

# Give God the Glory

Mark 12:41-44

Luke 19:1-10

## INTRODUCTION

“I used to think, when I was a child, that Christ might have been exaggerating when he warned about the dangers of wealth. Today I know better. I know how very hard it is to be rich and still keep the milk of human kindness. Money has a dangerous way of putting scales on one’s eyes, a dangerous way of freezing people’s hands, eyes, lips, and heart.” The Brazilian archbishop who spent his life seeking justice for the poor, Dom Helder Camara, made this statement while commenting on the warning in the Gospels about the dangers of money.

The message is very clear throughout the Bible. Money and possessions have a way of distracting us from “the one thing needful” and becoming themselves the “light of our eyes.” This is very difficult for us to accept because money seems to bring us so much pleasure and security. Surely Jesus was exaggerating when he talked about how hard it is for those with wealth to enter the kingdom of God! But, like the archbishop, we come to know better as we grow older. We experience many of the ways in which money separates us from God, and we view the biblical message with new appreciation. Our money can be very hazardous to our “health”!

But there is another side to the story, a positive and hopeful side. Throughout the Bible there are examples of how money



*Zacchaeus in the Tree* Stained glass, 20th century Grace Methodist Church, Wilmington, North Carolina.

can be used in creative and life-enhancing ways. Our wealth can be used to strengthen our relationship with God, and it can be used as a way of bringing wholeness of life to others. Money can be an instrument of freedom when we learn how to control it and use it to "give God the glory." There is a lot of bad news in the biblical teaching about money and possessions. But there is also good news!

## COMMENTARY

A poor widow and a wealthy tax collector appear in the Gospels as examples of how to use money in positive and life-enhancing ways. The widow had gone to the court in the temple where there were thirteen collection boxes known as "the trumpets" because they were shaped like trumpets with the narrow part at the top and the wider part at the bottom. Each of the boxes was assigned to offerings for a different purpose in maintaining the daily sacrifices and expenses of the temple. Many people made large contributions.

Jesus noticed a widow put in "two copper coins, which make a penny." These coins, translated "mites" in the King James Version, were the smallest of all coins. The word in Greek actually means "the thin ones." Their purchasing power, approximately two cents, was very small in comparison with the large sums contributed by the rich. But Jesus saw something of unusual value in her gift. He said to his disciples, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living." (Mark 12:43-44)

The most obvious thing about her gift was the sacrifice it involved. The gifts of the rich, though large in amount, did not change their comfort or security in any way. After they had given, their lives went on as before. But the widow made a great sacrifice. Her gift cost her everything she had, "her whole living." The important thing is not how much is given but how much is left over.

It is not only the sacrificial nature of her gift that Jesus commends, but also the spirit with which she gave it. We need to read between the lines, because the description in the Gospels is brief, but this woman must have loved God with her whole being. Otherwise, why would she be placing her whole living in the temple offering! Because of the way she loved God she gave recklessly, unconditionally, joyfully, sacrificially. She used her financial gift as a way of giving herself to God. Instead of separating her from God, her money brought her closer to him.

Zacchaeus, the wealthy tax collector, is another example from the Gospels of one who used money in creative and life-enhancing ways. The incident appears only in Luke's Gospel (19:1-10) and includes many of Luke's special interests: salvation for those who are lost, the joy of salvation, Jesus as the friend of sinners, and the importance of detachment from earthly possessions.

Jericho, where the incident took place, was a very wealthy and important town. Sometimes called the "garden of Israel," because of the fertility of the area, it was located on an important trade route between the East and West. The Romans carried Jericho's fruit and balsam to trading centers throughout the Mediterranean world. All of this combined to make the city one of the richest sources of taxation in Palestine.

Zacchaeus, the tax "commissioner," had become very wealthy by taking full advantage of this situation. But he was not happy. The other members of the community called him a "sinner" because of his profession, and forced him to live in isolated loneliness. We can therefore understand his excitement when he heard of Jesus, the friend of tax collectors and sinners. Determined to let nothing stop him, Zacchaeus climbed a sycamore tree in order to get a glimpse of Jesus when he passed by.

When Jesus saw the wealthy tax collector up in the tree, he said to him, "Zacchaeus, make haste and come down; for I must stay at your house today." Coming down immediately, Zacchaeus received him "joyfully" into his house—and into his

heart! The result of the visit was new life and new hope for a man who had been "lost" and lonely. As a result, Zacchaeus wanted to express his gratitude to God. What better way for a rich man to do this than with his money! "And Zacchaeus stood and said to the Lord, 'Behold, Lord, the half of my goods I give to the poor; and if I have defrauded any one of anything I restore it fourfold.' " (vs. 8) His love for God was demonstrated by giving half of his estate to the poor, and by going beyond what was legally necessary to make restitution to those he had cheated. (Cf. Exodus 22:1-7) "Today," said Jesus, "salvation has come to this house."

A poor widow and a wealthy tax collector. Ordinarily they would have little in common. But they both loved God and wanted to express that love in a tangible way. So they both used their money, the woman giving to the temple and Zacchaeus giving to the poor. Both were using their money as a way of praising God, loving God, and drawing closer to him. They must have felt like the author of the hymn,

Were the whole realm of nature mine,  
That were an offering far too small;  
Love so amazing, so divine,  
Demands my soul, my life, my all!

These examples suggest two reasons why our money can be such an effective instrument for expressing our love for God. First, our money is very important to us. It represents power, security, pleasure, and other things of great value in our lives. When we give money as an act of love, we are showing that we are very serious about our intentions. For some of us, there is nothing that demonstrates more clearly the unconditional giving of ourselves. Furthermore, our money represents an important part of ourselves. We understand what the economist meant when he said, "Money as a form of power is so intimately related to the possessor that one cannot consistently give money without giving self." This is especially true of the money we have made by our own toil and talent. A part of ourselves has been stored up in the money in negotiable form.

Therefore we come nearest to giving ourselves when we give our money.

A second reason why our money can be an effective way of showing our love for God is that it can do so much good for those who are in need, especially the poor. Jesus often tied love for God and love for others together. The author of First John summarized this in a much quoted passage; "Beloved, let us love one another; for love is of God, and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love does not know God; for God is love . . . this is the commandment we have from him, that he who loves God should love his brother also." (1 John 4:7 ff.) By giving half of his estate to the poor, Zacchaeus was "loving his neighbor" in a very tangible way. But he was at the same time moving closer to God: "Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me." (Matt. 25:40)