

## "God's Economy"

Mark 12:41-44

November 11, 2018

25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost

An infomercial begins with a frustrated couple sitting at their kitchen table, trying to figure out their family's finances. They were deeply in debt and things were getting worse. They didn't know what they could do to pay the current bills or how they could reduce their accumulated debt. A pitch man appears in the screen and says, "Maybe I can help. I have developed a new financial planning program which can help you get out of debt and stay out of it." Holding up a very small booklet (which was no bigger than a pamphlet), he says, "This is my book which can help you with all of your problems. It's called 'Don't Buy Stuff That You Can't Afford.'"

Of course, this was not a real infomercial, but a skit on Saturday Night Live. The rest of the skit consists of the pitch man trying to show the confused couple (played by Steve Martin and Amy Poehler) how financially successful they could be if they just bought things only when they had the money to pay for it and didn't buy things when they didn't have money to pay for it.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? It is just a matter of good economics. You buy what you can afford. You don't buy more than you can afford. When everybody does that, things work out well. Do these principles apply only when buying stuff for ourselves? Or, do these principles also apply when it comes to our financial contributions to support the work of the Lord? Maybe this area has its own special rules. When we consider our use of the financial resources placed under our control by our Heavenly Father, does this good economic sense necessarily translate into good theological sense?

Obviously, the wise and prudent use of money would be only to spend money you have in order to purchase the things that you need and to be sure that you always have enough money. Of course, this became harder and harder with the advent of credit cards, payment plans, and direct withdrawal. Plus, there are the advertisers which tell us what we need to buy and we often believe them. In addition, we live in a culture that tells us to indulge our desires immediately without denying ourselves or waiting to obtain what we desire.

Having a family budget can help us control our spending and make sure we only use the money we have available. Of course, this only works if the budget is followed. Temptations are always there to spend more than we have, especially for personal items, toys, trinkets, and stuff that we really like. In other words, we may continually increase the list of what constitutes the necessities of life or may overindulge in the pleasures of life, both of which get us into financial trouble.

When it comes to contributing to support the Lord's mission, we may follow the wise and prudent way of giving only that which we can afford. That's certainly what happened in our text for today with some rich people. Jesus is sitting in the temple courts, watching people contribute their offerings. The rich people were putting huge sums of money in the offering boxes which may have impressed the disciples and others. But the rich people were not breaking their budget in making their contributions. They were giving what they could afford. In fact, Jesus says that they were contributing out of their abundance which literally means giving what was left over. They felt good about their offering because of the huge amount and, as long as they still had money left over, they continue to do it.

That's the way many Christians operate today. We give what we can afford and some give out of what is left over. Some may not even plan what they are to give. It merely depends upon what's in their wallet that Sunday. Some may set a fixed amount and never change.

They might say, “if a \$5 bill was a good enough offering in 1947 when I was confirmed, it’s still a good enough offering today.” Even if we carefully planned the amount of our offering, it becomes just another line item in our family budget or what we have left over after we have paid all of our bills. We place self-imposed limits on our giving because of the concern with following good economic sense in this world.

Now, all of this does make good sense. However, this good sense is not God sense though. God runs a different kind of economy and the gift of the widow demonstrates that economy. She is poor and cannot possibly compete with the big givers. Her gift is small and certainly cannot be equated in any sort of measurable form with the gifts of the big givers. She gives only two coins which together are the equivalent of a single cent. In addition to giving a very small gift which some might look down their noses at, she does the very “foolish” thing of overspending her budget. With bills for food and daily living expenses coming due and no breadwinner in the house to pay for them and no government social services in the community to assist her, shouldn’t she have kept that money back for that? Instead, Jesus said that she gave all that she had, everything she had to live on. Economically speaking, this widow has failed the test.

However, in God’s economy, this all makes perfect and complete sense even though it conflicts with sound economic policy today. We all judge value by the amount. \$100 in our sight is more valuable than \$1 in our sight. However, in God’s economy, the value of the gift is not based on the amount of the gift. In our text, Jesus says that the widow put in much more than all of those who were putting in large sums of money. Her gift was of more value because it was all that she had.

Secondly, we commend people in financial matters based on the amount they give. Whose pictures are in the paper for their charitable contributions? Is it not the people who give a half million dollars for a new wing on the hospital? Is it ever the kid who contributes \$1.46 from his Kool-Aid stand for the same fund? However, in God’s economy, the commendation for the gift is based on the faith and trust of the contributor, rather than the amount of the gift.

What is the reason for this zany economy that God is running? Maybe it’s not that God is so zany. This is just the way that God has been all along. This is not a question of God’s economic policy, but of His generosity. He is extremely generous, some might even say to a fault, to anyone and everyone. The problem is with us. Because of our own sinful nature, our generosity is diminished and usually focused upon us and the ones we love only.

