

Moved to Generosity

by Stewart Ruch

The sermon emphasizes the call to radical generosity, inspired by the widow's example, and encourages practical steps towards giving everything to God.

Duration: 26:14

Scripture: Mark 12:41

Topics: "Generosity"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on the story of a widow who gave all she had to Jesus. The widow is portrayed as a simple person, without even a name, but she becomes a universal symbol of what it means to give one's life to Jesus. The speaker emphasizes that widows are often heroes in the Bible, despite their lack of power or success. The sermon encourages the audience to take steps in their own giving lives, from initial to consistent, intentional, sacrificial, and ultimately a lifetime commitment to giving to Jesus and his church.

Transcript

Father in heaven, you sent us Jesus, and the Bible tells us that Jesus became poor so that we might become rich in Him, or give us courage to empty ourselves as He emptied Himself. To as the widow did in our reading just now, give everything we have so that we can gain, Lord, all that You have. Help us, Lord, to give everything we have so that we can gain everything that You have.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. You may be seated.

Over a decade ago, I was in Sao Paulo, Brazil, where my wife Catherine grew up, and we were having a lovely coffee time with a family friend of hers, a woman in her seventies. She happens to be a widow, and she was telling us the story of her girlhood in Sao Paulo. And she told a riveting story of a time in the history of Sao Paulo and Brazil where the state of Sao Paulo, which has tended to be just a state that has been run well and has done well, was actually considering breaking free and having some kind of independence from the rest of Brazil.

And this independence movement took on incredible momentum around her as a young girl, and she watched as meetings were happening at her home, and her father was a key leader in this Sao Paulo movement. And it got so engaged that people began to give of things that were very dear to them to help finance this independence movement for Sao Paulo. People were literally going through their drawers and

literally going to their fingers and pulling off their wedding rings and precious stones and diamonds and giving them for the cause of Sao Paulo.

Well, Maria Julia was so caught up in this as a little girl that she began to try to figure out, what is it that I could give for the cause of Sao Paulo? I so believe in my city and my state. I so believe in my parents and their enthusiasm about this. What could I give? She didn't have a wedding ring.

She had no precious jewels, but she had a silver girl's tea set that had been given her. And she described the time when she went to her parents and she gave them her silver tea set and she said, I want to give this for Sao Paulo. Everyone that gave to this movement, many of them gave literally their gold and other precious items were given when they gave away these things, a ring.

It was a very simple ring. It was made of a base metal. And on the inside of the ring, if you looked closely and Maria Julia was given one of these rings for the gift of her silver tea set.

On the inside of the ring it read, I gave my gold for Sao Paulo. I would like to be given a ring when I go face to face with Jesus at the end of my run here on earth that says, I gave my gold for Jesus and his church. I gave up everything I had.

Yes, my money is, but far more than that. I gave my life for Jesus and his church. This morning, I want to talk to you about steps that we can all take of giving our lives to Jesus and of specifically giving of our resources to the work of Jesus Christ.

There among all of us here, and we're in very different places in our giving lives can all take at least one step. And we're given a really beautiful goal of what it looks like to give our lives, to give our gold for Jesus. And it's the story that was just read us.

It was just four verses. Would you look at that in your bulletin? They're very simple versus fittingly. So, because they give the picture of a very simple, simple person.

Well, you have before you in this widow that gives all that she had. We don't even have her first name. Often we're given the name of somebody in the new Testament.

We don't get her name. This gives her a kind of universality, but we're given her as the picture from Jesus of what a kingdom man or a kingdom woman is to look like. You know that widows are often heroes in the Bible.

A widow certainly is not a symbol of power. A widow is not necessarily a symbol of glory, a symbol of success. Indeed, what we see in widows initially and immediately, of course, is a symbol of need.

A widow is one who doesn't have that partner, and particularly in the financial ancient Near East. That was a very vulnerable place to be in. It's still a very vulnerable place to be in.

Widows are often heroes that Jesus chooses to show us because they are a picture of seeming weakness that can actually act in great courage. So, readjust your thinking right away that if you want to be great in the work of Jesus, become like a widow. Become like this widow that we just read of.

We have some amazing widows here at Church of the Resurrection. They actually can be, not to over exalt them, they happen to be human beings, but they can be pictures for us of this same kind of courage. Indeed, one of our widows just spoke to me right before this service started.

