

The Widow's Mite

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As he was making his way out of the temple area one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, teacher, what stones and what buildings!' (Mark 13:1)



The Widow's Mite (*Le denier de la veuve*) | James Tissot | Brooklyn Museum | PD-US

The selection for the Gospel readings for the latter part of Ordinary Time (Year B) do not necessarily help readers place the events in a context. From the 24th Sunday up through the 30th Sunday we have read from the core of Mark's gospel (chapters 8-10). Within those readings we have watched a pattern repeat itself: (a) Jesus predicts his passion, death, and resurrection; (b) the disciples either protest the prediction or seemingly grasp for prestige, places of glory, or authority; and (c) Jesus privately teaches the disciples how the Kingdom will differ than their expectations – one must serve, be last, be as a child. All of this is bookended by two miracle-stories in which the blind are healed. We turn the page from Mark 10 to the next Sunday (31st Sunday; Mark 12:28-34) and read about the 'Greatest Commandment.' It seems like a natural fit into the pattern of teaching and readying the disciples for their mission after the Resurrection.

What happened to all of Mark 11 and a good chunk of Mark 12? They are not used in the Sunday readings and what we miss is that in Mark 11, Jesus enters Jerusalem on the day we refer to as ‘Palm Sunday.’ The end is very near and one can understand a sense of urgency in what Jesus teaches. The Gospel reading for the 32nd Sunday is the final time that Mark presents Jesus in the Temple.

Here is Lane’s [31] outline of text that we do not cover in the sequence of Ordinary Time readings (*today’s readings appearing in bold*):

The Entry into Jerusalem, 11:1–11

The Unproductive Fig Tree, 11:12–14

The Expulsion of the Merchants from the Temple Precincts, 11:15–19

The Withered Fig Tree, Faith and Prayer, 11:20–25

The Authority of Jesus, 11:27–33

The Parable of the Defiant Tenants, 12:1–12

The Question Concerning Tribute, 12:13–17

The Question Concerning the Resurrection, 12:18–27

The Question Concerning the Great Commandment, 12:28–34

The Question Concerning David’s Son, 12:35–37

The Warning Concerning the Scribes, 12:38–40

The Widow Who Gave Everything, 12:41–44

The Olivet Discourse, 13:1–37 (*also referred to as the ‘Little Apocalypse’*)

A quick glance at the descriptions shows that many of the passages are controversies in which Jesus confronts the Jerusalem authorities as his life marches inexorably to the Cross.

When our Gospel for the 32nd Sunday stands adrift from the larger context, it is easy to reduce the sense of the reading to ‘bad scribes, who devour the life of the good widows – don’t be like them.’ But the reading of the 31st Sunday (the Greatest Commandment) should remind us that there was wisdom and goodness among the scribes

‘The scribe said to him, ‘Well said, teacher. You are right in saying, ‘He is One and there is no other than he.’ And ‘to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself’ is worth more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ And when Jesus saw that [he] answered with understanding, he said to him, ‘You are not far from the kingdom of God.’ (Mark 12:32-34)

The gospel description of the scribes who would devour the widow’s life should not be treated as being stereotypical of all scribes in the Jewish community. It describes the rich and powerful at their worst. It describes human behavior in all circles of life [Perkins, 682]

The Meaning of Widowed

Lurking in the background of our reading is the first-century Jewish system of levirate marriages (Gen 38 and Deut 25:5-10). In short, if a man dies without leaving a son, his widow is forbidden to marry outside his family. One of her deceased husband’s brothers must assume the duty of the *levir*, taking her as his wife. The first male of this second union is considered the son of the deceased brother.

It is clear from rabbinic discussions in the *Mishna* and other Jewish texts that rabbis valued the system of levirate marriage. Some scholars believe it was a valued institution because it protected the widow and helped compensate the family for the loss it sustained. Others think the rabbis supported the levirate marriage as a socially constructive institution. Society allowed a young woman only two proper roles. She is either an unmarried virgin in her father’s house or a faithful, child-producing wife in her husband’s or her husband’s family’s home. Through the levirate, society avoids having a young

childless widow. The levirate not only continues the line of the deceased, it reaffirms the young widow's place in the home of her husband's family.

In other words, there is one scholarly view that this woman is truly a widow without a husband or children – and outside the levirate tradition – and outside the norms of societal support. She is described as a “*poor widow*.” She was poor because she was a widow. It may well be that the sociology and economics in first-century Palestine did not have room for a rich widow (although the heroine of the *Book of Judith* is a rich widow). Women were highly (if not totally) dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. To be widowed meant not only losing someone you may have loved, but more tragically, it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were forced to live off of the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide food, shelter, and income.

