

2023 National Ministries Conference
Bring Him to Them
“Father to the Fatherless”
Mark 12:38–44
Dr. Eric Watkins
October 22, 2023 • Sunday Evening Sermon

We will be in Mark 12 for this study. I would like to say before we get started I had the privilege of getting to know your pastor, Harry Reeder, not terribly well, but fairly well in the last couple of years. We were definitely building momentum in our relationship and I was very much looking forward to coming and doing this conference, spending more time with him, getting to know his family and the Briarwood Church family when he passed away. Like all of you, I was quite shocked and then came the time and schedule of his funeral, which for me created quite a dilemma because in our church there was a fairly young single mom who had recently gone through a very difficult divorce with abuse, with two little kids. The day that Pastor Reeder’s funeral was scheduled, so also was her day in court and she asked me to attend that with her. I told her about this funeral and said to this young lady, “So, I have a dilemma. This is a man I really respected quite a bit, quite a father and a brother, and I’m torn as to what I should do.” She looked at me and I think this is bad theology but she could have been channeling Harry Reeder when she said, ‘Well, what would your friend tell you to do?’ I knew exactly what Harry would say to do, “Don’t come to my funeral. Stand by that young mom.”

Now let’s look at the Word of God and as we do so, remember, dear Church, that men will come and go but Jesus is always with His church. His promise is to never leave His church, and His intentional to gather, protect and to preserve His church is through the ministry of His Word. This is a familiar and beloved text from Mark 12. The grass withers, the flower fades, but the Word of God will endure forever. Mark 12:38–44 to 13:1–2 says [38] *And in His teaching He said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces [39] and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, [40] who devour widows’ houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”*

[41] And He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. [42] And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. [43] 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. [44] 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.”

[13:1] And as He came out of the temple, one of His disciples said to Him, “Look, Teacher, what wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!” [2] And Jesus said to him, “Do you see these great buildings? There will not be left here one stone upon another that will not be thrown down.”

Prayer:

We still ourselves, before You, God. We believe that it is your Holy Spirit who first inspired this Word. We believe it the Holy Spirit that has preserved Your Word and its integrity down to this very day. We also believe that it is the intention of the Holy Spirit to bless the reading, and especially the preaching of the Word of God that sinners might be converted and saints would be

built up in holiness and comfort through faith and salvation. Bless us now we pray for the glory of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, in Jesus' Name, Amen.

I want to begin by asking the question, why do we give to God part of our time and our money? Is that God needs our time and our money? Today, in conjunction with the theme of 'Bring Him to Them,' I want us to look at the tender and affectionate story of what is known as the widow's mite. In this story, we see a beautiful portrait of faith but not only that, a profound lesson about life in the Kingdom of God. This is a study with three points – one is a ministry of takers which is not a very affectionate section. Two is a ministry of one's life and thirdly, a ministry that always gives.

In many ways the story of the widow's mite begins by reflecting on a ministry of takers. To say it a little bit differently in order to well understand the widow's mite, we need to zoom out for a moment and contemplate what Mark has been about in the entire book, which is the arrival of the Kingdom of God. The Gospel of Mark begins with Jesus coming onto the scene and announcing the arrival of the Kingdom and the last chapter ends on the very same note of the preaching of the Kingdom of God. So if you think about the bookends of the story, the arrival of the Kingdom, the proclamation of the Kingdom, in many ways what you have here in Mark 12 is something like the top of the mountain or a crescendo in Mark's theology and his narrative account. The point of the crescendo at the top of the mountain is that the old order of things is about to pass away. With the arrival of the coming Kingdom of God, things, as they were known by the people of God, can no longer remain the same. A worldly way of looking at life and a flawed way of looking at the Kingdom must come to an end. Jesus has come and with Him has come the life of the Kingdom and a ministry that far exceeds the ministry of the earthly temple, literally a ministry that is out of this world.

