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SERVICE AND GOOD WORKS – THE POOR WIDOW WHO CONTRIBUTED TWO SMALL COPPER COINS

We have been considering the subject of service and good works, a major issue in Christian living. We want to understand the approach we should take in this area, and also learn how we can perceive and evaluate how believers, including ourselves, fare in this area.

In the previous two messages, we reflected on the woman who broke the alabaster vial (Mark 14:3-9). We saw that this woman willingly poured over the Lord's head very costly perfume worth more than 300 denarii. The others around her, including the Lord's disciples, considered it a waste. Yet, the woman's act was very significant and meaningful to the Lord.

Meaningful contribution in the Lord's eyes

In this message, we will consider an incident recorded in Mark 12:41-44:

Mark 12:41-44

41 And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums.

42 A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent.

43 Calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury;

44 for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

Verse 41 tells us that a whole multitude was putting money into the treasury, including many rich people who were putting in large sums. In verse 42, we see a poor widow contributing two small copper coins, which amounted to a cent, a minute amount. The margin of the NASB says a cent is a quadrant, or 1/64 of a denarius. Compare the perfume poured out by the other woman who broke the alabaster vial which was worth more than 300 denarii. This woman's contribution could easily be ignored and regarded as insignificant in the eyes of others. But from the words of the Lord in verse 43, it is clear that her contribution was very significant.

The Lord told the disciples: "Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury" (v. 43). What does the Lord Jesus mean by these words?

One meaning of the Lord's statement could be that the poor widow contributed more than any of the contributors. The second meaning could be that she contributed more than all of the other contributors put together. It would be remarkable enough if the Lord had considered her contribution – only two small copper coins – as more than that of any of the other contributors. It would be even more remarkable if the Lord had meant that she had contributed more than all the contributions of all the others put together. This latter meaning could well be what the Lord Jesus intended.

How could this poor widow, who had given only 1/64 of a denarius, contribute to the treasury more than all the other people, including the rich people who had put in large sums? What can we learn from the Lord's remarks?

1. Learning from the way the Lord views our contributions

Note the way the Lord views and measures our contribution. It is very different from how people generally evaluate such matters. In the eyes of the Lord, the large sums put in by all the rich men were worth less than the widow's two small copper coins. What appears to others to be much greater contributions may in reality be worth much less. What is deemed insignificant to most people can be very significant to the Lord.

The Lord Jesus had been observing what the people were putting into the treasury. Having observed what was going on, He called His disciples to Him and said: "Truly I say to you ..." This indicates that the Lord wanted to draw their attention to something important. The truth He was about to teach them is of deep significance.

The Lord wanted to teach them how to perceive accurately what was going on in the situation. The issues involved are very important, but not easy to appreciate. The Lord wanted His disciples to reflect on the matter. We, likewise, should ponder over and reflect on what the Lord wants to teach us through this incident.

2. The significance of our contribution is not measured by amount and quantity

The Lord's assessment and measurement of our contributions are not based on the amount and quantity, although they are not irrelevant. If His assessment and measurement were based on amount and quantity, then clearly the poor widow could not have contributed to the treasury more than all the rest of the people.

How, then, does the Lord measure good works and service? A primary aspect has to do with the meaning and quality of the contribution. What is it that motivates

someone to do an outward act? And what is the moral and spiritual quality within that person that gives birth to the outward manifestation?

In financial giving or material contribution, a person giving little may mean he is unwilling to part with his money or possessions. It may mean he is not generous and not giving as much as he should. That person may deceive himself into thinking that what counts is not the amount given, but the meaning in the heart. He may think that although the amount is little, it is all right as there is much meaning within him motivating the giving. But in reality, he may have given little because he is clinging on to his money and possessions.

The outward act (how much we give, how much we accomplish) – whether in financial giving or in other areas of service – is not irrelevant. But we need to understand the true nature of the act. Does it have real quality in the moral and spiritual dimension? Does it bear a relationship with the quality and meaning within the person seeking to contribute to the Lord's work?