She didn't know I was preaching about the widow who gives her final coins, and she was in tears because she just so loves the Lord. That's what she said, I just so love the Lord. Somehow in her need as a widow, she's been given space to deeply connect and love the Lord.

Why does the Lord point out this widow at this time? What's happening in Jesus' story at that time? What is this widow a symbol of? Well, she's a symbol of generosity, but of a very profound generosity. It's a generosity that Jesus in just a few days is going to show in the most ultimate way. He points to her and says, she gives everything that she has asked.

This is what I want you to be like, he's saying to the disciples as they're watching people come up to the offering there in the temple, and the rich come up first. Those who have influence and power come up first. Those who are profoundly impressive come up first, and Jesus says, no, no, no, no, no, no, yes, yes, right here, right here.

This is what I want you to be like. And we read in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 that Jesus became poor that we might become rich. And what he's doing in pointing this widow is that in just a few days, Jesus will become poor.

Jesus will be hung on a cross like a common poor criminal who doesn't have the means to get out of this execution situation. Like any poor criminal, Jesus will be hung upon the cross. He'll become poor in all ways that we might become rich.

And he sees this widow who makes herself even poorer than she already was because she wants to be rich in the things of God. And he says, this is what it looks like to follow me. This is what it looks like to be generous.

This is what I will look like in a matter of days. When we think about giving what we have, it's got to be foundationed and based in the work of the cross of Jesus Christ, in the grace of God, in the gift of becoming poor, that we might become rich in Jesus. So I want you to have this widow as the place where we all desire to go eventually in our lives here on earth.

We want to be like this widow in our emotional lives, our spiritual lives, in our financial lives. This is where we're trying to get to. This is the goal.

The many of us are not there yet. And there's a grace in that journey of getting there. I'd like to spell out for you just five possible steps.

And I think every one of us can find ourselves in one of these five generosity steps that we can take to become more like this widow, more like Jesus, becoming poor, that we might be rich in the things of God. The first step is to take an initial step of giving. And my guess is, I've got a lot of you out there who may have never really ever given to the work of Jesus or in the church.

As a matter of fact, I'm praying that in this generosity initiative, and there's no way that I'm going to know, I'm just praying that fifty of you who have never really given in a full way, in a free way, to the life of the church, that we would have fifty initial givers. When we give for the first time, we show that not only is our heart and our mind being converted, but as Martin Luther, 16th century Christian thinker, said, our wallet is being converted. And the conversion of the wallet is part of a full conversion of the mind and the body and the spirit.

When we give for the first time, we are connecting with what is talked about in 2 Corinthians chapter 8 as well. We begin to excel not only in faith, Paul says, don't just excel in faith, don't just excel in love, but excel in giving, excel in generosity. So for some of you, next week's our commitment Sunday, it may be the first time you've ever given.

Praise the Lord. Rather than being ashamed about that, break through on that and come to the side of generosity and of giving for the first time. It may be that you've given and that you've given, you give here and there and you still give here and there.

So the next step for you would be to step into a place of becoming a consistent giver. That's a beautiful verse in 2 Corinthians chapter 9. It talks about we realize as we give that, and this is just a biblical principle, that we will reap what we sow. So to begin to give consistently is to realize I want to reap the consistent joy of being with the Lord.

I want to reap the consistent presence of being and walking with the Lord. I want to reap his consistent generosity to me, and by doing so, I want to sow generosity. When we become consistent with something, we show a commitment to something.

It's one thing to go on one date, but by date 10, you're saying something to that person you're on that date with. It's a consistency. You want to be together regularly.

We show a commitment to our bank by paying our mortgage consistently. We take that seriously. It matters to us.

I'd like to have a home. I'd like to have an apartment, so I pay my rent consistently. It's a very similar thinking for the Christian that begins to move from simply initial giving to consistent giving.

I want to encourage all of you. That is a step that everyone here can take. I'm not saying how much you give consistently.

The only barrier to giving consistently has nothing to do with your finances. It has only to do with your freedom from the fear or the love of money, and that's a freedom that the Lord can give right now. That's a freedom that seeing a widow who gives everything can give you the courage to give right now.

So, maybe that the conversation with a friend or a roommate or partner is, okay, I don't give consistently. I'm going to confront the brutal fact, and I want to. I'm going to give monthly.

I'm going to give every other month, whatever it is, set out a consistent plan for your giving. Show that commitment. Maybe that you give consistently.

