

# The Widow's Mites

Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! **for ye devour widows' houses**, and for a pretence make long prayer: **therefore ye shall receive the greater damnation.** – *Matthew 23:14 (Mk. 12:40; Lk. 20:47)*

If there was ever a lesson in the Bible that demanded its interpretation be driven by the events surrounding it, the story of The Widow's Mites would be it. The story is told below as it appears in Mark 12:41-44, with details from Luke 21:1-4 added in parenthesis.

<sup>41</sup>And Jesus **sat** over against the treasury, (**And he looked up...21:1**) and beheld how the people (rich people...21:1) cast money into the treasury: and many that were rich cast in much. <sup>42</sup>And there came a certain poor widow, and she threw in two mites, which make a farthing. <sup>43</sup>And he called *unto him* his disciples, and saith unto them, Verily I say unto you, That this **poor widow** hath cast more in, than all they which have cast into the treasury: <sup>44</sup>For all *they* did cast in of their abundance; (**cast in unto the offerings of God:...Lu. 21:4**); but she of her **want (penury...21:4)** did cast in **all** that she had, *even all her living.*

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To begin, let's discuss what the story is NOT about.

- It is not about sacrificial (financial) giving
- It is not about taking a vow of poverty
- It is not about our attitude or motive when giving
- It is not about the percentage of our giving in light of our income (compared to the rich, she gave a higher percentage although much less in amount)
- It is not about true worship vs. religious worship
- It is not about money at all – although money is involved

If this passage is about giving, then you *must* teach that God is most pleased when we give ALL. More specifically, you must teach that God is most pleased when even poor widows have given of their very last in support of “the church.” But note that Jesus never says that he's pleased or displeased with her giving, or that he's pleased or displeased with her attitude or motive when giving, or anything else. All he says is that she gave of her want, that she gave all, and that she gave all her living. But if this isn't about financial giving, then what *is* it about?

As it happens, just prior to this story is where we find Jesus pronouncing his “seven woes” on the scribes and Pharisees.<sup>1</sup> He calls them hypocrites, fools, blind guides, serpents, and vipers. He describes them as white-washed sepulchers that look good on the outside, but inside are full of dead men's bones, rot, and decay. He speaks of their great pride, heresy, love of money, and religious but unbiblical pursuit of godliness (2 Tim. 3:5). They've persecuted the saints, killed the prophets, robbed God's people of their wealth, and done it all in the name of God (Jn. 16:2-3). But despite this, and in keeping with God's character (Eze. 33:11), he laments their destruction.

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<sup>1</sup> Cp. Mt. 23:1-36; Mk. 12:38-40; Lu. 20:45-47

† **Mt. 23:37** O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, *thou* that killest the prophets, and stonest them which are sent unto thee, how often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her chickens under *her* wings, and ye would not! <sup>38</sup>**Behold, your house is left unto you desolate.** <sup>39</sup>For I say unto you, Ye shall not see me henceforth, till ye shall say, Blessed is he that cometh in the name of the Lord.

He then looks up and observes the widow casting in her two mites, which is then followed by his foretelling of the destruction of the Temple and his Second Coming).<sup>2</sup> This is the context in which we find the widow casting her mites: between Christ's righteous indignation levied toward the scribes and Pharisees and their oppressive religious system and the foretelling of the impending destruction of Jerusalem and his Second Coming. And so we must ask ourselves, is it logical to commend a poor widow who's cast in her "last two dollars" in support of a doomed religious system?<sup>3</sup> But there's more.

Look at where Jesus is sitting. He's at the Temple sitting in an area known as the Court of the Women (Treasury), which is the second court encountered when proceeding from the streets of Jerusalem en route to the Temple. The first was a large court known as the Court of the Gentiles. Its name infers that it was for "Gentiles Only," but this is a misnomer. What it really meant was that it was as close to the Temple as Gentiles could come; they weren't allowed to come any closer: male or female. Anyone could wander through their court: they had to in order to get to the Temple. So while appearing special and unique, their court only served as a limitation because it was as close to God as they were allowed to get, and this is true of all the courts. The Court of the Women was next, which was as close as a Jewish woman could get. Next was the Court of Israel, which was as far as a non-Levitical Jewish male could travel, which was then followed by the Court of the Priests and then the Temple itself. But there's yet more.