It is not the outward act itself, but the meaning and quality within that the Lord looks at. In the Lord's eyes, the woman contributed more than all the others because of the meaning and quality within her. The Lord tells us that "they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on" (v. 44). Though she was poor, she gave willingly and sacrificially. She faithfully contributed what meant very much to her. The two copper coins were all that she had, and she gave her all as an expression of her deep love for the Lord. She was living by the principle of the willingness to give her all.

We must learn to live by this principle of the willingness to give our all to the Lord, whether in the area of money or in other areas. But the willingness to give our all has to be accompanied by the right attitude and the spirit of love.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 13 about the primacy of love. We may speak in tongues, prophesy, and have much knowledge, but if we do not have love, there is no true value in our actions (1 Cor. 13:1-2).

Even if we give our all but not in love, the Lord will not appreciate it. In verse 3, Paul says:

1 Corinthians 13:3

And if I give all my possessions to feed the poor, and if I surrender my body to be burned, but do not have love, it profits me nothing.

It is clear that in giving her all, the poor widow did it in the right spirit and with love. It was primarily her attitude, and the quality of her love and devotion to God that the Lord Jesus appreciated. And that was why the Lord considered her contribution as very significant.

This poor widow's act was similar to that of the woman who broke the alabaster vial. Although one poured perfume worth over 300 denarii and the other gave only two small copper coins, their deeds were in the same direction and with the same kind of attitude. The contributions of these two women came from hearts of quality and meaning, and hence their contributions had deep significance.

From the Lord's pronouncement, we see that it is not merely that the Lord Jesus appreciated the poor widow's contribution more than all the other contributors, but that she actually contributed more. In monetary terms, she had not contributed more. But in reality, she had. In what sense did she contribute more? The Lord Jesus is primarily concerned about understanding the true meaning and value of things from the perspective of God's kingdom. His words can be meaningfully appreciated to mean that the value and significance of what the poor widow had contributed was greater than that of all the other contributors in the spiritual realm and in God's kingdom. How such a small amount can have so much significance in God's kingdom is something that is not easily understood. But it is a truth we need to learn to grasp. It is not merely how much we give, what we do, or what we appear to have accomplished, but more importantly, the attitude and the quality of love and devotion to the Lord and love for people that the Lord appreciates.

3. Do we feel we have little to give?

Many of us may feel that we have little to give. But it is important that we do not refrain from contributing what we can as members of the body of Christ just because we think we have little to contribute.

If the poor widow had withheld her contribution because she thought she had little to contribute, relative to the rich people who were contributing large sums, wouldn't it be a sad thing? She would then have withheld the most significant contribution in that context.

Sometimes some brethren may think they have little to contribute and whether they do so or not does not really make a difference. So they leave it to others whom they think have more and are more able to contribute effectively – whether in the area of money or in other areas. This is not a healthy attitude to adopt. Let us not be like the slave with the one talent in the Lord's parable in Matthew 25. This slave was entrusted with one talent by his master and he went away and buried it.

In various aspects of our lives and in the outworking of church life, it is important that we learn to contribute what we can, what is appropriate for us in church life.

Let us not be unwilling or neglectful, or have the misconception that our contribution will not amount to much. It may appear insignificant to us or to others, but if our attitude in contributing is healthy and proper, the Lord will appreciate the contribution. Whether or not others notice or appreciate it is immaterial. If the Lord appreciates it, that should be sufficient for us. So let us consider before the Lord

what it is that we can meaningfully contribute. We may not think it amounts to much, but it may be significant to the Lord and its significance may go far beyond what we are conscious of.

Let us contribute what we can wholeheartedly, with the right attitude and spirit. We can do this in various settings: in private or corporate prayer; in our time of worship together; during home fellowship group meetings; or offering practical help in daily life.

This kind of spirit and attitude provides a conducive atmosphere for healthy outworking of church life. In such an environment, the Spirit of God will be pleased to work in us, reveal the truth to us, and enable us to live out what we have come to understand. This will lead to the proper working of each individual part, with believers growing unto maturity, and the body being built up in love. There will be deep love for one another and for the Lord. The congregation will have the capacity and strength to work out God's purposes together effectively. The name of the Lord will be glorified in the midst of His people and in the spiritual realm.

