

*2 Kings 4:1-7 (NIV)*

The wife of a man from the company of the prophets cried out to Elisha, “Your servant my husband is dead, and you know that he revered the LORD. But now his creditor is coming to take my two boys as his slaves.”

<sup>2</sup> Elisha replied to her, “How can I help you? Tell me, what do you have in your house?”

“Your servant has nothing there at all,” she said, “except a small jar of olive oil.”

<sup>3</sup> Elisha said, “Go around and ask all your neighbors for empty jars. Don’t ask for just a few. <sup>4</sup> Then go inside and shut the door behind you and your sons. Pour oil into all the jars, and as each is filled, put it to one side.”

<sup>5</sup> She left him and shut the door behind her and her sons. They brought the jars to her and she kept pouring. <sup>6</sup> When all the jars were full, she said to her son, “Bring me another one.”

But he replied, “There is not a jar left.” Then the oil stopped flowing.

<sup>7</sup> She went and told the man of God, and he said, “Go, sell the oil and pay your debts. You and your sons can live on what is left.”

*Mark 12:28-34, 38-44 (NIV)*

<sup>28</sup> One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”

<sup>29</sup> “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. <sup>30</sup> Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.”

<sup>32</sup> “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. <sup>33</sup> To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

<sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

<sup>38</sup> As he taught, Jesus said, “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup> and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. <sup>40</sup> They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely.”

<sup>41</sup> Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. <sup>42</sup> But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents.

<sup>43</sup> Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup> They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

*The question is simple: Are you really and truly making a living?*

If you asked most people why they work, they’d probably tell you that they are trying to make a living, to provide for themselves and their families. If you asked the same question of someone who is out of work, they’d tell you something similar. That’s how it is; most of us work simply to make a living. And if we came into enough money, we’d stop working. Or at least we’d work at something we truly enjoy and find fulfilling.

*Making a living*

But for most of us, for most of our lives, we work simply to get by, to stay a few steps ahead. If we’re smart and disciplined, we put some money aside for the storms of life and for our retirement. We avoid taking on needless debt, recognizing that we are inclined to turn “wants” into “needs” at every turn. We manage our money rather than letting it manage us.

But most of us are neither that smart nor that disciplined. We live in a consumer culture that dangles all sorts of shiny baubles in front of us – and we cave. We push ourselves, too often using credit to satisfy those wants – even as we convince ourselves that we simply “had to” buy it. We use new stuff to paper over feelings of loss and emptiness. We push ourselves financially until we wake up one day and discover that our financial obligations are crushing the life out of us. We thought we were just making a living when, in truth, we were making a dying.

It doesn't have to be this way. God certainly doesn't want it for us. But what is the way forward? A three-step plan? Another round of exhortations and admonitions? A fresh set of new resolutions we make to ourselves but never keep? No . . . this must begin in recognizing that our transformation in Christ necessarily entails every tiny part of ourselves and our lives. This extends even to seemingly “secular” areas such as our work, our money, and our debt.

The Bible can help us here. It is dominated by stories – of real people striving to live out their life with God. We can enter into their stories, identify with their struggles, in ways that we would never respond to a list of “oughts.” So . . . we'll take a look at the stories, such as we have them, of two widows, the most marginalized group in the ancient near east. Widows who were unable to marry again lived in constant fear that they would be left on their own, with nothing to live on.

#### *Debt as slavery – literally*

Our first widow lived nearly 800 years before Jesus. Her husband had been one on the numerous prophets of Israel (yes, there were bunches of them at the time). And now, he had died. Evidently, the man had taken on a good bit of debt, for the creditor is about to take the woman's two sons to be his slaves – all in payment for the dead husband's debt. Can you even imagine? It is one thing to lose your home to creditors – but your kids. Little wonder that the Old Testament warns time and again about the dangers of taking on any debt at all.

The widow has come to Elisha pleading for help. She is understandably terrified; she can feel the weight of the debt and its consequences crushing the life out of her. Elisha's response may surprise you. We might think he'd tell her to pray and hold out her hand as he placed some money in them. But, no, he put her to work. First, he asked her what she had to work with – which turned out to be one jar of olive oil . . . not much. He then told her to get to work. She is to go to neighbors and assemble a collection of empty jars. We're not told how she accomplished that – but she did her part.

Then Elisha told her to begin pouring oil from her pot into one of the others. She did so and he told her to keep pouring from her single jar into the second pot . . . and into the third and then the fourth and then the fifth, until the oil from her single jar had filled all the other pots. A miracle? Sure – but she had to work for it.

Then, Elisha told her to get back to work. She was to go sell all the oil from the pots and use that money to pay off her debts, lifting the prospect of slavery from her beloved sons.

