

“The One to Watch”
from Barbara Brown Taylor’s
The Preaching Life

1. Read Mark 12:38-44 (// to Lk 21:1-4). How does BBT contrast the Scribes with the widow?
2. Calvin writes,

This reply of Christ contains a highly useful doctrine that whatever men offer to God ought to be estimated not by its apparent value, but only by the feeling of the heart, and that the holy affection of him who according to his small means, offers to God the little that he has, is more worthy of esteem than that of him who offers a hundred times more out of his abundance.¹

Is this passage saying it’s the value of the sacrifice *to the giver* that matters, as opposed to the value to the recipient? Or is it saying that “it’s the thought that counts”—i.e., the “feeling of the heart?”

3. Addison Wright² points out that in both Mark and Luke the Widow’s Mite sits between the condemnation of the Scribes, and the prediction of the destruction of the temple and the overthrow of the religious authorities. He draws this conclusion:

Jesus’ saying is not a penetrating insight on the measuring of gifts; it is a lament, “Amen, I tell you, she gave more than all the others.” Or, as we would say: “One could easily fail to notice it, but there is the tragedy of the day—she put in her whole living.” She had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does, and Jesus condemns the value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who conditioned her to do it.

If so, then this story goes beyond a demonstration of complete devotion. Having said the Scribes devour widows’ houses in the passage before, Jesus points to an example of this *as it is happening*, the widow giving her last to the corrupt authorities, her “house” being devoured before their very eyes.

Wright supports this interpretation by noting that (a) valuing the gifts of the poor, by itself, is not a very noteworthy observation, and can be found in all manner of non-Christian literature (e.g. Aristotle); (b) if Jesus approved of her sacrifice itself, he would stand somewhat at odds with his own teaching on Corban (Mk 7:10-13), where he condemns those who abandon their obligations to their parents by giving money to the church instead. (While not an exact parallel, Jesus is clearly placing human needs and obligations above religious values, as he did in his Sabbath teaching, the parable of the good Samaritan and other places.)

Do you agree with Wright’s thesis?

4. “In very general terms Jesus lived in social-cultural contexts (the Jewish context and the larger Greco-Roman society) in which the male view of women was usually negative and the place of women was understood to be limited for the most part to the domestic roles of wife and mother. Women were perceived by extant male writers to be responsible for most (all?) sin, and especially for sexual temptation and sin.”³ There are few first-century examples of positive attitudes towards

¹ *Commentary on Matthew, Mark, Luke - Volume 3.*

² “The Widow’s Mites: Praise or Lament?—A Matter of Context,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*, **44**, 256 (1982).

³ Green, Joel B., McKnight, Scot; Marshall, I. Howard: *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (IVP, 1992) p. 880.

women. By contrast, the Gospel accounts record several instances in which “women portray persons of faith, including the widow of Zarephath, the Canaanite woman, the persistent widow, the woman who anoints Jesus’ feet, the woman with the twelve-year flow of blood, and the widow of this passage.

Calvin adds that Jesus empowers here also the poor:

In two ways this doctrine is useful, for the poor who appear not to have the power of doing good, are encouraged by our Lord not to hesitate to express their affection cheerfully out of their slender means; for if they consecrate themselves, their offering, which appears to be mean and worthless, will not be less valuable than if they had presented all the treasures of Cræsus.

Who are marginalized in our society? Can you name sacrifices you’ve seen them make, which would please Jesus in the way the widow’s mite does?

5. BBT asks,

Are we really supposed to admire a poor woman who gave her last cent to a morally bankrupt religious institution?

Compare the widow’s sacrifice with that of the woman who anointed his feet with perfume.

6. What are Taylor’s three clues for “finding Christ in this picture?”⁴

7. Why, according to Taylor, was Jesus watching the widow? What do we gain by spotting her ourselves? Do you think you have ever spotted a person like this, and if so, when?

8. How might the widow—and those like her—be seen as a “tracer” for the Spirit, and a proxy for the kingdom?

9. Calvin again:

This widow must have been a person of no ordinary piety, who, rather than come empty into the presence of God, chose to part with her own living. And our Lord applauds this sincerity, because, forgetting herself, she wished to testify that she and all that she possessed belonged to God. In like manner, the chief sacrifice which God requires from us is self-denial.

In what ways is your life more characterized by self-denial than it was ten or twenty years ago?



Fun fact: The widow’s “mite” of Mk 12:42 is, in the Greek, the *lepton*, the smallest of the Roman coins. The term “lepton” is also used for a class of elementary particles containing some of the smallest particles, including the nearly massless neutrino. Neutrinos, while numerous, are so nearly “invisible”—interacting weakly with the universe around them—that it’s been estimated more than 50 trillion neutrinos generated by our sun pass quietly through the human body every second.

There is a time, though, when neutrinos take center stage: during the collapse of a star in a supernova, a cataclysmic event where a single star can outshine an entire galaxy. A flood of neutrinos out of the dying star bears away most of the energy of this collapse, an effect which provides an early warning system; the neutrinos from Supernova 1987A, for instance, were detected three hours before the photons.

NEXT TIME: “KNOWING GLANCES”

⁴ A “Taylor series,” so to speak.