One can also see zooming in just a little bit more as we work our way toward the widow herself, that there are bookends surrounding the story of the widow's mite itself. Prior to the story of the widow and her mite is a warning about the Scribes and Pharisees regarding their false religion, how they love to parade around town in long ornate robes, how they like to be greeted honorably by people that treat them with high accord. Yet Jesus says that there is something false about their ministry, something that is worthy even of His own condemnation. So, He issues a warning regarding the leaders of Israel.

On the other side of this story of the widow's mite is another warning, one about the temple whereas when Jesus and His disciples come out of the temple His disciples say, 'Look at these beautiful buildings and stones.' And you can almost hear it in Jesus' voice a tone of indignation when He says to them, "Do you see these beautiful buildings? Do you see these beautiful stones? Not one will be left upon another not long from now." Why? It is because the Kingdom of God has come. The old is about to pass away and the new day has arrived in Jesus. Nothing shows the need for a new order of things than the ministry of the Scribes and Pharisees who have become in many ways a ministry of takers.

Before we deal with the widow from whom they have been taking from, let us consider just a little bit of backdrop. To say it differently, God actually has a lot to say in His Word from the Old and New Testament about caring for those who cannot care for themselves in this world, and in this case, particularly widows. He gives positive commands regarding their care and He gives sobering warnings regarding their neglect because He loves them, He cares for them, and regards them body and soul.

Let's take the positive ones first. Psalm 68:5 is a beautiful psalm that says [5] *Father of the fatherless and protector of widows is God in his holy habitation.* Deuteronomy 10:17-18 says

[17] For the LORD your God is God of gods and Lord of lords, the great, the mighty, and the awesome God, who is not partial and takes no bribe. [18] He executes justice for the fatherless and the widow, and loves the sojourner, giving him food and clothing. Deuteronomy 14:28-29 says [28] At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. [29] And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do. These are the positive things that God says regarding His covenant, people caring for those who cannot care for themselves in this world.

On the flip side, He gives a stern warning. Deuteronomy 27:19 says [19] “‘Cursed be anyone who perverts the justice due to the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow.’ And all the people shall say, ‘Amen.’ Exodus 22:22-24 says [22] *You shall not mistreat any widow or fatherless child. [23] If you do mistreat them, and they cry out to me, I will surely hear their cry, [24] and my wrath will burn, and I will kill you with the sword, and your wives shall become widows and your children fatherless.* The law stipulated that if a widow in Israel were wronged in any way, that the Lord's wrath would be kindled against the wrongdoer and that he would Himself strike Israel with the sword. He would make out of His own covenant people, widows and orphans if they abandoned and neglected widows and orphans in their midst.

Jesus was just condemned, described for doing exactly that. They were neglecting the widows in their midst, all the while drawing attention to themselves and literally devouring widows' houses, saying it in even sterner language and I know you can't take much more. The shepherds in Israel had become wolves, and the widows of Israel had become prey. So, the poor widow stands as a living testimony to their sin and spiritually speaking, even to their oppression. The woman we're about to describe illustrates what Jesus just condemned among the Scribes and Pharisees. This can mean only one thing if Jesus just issued a warning and now standing before Him as a living testimony to their guilt and condemnation, God's wrath and God's judgment must come. The Kingdom of God will bring about God's just judgment and also its gracious blessing at the very same time. A failing earthly order, a worldly way of thinking, and a ministry of takers must come to an end.

Against this backdrop, we come to the second point – a ministry of one's life. Enter the widow. A woman comes alone to the temple. No one is with her, neither husband nor son. Not much is said about her, other than that she is poor and that she is a widow. A widow in the time of Jesus had to meet certain criteria to qualify for that title, status and aid. In order to be considered truly a widow, she had to be not only without husband, but without a child who could provide for her. In fact, she must be unable, in a certain manner of speaking, to provide easily for herself in the first century, which is largely agrarian and very different than the economic system we have today. To be without husband or son was to be remarkably vulnerable, remarkably easy to be preyed upon. Widows in this time were given a daily ration of food and sustenance in order to live on. When the office of deacons instituted an Act 6, it's because what is happening to this one woman in Mark 12 was happening to many women in the Book of Acts. Widows, the most poor, fragile and vulnerable in the known world were being neglected.

