

“Changing Priorities”

Sermon: Nov. 11-12, 2006

Mark 12:38-44

I have a concern that there are people who do give all their money to a church or a TV evangelist. I don't think that this is what the text is talking about. It speaks to us of priorities.

This Gospel reading and the Old Testament lesson from 1 Kings 17 are about priorities. The First Commandment also talks about the priority of God in our lives. What is the First Commandment?

You shall have no other gods.

*What does this mean for us?*

We are to fear, love and trust God above anything else.

The scribes in this story have their priorities confused. They are the educated ones in the community who can read and write. They are given charge of the property of widows after their husbands die. Widows have no property or status in that society. The scribes, of course, take a cut of the property for themselves. They get wealthy by devouring widow's houses, and yet they also try to appear devout and reverent by praying long prayers.

What does this have to do with the First Commandment? The scribes are worshiping another god. They have let their desire for wealth and prestige change their priority of having no other gods. They fear, love and trust themselves and their desire for more, and they have turned their backs on God.

They claim to follow the law, to love God and neighbor, but when it comes to caring for the widows and oppressed people, the scribes are looking out for themselves first. This results in Jesus saying that they have the greater condemnation.

What about us? Does this story speak to you and me? This story is incriminating to me. I get concerned that we don't have enough money. I can lead prayers for people who are poor and oppressed in the world, but after church I can forget about them and get more concerned about my own needs. Do we pray for those who are in need in the world as long as our own bank accounts, stocks and bonds are doing well?

Are we, along with the scribes, those who deserve the greater condemnation? Jesus says, “Those who think themselves first will be last, and the last will be first.”

Jesus says that the widow gave from her poverty. The others in the Temple gave from their abundance, meaning their leftovers. Their giving came from what they did not need. When Ted Turner gave \$1,000,000,000 to the United Nations, he said that it didn't cost him anything. The money was from what a few investments earned over the recent years. In contrast, in the film, “Schindler's List,” at the end of the film, Oscar Schindler cries that he could have saved more than the 1000 people from the holocaust if he would only

have been able to sell more of his possessions to get more money. His efforts cost him his own possessions.

The widow gives from her poverty. She doesn't have anything else to draw upon. . She risks it all on God's promise. The widow of Zarahath has only a little flour and oil to make a bit of bread for her son and for her, and then they will die. But she bakes a bread for Elijah first, and there is always enough flour. Both the widows give all they have to live on. Their priorities are set on God. I would love to have known the rest of the story for each one of these women.

Another church was giving Thanksgiving baskets, but they had the families come to the church to pick them up. There were 10 families who were excited over the food they were taking home. It would be the best meal that they had in months. As the families were picking up their boxes of food, another family came. Father, mother, and three children arrived in an old, dilapidated car and came inside the gym. This family was not on the list. They were in need and they heard that food was being distributed from the church.

The leader of the food distribution project tried to explain to the family that there just was not enough food and they would try to work something out. But then an amazing thing happened. With no prompting a woman put down the box of food she was carrying and quickly found an empty box. She started removing items from her box to share, and soon the other families did the same. These poor families put together an 11<sup>th</sup> box for this new family. They shared from their poverty.

God is the widow who gives His own Son to die on the cross. He becomes poor so that we might be rich in God's mercy. He gives all that He has so that we can live on and on and on in an eternal relationship with God.

We are not condemned because God's Son, Jesus Christ, takes our condemnation on Himself. He is condemned and returns to us forgiveness of our sin, healing and God's sustaining bread of life. He turns our lives around in order that our priorities can be clear. We can fear, love and trust God above anything else, because God has made us and our salvation His priority. He says in Exodus 20, "I am the Lord your God, who brought you out of slavery to yourselves and to your own needs. I provide for you, protect you, and give you life. Now you shall have no other gods."

Through faith we live and don't die. Our priorities are changed and we follow in God's way. We receive the gift of the widow's mite. We are empowered to give not only our possessions, but we give ourselves away for those who are least in the world, but first in the Kingdom of God. Not only do we give turkey dinners at thanksgiving, or Christmas Child boxes for poor children, or Mite Boxes for the Shoes for Hope project, but we stand with Jesus for those who are oppressed and powerless in our world. We stand with those who have little or nothing so that we may all know Christ's love. Our priorities are changed! Amen.

