

**Mark 12:38-44; Hebrews 9:24-28**  
**Where You Go and What You Offer**

**Hebrews 9:24-28**

<sup>24</sup>For Christ did not enter a sanctuary made by human hands, a mere copy of the true one, but he entered into heaven itself, now to appear in the presence of God on our behalf.

<sup>25</sup>Nor was it to offer himself again and again, as the high priest enters the Holy Place year after year with blood that is not his own; <sup>26</sup>for then he would have had to suffer again and again since the foundation of the world.

But as it is, he has appeared once, for all, at the end of the age, to remove sin by the sacrifice of himself.<sup>27</sup>

And just as it is appointed for mortals to die once, and after that, the judgment,

<sup>28</sup>so Christ, having been offered once to bear the sins of many, will appear a second time, not to deal with sin, but to save those who are eagerly waiting for him.

**Mark 12:38-44**

<sup>38</sup>As Jesus taught, he said,

“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.

Many rich people put in large sums.

<sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny.

<sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury.

<sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

### The Sermon

There was this machine at my grandparents’ house that as a toddler I always found miraculous. It had a tall stand, like a microphone stand, maybe three feet tall, with two brushes at the foot of it and a button at the top. So you could put your shoes under the brushes, and push the button, and the brushes would automatically spin around and shine your shoes.

Grandpa had to be immaculate, since he worked for a distinguished garment company, first in Chicago and later in Louisville.

In the morning, he would put on his suit, and then shine his shoes with that magical machine.

And then he would go off to work at his corporate job in the city, for a corporation that was good and loyal to him, as he was good and loyal to them, for more than four decades.

Eventually came retirement, and a fixed income, and, later, declining health.

Grandpa—we called him Paw-Paw; Paw-Paw’s dignified cadence of speech slowed to a stammer; the stammer slowed to Alzheimer’s; and eventually he moved into a nursing home, where he never understood exactly where he was. In 1996, he and his twin brother, a few hundred miles apart, died on the same day.

Meanwhile, Grandma—Gran to us—retained her mental acuity well into her nineties.

A second bout with pneumonia had finally given her the will to quit the smoking habit she’d had for half a century. One time, when she was in her seventies, as she lit up a cigarette at the breakfast table, I said, “Those things will stunt your growth.”

Eventually began the slow parade, as her various physical abilities, one by one, tipped their caps and quietly took their leave.

She'd been a glamorous young woman who maintained a household on a shoestring during the Depression, and raised a family on her own while her husband fought in Europe at the Battle of the Bulge.

She had been a home economist, a gifted painter, a bridge player who maintained an immaculate house with style, serving Thanksgiving dinners to a massive extended family seated around two huge tables, decade after decade.

For the family, the memories were burnished as they faded.

For her, they just faded.

Joanne Seltzer wrote a ten-part poem called "A Place for Mother" reflecting on a woman's search for the right rest home for her mother.

The first part is called "Preliminary Advice:"

Remember how you once went shopping  
for the right nursery school  
and when the teacher asked you  
if your child was toilet trained  
you lied and said she was.

Use the same strategy  
in shopping for a nursing home.

Later—when you are told  
of Mother's incontinence—  
you will clench your fist and shout:  
"What have you done to my mother?"

"More Advice:"

Have a daughter-to-mother talk.  
Ask her what she wants.  
If she doesn't know

ask her if she's happy.  
She will either say  
she doesn't know  
or she will be silent.  
Tell her how much you love her.  
Promise you won't forsake her.

“A Checklist:”

Place One has an eight-year waiting list.  
Place Two has a nursing home odor.  
Place Three is in a bad neighborhood.  
Place Four is in another city.  
Place Five won't take Medicaid.  
Place Six takes only terminal cases.  
Place Seven doesn't offer therapy.  
Place Eight puts three in a room.  
Place Nine requires a hike to the dining room.  
Place Ten demands Mother's money up front.  
Place Eleven decides Mother won't fit in.<sup>1</sup>

“Strength and dignity are her clothing,” goes the passage in Proverbs 31,  
“and she laughs at the time to come.”

*She opens her mouth with wisdom,  
and the teaching of kindness is on her tongue.*

*Charm is deceitful, and beauty is vain,  
but a woman who fears the LORD is to be praised.*

*Give her a share in the fruit of her hands,  
and let her works praise her in the city gates.*

Jesus sat down, across from the treasury at the Temple, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury.

Many rich people put in large sums.

And then, a poor widow came, and put in two small copper coins—*leptons*, they were called.

