



BIG GIVER, SMALL GIVER

One of the most radical giving passages in the entire New Testament is found in Luke 21:1-4. You most likely have heard the story about the “widow’s mite.” Most people completely miss how profound this story and Jesus’ teaching on it are. In fact, Jesus, as He does on many occasions on many different subjects, turns the Old Testament teaching on giving “on its ear” with His comments:

Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. And he said, ‘Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.’ (ESV)

A person could all too easily read right through this story, be warmed by the sweetness of it, and move on. But we dare not overlook the fact that in Jesus’ assessment, He reverses our commonly understood definitions of what makes “big” giving big and “small” giving small. He changes the entire paradigm by identifying the widow as the big giver and the wealthy as the small givers (*this poor widow has put in more than all of them*).

To fully appreciate the extreme contrast in Jesus’ comparison here, we need to understand that the two small copper coins this poor widow gave were the equivalent of 1/64th of a common laborer’s daily wage. Assuming a minimum wage for an eight-hour day, her gift amounted to a measly ninety cents in today’s dollars. Contrast this with the huge sums of money that Jesus observed the rich dropping into the offering box. Their giving may have even been bags of surplus gold. And that is His point.

Even the significant amounts of money the rich were parting with in their offerings would have absolutely no immediate or long-term impact on their lives. They were giving what they did not need and what they would not miss. In their giving, they were making no personal sacrifice at all. The widow, on the other hand, would likely feel the impact of her gift by dinner time that very day.

Let me also note the percentage of giving Jesus is endorsing here before we move on. You can check my math, but I believe it is 100%, not just some arbitrary or perfunctory 10% tithe. He is praising and promoting 100% giving. That alone is off-the-charts extreme teaching.

A Modern Day Comparison

In order to better understand what Jesus is actually saying here, let's consider this hypothetical, modern-day situation. Imagine there are two members of your church. The first member is a poor, elderly widow who receives \$12,000 a year in Social Security and who gives out of her meager annual income \$500 a year to the church. The second member is a successful businessman who is giving \$50,000 a year to the church from his \$350,000 annual income.

Comparison #1

If you compare the total dollar amount the two are giving, who is the big giver and who is the small giver? Obviously the businessman is the big giver and the widow is the small giver. The businessman is giving 100 times more than the widow.

Comparison #2

If you compare their giving as a percentage of their income, you will see that the widow is giving a very modest 4% of her income (an unacceptable amount in many churches' theology). The businessman, on the other hand, is giving a very healthy 14% of his income. By this measure, the businessman is again the big giver and the widow is the small giver. The businessman is giving 3.5 times more.

Comparison #3

Putting aside our "normal" methods of measuring the liberality of giving, let's consider the brand-new giving measurement that Jesus here institutes. Simply stated, here is Jesus' new definition for measuring generous giving: *Your degree of generosity is not measured by how much you give, it is measured by how much you have left over after you give.* Stop and read that one more time. This is a profound truth that may take some time to fully absorb.

Using Jesus' new definition to measure who is the bigger giver, we are not to compare their total giving (comparison #1) or even their percentage of giving (comparison #2); we are to compare how much the widow and the businessman have left over after they have made their respective gifts (comparison #3).

The widow has a meager \$11,500 left over to live on for the entire year (less than \$1,000 a month), while the businessman must "struggle" to make ends meet on his remaining \$300,000 salary (\$25,000 a month). The message is unmistakably clear here. Jesus' teaching, in this case, is telling us that the widow who gave only \$500 is a much bigger giver than the businessman who liberally gave \$50,000. Jesus has thrown us an incredible curveball in His comparison in Luke 21 when He identifies the poor widow, not the rich, as the bigger giver.

The Most Generous Person I Have Ever Known

I have worked with many affluent families over the past 30 years, helping them make several substantial gifts to the kingdom. However, when I think about the most generous person I have ever known, none of these committed and willing givers reaches the top of my list.

That top position goes to a ten-year-old boy named Jimmy Mitchell who was a member of my church back when I was preaching as a young man well over 30 years ago. One Sunday before church, I was standing up at the pulpit getting my sermon notes ready when Jimmy came running into the auditorium of our very small country church in rural Kentucky. He ran up to me with a one dollar bill in his hand and exclaimed, “Jay, look what I’ve got!” I replied, “Jimmy, that’s great. Where did you get it?” He told me that after he mowed his yard, he decided to go ahead and mow his elderly neighbor’s yard next door because she wasn’t able to get around very well. He excitedly exclaimed, “After I finished, she came out and gave me this dollar!” He then paused and gave me a reflective look and said, “You know, Jay, I’d like to give some of this dollar to the Lord.”

Touched by his comment, I replied, “Jimmy, I know the Lord would be so pleased that you want to share some of that dollar with Him. How much do you think you would like to give Him?” Even now, more than three decades later, I still remember his penetrating words like it was yesterday. He looked down at the dollar and then questioningly looked up at me and asked, “Do you think He would mind if I kept a dime?”

His words still ring in my mind to this day, *Do you think He would mind if I kept a dime?* Jimmy knew whose dollar it was, and he was just hoping to enjoy some small benefit from it having passed through his hands on its way back to its rightful Owner for His use and purposes.

Even after thirty years, Jimmy Mitchell still remains the most generous giver I have ever personally known. Not because of the total amount of the gift, a meager 90 cents, or even the amazing percentage of his giving, 90%, but because of the amount he had left over after he made the gift—one thin dime.

I have never personally given this sacrificially and extravagantly at any time in my life. Have you? Can you imagine what the kingdom of God would look like today if it were full of believers who thought and acted like Jimmy Mitchell? *Your degree of generosity is not measured by how much you give, it is measured by how much you have left over after you give.* This new definition should challenge all of us to reassess our current level of giving to determine if we should even be thinking of ourselves as big givers.

It may just be that based upon Jesus’ revolutionary new definition of what it means to be a big giver, some of us may realize that we aren’t all that big of givers after all, and many of us who likely have never thought of ourselves as big givers indeed really are!

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