Sermon on Mark 12:41-44

Ten for Ten: Week 3

**Should Jesus Really Be Watching My Wealth?**

**JESU, JUVA!**

My Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,

Lutheran theologians call them GOD’S ATTRIBUTES. They are the big “omni” words students learn in Catechism. Omnipresent, omniscient, omnipotent. Those theological terms sound cerebral, but they make all the difference in the world for living life on Main Street. That God is omnipresent means that he is with us wherever we go—even in the middle of the Taliban’s turf in Afghanistan. That God is omniscient means that he knows everything that we are going through—even when the doctor isn’t so certain. That God is omnipotent means that we can rest easy because the Creator of Life has complete control over the issues of life.

There is, however, the *other* side to that coin. That God is *everywhere* also means that he’s behind every closet door and every back seat on a Friday night…. That God knows *everything* means that he knows not only the number of hairs on our heads but also the unspoken thoughts our heads think. That God is *almighty* also means that God also has the power to judge me for the times that sin has made me into an adversary of the Almighty!

This morning, we hear that Jesus is WATCHING. Take *comfort!* The Lord who watches over you neither slumbers no sleeps. Jesus is WATCHING. Take *warning!* The Lord is watching every area of our lives; even if we don’t think he has the right to, even when we don’t want him to! There Jesus is. Can you believe it? Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and **watched** the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. (v.41) Obviously, Jesus hasn’t learned a thing about a person’s right to privacy! And then there is that sobering thought that if Jesus watched the widow give her offering, then he is watching our offerings too! **Should Jesus really be watching my wealth?**

If it surprises you that Jesus sat down to watch people give their offerings, then it should surprise you twice as much to realize *when* he did this. This was TUESDAY of Holy Week. On Friday, he would be hung out to die on the cross. With the clock ticking, what does Jesus do? Note the details: He SAT DOWN in the temple courts precisely at the very place where people GAVE THEIR OFFERINGS. He didn’t sit there because he needed to take a breather. Jesus sat down specifically so that he could WATCH the people as they gave their offerings. The Greek word is explicit here: *Jesus was studying the people as they gave their offerings, and he did this for some time.* For Lutherans who were trained to be discrete when they put their envelopes into the plate, the thought of Jesus sitting there, watching, staring, studying, makes us more than a bit uncomfortable.

*Should Jesus really be watching wealth?* If you and I were Jesus’ personal advisors, we would say absolutely not. Jesus, you’ve got bigger fish to fry! Instead, you should watch for a *place* to eat the Last Supper. You should watch your *step* because the Pharisees are trying to trip you up. Better yet, watch your *back,* because Judas is plotting to betray you. But watching what people are doing with their wealth at the temple? Don’t do that! *Because you know Jesus, if you sit there watching people give their offerings, then you’re going to give the impression that you’re actually interested in what people give to you!*

Well, what did Jesus see? Many rich people threw in large amounts. This doesn’t seem all that surprising. We sort of expect rich families to be big givers. After all, Jesus himself once said: “From everyone who has been given much, much will be demanded; and from the one who has been entrusted with much, much more will be asked” (Luke 12:48). But there is another insight that the Greek gives us: It seems as if they wealthy were coming back to get in the offering line again and again. There was some pomp and show to their offerings. *“Excuse me! Mr. Usher, can you run the plate past me a second time please? I forgot to put my OTHER envelope in!”* It turns out that Jesus was not only watching the amount of their gifts, but he was also staring right through their reasons for giving them.

Then Jesus saw another person. No one would have mistaken her for a big giver. Can you picture the scene? 42 But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents. Turns out, Jesus was watching the widow’s wealth too! What surprises you about her? That she was poor? No surprise there. Social Security wouldn’t be invented for another 1,900 years. She offered two tiny copper coins—the bare minimum that could be paid for the temple tax? Again, no surprise there.

What should surprise us, even shock us, is what we never would have known if Jesus hadn’t said something: 43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. This widow, this woman that no one else took notice of; she was the one our Lord really noticed! **She had given more than all the others.** Can you picture the disciples scratching their heads? *‘You mean to tell me, Jesus, that this widow with her two copper coins gave more than the rich who gave their thousands?’* That doesn’t even make sense! To the eyes of men, it didn’t make an ounce of sense. But Jesus could see what the disciples couldn’t see: 44 They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”

When Jesus watched Jerusalem’s givers, he saw the rich give out of what was left over. They gave their thousands, but they had thousands left over. They went home to a warm house, a full fridge, and a cozy bed. They gave big gifts, but there was precious-little personal sacrifice behind those gifts. They gave some of the frosting on the cake, but they still had both cake and extra frosting left over.