This simple story says enough to fill several sermons about the precariousness of life, the dangers of debt, the importance of work, and so on. (But I prefer the story to the sermons.)

#### *No, all our “wants” are not “needs”*

The setting of the story is important to grasping the significance of the second widow. Jesus has entered Jerusalem to waving palms. He has wept over the city, knowing where things are headed. He has been to the temple, where, invoking the words and actions of Jeremiah, he has pronounced warnings against the temple, the nation, and all those who refuse to embrace Jesus and the path that he has laid before them. In response to all this, groups have come forward to trap Jesus in a mistake. The Pharisees

have tried to trap him over the question of taxes. The Sadducees have tried to trap him over the question of the resurrection. Others have tried to use David's words against him. Now, a crowd is gathered around Jesus and his disciples as they sit in the temple courtyard. The stakes could not be higher.

### Scribes?

There are various groups that swirl through and around the Gospel accounts, such as the Pharisees, Sadducees, priests, scribes, and more. Who were these groups? Specifically, in today's passage who were the scribes Jesus refers to?

In a general sense, a scribe was simply someone who could read and write. That doesn't seem like much in our culture, but in the ancient world such people were pretty rare. In Jesus' day, perhaps less than 10-15% of people were literate and many of those were barely so. Thus, we shouldn't be surprised that scribal classes developed in ancient cultures. Scribes came to be those who were able to gain the skills and learning needed to build a career around their literacy.

Scribes were the educated intelligentsia and were widely respected for their learning. This would be especially true among the Jews who cherished the Word of God contained in the written Hebrew scrolls. For example, Ezra the scribe was sent by the Persian king to guide and instruct the inhabitants of Judea after the Babylonian exile. Ezra was an official in the Persian Empire and educated in the laws and customs of Israel (see Ezra 7).

The Jewish scribes in Jesus' day were leaders in the community and were often wealthy. They were easily susceptible to the twin temptations of pride and greed. Of course, who among us is immune to these temptations? There are many warnings to the early Christian leaders as well (Acts 4:32-5:11; 20:33-35; Romans 16:18; Philippians 3:19; 1 Peter 5:2-3; 2 Peter 2:3).

Perhaps a little melodramatically, Jesus raises his voice so that everyone can hear him. He is ostensibly teaching his disciples but he wants to make sure that no one misses a thing! Jesus draws the crowd's attention to scribes walking through the temple. How they love to walk around so that all can see their importance. How they love the best seats, the places of honor, the deferential greetings – all as they consume the property of widows. One could hardly paint a more compelling picture of the worst in human pride and greed. And all this is directed at the scribes, those the crowd sees as the learned spiritual leaders of Israel! And it is in stark contrast to one scribe, who seemed to hear Jesus clearly and understand much about the nature of God's kingdom.

Then Jesus draws the crowd's attention to the chests in which visitors could place their temple offerings.<sup>1</sup> The rich were stopping by to drop in their gifts. But Jesus points the listening crowd to a woman, a poor widow,<sup>2</sup> who drops two "lepta" in one of the chests. A lepta was the smallest value coin, equivalent to about 1/128<sup>th</sup> of the average daily wage.

In a pointed comment, Jesus says that the rich gave out of their "left-overs" (from J. Nolland's translation), whereas the widow dropped in all that she had. In contrast to the gifts of the rich, the widow has made hers out of a passionate and wholehearted commitment. For her, it was a matter of love pointedly expressed in how she used the little money she had. This widow, a woman who has so little, finds in her heart only a single want, just one desire – to express her devotion to God. That's all we really know about her – but that is enough.

In the temple courtyard, Jesus draws a stark contrast. On the one hand, the scribes have allowed their many talents and their successes to grab hold of their hearts, turning them inward. They "need" so much. They live for the trappings and privileges of the elite, perhaps blind to the harm they do. Indeed, at best, they have grown to be morally and spiritually blind; at worst, they have grown to

<sup>1</sup>Josephus, writer of a late first-century Jewish history, reports that there were thirteen collection chests

<sup>2</sup>Widows were at the bottom of the social ladder and epitomized the needy. Under the Law of Moses, the Jews were obligated to look after the needs of widows and orphans.

be calculating exploiters of the weak – all to satisfy their “needs.”

We know nothing of the widow’s life, but we do know that she has grown to have a heart that is passionately devoted to God’s cause. She is destitute in a way that you and I can’t imagine. There is no Social Security or Medicare. All she has is a couple of nearly worthless coins, yet she offers them to God. There is no reason to think she is a fool. She must know that her two lepta will make zero difference to the temple. But she knows that she gives not based upon what the temple needs, nor even what God needs, but out of her own need, her own faithful heart’s need to give generously. It is her heart that matters, not her household budget. For her, it is a matter of love and Jesus knows that out of love, she has given far more than all the rich people lined up at the chests.