This is a vital aspect of the vision of church life as revealed in the Scriptures, a central aspect in the fulfilment of God's purposes.

So do you still think you have little to contribute? Ponder and pray over it. Contribute to the degree that you can, but do not overstretch yourselves. If you are uncertain how you should contribute and whether it is wise to do so, you can always discuss with those who can help you.

4. Our heart determines the quality of our contribution

Among the rich who were giving large sums, there could be some who have this false sense of having contributed much when it was not so in the eyes of the Lord. Of course, their attitudes vary. Some may be better and the Lord may have appreciated their contributions to some extent.

What is important to note is that the quality of our contribution bears a direct relationship with the meaning and quality within our hearts. The Lord looks at our hearts; He weighs our motives. So if we want to contribute something significant to the Lord's work, we must nurture our inward qualities. This applies not just to financial giving, but also to our whole approach to serving God and contributing to God's kingdom.

5. Principle of sacrificial giving

Mark 12:44

For they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."

The other people gave out of their surplus but the widow gave out of her poverty. We should be willing to give not just out of our surplus, but whatever the Lord has given us. It could be anything – material things, our money, time, energy, resources. Most of all, be willing to give of ourselves, not only when it is convenient, but even when it is difficult, when we feel the pinch and there is a cost to be paid.

The principle of sacrificial giving is an important feature in service and good works. This kind of wholehearted giving to the Lord, His people and His work has a significant bearing on the quality and meaning of our actions, our contributions, as well as our lives.

The question we should be asking is not how much it will cost us, but whether it is appropriate, wise, pleasing to the Lord, and whether a particular contribution is really what the Lord would want us to be involved in.

6. The Lord is observing

Mark 12:41

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the people were putting money into the treasury;

Sometimes, we fail to do something or we do it half-heartedly because no one notices. But when others are noticing, we are motivated to work harder. This is not how we should be living our lives. Let us not do things so people can take notice and praise us. Let us instead be motivated by truth, by what is meaningful in the eyes of the Lord.

The Lord observed what went on around Him during His time on earth. He is still observing, even now. He is omniscient. Nothing escapes His eyes. He is observing what goes on in this world and every aspect of our lives. He is not indifferent to what goes on in our lives, how we live our lives, even many areas which may appear insignificant. He takes note of every positive attitude in our hearts as well as every neglect, failure or negative act.

So let us not be unduly bothered when people do not take notice of what we do, or when they think what we do is not meaningful. The Lord will not misunderstand us. He perceives accurately the nature and meaning of our actions.

On the other hand, we may look at our outward accomplishments and have a false sense that we are doing well. But the Lord does not look at outward accomplishments; He looks at the reality, at what is within the heart. So even if we rationalise and convince ourselves and others contrary to what is actually taking place, we cannot escape from reality or change it.

Let us learn from the Lord to perceive things accurately, concentrating on the reality rather than on appearance, so that we may know how to live our lives properly, in a manner that is truly pleasing to Him.

7. Paying heed to the Lord's warning and commendation

Let us look at the Lord's remarks in the preceding verses 38 to 40 and contrast that with the Lord's commendation of the act of the widow.

Mark 12:38-40

38 In His teaching He was saying: "Beware of the scribes who like to walk around in long robes, and like respectful greetings in the market places,

39 and chief seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets,
40 who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."

Here is a description of the scribes and their false religion. The scribes concentrated on outward appearance. They were proud and self-centred. They sought recognition and honour from men. They were hypocrites whose lives were highly displeasing to the Lord. Such people would incur God's wrath and condemnation.

In other parts of the Scriptures, we see the Lord Jesus pronouncing woes on the scribes and Pharisees who were self-righteous, and who considered themselves as doing well. We see this in Luke 18:9-14:

Luke 18:9-14

9 And He also told this parable to some people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt:

10 "Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector.

11 "The Pharisee stood and was praying this to himself: 'God, I thank You that I am not like other people: swindlers, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector.

12 'I fast twice a week; I pay tithes of all that I get.'

13 "But the tax collector, standing some distance away, was even unwilling to lift up his eyes to heaven, but was beating his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, the sinner!'