Beware the Scribes

³⁸ *In the course of his teaching he said, ‘Beware of the scribes, who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹ seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁰ They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.’*

There is always a pause when I read this passage. Being a Franciscan Friar, I go around in long robes, inevitably accept greetings as I move out and about, whether I want it or not, I end up in the places of honor at banquets, and in the church, and I occupy the ‘big chair’ reserved for the presider at Mass. During Mass, some parishioners might accuse me of reciting lengthy prayers (hopefully not as a pretext). The only part for which I am reasonably safe is devouring the houses of widows. Perhaps it is a cautionary pause.

The description of the scribes lists what could be seen as normal privileges of the aristocracy in a traditional society: wearing long, ornate robes; being greeted by others when they go out in public; having the best seats in public gatherings; and indulging in elaborate banquets (vv. 38–39; cf. the rich man in Luke 16:19; Jas 2:2–3). But who are these scribes? Stoffregen provides a very nice summary which I copy here.

Generally, they were people who could read and write. The Greek word translated ‘scribe’ is *grammateus* which comes from *grapho* = ‘to write.’ The same is true of the word ‘scribe,’ which comes from the Latin *scribo* = ‘to write.’

Scribes were common in many countries of the Near East. They were more than copyists. The title became synonymous with being educated, e.g., in 1 Cor 1:20 ‘scribe’ is used in parallel to ‘wise’ and ‘debater’. Some scribes were legal and biblical experts. Note that in Luke 5:17 ‘Pharisees and *teachers of the law*’ (*nomodidaskalos*) is used, but later, in the same setting, it is ‘*scribes* and the Pharisees’ (5:21), thus the scribes in that story were teachers of the law.

Perhaps more than defining ‘scribes’ as they were understood in the first century, we need to understand what Mark and his (Gentile) readers might have understood by ‘scribes.’ The following is what Mark tells us about ‘scribes’ in other verses.

- They were teachers (without the authority of Jesus) 1:22
- They frequently question Jesus (their method of teaching and learning):
 - about forgiving sins (2:6)
 - about eating with sinners and tax collectors (2:16)
 - about eating with defiled hands (7:1, 5)
 - about the source of his authority (11:27)

- about the first commandment (12:28, 32)
- They accuse Jesus of being possessed by Beelzebul (3:22)
- They will be part of those who reject Jesus (8:31; 10:33)
- They (as Bible experts) say that Elijah must come first (9:11)
- They argue with Jesus' disciples (9:14)
- They seek to arrest and kill him (11:18; 14:1, 43, 53; 15:1)
- They (as Bible experts) say that the Messiah is the son of David (12:35)
- They mock Jesus on the cross (15:31)

The ‘scribes’ are not always pictured negatively in Mark. In 12:34 Jesus declares that this particular scribe ‘is ‘not far from the kingdom of God.’ Jesus agrees with their interpretation that Elijah must come first (9:11-13). Perhaps like the arguing scribes in 9:14, Jesus is critical of his disciples' inability to cast out a demon. Note that ‘scribes’ have been mentioned three previous times in chapter 12: vv. 28, 32, 35.

“...who like to go around in long robes and accept greetings in the marketplaces, ³⁹seats of honor in synagogues, and places of honor at banquets.” What is wrong with these desires and/or actions? As I mentioned above, it rather describes a part of my life – at least in outward appearance. It is interesting that Jesus does not address these comments to the scribes, but to the crowd (v. 37b).

Perhaps, taken in the context with the previous week’s gospel about the greatest commandments, Mark may be pointing out that they are not loving others as themselves, they are just concerned about themselves, and that they are lording it over others, rather than, even as David did, putting themselves under the Lord and above everyone else. It is not the actions *per se* that Jesus criticizes, but their desire [*thelo*] to do such things (v. 38 “like”). It is really their inward desires and wants that are the issue.