You've connected with that. You have a consistent plan and you're giving consistently. So, the next step that I would encourage you in would be an intentional giving.

This is really where I started in my marriage. I gave, and I gave in a certain consistent way, but it was in meeting Catherine, my wife, who'd grown up in a profound generosity culture in her family, a culture that I didn't necessarily grow up in and wasn't familiar with, that I began to learn to give intentionally. I began to study in the Bible how intentional giving was.

Indeed, one of the intentional moments we see is in the Old Testament, the book of Deuteronomy, where when you would harvest your fields, you would intentionally give your first fruits, the first produce, you

would give that to the work of God. You would give that who served the temple of God, you would give that for the sake of the poor. You would give the first thing that you harvested, and you would give that away, rather than saying, oh, first thing, I need to secure the first thing I have.

We need to put this away in storehouses to make sure that we have everything that we need, and then whatever we get after that, then I'll make sure I give those things to God. But indeed, what happened for the follower of God in the Old Testament is that they intentionally gave the first thing that they pulled out of their fields, and they gave that away to God. There was an intentionality to it.

And what happened for me in intentional giving is I looked at my consistent giving, not only to the church, but I gave consistently other places too, like my mortgage, like other monthly things that I gave to, and I went, wow, shouldn't I be as intentional in my giving to Jesus and His work as I am in my giving to my mortgage? I'd love to be as intentional about the things of the world as I am, as I want to be, about the things of Jesus and His church. I began to square up my monthly giving and think intentionally about that. I began to realize that while the Bible teaches about giving 10%, in the Old Testament, the New Testament actually teaches about just giving lavishly, giving radically.

It never gives a percentage at all, and I began to think, so why should I only give 10%? If I'm intentionally engaged in the work of the kingdom, why wouldn't I want to give more? And I became very intentional, Katharine and I, about giving to Rez, about giving to those who are doing the work of global work, about giving to the poor, and it became extremely exciting to be intentional, very intentional about our giving. And I lived there for several years, Katharine, I lived there for several years, being very intentional, giving firstfruits. And then a generosity initiative that we did a few years ago called Reach came around, and we were excited about giving because we already loved giving, I was already intentional in my giving.

But then I realized that there was another step that I could take. I realized actually that I could give, not just with great intent, but that there might be joy in giving in a way that costs us, and giving in a way that actually changed our lives. Not only rearranged our budget, but actually changed our budget.

Giving in a way that might change our future and how we thought about our future. Giving in a way like this widow, who is a beautiful picture of sacrifice, who Jesus said gives everything that she has. There is a place for financial planning, and the Bible does not speak against planning.

And there's a good place for financial counsel. But I highly doubt if she had gone to a financial advisor in our day and age, who came from a secular perspective, that he or she would have told her to do what she did. I highly doubt it.

I don't know of many who would have counseled or advised her to do what she did from a financial planning perspective. And we just have to face that. I realize it can make you feel uncomfortable for me to say that.

It makes me feel uncomfortable to hear myself saying it. But I think it's a biblical picture that we're given. What she did was so kingdom responsive.

She obviously had been given, through the reading of the Scriptures, the hearing of the Scriptures, a vision of who God was. She obviously had been given such an abundance of who God is, that something had happened in her. And now she was so kingdom responsive, she was willing to be worldly irresponsible.

Brothers and sisters, we've got to face into the fact that we all as Americans can carry such profound deception around the security of money, that we look at a widow like this and we want to encase her in a story that's cute and sentimental and ancient and archaic. And we don't want her to leap off the pages and walk down our aisle and look us in the face and say, I gave everything that I had out of sheer joy, because Jesus gave everything that he had. And it's exactly what we have here.

For us, so many of us live with, we think about money like a big old pie. And I choose pie because I absolutely love in an obsessive way, the reality of pie. One slice is never enough.

And when I look at it, I will be looking at that circumference of pie coming up on Thanksgiving. We will have many pies at the ruck house, many pies. But they will all be circumferenced.

There will only be eight slices in each of those pies. And I'll be strategizing how I can have one piece of pie, but then how I can have maybe two hours later when no one's looking, another piece of pie. And then because all the kids will be in bed, it'll be late at night and Thanksgiving will be over and we're relaxing, maybe a third piece of pie, if enough slices left in that pie.