“The Romans allowed local coinage to circulate in addition to their own... In New Testament times the sole Jewish coin was a copper *lepton*, which means ‘thin.’...It was equivalent to about half a quadrans,”<sup>ii</sup> which was the smallest Roman coin at the time—this according to Ralph Gower of the London Bible Institute.

In other words, she tossed in two of the tiny Jewish coins that, together, were only worth one of the smallest Roman coin.

She may or may not have been advanced in years, but either way, she was a widow, and she was poor.

Linda Tirado wrote a book in 2014 called *Hand to Mouth*,<sup>iii</sup> in which she explains the world from the perspective of someone who lives in poverty.

It speaks to those of us who are better off economically, and, for example, wonder why occasionally you may find yourself dealing with a store employee who is not as chirpy and polite as we think they ought to be.

“You have to understand,” she says, “that we know that we will never not feel tired. We will never feel hopeful. We will never get a vacation. Ever. We know that the very act of being poor guarantees that we will never not be poor...”

“I am not beautiful,” she says. “I have missing teeth and skin that looks like it will when you live on B12 and coffee and nicotine and no sleep. Beauty is a thing you get when you can afford it, and that’s how you get the job that you need in order to be beautiful...”

“I am not asking for sympathy,” she wrote. “I am just trying to explain, on a human level, how it is that people make what look from the outside like awful decisions. This is what our lives are like, and here are our defense mechanisms, and here is why we think differently. It’s certainly self-defeating, but it’s safer. That’s all.”

Her book grew out of an original post she had made on a website that went viral, and suddenly hundreds of thousands of people were reading her thoughts. “What was neither fair nor true,” she says in the book, “was the criticism I received inferring that I was the wrong sort of poor. A lot of this

criticism seemed to center on the fact that I was not born into poverty, as though that were the only way someone might find herself unable to make rent. And yet we have a term for it: downward mobility. We have homeless PhDs and more than one recently middle-class person on food stamps. Poverty is a reality,” she says, “to more people than we’re willing to admit.”<sup>iv</sup>

Poverty was a reality for the woman at the treasury, who lived in a time when the rules of inheritance were still appallingly stacked against women.

First of all, the estate of a married man who died would go to all the sons before any of the daughters.

And as for the widow, “In Jerusalem and Galilee, the tradition was that the widow had a legal right to stay in the family home and live off her husband’s property.” But out in the countryside, when the husband died, the heirs could just pack her off with her *ketubah*, which was the amount of the dowry she had brought to the marriage from her family plus her “indirect dowry,” the wedding gifts she had been given by the groom’s family.<sup>v</sup>

Once that ran out, she was on her own, denied the ability to create security for herself, entirely dependent on the benevolence of others.

And Jesus called the disciples around and said, “That poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. They all contributed out of their abundance; but she, out of her poverty, has put in everything she had to live on”—the Greek could even be translated, “her livelihood,” or “her life.”<sup>vi</sup>

What happens when all you have left is your life?

I think of that American sailor, about 20 years ago, who was walking in the early morning on the deck of the USS *America* as it sailed on the Indian Ocean, and just as he passed by a door that opened out, a gust of wind blew the door open and knocked him over the railing and overboard.

With no one else around and no possibility of being seen or heard as he watched the ship sail on, he was left there, bobbing in the middle of the ocean, with only his training, his faith, and his trousers.

I mention the trousers because they were part of the training. If you tie off each of the pant legs, in a knot down by the ankle, you create a momentary flotation device by bringing the waistline down onto the surface of the water, trapping enough air in the trousers to help keep you afloat. This effect lasts for about two and a half minutes if you do it right, and then you keep repeating the process until you are rescued.

It was hours before anyone on board had any idea they were missing a man, by which time the square mileage of the surface they would have to search was enormous.

It was 36 hours later when a Pakistani fishing boat which had been blown off course happened to come near where the sailor was treading water.

I can't imagine exactly what he must have felt like out there. But I wonder if the widow in her poverty felt something similar.

And I wonder if some of the people around me may know something about that feeling, too.

I can feel at home; I can feel a sense of self-made security, when I'm surrounded by my stuff. And sometimes that "stuff" is my material goods, and sometimes it's the baggage I carry around with me that tells me I'm right, that tells me that I've made it, that I am somebody, and that I have the world and my individual neighbors all figured out.

But what happens when you lose all that stuff—when, like the widow at the Temple, you're down to your last pennies, and all you have left is you?