On the day when this widow comes, she doesn't simply come alone. She seems to be quite literally and figuratively at the end of the line, for as Mark describes her, the rich go before her and she comes last. As they go before her, they put in large sums and by contrast, hers is very little. In the outer court of the Gentiles, which is also the court for the women, there would be 13 brass trumpets. These are the receptacles by which the people of God would give their coins to

God. It's hard to imagine a world before Venmo or credit cards or even checks and online giving yet back in the day they had coins. So imagine the sound of a metal coin falling into a large copper receptacle as you're in a medium sized room with 13 of these, hearing the clatter of these coins all around the outer court of the Gentiles.

One commentator suggests, it would be almost like going to a movie where a spectator could sit and watch people come in and make their way to one copper receptacle or another and put in their coins, and the coins would bounce on their way down and finally reach their resting place. You could tell who gave a lot because it made a lot of sound and the rich went first and you could tell who gave very little because it would make very little sound. That's where we find our widow who puts in two copper coins. This is the lowest denominator of money at that time, just under a day's labor for a day worker and what might seem like little in the eyes of you and me, in the eyes of the disciples, the Scribes and Pharisees and all the spectators in the outer court of the Gentiles, catches the attention of Jesus.

Jesus calls His disciples to Him, almost as though saying, "Boys, come see this for something is going on." What they see as insignificant, Jesus sees as very significant and this is one of the great lessons of the Kingdom. The Kingdom of God is not defined by a worldly perspective. What the world often sees as insignificant and of little value is a great treasure in the Kingdom of God. God does not regard as the world regards and in the Kingdom of God, things are upside down. They measure with worldly math. After all, who can tell that 100 lepta is more than two but Jesus measures with the standard of the Kingdom where often very little can actually be much in the sight of God.

Why is it that Jesus, in a certain sense, almost seems condemning of those who have gone before the widow and given much in contrast to her little? It's because, as He says, they contribute out of their abundance. It's a very challenging and provocative point. The rich have given away that which protects their comfort, their surplus, their giving is cautious and calculated. It comes with very little risk and the widow is the exact opposite. She comes alone and with very little in all that she has, the very summary of her life, she gives to God. The Greek word for her whole life is *bio*. She literally puts her *bio*. Her life into the temple treasury. This is remarkable at many levels. The rich have clearly given away that which protects them and keeps them rich but the poor widow gives all that she has. To say it differently, she risks all that she has for the Kingdom of God.

Already in this context, you can see many reasons why she might have done the exact opposite. Think about a few. She was poor. What sort of a fool would give away their last \$20 bill when they have nothing left? She was a widow, and in these days, money was not easy to come by. Even worse, not only was she a poor widow, as Jesus just pointed out, she has been neglected, devoured and preyed upon by the very ones who were called to steward her body and her soul. She had every reason not to give. She had every reason to literally take or keep matters in her own hands but she gives – this woman who has become prey. She gives, if you will, even putting it into the registry that belongs to the den of thieves and robbers, as Jesus said. To say it in a very pointed way, what they have not already devoured this widow freely gives. It is truly remarkable.

Who gives like that? A woman of faith gives like that. A woman who sees beyond the thieves and the robbers to the God who promised to provide all that she needs, gives like that. A woman who sees in her giving that she does not give to men, to the den of thieves and robbers, but rather her giving it to God Himself. A woman who has shown herself even to be more faithful than those who are called to be faithful stewards of her, gives like that. A woman who

sees and this is very important, beyond the walls of the temple, the copper receptacles and the walls that separate her from the Holy presence of God, gives like that. A woman who sees beyond the temple and those walls to the God who dwells in its midst and whom she knows always sees her, gives like that. The God who is Himself, Father of the fatherless, protector of the orphan and widow and the One who will not fail to keep His promises, even if the Scribes and Pharisees do not keep theirs. This is a woman of great faith, even as she gives her heart, her life, her final lesbos into the hands of the invisible God of the covenant, there is Someone who sees her and it is Jesus.