Travelling from without to within, each court became smaller in size than the one before it; and so the Court of the Gentiles was the largest and the Court of the Priests the smallest. They also increased in elevation. The Court of the Gentiles was the lowest and the Court of the Priests the highest (before the Temple, of course). In addition, each court was divided from the other by stairs, walls, and pillars, or some combination thereof. So the impression given was that Gentiles were the lowliest while the Jewish priests were the most revered. The Gentiles were at the bottom and the priests were at the top. And since each court was smaller than the one preceding it, then each court became exclusive to an increasingly smaller number of people, thus giving the impression that only an increasingly select few were allowed to draw close to God, or were approved by God, with the Jewish religious leaders being at the top. In other words, because of its construction, the Temple courts gave the impression that God loved Jews more than Gentiles. And that even within Israel, God loved his priests more than he loved Jewish women and children. But in the original design of the Temple (Tabernacle) there was only one court where the priests stood and ministered with everyone else standing outside: Jew or Gentile.<sup>4</sup> And so the simple lesson here was that you're either a priest serving within the

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<sup>2</sup> Mt. 24:1-31; Mk. 13:1-27; Lu. 21:5-28. Chronologically, after The Widow's Mites, there is a brief pause in the narrative of Matthew, Mark, and Luke reminding the reader that Jesus is The Light of the world (Jn. 12:20-36) followed by a brief summary explaining the unbelief of the Jews (37-43).

<sup>3</sup> The exact value of the mites (leptons) and the farthing (quadran) in modern values is difficult to ascertain; but the *high* estimate is about \$2USDs.

<sup>4</sup> Ex. 27:9-19; 38:9-20

courts of the Lord or you're not; i.e. you're either saved or lost. Herein we have a clear contrast where everyone is on the same footing: all lost people were equally lost and all saved people were equally saved; but that all saved people had equal access to God (by way of the New Covenant: cp. Mt. 27:51; 1 Pet. 2:9-10). There were no height deviations or graduated steps in God's plan, nor were there any man-made divisions (walls, pillars, steps). They all stood on level footing whether lost or saved; and so there was no separation of the saints because there was only one court for them.

But this is what religion does; it separates under the guise of inclusiveness. In adding these courts, the Jews made a place for *everyone*. Everyone could "feel" as though they were a child of God because *everyone* had a court *made* especially for them (i.e. the wide road: Mt. 7:13-14). But in adding these courts, they also created artificial divisions (walls, stairs, pillars) where once there were none. We see this today. Under the guise of Christianity, *man* has created denominations (and cults) to suit every possible belief system thereby allowing everyone to feel as though they're a part of God's family when in fact they may not (Mt. 7:21-23). But in doing so, they've also separated God's people from one another as each division (denomination) pursues its own self-interests. Thus, denominations don't draw God's people together, they separate them – a proposition of which Scripture expressly forbids.<sup>5</sup> Let it therefore be understood that all denominations are sin; they're all man-made additions to the Word of God just as these courts were man-made additions to the Temple.<sup>6</sup> So when Jesus observes this poor widow, it not only occurs between his righteous indignation levied towards the scribes and Pharisees and the foretelling of the destruction of the Temple, it occurs as he's physically sitting in the very midst of the false religious system they'd created.<sup>7</sup> And so again we must ask, is it logical that he would commend a poor widow for her sacrificial giving when it's given in support of a doomed religious system? The answer should be obvious; the context doesn't allow for that interpretation.

But there's another way to tell that the story isn't what it seems. For this, we'll let Scripture speak for itself.