Injustice via God’s Name. ⁴⁰ *They devour the houses of widows and, as a pretext, recite lengthy prayers. They will receive a very severe condemnation.*

The charge that the scribes “devour widows’ houses” (v. 40) also seems more characteristic of prophetic charges against the rich than of a particular role played by scribes. Some interpreters have hypothesized that scribes might have acted as guardians for widows who lacked male relatives. Others suggest that they may have accepted hospitality from widows under the pretense of piety in order to support their tastes for wealth and power. When he sent them out to preach, Jesus prohibited his own disciples from accumulating wealth or moving from the first household to take them in (6:8–10). Jesus also constantly warned his own disciples against seeking honor rather than serving others (9:33–35; 10:42–45). Mark’s Roman/Gentile readers were not likely to have had dealings with scribes, but they could recognize the same characteristics among others. The wandering Cynic philosophers who frequented Greco-Roman cities often castigated other philosophers whose wealthy patrons provided luxurious clothes, sumptuous food, and social honor.

“It describes the rich and powerful at their worst, much as the sharp social commentary that one finds in newspaper columnists. Every debater knows that if one can use a strong image to make opponents look ridiculous, the audience will have a hard time believing anything the opponents say. Of course, such comments must point to a real evil or social problem in order to be effective. Jesus insisted that his disciples not adopt social standards of power and influence. This depiction of the scribes applies to any religious authorities who treat their position as access to the influence and power of the wealthy, making those who should be defenders of the widow, the orphaned, and the poor the agents of their

destruction. The condemnation for those who engage in such practices will be even worse than that for others, since they use the name of God to mask what they are doing.” [Perkins, 682]

It is unclear exactly what is meant by “devouring the houses of widows.” Chad Myers (*Binding the Strong Man: A Political Reading of Mark's Story of Jesus*, 320-21) offers a couple of interpretations.

These are hard words, but they get harder. Scribal affluence is a product of their “devouring the estates of widows under the pretext of saying long prayers” (12:40). There are two possibilities for interpreting this bitter euphemism. Derrett [“Eating up the Houses of Widows': Jesus' Comment on Lawyers?” *NovTest*, (1972) 14, pp. 1ff.] argues that Mark must be alluding to the practice of scribal trusteeship of the estates of widows (who as women could not be entrusted to manage their deceased husbands' affairs!). Through their public reputation for piety and trustworthiness (hence the “pretext of long prayers”), scribes would earn the legal right to administer estates. As compensation they would usually get a percentage of the assets; the practice was notorious for embezzlement and abuse. In this case the issue here would be similar to the *korban* practice to which Jesus objected in Mark 7:9-13. The vocation of Torah Judaism is to “protect orphans and widows,” yet in the name of piety these socially vulnerable classes are being exploited while the scribal class is further endowed.

Fledderman [“A Warning About the Scribes (Mark 12:37b-40).” *CBQ*, (1982) 44, pp. 52ff.] on the other hand believes that the explanation lies in Mark's narrative opposition between “prayer” and “robbery.” The site of scribal prayer is the temple, and the costs of this temple devour the resources of the poor. Jesus, who fiercely opposed such exploitation in the temple action and demanded a new site for prayer, points to the tragic story of the “widow's mite” by way of illustration. Because of its narrative analysis this interpretation is probably the stronger one. In either case, however, the essential point is the same: scribal piety has been debunked as a thin veil for economic opportunism and exploitation. Mark charges them with full responsibility for these abuses, and in perhaps the harshest words in the gospel, announces that they will receive far heavier judgment (cf. 9:42).

The Poor Widow and Jesus. ⁴¹ *He sat down opposite the treasury and observed how the crowd put money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums.* ⁴² *A poor widow also came and put in two small coins worth a few cents.* ⁴³ *Calling his disciples to himself, he said to them, ‘Amen, I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the other contributors to the treasury.* ⁴⁴ *For they have all contributed from their surplus wealth, but she, from her poverty, has contributed all she had, her whole livelihood.’*

We are conditioned to consider that Jesus is continuing his castigation of the scribes (religious leaders who use their position for their own gain) and their social counterparts, *many rich people*. By juxtaposition we then infer that the *poor widow* is praised for her giving of her whole livelihood and placing her full dependence upon God. We infer that, and perhaps rightly so, but there are many who see things differently.

David Lose questions our assumptions:

How do you hear Jesus' description of the poor widow's offering – is it praise or lament? To put it another way: Is Jesus holding up the widow and her offering as an example of great faith and profound stewardship, or is he expressing his remorse that she has given – perhaps feels compelled – to give away the little she has left?

