

Meet Jesus: As he diagnoses the financial crisis

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Date: 26 November 2008

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[0 : 00] Well, if you'd like to open your Bibles, we're in Mark's Gospel and we're at the end of chapter 12. So, Mark's Gospel, the end of chapter 12, it's on page 849.

849. And we'll read from verse 41. And Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box.

Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, Truly I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box.

For they all contributed out of their abundance. But she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had. All she had to live on.

Uh-oh, we all think. The passage is about giving. So, let me reassure you, friends, I'm not going to be suggesting what percentage of your income you should be giving to the church.

[1 : 24] I've not got a pile of direct debit forms. Waiting for you on the way out to fill in. So, just relax. I don't want it to be like you're at the dentist.

Waiting for that filling. And I'll take it, this widow, you know, she gave with joy. Didn't she? And Jesus is there observing, isn't he? Making comments.

Just sat there. Drawing conclusions. And helping us to think through giving in sort of broad brushstrokes. Are you with me? He wants us to think about our commitment.

So, where is Jesus? Where is he? He's in the temple, isn't he? And in the temple, it's been one confrontation after another.

The religious leaders have been ganging up on him. You know, he's a threat to their status and they want him dead. So, a boxing ring.

[2 : 25] The bell rings, doesn't it? And the boxer sits down. And Jesus sits down for a breather. He's opposite the treasury. And you'd have been able to hear the coins falling into the treasury chest.

I guess it was something like this. I'm not sure. Probably bigger. Apparently, the first century historians tell us that it had a big horn on it. So, you could drop your coins in and it funneled them down and they fell into the treasury chest.

I guess it was very much like... Have you ever been on a toll motorway? Or under a toll tunnel? You pull up to the kiosk and some of them, they've got a big funnel, haven't they?

And you slow down and you wind your window down and you throw the coins in. I guess it was a little bit like that. No paper notes those days. Just silver and copper coins.

So, you'll have been able to hear them falling in. Actually, they would have been cascading in because it was Passover time. And this is the situation that we have before us.

[3 : 29] So, let's have a look at the passage. Let's have a look from verse 41. Jesus sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box.

Many rich people put in large sums. What a contrast.

Isn't that? That, friends. What a contrast. That is. Many rich people, a poor widow. Large sums, two small copper coins that make a penny.

So, let's try and capture that contrast. And we've got two points. First of all, the love of wealth. And then secondly, the wealth of love.

But first of all, I think Jesus summons us into this passage. Come and see what I'm seeing, he says. Verse 43. Can you see? And he called his disciples to him and said to them, Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box, for they all contributed out of their abundance.

[4 : 46] But she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had, all she had to live on. See how Jesus makes the observation, and then he shares it with his disciples, and then he just sort of leaves it up in the air, for us to think through.

And it's like each one of us has to think through this passage here, and how it would apply to our own lives. Now, before we get to our first point, I brought the widow along.

Here she is. Can you hear this, those listening in? These are her two. This is all she's got, isn't it? If you look at the passage, can you see the end of verse 44, everything she had to live on?

She puts it in. It's two small copper coins. There it is. That's her. So she puts in those two small copper coins. And what about the others? What about the other people?

Well, he's one of the rich people here. This is him. He's got a lot more than the widow. But actually, he doesn't put any in.

[5 : 59] He gives. He's got a reserve supply of money. It gives. Can you see it there? Just look at the passage. Verse 44. It gives out of his abundance. Can you see the difference?

So the rich person gives out of his abundance. He's not going to have any trouble with the weekly shop, is he?

He's going to be able to pay for that, all right. He's not going to have any problems with the fuel bills. And he's got a lot here left over in his abundance for his holidays. Do you see the difference, friends, with the two types of giving here?

So we've got these two types of giving. We've got the contrast before us. And we'll think about that now in our first point, the love of wealth.

And first of all, let's think about Genesis. Let's think about Genesis chapters 1 and chapter 2. And ask ourselves, did God shortchange Adam and Eve?

[7 : 05] You know, was there anything extra that they needed to enjoy life? And the answer is, they have all that they need. In Genesis 1 and 2, isn't it?

It's a lovely environment to live. And God saw everything that he had made. And behold, it was very good. But Adam and Eve, they wanted more, didn't they?

They wanted extra for themselves. Is wealth wrong? No. But greed is, says God. Adam was already wealthy. But he wasn't satisfied, was he?

With what God had given him. And humanity's never been satisfied since. That's the reason, isn't it? For the financial crisis at the moment. You know, the unrestrained greed of the banks, the unrestrained appetite of the public, there's a cutting here, a press cutting.

It's from the Daily Telegraph. It's actually two years, nine months ago. March 2006. The writing's on the wall here. Listen to this.

[8 : 12] Those who think the debt problem is going to get better are kidding themselves. The number of delinquencies is rising, not falling. Just days earlier, Barclays revealed that it had been forced to set aside 1.6 billion to cover bad debts for 2005, up 44% on the previous year.

Personal debt in Britain stands at more than 1.1 trillion, as cheap borrowing conditions have enticed consumers to take out record levels of loans, credit cards, and mortgages.

Thou shalt not cover, said God. And \$25 million won't satisfy those Somali pirates, will it?

Let's think about this for a minute. Wealth, it's sort of a form of security, isn't it? And we're all wealthy here. Yes, you are, compared to the rest of the world's population.

You know, we have better health services, don't we? Because of the wealth here in the UK. Better security, better education, a more comfortable retirement.

[9 : 20] But the problem, friends, here's the problem. It's when we trust our money more than we do our saviour. That's where the problem arises.