The widow was different. She didn’t give some frosting off the cake, because she didn’t have any cake. Instead, she gave her daily bread! She gave her bread money, her milk money. She gave everything—all she had to live on.” She didn’t give thousands. She gave a few cents. The amount of her offering was tiny, but her self-sacrifice was total. She gave until she had nothing left—and at that very moment she still had absolutely everything. She had her Lord. She had God’s promises and God’s gift of faith to trust them. The big point today? *She gave even beyond her ability, because she trusted her Lord’s ability to care for her.*

Now I’ve got another question: If you were sitting in Jesus’ seat watching the widow give her offering, what would you have told her? *‘No, dearie! God’s knows your heart. He knows you don’t have two dimes to rub together. He knows you’ll give it someday—if you’ve got it. Hey, here’s two more pennies. Go and buy yourself a cup of coffee.”* I’m willing to bet—at least two small copper coins—that we would have done our best to talk the widow out of making her offering! And in so doing, we would have talked her out of doing the exact thing that Jesus commended her for! My point? *Could it be, just every now and then, that we are far too eager to make pious-sounding excuses NOT to give and not nearly eager enough in encouraging one another on toward godly generosity?*

Why is that? We’ve got this enduring suspicion that giving primarily has to do with the wallet when what Jesus is really watching is the attitude of our hearts and the actions that follow. Simply put: Do we trust God or don’t we? That’s a “yes or no” question. So when is the last time that we opened up our hands and gave sacrificially—gave as if we really trusted in God and staked our future on his promises? I’ve got two examples:

* Why is it easy to send thousands of dollars to Fidelity, Vanguard, or Charles Schwab every year? Because we TRUST that these people will make our money grow. But have you noticed that Charles Schwab, makes no promises to us? Seriously! *“Past performance is no guarantee of future results.”* Charles Schwab makes no promises. God does! 11 You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God (2 Corinthians 9:11). Why are we so tempted to trust Fidelity more than our faithful Father? Why do we take comfort in our investments, but fear giving as a net loss? Jesus is watching our attitude and actions. What does he see?
* And I’ll be very frank this morning. Would we say this morning that it is a great act of faith to pay an electric bill every month? Even more, would we say that it a great act of faith to pay for our gym membership every month? The answer is likely a resounding NO. There is no faith involved whatsoever in paying for a gym membership. Let’s put those numbers I shared in my in-service Bible study into perspective: [xx%] of our [church] family offered God—the Creator of the atom—less than they do to the electric company. [xx%] of our [church] family offered God—the Creator of the human body—less than a monthly membership at the gym. Does that even make sense? We undoubtedly have some poor widows among us. And they need our special love and care. But I doubt sincerely that we have over [xx] poor widow families at [church]. Jesus is watching. What does he see?

I’ll sum it up this way: There is only one reason why we fail to give God our firstfruits: He, simply put, isn’t first in our hearts. There is one overriding reason why we don’t practice the principle of proportionate giving: We’ve forgotten that God is always the Ultimate Owner of Everything. There are two major reasons why we fail to practice sacrificial giving: We don’t believe that God will truly care for us as reflected in Jesus ultimate sacrifice for us.

So how do you think the widow’s story ends? St. Mark doesn’t tell us. But knowing what you know about the faithfulness of the Father and the sacrifice of the Son, do you really think that Jesus let the widow go home and starve to death? Do you get the impression that after commending the widow’s gift that Jesus was ignorant of what the widow needed? The widow gave her all trusting in the God who gave his all, his everything, his Son for her.

And God offered his all, his everything, his Son for you. He didn’t offer two coins for your salvation, but the double treasure of a perfect life lived for you and an innocent death died for you!

Jesus knows all about coins! When Satan tempted him with the wealth of the world, he told Satan to go away and pack sand. When the money changers were fleecing the flock in the temple courts, he made a whip and drove them out. This was a house of prayer, not a place of profit! Days after sitting and watching the widow, Jesus would be kneeling and praying in Gethsemane—sold for coins of silver by Judas. Jesus never once thought a greedy thought, but human greed led directly to his crucifixion. And on that cross, Jesus bled and died to forgive the very hearts that loved copper more than the Christ, silver more than the Savior!

And Jesus knows all about widows and what they need. Just three days after watching the widow give her gift at the temple, he looked down from the cross upon another widow—his mother. Even with his hands nailed to the cross, he opened his hands and took care of her future needs. And to this day, he opens his crucified hands and fills our desires with good things.

Jesus knows what it means to commend someone—as he commended the widow for her gift. He also knows what it means to be forsaken by someone—as he was by his Father for our greed, for our doubting his care, for our disregard of God’s Words about worldly wealth. Jesus’ hands were poked with spikes so that our hands could be completely cleansed of their death grip on the copper coins of this world.

And in him, both we and the widow have the forgiveness we crave and the motivation we desperately need to open our hands and give in a way that glorifies God and cares for our neighbor.

Jesus is still watching his people’s wealth. What will he see? A tip? God forbid! Or deep-seated trust? God give it! Your Lord is faithful; he will do it! Amen.