I'll be honest, for most of my life, I've assumed it was the former. But recently I've been persuaded that it's the latter. Here's why:

- This passage is part of a larger set of passages that focus on Jesus' confrontation with the scribes and Pharisees and center on his critique of the Temple. Indeed, ever since Jesus entered Jerusalem triumphantly (in ch. 11), he has done little else except teach in the Temple and debate with the religious leadership there.
- The first verses of this week's passage condemn the scribes precisely for "devouring widow's houses" – shorthand for pretty much everything they own.
- In the passage immediately after this one, Jesus foretells the destruction of the Temple itself, seemingly the culmination of his attack on the religious establishment of Jerusalem, an attack that has prompted his opponents to seek first his arrest (12:12) and, eventually, death (14:1).
- Notably, there is actually no word of praise in Jesus' statement about the widow or any indication that Jesus is lifting her up as an example. All he does is describe what he is doing. Which makes how we imagine his tone of voice – praise or lament – so critical.

All of this leads me to conclude that Jesus isn't actually lifting her up as an example but rather decrying the circumstances that demand her to make such an offering, a sacrifice that will likely lead to destitution if not death. He is, in short, leveling a devastating critique against Temple practice and those who allow, let alone encourage, this woman to give "all she had to live on" (or, in a more literal translation of the Greek, her whole life!).

Other commentators go even farther. They note that Jesus is on "Tuesday" of Holy Week – meaning he will be crucified and die in four days. The *poor widow* possessed two coins (in other words, she had a choice to contribute other than both coins). Some wonder if the woman two, now destitute, will also soon pass from this life. At the beginning I noted the new verses beyond our periscope: *As he was making his way out of the temple area one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, teacher, what stones and what buildings!' (Mark 13:1)* Jesus has just watched a trusting woman give her all to an institution failing at its most basic divine charge: protection of the widow, the orphan, and the stranger. No institution steeped in such injustice will stand.

The image of an impoverished widow giving all that she has forms a remote parallel to the story of the poor widow and the prophet Elijah, who asks for her last bit of food (1 Kgs 17:8–16). In that case, the widow, her son, and the prophet are provided for during the famine. Jesus does not offer this widow any such reassurance. The contrast between her offering and all the others who are tossing in what they can spare exhibits the false values of a society that does not really offer sacrifice to God. Jesus has already told his disciples that persons must be willing to renounce their own desires, take up the cross, and become slaves of all in order to follow him (8:34; 9:35; 10:42–45). The widow's story can be read as an anticipation of Jesus' own sacrifice of his life

Notes

Mark 12:39 *seats of honor in the synagogues*: James 2:2-3 asks rhetorically: 'For if a person with gold rings and in fine clothes comes into your assembly, and if a poor person in dirty clothes also comes in, and if you take notice of the one wearing the fine clothes and say, 'Have a seat here, please,' while to the one who is poor you say, 'Stand there,' or, 'Sit at my feet,' have you not made distinctions among yourselves, and become judges with evil thoughts?'

Mark 12:39 *places of honor*: In Luke 11:43, Jesus says: 'Woe to you Pharisees! For you love to have the seat of honor in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces'. See also Luke 14:7-11.

Mark 12:41 *putting money into the treasury*: There were thirteen chests in the temple court, each one labeled with the purpose to which the funds would be put. The chests were shaped like an inverted trumpet – for protection against theft.

Mark 12:42 *small coins*: i.e. *lepta*.

Mark 12:42 *a few cents*: A laborer's daily wage was 64 pennies. The Greek word is *quadrans*, meaning a fourth part; hence the translation farthing in the King James Version.

The Widowed Prophet

By Debie Thomas.

“The Widow's Mite” is a classic Gospel story — a go-to for churches during Stewardship Season. Who hasn't heard the moving account of the widow who slips quietly into the Temple, drops her meager offering into the treasury, and slips away? Who hasn't squirmed when a well-meaning pastor saddles the story to its inevitable “so what?” question: “If a poor widow can give her sacrificial bit for the Lord's work, how can we — so comfortably wealthy by comparison — not give much, *much* more?”

I'll admit it; I've squirmed, but not because the question indicts my giving. I've squirmed because this woman's “mite” haunts me; her story is harder-edged than I'd like to admit. And yet something in me doesn't want her reduced to a moral, or exploited for the sake of capital campaigns and annual budgets. I wish I knew her name. I wish I knew for sure that her real-life fierceness exceeded the piety we've imposed on her. I hope — *I hope* — she died with dignity.

Died? Yes. *Died*. She died, probably mere days after she dropped those two coins into the Temple treasury. In case that's a surprise, consider again what Jesus said about her as she left the Temple that day: “She out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

As far as I can tell from reading the Gospels, Jesus wasn't given to exaggeration. If he says the woman gave everything she had, well, she gave everything she had. We know she was an impoverished widow in first century Palestine, a woman living on the margins of her society. She had no safety net. No husband to advocate for her, no pension to draw from, no social status to hide behind. She was vulnerable in every single way that mattered. Two pennies short of the end.