- † **Dt. 14:28 (Dt. 26:12)** At the end of three years thou shalt bring forth all the tithe of thine increase the same year, and shalt lay *it* up within thy gates: <sup>29</sup>And the Levite, (because he hath no part nor inheritance with thee,) and the stranger, and the fatherless, and the **widow**, which *are* within thy gates, shall come, **and shall eat and be satisfied; that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hand which thou doest.**
- † **Dt. 24:19 (Lev. 19:9, 23:22)** When thou cuttest down thine harvest in thy field, and hast forgot a sheaf in the field, thou shalt not go again to fetch it: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the **widow**: that the LORD thy God may bless thee in all the work of thine hands. <sup>20</sup>When thou beatest thine olive tree, thou shalt not go over the boughs again: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the **widow**. <sup>21</sup>When thou gatherest the grapes of thy vineyard, thou shalt not glean *it* afterward: it shall be for the stranger, for the fatherless, and for the **widow**. <sup>22</sup>And thou shalt remember that thou wast a bondman in the land of Egypt: therefore I command thee to do this thing.

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<sup>5</sup> 1 Cor. 1:10-13; 3:1-4; 11:18-19; Rom. 16:17-18

<sup>6</sup> Dt. 4:2; 12:32; Rev. 22:18-19

<sup>7</sup> Man had so profoundly perverted God's Word that it was no longer effective (Mt. 15:1-9; Mk. 7:1-12).

- † **1 Tim. 5:16** If any man or woman that believeth have **widows**, let them relieve them, and let not the church be charged; that it may relieve them that are widows indeed.
- † **Ja. 1:27** Pure religion and undefiled before God and the Father is this, To visit the fatherless and **widows** in their affliction, and to keep himself unspotted from the world.

From these and many others, Scripture is clear. In the Bible, destitute widows were to receive support and not the other way around. This is how you know something is wrong with the story without having to know the context. But in applying them both, what we discover is that it explains why the Jewish religious system and their Temple will be destroyed in 70 A.D.

- † **Ex. 22:21** Thou shalt neither vex a stranger, nor oppress him: for ye were strangers in the land of Egypt. <sup>22</sup>**Ye shall not afflict any widow**, or fatherless child. <sup>23</sup>If thou afflict them in any wise, and they cry at all unto me, I will surely hear their cry; <sup>24</sup>**And my wrath shall wax hot**, and I will kill you with the sword; and your wives shall be widows, and your children fatherless.

The religious leaders had so perverted the Word of the Lord, and they'd done it for so long, that they had no compassion – no, not even for the poor, and nothing has changed. People today are still being taught to give sacrificially with the (false) hope that God will bless them in return. “Prosperity preachers” tell people to send checks for money they don’t have, and then when it doesn’t appear, they tell them that they didn’t have enough faith, that they must be harboring some secret sin, or that they need to be more patient, etc. Never is their doctrine wrong. The fault always rests with those giving. Thus their doctrine is no different than that of the scribes and Pharisees. They both teach that the poor should give when the Bible teaches they should receive. Similarly, those writing checks of their want are faring no better than the widow in this story. One is preaching a lie and the other is believing a lie, even though the clear Word of the Lord teaches the exact opposite; thus proving that neither are reading the Word of God nor hearing his voice. But just as the scribes and Pharisees were destroyed for their lack of compassion, so too will the scribes and Pharisees of our day. But the question remains: if this story isn’t about financial giving, then what *is* it about?

When Jesus spoke of the poor widow, he wasn’t referring to her financial giving, but her spiritual condition. The “want” from which she gave was her spiritual poverty. She was spiritually destitute: unsaved. This means that the “all” from which she gave was that of the mind, body, and soul; and in giving “all her *living*,” her salvation rested not in the Lord Jesus Christ, but in this false religious system and what she perceived it could do for her. The same continues today. Many are still pinning their hopes in “the system” and the message that it preaches instead of what’s found in God’s Word. And so Jesus wasn’t commending her for her sacrificial giving, he was sorrowing over her spiritual status which was but a reflection of the overall problem in Israel.<sup>8</sup> So although practically everyone uses this story as an example of “sacrificial giving” necessary to support the work of the church, the context doesn’t allow for it. Suffice it to say that “giving to God” while neglecting the practical needs of the people is sin (Mt. 15:3-6; Mk. 7:9-13). Hence, any religion, denomination, church, or doctrine that’s willing to impoverish the poor for its own benefit is a false religion. Selah.

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<sup>8</sup> Not to be forgotten, the rich trusted in their own riches to save them (Ps. 49:6-9; Mk. 10:24; 1 Tim. 6:17 etc.).