And we can slowly slip from anchoring our lives in Jesus to seeking security elsewhere. Be with me. Jesus mentioned that. Let me just read it to you. Jesus says this, And others are the ones sown among thorns. They are those who hear the word, but the cares of the world and the deceitfulness of riches and the desire for other things enter in and choke the word.

And it proves unfruitful. So these rich guys, they saunter up, don't they? And they toss in a few coins. There they are. And Jesus says they're just throwing a small change.

That's really what he's saying. Once I read that Christians, we should be more concerned about what we keep for ourselves than what we give to God.

[10 : 27] And ultimately, friends, it's to do with our orientation, isn't it? Which kingdom are we living for? Jesus said, What good is it if you gain the whole world?

He says, Let's take it off the scale. Here you are. You've got the whole world. What good is that? Mark chapter 8, verse 36, If you lose your own soul. Do you see? Friends, I know our circumstances, they differ.

But we all have a responsibility, don't we? To think these things through. You know, we can sometimes forget, can't we? That without Jesus, hell has got our name on it.

Do you see? And so we can give the small change of our lives in proportion to our gratitude. As we finish this point, let's hear some wise words from C.S. Lewis.

Just listen to this. I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.

[11 : 30] In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we're probably giving too little away.

If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say that they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them. There we are, our first point. It was just broad brush strokes and Jesus just wants us to think through these things, think through our circumstances and he's sort of left it hanging in the air for that reason for us to think through.

Now, what about that widow? And that's our second point, the wealth of love. Let's just see where we are in Mark's Gospel.

Chapter 13, verse 1. Look, can you see where we are in Mark's Gospel? And thus he came out of the temple. So, chapter 13, verse 1.

[12 : 37] Jesus leaves the temple. And so that's the end of his ministry inside the temple, do you see? And our passage, it's the curtain-closing scene of his ministry inside the temple.

Are you with me? Does that make sense? Herod's temple was an amazing place. It was absolutely spectacular. First century commentators and historians, they say it dazzled you when the sun was shining because of the gold.

But inside, it was corruption, wasn't it? Can you remember? Jesus overturned the tables of the money changers. It was superficial religion wherever he went.

The long-flowing robes of the ostentatious leaders. The prayers which sort of gathered a big audience to listen to them, but were not heard by God.

And Jesus, as he was walking around, the air was thick with a plot to kill him. Outside, outside, there was a withered fig tree, silently speaking of what was going on.

[13 : 56] And Jesus is probably exhausted by it all. He sat down. She was such a contrast to the prestige of the temple as she silently walked into his view.

Probably the only person who saw her was he. She looked insignificant as she dropped in her two small copper coins which make a penny.

Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow. They neither toil nor spin. Yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these, says Jesus.

She lost her husband, friends, but not her God. Not anything could take him from her. Jesus said to his disciples, didn't he, chapter 8, deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me.

And here she is, denying herself. When I came to Glasgow, I lived for four years in a flat which was left to the church by a guy, his name was Campbell Ross.

[15 : 09] He was one of the church members at the Tron. And I know that he liked wild flowers and birds. I've read quite a few of his book collection.

And our passage, it leaves the exact nature of our giving up in the air for the reader to think through. Here's Moses.

The writer tells us, the writer to the Hebrew tells us, that he considered the reproach of Christ greater than all the treasures of Egypt. He's the Apostle Paul.

The Apostle Paul was a Pharisee. I don't know, I imagine he was somewhere around the temple, probably inside there somewhere. Yet he gave up everything, didn't he, to follow Jesus. And he said, in 2 Corinthians, chapter 6, poor, yet making many rich, having nothing but possessing everything.

Here C.T. stood. He left a lovely country mansion to be a missionary in Africa. He said, if Christ Jesus be God and died for me, no sacrifice is too great for me to make for him.

[16 : 22] He is Jim Elliot. Jim Elliot wrote in his diary shortly before he was martyred by Ecuadorian Indians in 1949, he wrote, he is no fool who gives what he cannot keep to gain what he cannot lose.

Two copper coins. They spoke more than their weight in gold. And this is the way of God.

It's unseen, isn't it, friends, by the world. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief.

And as one from whom men hide their faces, he was despised in what we esteemed him not. two copper coins and Jesus knows, doesn't he, the value of the insignificant.

Friday was approaching and like the widow, he gave everything he had, all he had to live on. And in the morning mist, the grieving girls made their way to the tomb.

[17 : 34] He is not here, the angels said. He is risen. And everything seems upside down, doesn't it? It's all topsy-turvy. Death is life and life is death.

It's the folly, friends, isn't it? Of the cross. And when Jesus sat there watching this widow, he knew, didn't he, far more than she did.

He knew that in his kingdom widows would no longer be widows for they're his church, the bride of Christ.

And as Jesus watched this widow, I can imagine he had a twinkle in his eye, you know, watching her. As she walks off into the distance, 2,000 miles away, 2,000 years away, I can imagine, I can imagine her singing, riches I hear not, nor earth's empty praise, you my inheritance now and always, all of your treasure to me you impart, high king of heaven, the first in my heart.

Shall we pray? Shall we pray? A moment as we think through with gratitude what the Lord has done for each one of us.

[18 : 56] dear heavenly father, we give thanks for Jesus that you spared him for us, that if we've asked, you have dealt with our sin through him, that he absorbed our hell.

and so, help us father to live lives that reflect this glorious sacrifice, that is lives that have a weight of glory about them because they're yours.

Help us as individuals, we pray, to meditate on what we've heard and we pray father that like the widow we would want our giving to be pleasing in your sight.

So go with us now, we pray, as we go our separate ways. In Christ's name, Amen.