This takes us to our third point and we'll look at this point a little bit longer than the first two points. Jesus looks upon her with the eyes of compassion. Jesus is struck by the fact that this woman, in contrast to the rich who've gone before her, has literally just given her life away for the Kingdom of God. You can almost sense that just as much as there is a surge of compassion toward the widow, there is a surge of scorn to this failing ministry of takers. In fact, in many ways, Jesus makes it clear that He has come for such as this lowly broken widow. Things as Jesus sees them, things as Jesus knows them, things as they stand must come to an end and something new must take its place. What the scribes will not do, Jesus will. What the temple cannot do, Jesus will. What the widow does, Jesus sees.

Jesus not only sees her giving her life away but something beautiful and remarkable happens, because here in Jesus is One who fulfills all the promises that God made, such as in Psalm 68. When He refers to Himself as the Father of the fatherless, Protector of the orphan and widow, that's not just an abstract, sentimental feeling, it's what Jesus came to do. This is why He comes binding the broken, ministering to down and outers, bringing the Gospel of the Kingdom, not simply to those who think that they were postured and earned it, but rather those who recognize that they had no hope apart from the grace of God.

Here is Jesus and not only does He see what the woman does, He recognizes her giving her life away and here truly is the emblem, the summary of life in the Kingdom of God. How do you keep your life in the Kingdom of God? You do it by losing it. How do you find your life in the Kingdom of God? You do it, by giving it away. Jesus will give His life for her. You know how important this next point is – not because of what she just did, not because of what she does or what she can do for the Kingdom of God. This is what distinguishes Jesus from the Scribes and the Pharisees – a ministry of takers, in contrast to a ministry of One who has come to lay down His own life. Jesus will give His life for her not because of what she does or can do, but because of what she cannot do. She cannot provide for herself. She cannot sustain not only her earthly needs, but how much more her eternal spiritual needs.

Why did Jesus come? It was not simply to fix the bumps and the bruises of this present evil age, nor simply to stand into the economic gap of this world and its problems, but rather to bring the Kingdom of God, which comes with the cross, which opens the doors to heaven. What this woman needs is a ministry that will not fail her, a temple that can truly reconcile all of her sins in the sight of a holy God and a Shepherd who will neither neglect her body or her soul. This is true not only of this widow but it's true for you and me, for this woman is the epitome of weakness.

In many ways, that's the point of the widow. They are the epitome of weakness, but who did Jesus come for? The strong or the weak? The righteous or sinners? Jesus came not for the strong, but for the weak, not for the greatest before the least. Those who recognize that it's not what they do or what they give that will earn their status in the Kingdom of God, but rather that they must deny themselves, find their life in Christ, be hidden in Christ, and in Him alone is their

meaningful and eternal life in the Kingdom of God. Those who seem to be of little value are actually of great treasure to the King of Kings and Lord of Lords.

Jesus here, even in this very story, shows Himself to be the living Temple but what was the last thing He promised? It was not simply judgment upon the Scribes and Pharisees, but even judgment upon the temple. These beautiful stones and this beautiful building, Jesus said, 'must come to an end.' Why? It is because the old order will pass away but it will not pass simply with the destruction of the earthly temple for the transition will be found in the destruction of the temple, which is His body. It is where God and man truly meet. It's not simply the temple that will be destroyed for this woman, it is Jesus who will give up His bio for her, His life for all those who will come to Him by faith.