14 "I tell you, this man went to his house justified rather than the other; for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but he who humbles himself will be exalted."

In verse 9, the Lord highlighted people who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and viewed others with contempt. He then told a parable about a Pharisee who thought he was all right and doing well because he fasted twice a week and paid

tithes of all he got. But these were outward observances done with the wrong attitude. The Lord ended the parable by saying that he who exalts himself will be humbled and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

When we move from Mark 12:38-40, where the Lord warned about the conduct of the scribes, to Mark 12:41-44, where He commended the poor widow, it is like emerging from a damp, smelly dungeon into the refreshing morning sunshine and walking in a garden with beautiful flowers.

Concluding remarks

The woman who broke the alabaster vial of costly perfume was scolded by others as being wasteful. The widow who gave her two small copper coins could easily have been ignored and her contribution regarded as insignificant.

We can be grateful that the Scriptures recorded for us these two episodes. If the Lord had not drawn our attention to these two women, we could easily have missed out on their significant contributions. In the eyes of most people, their contributions would have been regarded as of little worth in relation to service and good works. But in the eyes of the Lord, they were very precious and significant.

There are important truths we can learn from these two accounts – truths that are very helpful for us individually and together as a congregation. When we grasp these truths well, and respond appropriately, we will be more able to equip ourselves to contribute significantly in the spiritual realm to God's kingdom.

It is interesting to note that these two incidents in the Gospel of Mark are recorded very close to each other. They are separated only by Mark 13, which is on the Second Coming of Christ. The issues raised in these two incidents are issues that concern how we should work out our lives in the light of the Second Coming of Christ and how we can be ready to meet Him.

Like the poor widow's contribution, there could be many other significant contributions to the Lord's work that have gone unnoticed and their true significance unrecognised, simply because they do not appear impressive. On the other hand, there may be many contributions that have been lauded because they look so impressive. But these contributions may have little true value.

Believers often have the wrong concept of what is truly significant in service and good works. Many fail to appreciate the true significance of contributions in the spiritual realm and in God's kingdom. They tend to assess according to the outward, the obvious, and what is easier to understand by way of measurement and counting.

Those who love the Lord may feel a strong sense of urgency that there is much to be accomplished in God's kingdom before the Lord Jesus comes again. With such a sense of urgency, there is a tendency to emphasise on producing results that give a

sense of accomplishment. But what is the reality – is much being accomplished or is it in appearance only?

Let us then ponder and learn what these two incidents can teach us:

a. Do not underestimate or belittle

Do not underestimate or belittle the contribution of those who may appear to contribute little. Do not be preoccupied with the outward and the obvious. Instead, let us learn to appreciate what is in the heart of those seeking to contribute and look at their attitude and the meaning in their contribution.

b. Do not overestimate or be unduly impressed

We must also learn not to overestimate, be overawed, or be unduly impressed by those who appear to be contributing much. Some may be so impressed that they even try to live in the same kind of way, when doing so may not be meaningful in the eyes of the Lord.

At the same time, we must be careful not to have an unhealthy critical spirit or be overconfident in our observations or assessment, thus making hasty conclusions.

Ask the Lord to help us grow in our personal development and, as we become more mature, we will be more able to perceive people and situations more accurately.

c. Contribute effectively

We need to also learn how to contribute effectively to God's kingdom in our own lives. Let us not concentrate on things that give only the appearance of accomplishment. Instead, let us concentrate on that which is truly significant in the eyes of the Lord.

Do not think that because we have little to contribute, our contribution will be insignificant. It is the quality and reality within that matter to God. It is these that give significance to our contribution.

If we truly love the Lord and seek to walk in His ways, each one of us can contribute meaningfully and significantly, even though we may not appear to accomplish a lot. Let us learn to contribute our part with conviction and consistency.

Let us ponder over all that the Lord Jesus is trying to teach us on this subject of service and good works. Let us learn from Him how we can perceive this area accurately and what to concentrate upon for our own lives and for our working out together as a congregation.

It is feasible for any believer in any context to contribute meaningfully and significantly to the Lord's work and the advancement of God's kingdom. Let us ask the Lord to help us understand the meaning and implications of this vital area of truth.

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