

The Widow's Mite

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on 6 November 1988, the 24th Sunday after Pentecost. Scripture Lessons: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Psalm 146; Hebrews 9:24-28; Mark 12:38-44.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Martin Luther astutely observed, "There are three conversions necessary: the conversion of the heart, mind, and the purse." Of these three, it may well be that we moderns find the conversion of the purse the most difficult. It's hard for us even to talk about money. There's hardly any area of life more private, more personal to us, than how we use our money. I recently heard of a couple, both psychologists, who speak openly and frankly in front of their children about sex, death, and all kinds of difficult subjects, but go into the bedroom and close the door when they want to talk about money. For us, money is indeed a forbidden subject.

And yet Jesus spoke about money more frequently than any other subject except the kingdom of God. In the story about the "widow's mite," we're told that Jesus intentionally sat in front of the treasury and watched people putting in their offerings. He saw what they gave and knew the spirit in which they gave. He didn't glance away embarrassed at prying into someone's personal business. He talked openly about money. Jesus used this occasion to teach his disciples about sacrificial giving. He called his disciples and drew their attention to this widow by saying to them, "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." The disciples never forgot that incident.

Jesus commended this widow because she gave everything she had. It's our tragedy that there's so often some part of our lives, some part of our

activities, some part of ourselves which we don't give to Christ. Somehow there's always something we hold back. We rarely make the final sacrifice and the final surrender. It reminds me of a group of people who came into the church back in the Dark Ages. It was during this period of history that Christianity made its first great impact on the people of northern Europe. Large numbers of the savage tribe of Franks professed the Christian faith and presented themselves for baptism by immersion. But many of them weren't quite sure they wanted to give up their warring ways.

Consequently, they'd walk into the river to be immersed holding their battle-axes out of the water. Then they'd say, "This hand has never been baptized" so they could swing it again in slaughter. Well, we don't carry battle-axes around with us today, but we do carry wallets and purses and check books which some of us lift up in a way that is strikingly similar! By the careless management of our money, involving our contributions to Christ's church and work of his kingdom, we proclaim "This wallet, this purse, this check book has never been baptized!"

Money can have so much power over us. It seems like the more we have, the more power it has over us. I've never yet met anyone who claims to have enough money whether they make \$10,000 a year or \$100,000, it always seems as though the outgo exceeds the income and we want more. Sometimes it seems like money has a life of its own. It dominates us. It has God-like characteristics. It gives us security. It can induce guilt. It gives us freedom. It gives us power. It seems to be omnipresent. We speak of the *almighty* dollar. It has strange, mysterious, almost magical powers.

Some of you may have read J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and his trilogy, *The Fellowship of the Ring*. In it Bilbo Baggins, a Hobbit, comes into the possession of a magic ring. Whoever wears it becomes invisible. At

first Bilbo uses it for only good purposes, to help his friends or to escape danger. But the magic ring had a dark side. The more he used it, the more he came to be dominated by its power. He became addicted and dependent on it. His life became more and more anxious, insecure, and fearful. He became dominated by the desire to hang on to the ring at all costs.

Money also has a dark side. All of us, from the moment we snatch at a toy in the nursery and yell, "It's mine," have a strong tendency to be mastered by our possessions and let God have second place. Money is a powerful drug. When prescribed by the Good Physician, the Risen Christ, it can do so much good for ourselves and others. But if we use it apart from his prescription we can get hooked on it. We begin to look to it for a quick fix. We get a raise or inherit a big wad of money and it's like a shot of cocaine. It makes us high and giddy and momentarily we feel at peace and happy. And then when it's spent there comes depression, anxiety, fear, insecurity and we need another bigger fix.

How can we break this addiction to money and possessions? I believe it can happen only if we give ourselves and all that we have to Christ. That's in fact what we say we do when we're baptized and confirmed. We renounce all that we have and confess Christ as our Lord and Savior. That's what we *say* when we're baptized and confirmed, but in practice how many of our decisions are dictated by money and how many by God? I imagine that all of us would violently repudiate the idea that we considered the church of Jesus Christ as a triviality. But it's possible to indicate just that by what we give for its support in comparison with what we spend on really trivial things.

I think of something that happened nearly thirty-five years ago at, what was then, the new Sears store in Wilmington. My mother was looking at some merchandise and I was playing with a nearby candy machine. I

didn't have any money but I started pulling the handles and out came Hershey bars, Milky Ways, Clark Bars and Three Musketeers. My mouth fell open. A miracle! Then I tried pushing the change release and out came dimes and nickels and quarters, as much as I could hold in both hands and I was praying, "Thank you Jesus!" By a push of a button I had become a person of great wealth. I called my mother over to help me carry away the loot in her pocket-book but instead of helping me she said, "Teddy, that doesn't belong to you." "But mom!" "You can't have it, it doesn't belong to you." (There are distinct disadvantages of having an old-fashioned puritanical mother.) I wasn't allowed to keep it. We took it to a floor manager who rewarded me with one candy bar.

That insignificant incident made a deep impression on me that's lasted nearly 40 years. It taught me that money and possessions, like those candy bars, come into my hands by the grace of God. They simply don't belong to me and I'm responsible for handing them all over to Jesus, the Risen Christ. But unlike the floor manager at Sears, Jesus doesn't simply give me back one candy bar. Rather Jesus says to me, "I want you to have and enjoy nine out of ten of those candy bars. But I want you to give one of them to one of my brothers and sisters." And I say, "Only one out of ten?" And he smiles and says, "That's right! Just one." And I say, "Do you mean I can keep 9 out of the 10?" And Jesus throws back his head, laughs loudly and says, "Of course you may. I'm very generous. I execute justice for the oppressed. I give food to the hungry. I set prisoners free. I open the eyes of those who are blind. I lift up those who are bowed down. I love the righteous. I watch over the sojourners, and uphold the widow and the orphan, but bring the way of the wicked to ruin. I will reign forever."

Let us Pray: Almighty God, whose loving hand has given us all that we possess: Grant us grace that we may honor you with our money and possessions, and, remembering the account which we must one day give, may be faithful stewards of your bounty, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.