



Part II—Finding Our Joy

LESSON FIVE

The Gift of the Woman Who Was Poor



SCRIPTURE

Mark 12:41–44

MAIN IDEA

Joy in Christ is more than happiness; it can change challenging circumstances into faith-filled, even joyous times.

Opening Prayer

God of love, we thank you for those among us who often seem invisible but are treasured members of your household. We remember today the gift of the woman who was poor and her generous spirit. Help us not to turn away from those who are poor among us. Help us not to be so saddened by their circumstances that we miss their joyous gifts, O God. We are filled with gratitude and overjoyed for the promise of abundant life. Amen.

SUMMARY

Christian joy, to me, has always been different from the way that the world defines joy. For many people, joy and happiness go hand in hand. Christians, however, can experience joy even when things are not going well. The joy that we find in Christ can change horrible circumstances into faith-filled, even joyous times.

We do not know enough about the woman who put two copper coins in the treasury one day to know whether she experienced joy. I can imagine, though, that while her circumstances were challenging, she gave joyfully—all that she had.

LESSON

We do not know the name of the woman who contributed to the treasury, as her name is not in the passage. We know that she had a spouse and that her spouse died. We know, from what is said about her, that she did not have much money. She was, as Jesus suggests, a generous giver, according to her means.

Jesus observed her contributing to the treasury, and he called his disciples over and said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on” (cf. Mark 12:43–44 and Luke 21:1–4).

I imagine this woman saying:

It is true that I do not have much. It is jarring to experience the death of a spouse and go from having what you need to deciding what needs will be met. When I was growing up, I went to temple and gave an offering, because that's what I learned to do. I still go to worship and give an offering when I can. I am grateful to God for God's blessings, so I give joyfully.

Sometimes, I only have a coin or two to contribute. I know it is not much, but at times it is all I have. I see the way people look at me. It is not a good experience to be a poor giver, even if it is beyond my control. So many others give much more than I do. It is hard being identified by what you do not have, but it is pure joy to be able to give what you have for the good of the world.

We do not want to identify this woman by what she does not have. Some of us know what it feels like to be identified by what we do not have or who we are not. We can surmise that she did not think she was doing anything exceptional when she put her two copper coins into the church treasury that day. But Jesus believed it to be extraordinary.

If we were reading this story for the first time, though, we may be surprised that Jesus pointed her out and praised her for her generosity. Remember the coin banks given to children during Lent, Pentecost, and Christmas? Children learned a valuable lesson about sharing from their abundance as they filled the banks with their pennies, nickels and dimes. Church treasurers may have had to spend extra time after church counting the many coins but small coins add up quickly, and each coin given in joy matters. Jesus could have praised a really big giver in the temple, but he lifted up this woman, who presumably did not give out of extra income or savings but with nothing to spare, gave everything.

Activity

Think of a person who provided help in what seemed to be a small way but was huge for them. Write a letter, note, or text to thank them for the big sacrifice and contribution they made to others' lives. This letter, note, or text can be sent, if you wish, but if it is not possible to do so, it does not have to be. Just the writing and acknowledging of the gift is enough.

Giving as Gratitude

I imagine that the woman who was poor grew up going to the temple, and that she contributed to the offering, because that's what she learned to do as a woman of faith. Like many women we

know in the church, she gave because giving is important, and I would like to believe that it was part of who she was, and part of how she lived. Women's giving in the church is also part of our identity in Christ. In our giving, we find joy. Sometimes it seems that the more we give, the greater the gifts to us. In other words, it is nearly impossible to give it all away, because we receive so much in return. I think if someone were to ask, "How do I find joy in Christ?" my answer might be, "Give. Give of yourself. Give of your possessions. Give of your time. Be part of a faith community. Be part of something bigger than yourself."

I imagine this woman knew in her giving that she was not really depleting her resources but prioritizing her gratitude to God above all else. She may have been more in touch with her purpose than many of us. In the Reformed tradition, we are taught that our chief end is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever.²⁰ I imagine that she loved God so much, and was grateful for so much, that she had to give back.

While most of us would like to feel that we would do the same, we have all found it hard to know when to give and how much to give. Some of us remember what it was like when we did not have a lot of money. Some of us are in that place right now. We are struggling with having enough money to pay our bills. Those who retire often have less money than when they were actively working. But complaints about being on a fixed income do not begin to compare with people who have no resources or income at all. Many of us will not ever understand what it is like for those who are poor to exist in a society where you need money to live.

In some cities you cannot leave home with the same money you had in your pocket that morning, because the culture depends on tipping for services. And even at home, in some places, you cannot answer the door without having to tip or have someone come by looking to collect the money you owe them.

What is more stressful than not having the money you need to live? Even today, generally women's incomes do not equal men's incomes, even if they perform the same work and are in the same positions. And, a lot of the work that women do, especially in the home and with children and providing care for other family members, particularly during the global health crisis, is unpaid work.

Giving in Joy

We have all had times where we have felt that we barely have enough for ourselves and so, we could not give. I hope, though, that we have also had times when we felt we did not have enough for ourselves and even so, we chose to give. Jesus said, "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (12:44).