But it's only so many slices in that pie. And that's how so many of us think about money. There's only so much money, the circumference.

It's like a pie. We got to be so careful how we slice that pie and how we eat that pie. We got to manage how we think about that pie.

And I might have one piece here and then one piece in two hours. We're always managing how we think about money because it's so important and it's so secure. And it's such a relief to have it that we have to manage it so carefully.

But the fact of the matter is money is not secure. Do we need to look at the last twenty years of history in America? Or how about the last hundred years of history in America? How secure is money really? Your security is far greater in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. That happened.

That historically and factually happened. And that has changed everything. The resurrection of Jesus, the cross of Jesus is far more secure than money ever will be.

It's a deceit that money will secure you. It's a deceit that money will ever be enough. And for us as Americans, and I have to constantly admit, I am all too quick to believe that deceit.

It has a power over me. And then I'm faced with that widow looking me in the face from the Bible. And Jesus saying she gave everything that she had.

So we sacrificed for the last Generosity Initiative, Catherine and I. At least we thought we were sacrificing. It felt like sacrifice. We looked at the things that we were not going to be able to do, the things that we were not going to be able to set aside, the future that was not as secure as it had felt before we sacrificed.

We looked at our financial world, everything in our financial world, our retirement accounts, our planning for the future, what we needed right now. And we said there is no no-fly zone for God. This all is yours.

All of it is yours. How do you want us to sacrifice? And it felt like a sacrifice when we gave our commitment card. And it felt like a sacrifice often when we couldn't do what we'd hoped to do.

But God confounded even our sacrifice. Even we thought that we were giving so much. He confounded us by giving us more.

Literally of His presence, of His joy, of a sense of being deeply connected with Him, but also financially. In the two years in which we made a commitment to reach, and we're making a two-year commitment to move by Jesus, three different instances God radically gave money to us. Now He gave us His presence, far more important.

But just in case we weren't getting the message, He spoke to us very concretely. And in three different instances, miraculous instances, money was given to us. Thousands of dollars at different times.

Literally one time we had a computer breakdown, a car breakdown. We did not have the finances to cover it. We came to church on a Sunday.

We didn't know how it was going to happen. After the service, one of our staff came up to me and said, you're not going to believe this, but a woman who I've never seen before came up to me. She pulled out a wad of cash from her purse.

She said, would you please give this to your senior pastor? It's \$2,000. Exactly what was needed, of course, to repair the computer and the car. Now waiting for that moment was a sacrifice.

But all God was doing concretely was saying, don't you see? I can give you so much more than you ever sacrificed, even when you think you sacrificed. I will joyfully confound that with a satisfaction in me. There's a fifth place we can get to, and that is of a lifetime giving mentality, which is also what this widow so beautifully depicts for us.

Biblically, it's a lifetime giving mentality. It's giving in such a way that our lifetime speaks of generosity for eternity. This nameless widow will be a picture of a lifetime giver.

She has had a ministry that has been multiplied upon, multiplied upon, multiplied. And in our own small way, as we choose to live lives of worldly, irresponsible, kingdom responsive generosity, we too can minister a lifetime of generosity. How does this happen? Well, the lifetime giver stops asking the question, how much do I give? And they begin to ask the question, how much do I keep? They look at long term decisions about when they buy an automobile, or when they choose to make a mortgage on a house, or to purchase this larger thing.

They actually look at the future about how they'll be able to give into the future, and that affects their immediate buying decisions. A lifetime giver is looking at a lifetime of generosity, and the joy of giving over a lifetime, and then from their lifetime, I'm giving the faith for generosity to others. I'm not there yet.

I'm just not there yet. I live in sacrificial, then I drop down again. Then I live in sacrificial, then I drop down again.

There's opportunity for moved by Jesus, another opportunity for Catholic, and I go, OK, let's live in sacrificial. But I don't even want to stay there, because of the power of money in my life. But my goal, where I'd like to be, I'd like to push through that and be in that lifetime giving place.

I'd love to have the freedom to ask the question, how much do we keep? I don't know where you are in those five steps. Identify just honestly where you are, and identify what it would take to take one step from

initial to consistent, from consistent to intentional, from intentional to sacrificial, from sacrificial to lifetime. Widows are heroes in the Bible.

This widow who gave everything she had was a lot like Jesus, who was rich, and yet through grace to us became poor, that we might become rich in Him. In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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