I was thinking and praying about this in my car the other night, Tuesday or Wednesday night, when a short song by Bill Withers came on—eight lines. I must have played the CD in my car 25 times, and I had never noticed this before. And all of a sudden these words were coming through the speakers:

*One of us has to say he's sorry  
Or we will never be friends again  
Let's have a drink and talk it over  
I want to keep you for my friend*

*We're here today and gone tomorrow  
None of us knows when life will end  
I've said some things that caused you sorrow  
But I want to keep you for my friend.<sup>vii</sup>*

I said, thanks, God, but I was hoping for something a little more obvious, like having a herd of deer come out and sing the Hallelujah Chorus.

You can be like the scribes, who, when they go out into the community, look for as much attention and deference as they can get.

Or you can trust God's strength and love and guidance enough to bring the only thing you have that matters: yourself.

That's when I find that we have a God who knows who I am underneath all the baggage, all the stuff I've accumulated, all the things that I feel like I need to keep me secure in this world.

And this same God, the Almighty Creator of the universe,  
the Maker whom Jesus called Father,  
    loves me, and you, without all that stuff,  
        and calls us to a higher calling,  
            and sustains us when we feel like everything else is lost.

It turns out that human beings are capable, to a staggering degree, of thinking of those less fortunate than ourselves.

For someone like me, that ought to be easy. I have enough. My cup runneth over.

But I hear it—and you do too—from veterans who are missing limbs;  
from victims of war and famine;  
from people coping with daily, excruciating pain which is the result of  
    nothing on their part other than just having lived in their bodies;  
from people who don't have two dimes to rub together—  
    literally zero money for anything other than survival necessities—  
    who still contribute to the Swannanoa Valley Christian Ministry,  
    because they know there must be somebody out there  
        who is less fortunate than they are.

People have a remarkable ability, no matter what their circumstances,  
to think about people who have it worse than they do.

But that doesn't mean their own pain isn't real. The emotional wounds are deep and raw and may need time to become scars. We should probably not expect each other to jump up and dust off right away.

I was, some time ago, in a shop on the coast that had kind of a pirate theme. And one of the kitschy things they had was a shot glass, on the side of which were printed the words, in pirate script: "The beatings will continue until morale improves."

It cracked me up at the time.

But we do need to be smarter than that.

We can do all the reconciliation workshops we want, but until we all come to understand how we are, in some ways, still hurting one another, that isn't really reconciliation; it's just pretending something isn't still happening.

Some wounds are not yet scars; for some, the wounding has not stopped.

And so maybe what God is calling for is a community of people who see themselves less as scribes, who walk around in long robes, and expect to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats and places of honor at banquets,

and more like the widow who can only give what God has given her: who is willing to come to God's Temple, wherever it may be, and say, I don't have possessions and accomplishments to bring. All I have is me, and my life; and I lay it out for God's use, which I can do because I trust God more than any human-made institution.

And I know that this God loves me enough, and loves you enough;  
and values my life enough, and values your life enough,  
to be willing to die for all of us, everywhere, no matter who we are,  
what side we're on, which church we belong to, which town we live in.

Jesus sat down at the Temple and saw a poor widow contribute something even greater than what the wealthy were putting into the collection.

It was, according to Mark, Jesus's last public ministry before moving on to the events we now commemorate in Holy Week.

As the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews would observe: Christ entered into heaven itself, to remove our sin by the sacrifice of himself.

He had only himself to give, so that you and I could learn what it means to live in God's world as God's people.

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<sup>i</sup> Joanne Seltzer, in Sandra Haldeman Martz, ed., *When I Am An Old Woman I Shall Wear Purple*. Watsonville, CA: Papier-Mache Press, 1987, p. 56.

<sup>ii</sup> Ralph Gower, *The New Manners and Customs of Bible Times*. Chicago: Moody, 1987, p. 176.

<sup>iii</sup> Linda Tirado, *Hand to Mouth: Living in Bootstrap America*. G.P. Putnam's Sons, 2014.

<sup>iv</sup> These quotes all come from an excerpt from Tirado's book *Hand to Mouth* as found in an online article published by the Guardian:

<http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/sep/21/linda-tirado-poverty-hand-to-mouth-interview>.

<sup>v</sup> K.C. Hanson and Douglas E. Oakman, *Palestine at the Time of Jesus: Social Structures and Social Conflicts*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998; p. 48. See also pp. 44-48.

<sup>vi</sup> Per Hammond & Busch, eds., *The English Bible: The New Testament and The Apocrypha (Norton Critical Edition)*. See note on Mark 12:44, p. 112.

<sup>vii</sup> "For My Friend" © 1971 Bill Withers.