources carefully in line with His priorities.

Can I be blunt and specific? If you’re not current on your bills, you need to think twice about going out to dinner or the show. You should consider cutting cable and high speed internet. Do you really need a cell phone? A smart phone and a big texting plan? The point is that you need to cut out the nonessentials until you get rid of credit card debt. And the reason isn’t so you can then start spending more on yourself. It should be so that you can begin giving as the Lord wants you to give. For some, that probably sounds radical. The Bible is clear though that if you can’t give as you should, you’re not managing your money as the Lord wants you to do.

The first lesson then is that Jesus observes our giving. He knows how much we make,

how much we spend, and how much we give. Keeping that fact in mind would greatly affect our giving and how we manage all that the Lord entrusts to us.

**2. The Lord Jesus evaluates our giving.** When the Lord exclaimed, *“this poor widow has put in more than all the others,”* He was evaluating their gifts. Pile up all the gifts of the rich combined on one side and her two small coins on the other, and hers is a lot bigger in God’s sight.

Charles Simeon was probably right. He points out that if Jesus hadn’t *commended* this woman’s gift, most of us would have *condemned* it. He says that it was *unnecessary*, because surely God wouldn’t require a gift from one so poor. It also was *useless*, since the temple didn’t need this pittance. It was even *presumptuous*, because to give away everything was to tempt God by giving away what He’d already supplied for her basic needs. So why did Jesus speak so highly of her gift? **Two reasons:**

**a. Jesus always evaluates the cost of the gift to the giver.** Jesus explains that they all gave out of their surplus, what they could afford. This poor widow gave out of her poverty. She put in everything she had to live on. The gifts of the rich didn’t cost them anything. They didn’t have to go without anything or adjust their lifestyles to give large amounts. This widow may have gone hungry that night because she gave all that she had.

It’s tempting and many of us succumb to just giving God leftovers. If we have anything left after we’ve spent the rest, not just for our needs, but also for many nice extras, then we drop a bit in the plate. Or if it’s something old that we don’t need, we’ll donate it to the church.

Paul Harvey told about a woman who called the Butterball Turkey Company and asked whether she could cook a turkey that had been in her freezer for 23 years. The customer service representative explained that it might be okay if the freezer had maintained a below-zero temperature the whole time, but that the flavor would have deteriorated so much that it wouldn’t be very tasty. The woman said, “Oh, that’s what we thought. We’ll just donate it to the church.”

Even if you tithe, if you make an average wage, it doesn’t cost that much. You still have 90% to spend on yourself. 10% is a bit like a tip. It’s a nice gesture, to show God that you appreciate His services after you’ve gorged yourself on the gourmet meal He gave you. But it doesn’t really cost you; you didn’t give up the meal.

The Lord evaluates our giving not by how much we give, but by how much we have left after we give. The more we make, the more percentage-wise we ought to give. Ignoring taxes, a person making \$50,000 who tithes has \$40,000 left to live on. But a person making \$10,000 who tithes has only \$9,000 left. Did you know that studies consistently show that lower income people give more proportionately than those who earn more? One Gallup poll showed that people earning under \$10,000 gave 5.5% of their income. Those with \$50,000 to \$60,000 gave 1.7%. Those earning between \$75,000 to \$100,000 gave 3.2%. That shouldn’t be. Giving from the heart is going to cost us something. We shouldn’t offer to the Lord sacrifices that cost us nothing (2 Sam. 24:24).

**b. Jesus evaluates the motive of the giver.** I’ve already touched on this but I believe that the context of this story suggests that Jesus knew the selfish motives of the religious leaders who gave large amounts to the temple. He knew they did it to be honored by men (Matt. 6:1-4). And Jesus condemned them for their hypocrisy, but He commended this poor widow, who didn’t even know that He saw her give. Jesus knew

her heart. He knew her motives; that she gave to express her devotion to God. It was an act of worship.

Hear me and hear me well. God doesn't need and God isn't after our money. He's after something much more important, He wants our hearts. He wants us to love Him first of all. He knows that our hearts are often inseparably bound up with our money. As Jesus said, *"For wherever your treasure is, you may be certain that your heart will be there too!"* (Matt. 6:21). Your heart follows your treasure. If you invest your treasure in stocks, your heart follows the Dow. If you invest in God's kingdom, your heart will be drawn to God. Since the Lord Jesus observes and evaluates our giving, the bottom line is...

**3. We must give as unto Him.** Motive means everything in giving. God loves a cheerful giver who gives out of love and gratitude to Him. We shouldn't give out of pressure to meet needs. Now I wouldn't be honest if I said that the church doesn't have needs. We're trying to build a new building, a new tool we can use to better serve the Lord and have a more effective ministry in this community. **But** we don't want you to give because you feel pressured. In fact, if you're giving out of the wrong motive, please don't give. We want you to give to the Lord because you love Jesus and have received His indescribable gift.

One day a little girl out shopping with her mother saw the most beautiful doll. She wanted it so badly, but they just couldn't afford it. Her daddy had been sick and out of work for several months. Trying not to sound too disappointed, she said, "I know, Mama, I know...but isn't she beautiful?" Every time they went into that store, this little would gaze fondly at that doll. Some months passed and things got better for the family. The little girl had almost forgotten her dream wish when, to her utter surprise, she got that doll as a birthday present. From then on, she and the doll were inseparable. It became her "favoritest treasure," as she put it. One day, while sitting with her parents in church, she listened as the pastor spoke of how much Jesus loves us—how He left His beautiful home in heaven and came down here to die for our sins. All week long that little girl thought about how much Jesus loved her and she wished she could do something to show Him that she loved Him, too. But she only had one penny.