Consider the overwhelming generosity of God. In saving you and me. God “throws good money after bad” as economists might say. He sends His holy and perfect Son, Jesus Christ, to redeem (that is, to pay the price) those who are sinners. Does that seem like a wise investment? If you are going to gather a people for yourself, wouldn’t you purchase those people who are good and supportive of your cause? Yet when God our Heavenly Father plans to gather a people for Himself, He chose those who are conceived and born in sin; who are blind and spiritually dead; and who are enemies of God and all for which He stands; namely, you, me, and everyone who is ever lived.

The capital which God uses to make this purchase doesn’t seem to be right either. Couldn’t he have had us for a mere pittance which is all that we were worth? Instead, God pays the highest price to have you and me. It is not with gold or silver by which He pays (even if it was all the gold and silver that the world ever had), but with the holy precious blood and innocent suffering and death of Jesus Christ. The shed blood of Christ and His innocent life offered on a cross was the purchase price of the bunch of rogue sinners like you and me.

The Bible even describes God's grace in economic terms. When Paul addresses the people in Corinth. He says, "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you by his poverty might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8:9) Understand what this means: Jesus was wealthy beyond measure. Yet, though he was rich, He became poor and gave up everything. In earthly economic matters, this would be very foolish use of well in very poor planning.

However, Jesus did all of this for your sake and my sake. He did this for us who were at the bottom of the barrel poor. We had nothing, deserved nothing, and could look forward to nothing. Yet Jesus' action was taken so that we, who were poor, by his poverty might become rich. Now, we are rich beyond measure which is very unfair. Yet in God's economy, this is exactly what He wanted you to have.

What does this wealth have to do with our use of earthly wealth especially when it comes to giving for the use of the Lord's mission? In our text about the widow, some would say that the root of the problem is not about money or giving at all. It is a First Commandment issue. The First Commandment, as you all know, says, "You shall have no other gods." Luther's short and simple explanation of this commandment is, "we should fear, love, and trust in God above all things."

With money and our craving for material goods easily becoming idols, did the people in this text obey this commandment? There is some question with the rich people because they gave safely and held on to the majority of their material goods. However, there is no question with the poor widow. She feared, loved, and trusted in God above all things in this instance. Being so poor, one might wonder why she would do this. However, in appreciation for God's mercy and grace shown to her and the desire to show that appreciation in a tangible form of a contribution while, at the same time, still trusting in the Lord to care for her needs, she responded. She was freed from sin, death, and hell in the future and was freed for generosity, acts of kindness, and contributions in the here and now.

We are the same. We have been freed. We have forgiveness all of our sin to Christ's sacrifice on the cross. We need not fear God's wrath or His judgment against sin. We also have eternal life in heaven because of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Therefore, we are also freed from the fear of death and hell.

Like the widow in our story, we are freed for service and generosity without fear or hesitation for we are freed from fear of the needs of this life. Why would we ever possibly doubt or be afraid? Why would we ever let anything curb our generosity or keep us from giving? It makes no sense and none of God's other creatures do it. Jesus asks the same question in His Sermon on the Mount.

Therefore, I tell you, do not be anxious about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, nor about your body, what you will put on. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And which of you by being anxious can add a single hour to his span of life? And why are you anxious about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.

If God takes care of plants and animals of this world without their worrying or doubting, will he not do the same for you? If he has granted you eternal life and salvation, will he not provide you with the things that you need here and now? Jesus asked the same question.

Therefore, do not be anxious, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' For the Gentiles seek after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them all. But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you."  
(Matthew 6:1-33)

St. Paul says the same thing in the book of Romans. He writes, "What then shall we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things?"  
(Romans 8:31-32)

In Christ, we are freed from our sinful addiction to money and things. However, we still face the same First Commandment challenge which the widow faced. How much do we fear, love, and trust, in God above all things? How much do we fear God's anger when we have financial or material idols? How much do we love God for all that he is given to us and will give to us? How much do we trust God to care for us, even when common sense says that it's impossible?

Life in God's economy might seem strange to us. Rich people give large sums of money and are mildly criticized. A widow gives hardly anything but is commended. Many bags of money are considered to be a small gift while coins equaling one cent are considered to be a generous gift. Some who have much are still attached to their wealth while one who has little is freed from attachment to it.

Who will you be? And what will your giving consist of? It is interesting that, unlike the command given to the rich young man to sell all that he had, Jesus does not command the rich people in the story to give all that they had. Instead, He purposely makes no comment and we are left with the uncomfortable task of deciding.

How should you and I respond? Shall we respond according to the rules of our earthly economy or according to the freedom of God's economy? God's economy may seem strange. It doesn't seem fair at times. The numbers don't always add up as we think they should. Sometimes, that's a good thing. Jesus, who was rich, became poor so that we, who were poor, might be rich. Life in God's economy gives us everything and frees us from everything so that we might have everything we need and give everything in gratitude toward Him and in service to our neighbor. That is a strong and thriving economy. Amen