

Rev Freddy De Alwis – Sunday 5 November 2023
Does God require your last penny? - Religious Exploitation

Mark 12:38-44

- In this passage and Matthew 23 Jesus makes serious charges against religious leaders. They are very serious charges, because they themselves value them very highly.
- Traditionally the church has used this story of the poor widow as the ideal symbol for Christian generosity of giving and wholehearted discipleship, or total commitment.

Traditional sermons on this text often tend to overlook the rich people mentioned in the story who only gave out of their excess. **Why?** Because we should not offend those whose larger financial gifts are needed to raise the funds to support the church budget. (Maybe that's not such a bad approach...) if you looked at this story in a traditional way;

1. What makes the widow's gift valuable and important is not its size but the heart and the sacrifice behind it.
2. In the eyes of the people, the widow's offering is virtually worthless but in the sight of God it is most precious.
3. After throwing her last two coins in the box, she wins the Lord's favour and earns his commendation, is the fact that she kept nothing back for herself. Her small gift is her all. In a way she is making an offering of her total life to God.

When I hear this story interpreted this way it makes me cringe. I even find it theologically and socially offensive.

Why? Because the way this story was interpreted, has complete disregard of its historical context and totally ignores the social, political, and religious dimensions of the text, as well as its place in the gospels. Originally Luke has borrowed this story from Mark 12:38-44.

So, let's look at its context. According to Mark, Jesus, watching the poor widow as she throws her last two coins into the Temple treasury, comes at the very end of Jesus' public ministry during the last week of his life.

Jesus had overturned the tables of the money changers a few days earlier. The gospel writer has already made it clear that Jesus was angry with the corrupt **Temple religious system**.

1. In Mk 12:38 Jesus said “watch out for the teachers of the Law. They take advantage of widows and rob them of their homes.”

How does any of this relate to us today? It immediately reminded me of certain TV evangelists and faith healers who take advantage of the poor, elderly and sick, asking them to send money in return for answers to their prayers. Friends, this is among the worst forms of religious abuse.

It is with all this in mind that Mark and Luke tell the story of the widow's offering, therefore continuing the theme of the exploitation of widowed women.

2. Yet unlike traditional interpretations, modern progressive biblical scholars are asking new and different questions of this biblical passage.

For instance, **the text does not praise the widow's actions**, or merely comment on the size of her offering and sacrifice. Rather,

- **A concrete example of how innocent people are victimized by the Temple authorities.** That is robbing her last pennies she had.

In fact, there is much evidence to suggest that Jesus wasn't teaching about 'giving until it hurts 'at all, but

- Jesus is attacking the religious leaders and the Temple system that compelled this woman to offer her last tiny coins. The question is, does God demand such total financial sacrifices from the poor of the world.

Let me stress this last point. Do you believe that our loving God would require you to give up 'all that you have and own, and all that you have to live on?' I don't think so, because our God is a God of **love, grace and compassion.**

So perhaps this story, in its context, asks us to see these scribes not just as bad examples, but also as part of a bad system - a religious system, no less, that abuses and exploits the poor for its own gain.

A religious system that is more concerned with its own institutional maintenance than it is on its mission to minister to those in need. The woman, who Jesus observes, far from being a sentimental example of faithful stewardship, is a victim of a bad system.

Perhaps today's gospel lesson, we can see as a warning to the church and the other religious institutions and the NGOs to see if our systems have been infiltrated by any injustices and exploitation of others.

Jesus condemned the corrupt religious system of his time.

I wonder what Jesus would have to say about the Christian religious system of today.

Are we or the church guilty of injustice, oppression, or exploitation?

I'm here this morning not to tell you, or judge, or ask you to give until it hurts, but rather to thank you for the **contributions of your time, abilities** and yes, your **financial resources** that are used (in a faithful manner and with integrity) to help support the work and ministry of these two congregations and the denomination as well. May God continue to Bless you and be with you in times of your need. Amen.