The next Sunday her father and mother couldn't believe it when they saw her take her treasured doll and place it in the offering plate. Some stared, some chuckled as they saw the doll in the offering plate, not realizing the costly sacrifice it represented. Every day the little girl missed her doll, but especially at bedtime. She'd get tears in her eyes, but then she'd think about Jesus and it would be all right again.

One evening her pastor dropped by, just for a social call, he said, with the doll tucked under his arm. He smiled warmly and said, "I brought your doll back to you." The little girl seemed transfixed at the sight of that doll but she didn't move. "Go ahead, take her," the pastor said. "I'm giving her back to you." Only the look in her eyes betrayed how much she wanted to take that doll back in her arms. But, brushing away a tear, she said, "I can't...I can't take her." "But, why?" asked the startled pastor. "Because I didn't give her to you." She had given her doll to the Lord.

**Conclusion:** That's the lesson this poor widow teaches us. Since the Lord observes and evaluates our giving, our gifts must be to Him. This widow's giving pictures two things. It shows us how we should respond to the great love of Christ. We must give Him our hearts, which certainly includes our money. Christian friend, if you're not giving faithfully and generously to the Lord's work, it shows you don't love Jesus as much as

you should.

It also points us to Christ's total self-giving for us on the cross. As Paul put it, "*For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich*" (2 Cor. 8:9). He took our sins on Himself so that God could be both loving and just in offering us a complete pardon.

To please God with your monetary giving, you must first receive His indescribable gift of eternal life through Christ. Then, out of love, give Him your heart and show it by giving gifts that cost you to please Him. As J. C. Ryle observed, "*A giving Savior ought to have giving disciples.*"

Let me close with one of the most famous stories in church fund raising history. It happened in 1912. A sobbing little girl stood near a small church from which she'd been turned away because it "was too crowded."

"I can't go to Sunday School," she sobbed to the pastor as he walked by. Seeing her shabby, unkempt appearance, the pastor guessed the reason and, taking her by the hand, took her inside and found a place for her in the Sunday School class. That little girl's name was Hattie May Wiatt. And little Hattie was so touched that she went to bed that night thinking of all the children who had no place to worship Jesus because there wasn't room.

Two years later, little Hattie died. She was from a poor, tenement building and her parents called for Dr. Russell Conwell, the kind-hearted pastor, who'd befriended their daughter, to handle the funeral arrangements. As her little body was being moved, a worn and crumpled purse was found which seemed to have been rummaged from some trash dump. Inside were 57 cents and a note scribbled in childish handwriting which read, "*This is to help build the little church bigger so more children can go to Sunday school.*" For two years Hattie had saved for this offering of love. When Dr. Conwell tearfully read that note, he knew instantly what he was going to do. Carrying this note and the cracked, red purse to the pulpit, he told the story of her unselfish love and devotion. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for a larger building.

But the story doesn't end there! A newspaper learned of the story and published it. It was read by a Realtor who offered the church a parcel of land worth many thousands. When told that the church could not pay so much, he offered it to them for...57 cents. Church members made large donations. Checks came from far and wide. Within five years Hattie's gift had increased to \$250,000.00, a huge sum for that time. Hattie's unselfish love had paid large dividends.

The next time that you're in Philadelphia, look up Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of over 3000 and Temple University, where hundreds of students are trained. Have a look, too, at the Good Samaritan Hospital and at a Sunday School building which houses hundreds of Sunday children so that no child in the area will ever need to be left outside during Sunday school. In one of the rooms of this building there's a picture of little Hattie May Wiatt whose 57 cents, so sacrificially saved, made such remarkable history. Alongside of it is a portrait of her kind pastor, Dr. Russel H. Conwell, author of the book, *Acres of Diamonds*.

That's a true story. It shows what God can do with a poor widow's two small coins or a poor little girl's 57 cents. It's not how big is your gift; it's how big is your heart.

I've received lots of gifts over the years. When Jane and I were newly married and in our first church, periodically my Dad would pop a check in the mail for a thousand dollars. Those were big amounts. But do you want to know the gifts that I'll remember the rest of my life? They always came at my birthday with a handwritten note, not even a birthday card. They came on a piece of paper from stenographer pad, about the cheapest paper out there. It was always just a few dollars, the number of dollars for how old I was that year and those dollars were sewn into the note. They were from my grandmother, Ma Ma.

They mean more to me than nearly every other gift I've ever received because my grandmother was dirt poor. It cost her a lot to send me a birthday gift. When I was about ten, she finally got her first phone and it was a party line. Ma Ma always gave out of love and out of her poverty.

There are some of you sitting here and as we've been talking about our ***Building Changed Lives Campaign*** and our new building, you've wrongly thought, "I don't have much to give. What is the little bit that I have? What difference will it make?" You may be on Social Security or on Food Stamps. Maybe you're just barely getting by.

Please join us. Not because we need the money but so that God will bless you, just like that poor widow, because giving for you really costs you.

This is your church. It's your building, too. If you give from your heart out of love for Jesus out of your poverty; it's more valuable to God than gifts of those of us who give out of our abundance. And you'll have God's great blessing because you have truly sacrificed for Jesus.

So please, please don't ever think that your gift, your commitment doesn't matter because it's just too small. Tell that to this widow. Tell that to Hattie May Wiatt. Like that widow, you're giving deep and sacrificially and your gift pleases Jesus and God will reward your sacrifice.

And I have only one request, when you get Home and move into your mansion, would you please let the rest of us visit you some time? You who are so faithful with so little are known by the Father and will be richly rewarded for your sacrifice. Oh my friend, don't you dare miss it!