If I'm getting the timing right, Jesus died four days after the events in this story. I wonder if the widow did, too.

Here's what makes me squirm: what does it mean to applaud a destitute woman who gave her last two cents to the Temple, and then slipped away to starve? Is this really a story of selflessness, or is it a cautionary tale about naivete? Should we cheer or weep?

Let's complicate the question further. St. Mark prefaces the story of the widow with an account of Jesus blasting the religious leaders of his day for their greed, pomposity, and crass exploitation of the poor. “Beware of the scribes,” Jesus tells his followers. “They devour widow's houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers.”

Their piety, in other words, is a sham, and the religious institution they govern is corrupt — not in any way reflective of the God the Psalmist calls a “Father of orphans and protector of widows.”

Indeed, in the days leading up to the widow's last gift, Jesus offers one scathing critique after another of the economic and political exploitation he witnesses all around him. He makes a mockery of Roman pomp and circumstance when he processes into Jerusalem on a donkey's back. He cleanses the Temple's money-mongering with a whip.

He refuses to answer the chief priests, scribes, and elders when they demand to know the source of his authority. He confounds religious leaders on taxes, indicts them with a scathing parable about a vineyard and a

murdered son, defeats them on the question of resurrection, and bewilders them with riddles about his Davidic ancestry.

So why on earth would he turn around and praise a woman for endangering her already endangered life to support an institution he condemns?

The simple answer is, he doesn't. Read the story carefully; he doesn't. Centuries of stewardship sermons notwithstanding, Jesus never commends the widow, applauds her self-sacrifice, or invites us to follow in her footsteps. He simply notices her, and tells his disciples to notice her, too.

This is a moment in the story when I'd give anything to hear Jesus's tone of voice. Is he heartbroken as he tells his disciples to peel their eyes away from the rich folks and glance in her direction instead? Is he outraged? Is he resigned? What does it mean to him, mere seconds after he's described the Temple leaders as devourers of widows' houses, to witness just such a widow being devoured? And worse, participating in her own devouring?

Here's a telling postlude: immediately after the widow leaves the Temple, Jesus leaves, too, and as he does, an awed disciple invites Jesus to admire the Temple's mammoth stones and impressive buildings. Jesus' response is quick and cutting: "Not one of these stones will be left upon another; all will be thrown down."

Ouch. I wonder if the widow is still on Jesus's mind as he predicts the destruction of the Temple. He has just watched a trusting woman give her all to an indefensible institution, one that refuses to protect the poor. No edifice steeped in such injustice will stand.

Back to my earlier question: should we cheer or weep in the face of this story? Or — here's a third alternative — should we call out (as Jesus did) any form of religiosity that manipulates the vulnerable into self-harm and self-destruction?

Jesus *notices* the widow. He sees what everyone else is too busy, too grand, too spiritual, and too self-absorbed to see. For me, this is the only redemptive part of the story — that Jesus's eyes are ever on the small, the insignificant, the hidden.

What did Jesus notice? I don't know for sure, but I'll hazard some guesses.

I think he noticed the widow's courage. I imagine it took quite a bit of courage for her to make her gift alongside the rich with their fistfuls of coins. Even more to allow the last scraps of her security to fall out of her palms. And more still to swallow panic, swallow desperation, swallow the entirely human desire to cling to life no matter what — and face her end with hope.

I think Jesus noticed her dignity. Surely she had to steel herself when widowhood rendered her worthless — a person marked "expendable" even in the Temple she loved. Surely she had to trust — in the face of all the evidence piled up around her — that her tiny gift had value in God's eyes.

And finally, I think Jesus noticed her vocation. Whether she knew it or not, the widow's action in the Temple that day was prophetic. She was a prophet in the sense that her costly offering amounted to a holy denunciation of injustice and corruption. Without speaking a word, she spoke God's Word in the ancient tradition of Isaiah, Elijah, Jeremiah, and other Old Testament prophets.

But she was also prophetic in the Messianic sense, because her self-sacrifice prefigured Jesus's. Perhaps what Jesus noticed was kinship. Her story mirrored his. The widow gave everything she had to serve a world so broken, it killed her. Days later, Jesus gave everything he had to redeem, restore, and renew that world.
