

“Stewardship Lessons”

Mark 12:41-44

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In most churches, giving is a very private matter. As a matter of fact, churches go to great extremes to make sure contribution records are confidential. In thirty-six years of ministry, I have known only one church that publicized members' contributions. Each year a list of names and contributions was posted in the vestibule for all to see. I'm not sure that church is still in existence.

Giving was not so private in Jesus' time. Near the Court of Women in the temple there were thirteen collection boxes known as The Trumpets. As you would expect by their name, they were metal containers shaped like trumpets. Worshipers would go to the trumpets, representing thirteen ministries that needed financial support, and boldly announce how much they were placing inside each one. The larger the coin, the more noise it would make as it slid down the neck of the trumpet. You can only imagine how this method of giving fed some people's egos and intimidated others.

One day Jesus was sitting near the treasury probably discouraged and exhausted from his most recent confrontation with some of the religious leaders, whom he saw as arrogant, greedy and hypocritical. He had just exposed them for preying upon and exploiting defenseless widows when suddenly he became excited and called for his disciples. What he witnessed that day was nothing short of a miracle.

One of the very persons he was concerned about, a widow, approached the treasury and placed inside one of the trumpets two of the smallest coins minted in that era. They were worth a fraction of a penny and surely made no noise as they silently slid down the trumpet to the basket at the bottom.

Upon observing this, Jesus said to his disciples, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth, but she, out of her poverty, put in everything, all she had to live on” Mark 12:44.

I am not surprised that Jesus noticed what the widow gave. He has a way of seeing and hearing what the world ignores. Neither am I surprised that he told his disciples what happened. This was a teachable moment that did not need to be overlooked. Nothing he could say about generosity, faithfulness and trust would speak louder than this nameless widow's actions that day. So dedicated was she to God and loyal to the temple leaders that she sacrificially gave her offering without knowing from where her next meal would come. Jesus had never seen such reckless generosity and had to point it out to his disciples.

Speaking of teachable moments, what experience taught you more about stewardship or money management than any other? What did someone do to inspire you to be more responsible and generous? What happened to you or someone else that had a lasting impact upon you? What did you learn? How has that experience changed you? I'll go first.

One day when I was six or seven, I walked by the mantle in the kitchen and saw a jar on it. “Can you spare a penny?” was scribbled on a piece of paper and taped to the jar. The lid had a slit in it so pennies could be dropped inside it.

When I found out that my brother had this bright idea, I followed suit. “Can you spare a nickel?” I taped to my jar and sat it next to his.

I got excited when my grandparents came for a visit. Grandparents always have pocket change. One Saturday morning, my grandfather walked into the kitchen, proceeded to pull several pennies out of his pocket and place them in both jars. I thought this was strange because my jar asked for nickels and I was afraid my brother would accuse me of stealing his pennies. My grandfather put nine pennies in my jar and then placed the tenth penny under the jar. “This one belongs to God,” he said as he introduced a new word to me, tithe. “One tenth of everything we get should be returned to God. This is one way we express gratitude for all He has given us,” he taught me that morning.

I've never forgotten that lesson. Perhaps others had tried to teach me about tithing and stewardship, but not until that day did it sink in.

That was almost fifty years ago. Countless times I have remembered what he did and recalled his words, especially when I thought I was unable to tithe because of school debts, children's needs or my own desires and wishes. "This one belongs to God," he said as he placed that penny under the jar. I'm glad he is still saying that to me. There are days I need to hear it.

When I was twelve, my parents gave me an unusual present. They wrapped up a check book and placed it next to my birthday cake. I opened it and saw that fifty dollars had been deposited in the account. Then I saw that my name was on the account. They gave me a checking account for my birthday. I'm not sure I recall any birthday present I received as a child other than this one. It certainly stands out, though.

"This is your own account," my father said to me. "You can write checks on it anytime but I need to tell you two things. You must maintain a minimum balance of at least fifty dollars or the bank will charge you for the account. If you overdraw the account, spend more than you have, you will lose the privilege."

I was determined not to lose the privilege. I wanted that account which meant I had to work and make money so the account would grow and I had to live within my means. I've done both all my life.

When I was seventeen, my father lost his business. He had a car dealership and that loss was painful for my parents and all my family. Tied up in that dealership was our home and other property, which meant we lost everything except our clothes and furniture.

I learned several lessons through that humbling ordeal. It hurts to swallow pride. It gets stuck in your throat and stays there a long time.

No matter how bleak a situation may seem there is always hope. The sun will shine again and the clouds will depart if you rely upon your faith to help you. There is no situation that God cannot change for the better if He is given a chance.

Everybody needs a soft place to fall, a support group of friends and family that will love you unconditionally and embrace you when you are hurting the most.

You can start over and rebuild your life, even financially, if you work hard and refuse to roll in pity.

My father lived fifteen more years and they were some of his best. The day after he was buried, I was sitting at the table with my mother. I noticed a box full of canceled checks that spanned several years. I asked her if I could look at them. I liked what I saw.

There were weekly checks to the church that represented one tenth of their income. There were checks written to other charitable organizations along with individuals that needed help. My father's financial reversal had not taken away my parents' generous spirits. There were things they did without in those last years in order to be faithful stewards. I cannot begin to tell you what an impression that has had upon me. It is the equivalent of the widow's mite.

I'll share one more story. Recently Fernando Martinez, the minister from Tijuana that coordinates the work of our volunteers, visited our church. Fernando spends his day working with people that live in cardboard boxes, have no water and dig through garbage dumps to find food.

While eating lunch after the worship service a couple of weeks ago, Fernando looked at me and said, "Your people have no problems, do they?" "What do you mean?" I asked. "It appears that all of them have homes to live in and know where their next meal will come from. So they have no problems, do they?"

I paused a moment and replied, "No, Fernando, they have no problems. They just don't know it."

I could tell many more teachable moments that have occurred in my life just as I am sure you could, too. I must move on, though, and ask you a final series of questions.

What have you taught others about financial stewardship? How have you impacted the lives of those around you? What kind of role model have you been?

Do you inspire people to be generous? Are you an example of responsible financial management? Are you a faithful steward? Would you want your children and grandchildren to follow in your footsteps?

If Jesus were here today, would he use you to teach others about generosity, faithfulness and trust? Give this prayerful consideration as you examine your buying and spending habits this month.