



## “Nothing Left to Give?”

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*Mark 12:38-44*

Can you picture the Temple scene in your mind? The Scribes are strolling about the outer courtyard of the Temple wearing their long, luxurious robes, with every pleat and tassel in its proper place; religious elites are hobnobbing with prominent community members and wealthy merchants as they bring their money—their offerings—to the Temple treasury. “These scribes want to be greeted with honor in the marketplace, and they long for the places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets.” (Mk 12:39 – CEB).

Who are these scribes, and why are they so important? Other Bible translations refer to the scribes instead as “legal experts” or “teachers of the law.” Indeed, scribes of the first century were people who could read and write, making them indispensable to society. They kept military, government, legal, and financial records. But they didn’t just serve in secular roles—Scribes were also the Torah scholars of their day. Their job was to teach and interpret the law. And that wasn’t their only role—scholars tell us that Scribes were also the trustees of the estates of widows.

You probably remember from several recent sermons that widows and orphans existed on the bottom rungs of the social ladder. They were considered among the most vulnerable members of their communities. In a fiercely patriarchal society, without a male relative to provide for them, widows were often destitute and unable to survive. So the scribes of 1st century Palestine were tasked with managing the assets of widows, however meager those assets might be, simply because they were women. And for their efforts, the scribes received a percentage of the widow’s assets. As you can imagine, this arrangement was often abused, and scribes enriched themselves at the expense of the widows. As one scholar puts it, “the vocation of Torah Judaism is to protect ‘orphans and widows,’ yet in the name of piety these socially vulnerable classes are being exploited while the scribal class is further endowed.”

So when Jesus criticizes the scribes, he warns: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues, and places of honor at banquets! They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes echoes the prophets who denounced similar practices among religious leaders.

Listen to this passage from Isaiah 10: Doom to those who pronounce wicked decrees and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among my people of justice; to make widows their loot; to steal from the orphans!”

And this one from Zechariah 7: “The LORD of heavenly forces proclaims: Make just and faithful decisions; show kindness and compassion to each other! Don’t oppress the widow, the orphan, the stranger, and the poor...”

These teachings from the prophets were surely on Jesus’ mind as he condemned the scribes—these religious and political leaders of his time—for breaking a sacred trust with the vulnerable people they are sworn to protect. One writer on the text states it perfectly: “[The scribes’] pretentious practices—strolling about in long robes, seeking public acclaim, taking the best seats at the synagogues and local banquets, [offering] lengthy prayers—mask their ruthless exploitation of poor people, in particular widows, who in a male dominated society are left without defense.”<sup>1</sup>

It is no accident that immediately following Jesus’ condemnation of the scribes, the narrator establishes the stark contrast between wealthy people giving large sums of money towards the Temple treasury and the destitute widow who gives her last two copper coins. In a traditional reading of the text, Jesus praises the widow for giving out of her poverty, setting her over and against those who gave out of their abundance. So was Jesus lifting up the widow as an ideal example? Maybe. But we cannot ignore that there is an alternative narrative in this text. The poor widow in this story gave to the Temple treasury “everything she had, all she had to live on.” Given the widow’s context and socio-economic location, starvation and death would certainly have followed.

Throughout his public ministry in Mark, Jesus points out the corruption of the Temple and tension grows between Jesus and religious authorities. We are reminded of the cursing of the fig tree, the purifying of the Temple where Jesus drives out the money changers, the challenge of Jesus’ authority in the Temple, and the parable of the wicked tenants.

Are we to believe that the same Jesus who consistently preached to bring wholeness to the most vulnerable would applaud the widow’s gift of her last two coins to the Temple, even though it almost certainly meant starvation and death? Or does the widow rather serve as an example of how innocent people are victimized by the Temple authorities? Walter Brueggemann perhaps puts it best when he writes, “Jesus’ comments about the widow are really a lament about her plight and continue the denunciation of the scribes, who instead of caring for this woman as the law directed them to do are robbing her of her last dime.”<sup>2</sup>

Let me be clear, I am not saying that the story of the widow’s mite ought to be claimed as an excuse not to tithe to the church. Quite the contrary—there is a long tradition in scripture of tithing. But this tradition teaches us to give out of our abundance, rather than giving out of our poverty, like the widow did. Our Old Testament reading from this morning says “When you have

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<sup>1</sup> Laurel K. Cobb, *Mark and Empire: Feminist Reflections* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2013)

<sup>2</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “Mark 12:38-44” in *Texts for Preaching, Year B: A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV*, edited by Walter Brueggemann, Charles B. Cousar, Beverly Roberts Gaventa, and James D. Newsome, Jr. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knows, 1993), 584.

come into the land that the LORD your God is giving you as an inheritance to possess, and you possess it, and settle in it, you shall take some of the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from the land” and bring it to the priest as an offering to God. The first fruit, not the last. This passage is asking us to give out of our abundance, and not our poverty.

And what will happen with these first fruits? The text says that these tithes of produce will be given to “the Levites, the aliens, the orphans, and the widows so that they may eat their fill in your towns.” This passage from Deuteronomy, and others like it, call on us to give out of our abundance, not our poverty—from our first fruits, not the last. And these first fruits will be used to fulfill God’s commandment to care for the stranger, the immigrant, the orphan, and the widow—the most vulnerable and oppressed among us.

The idea that we must give to God our first fruits comes from an early Jewish tradition of honoring God for blessing us with abundance. As early as Genesis, we see the practice of sacrificing the first-born of livestock and even human sons to God. Remember the story of the binding of Isaac? In this case, a ram is sent at the last minute as a substitute for Isaac.

And this same tradition is carried into early Christianity, although it begins to take on a metaphorical or allegorical meaning. Jesus talks about the giving of the first fruits of harvest in the Gospel of Matthew, and Paul writes about it in his letter to the Romans and the Corinthians. And this concept is not exclusive to our Christian and Jewish scriptures, but it is also a core tenet of Islam. Zakat, or Charity, is the third of five pillars central to the Islamic faith. With the understanding that all things belong to God, Muslims are obligated to give out of their abundance. It is the personal responsibility of each Muslim to ease the economic hardship of others and to strive towards eliminating inequality. Zakat consists of spending a portion of one’s wealth for the benefit of the poor or the needy. The concepts of giving out of our abundance and protecting the most vulnerable in our society are common to all of our Abrahamic traditions.

And Jesus draws on those common values to speak truth to power—to condemn the actions of the Scribes—the religious and political elites of his time. And, I believe, that God is calling us, as people of faith, to do the same—to stand on the side of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed and to condemn those in power who exploit the most vulnerable members of our society for their own personal gain.

This reading shifts our focus away from the poor widow and the faithful giving of her last two coins and takes a hard look at the exploitation she must endure at the hands of the religious and political establishment. This reading demands that we take a look at how we tithe and how we use those tithes—those first fruits given out of our abundance—to change the systems that oppress the vulnerable among us.

I challenge you this week to consider what this calling means to you. How can we, as a community of faith, follow the example of Jesus and call out our institutions and condemn their exploitation of the poor, their oppression of the foreigner, and their abuse of the widow and the orphan. Will we speak up when our religious and political leaders pronounce wicked decrees and keep writing harmful laws to deprive the needy of their rights and to rob the poor among us of justice? Or will we stand idly by, afraid to step into the fray of our nation’s political discourse? Will we stand on the side of the exploited widow who has no more money to give? Or will we be

complicit in her oppression by the religious and political elites through our silence? These are the tough choices we must make as people of faith. Either path we choose has consequences. So, church, which path will we choose?