This raises the question, have you come to Him by faith? Do you know the One who cares not simply for your body, but just as much, if not even more, for your soul? Do you know the One who has great disdain for oppression, for neglect, for a ministry of takers and yet at the same time is an everlasting and faithful Shepherd who never abandons His sheep, who always cares for them, provides for them, preserves them, body and soul? The New Testament takes up this theme. In the Book of James, it's referred to as true religion and what is true religion according to James 1:27? It is to visit widows and orphans in their time of need, that's the work of the church – to visit the widow and the orphan in their time of need. Why? It is because from the heart of God flows the character and actions of God and God Himself is regarded as the Father of the fatherless, the Protector of the orphan and the widow.

The heart of God, the attributes of God, the character of God, the hands and feet of God are found in His church. This is the Gospel that Jesus, the Lord of the Temple, entered history to fill its ministry that was failing in that day but that ministry that Jesus began with the announcement of the arrival the Kingdom, continues down to this very day. To say it differently, God's still cares about the fatherless. God still cares about the orphan and the widow, and part of what it means to be His church, His people, the citizens of His kingdom, is to regard the things that God regards, to care about, the things that God cares about, to look at no person as unsavable, unlovable, undeserving of dignity, of honor, of protection, to recognize in every person we see, young or old, born or unborn, that there is one who bears the image of God and can be saved by the grace of God and raised up in the love of God.

I need to grow as a pastor in these things. We need to grow as the body of Christ in these things but it's not my goal to chide you. In fact, it's actually the opposite. This is my swan song sermon. I want a moment with your heart, if I may say it like that. I was greatly encouraged to hear amongst the many reports, and I've not heard them all but one of the things that your church has been attempting to do, and even did yesterday or the day before, is this impact ministry when the brother said that 250 members of this congregation went out and served about nine places I thought 'they're getting it.' That's a church that's not just focused on a ministry of inreach, but a ministry of outreach. It's making the Kingdom presence known in the community who are serving people who are broken and bruised by the sin of this present evil age that devours widows' houses, that abandons children and leaves them fatherless. I found it surprising he didn't get much more reaction when he mentioned that they even cleaned an entire high school. That's love.

So why do we give? Why do we give of our money? Why do we give of our time? Why do we roll up our sleeves? Why do we come alongside those who are broken and bruised by the thorns and thistles of this present evil age? Why? It's because God did in Jesus Christ and He continues to do so through the work of His church. Scripture tells us elsewhere, God loves a

grumpy giver. That's not what the Bible says, is it? God loves a halfhearted giver. God loves a calculated giver. God loves a self-preserving giver. II Corinthians 9:7 says [7] *Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for **God loves a cheerful giver.*** You will never be able to out give God.

There are young people reading this who could contemplate things like serving locally or serving in foreign missions or planting churches or pastoring churches. There are all kinds of ways that you as a church, can serve the community around us and, you know what the world most needs from the church right now at this mind-blowing moment in history? What the world needs most from the church is for the church to be the church, to be a pillar and buttress of truth and the hands, heart and feet of the love of God. Let's pray.

Prayer:

O Lord our God, I thank You for my new friends at Briarwood Presbyterian Church and for the old friends that I remember from this church as well. We thank You that when Jesus came into the world, it was not to take even as the same Book says, 'for the Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to give His life a ransom for many,' I'm encouraged to see and to hear that my brothers and sisters desire to be a church that is known for truth, but as well, desire to be a church that is known for serving, reaching out generously, sacrificially into the community around us, where sin has left so many scars and so much devastation. We know, O Lord, that doing mercy, apart from the Gospel, is unbiblical but doing mercy ministry in the context of the Gospel is very Christ like and a beautiful embodiment of the Kingdom of God. So I pray, Lord, that You continue to do a great work here in this church that young and old would roll up their sleeves together, that people would realize that God is continuing the great work of expanding His kingdom, and He's raising up another generation that will take the place of those that are now passing and that the Gospel will continue and the work of the church will never fail because its Savior is resurrected and He promises that His church will prevail. So, give us comfort, give us grace and give us boldness to serve our God in His Kingdom, in Jesus' Name, we pray, Amen.