Is money really the point here? Of course not. Jesus is contrasting the hearts of the scribes and the rich with the heart of this lone widow. But Jesus also knows, as the crowd knows, that how people handle their money is a concrete expression of what they most value, where their hearts are. And there could be no more concrete demonstration of a committed, outwardly-focused heart than the widow dropping in the two nearly worthless coins. It is the concrete expression of her love for God, a love that encompasses her heart, mind, soul, and strength.

The scribes grew to be people focused inwardly, focused upon themselves. The rich gave only token gifts, ensuring that their own social status would stay intact.<sup>3</sup> But the widow – despite her hardships -- gave no concern to herself, but gave all she had for the benefit of others. This ought to remind us that none of us have been saved solely for our own benefit. We have been restored to a right relationship with God so that we may extend God’s mercy and caring to others. We are to love God and love neighbor. Do we? How would someone know?

As believers striving to be passionate servants of Jesus Christ, we always have to remind ourselves of where our lives should be centered, particularly in these anxiety-ridden times. That center is to be our Lord Jesus Christ, who is the incarnation of God’s love. Nothing matters more.

## Questions for Discussion and Reflection

The story of the widow and her coins is often referred to as the story of the “Widow’s Mite.” It is very popular during annual stewardship campaigns. A person could be excused for thinking that perhaps Jesus told this brief story for the express purpose of helping pastors talk about money!

I’ve read countless articles and letters from pastors expressing how much they dread this time of year. Indeed, if you prowl the web for awhile you can find entire compilations of their expressed anxieties. One pastor wrote, “Yet it never fails: the Sundays I preach on money, someone tells me, “I’ve been working on a friend for a long time, and he finally came this morning when you preached on money. I’m not sure I’m going to be able to get him back, and it’s your fault.” For my own part I used to ask questions like, “Do you really need more money?” or “How can you possibly expect me to do more?” But this was before I came to realize that I had this all backwards. The question is not how much of our hard-earned money Patti and I will give, it is how much we will keep. The widow provided the answer to that question.

You might discuss this change in orientation. What is involved in making the change? What are its implications? Where we would begin? Where do you think such a change would lead you?

The story of the widow is not about money, it is a story of the heart. The hearts of the scribes and the rich had turned inward. But the widow’s heart was consumed with her love of God and neighbor. Spend some time discussing this story. Feel free to use your imagination! What sort of person do you imagine the widow to have been?

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<sup>3</sup>In the Mediterranean cultures, the principal use for wealth was to acquire and maintain social status.

## Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

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| <p><b>Monday, Exodus 35:4-29</b> The Israelite men and women gather to contribute materials needed to construct the tabernacle, the moveable dwelling place of God.</p>   | <p><b>Tuesday, Hebrews 12:1-13</b> The value of difficult times (trials) in growing to a mature righteousness.</p> |
| <p><b>Wednesday, 2 Corinthians 8:1-5</b> Paul commends poor congregations who have given generously to an offering that Paul has collected for the poor in Jerusalem.</p> | <p><b>Thursday, Luke 12:13-21</b> Jesus tells a parable about a man who has grown to be a rich fool.</p>           |
| <p><b>Friday, Acts 4:36-37; Acts 11:27-30</b><br/>Examples of generosity among the early Christians.</p>  | <p><b>Weekly Prayer Concerns</b></p>   |

## Scott Engle's Weekday Bible Classes

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible. On occasion Scott has to cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) to make sure the class is meeting.

### **Monday Evening Class – now studying Romans**

Meets every Monday from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

### **Tuesday Lunchtime Class – now studying 1 Peter**

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall on Tuesdays.

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## Scott's 11:00 Sunday Class in Festival Hall

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

This week – beginning a new series:

***Everyday Theology: from the checkout line to the funeral home***

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**Scott's New Book, *Restart: Getting Past Christian-ish*, is available in the St. Andrew bookstore.**

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**Scott Engle and Robert Hasley will be leading a trip to Israel in late October 2014. This will be a land-only trip that will include all the major sites in Israel.**

*For more information go to [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org) or email Scott at [sengle@standrewumc.org](mailto:sengle@standrewumc.org)*

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Scott's Weekly Bible Studies are available at [www.standrewumc.org](http://www.standrewumc.org). Just go to "worship" and then "sermons." You'll find the study with each week's recorded sermon. There is also a complete archive of the studies at [www.scottengle.org](http://www.scottengle.org)

## Sermon Notes

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