Second Corinthians 9:7c reads, "God loves a cheerful giver." We sometimes take this to mean that we should stop complaining about money, and rather, cheerfully give to the church and charities. This is one way of looking at it. Another is realizing that regardless of how much money we have, we derive joy from the very act of giving. And when you do not have very much at all, it takes strong discernment to realize that some have even less than you do, thus you give because God first gave to you.

20 *The Constitution of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.), Part I: The Book of Confessions, Study Edition Revised*, The Westminster Shorter Catechism (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press), 2017, 7.001.

If you are confused as to why we are considering that the woman who was poor might have been a joyous giver, in such lamentable circumstances, you are not alone. It also makes no sense to many of us when we hear of a survivor of a car crash, or one whose loved one was murdered, forgive the person responsible, give thanks to God and find joy in life, even though they will never be the same again.

When I was an associate pastor at Fourth Presbyterian Church of Chicago many years ago, we frequently held worship services in the sanctuary with persons who then lived in the Cabrini Green housing project. We had a Center for Whole Life located at Cabrini Green. For some of those worship services, church staff would suggest that we take out the offering section in the Order of Worship because the residents of Cabrini Green did not have a lot of

money. I always kept the offering in the service, because giving people the opportunity to give to God, regardless of their means, is significant. I have often seen people who did not have much give the most.

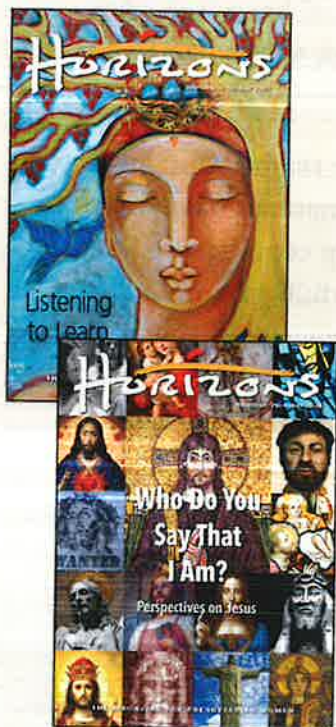
We identify the woman who was poor as “the poor widow.” We identify her by what she does not have—a spouse, money, status, but what she has is what interests me—a generous spirit, courage. I would like to think that she gave joyfully in gratitude for God’s good gifts to her.

Activity

Reflect upon a time when you found joy in circumstances that did not seem, at first glance, to be good. Where did your joy come from?

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Finding Our Joy

One of the best ways to live joyfully is to focus on gratitude. When you have an attitude of gratitude, you cannot help but be thankful for everything that God has done for you.

Presbyterians are known for many things such as doing things decently and in order, for creating schools and nonprofits, and for seeking to serve with energy, intelligence, imagination, and love. Presbyterians are also known for our theology of grace and gratitude. The grace extended to us by God is so amazing that we cannot help but express our gratitude. I think of grace and gratitude when I think of the woman who was poor. We do not know if this woman had gratitude and joy in her heart. What we do know is that she was very generous according to her means. Jesus said, "this poor widow has put in more than all of them" (cf. Luke 21:3 and Mark 12:43).

I spoke with a woman in the west end of Louisville, Kentucky, on a Sunday morning after she expressed a desire to join a church. She told me that she and her children were unhoused. She would move from place to place, living with relatives or friends who would put her up for a while.

I asked her about her faith and her desire to join the church, and she told me that her mother had not talked with her about Jesus. She said that she had no one to talk to about faith and that she did not know much about Christ. I wondered how she knew about the church. Apparently, someone had brought her there to worship years ago.

She had no ability to feed her children without help. I felt inadequate speaking with her. She had no resources, except thankfully, the friends and relatives who would provide housing and food temporarily. She had faith in Jesus Christ, even though she had very limited knowledge of Christ, but she told me that she trusted in Jesus, that Christ was her savior, and that that was her church.

She had little, but I imagine that she gave what she could. She expressed a deep gratitude to God for giving her what she had, and she was not sad, but joyful in her desire to know more about Jesus Christ and to come back to the church.

I was glad I met her and honored to speak with her, but I was also overwhelmed by her story. Certainly, she is not the only one in this situation. Some people have limited autonomy and poor resources, but some still have immense gratitude for what they have.

I prayed with her and for her. Then, a church membership coordinator asked her to come with her, and they went upstairs. I would like to believe that this was a transient moment of hardship in this woman's life, and that she and her children are no longer unhoused, are receiving good education and care, and are thriving, but I do not know what happened to her. Like the woman who was poor and contributed to the treasury, we do not know what became of her.

We do know that some of God's children define abundance in a totally different way than others. And some who may have received limited Christian education, have a deep desire to know Jesus and a trust in Christ as their Savior.

I was struck by the thankfulness and joy that this woman had, even though she described her dire situation. Instead of being sad and depressed, at least at that moment, she was joyful.

Christian Joy

Some of us do not understand how we could consider that joy might be a quality of the woman who was poor. How can someone so poor experience joy? In our minds, we recall Hollywood images of poor people and neglect to realize that they have full lives, as we do. This is not to say that those who are poor have easy

lives. It is not easy at all to have limited resources. It is possible, though, for those who are poor to be joyful in a more profound way than those who are rich.

How do you find joy in the midst of tribulation? A focus on gratitude may be what leads some to joy. The amount of money that one has does not always determine whether people will have a joyous life.

We do not know how the woman who put two copper coins in the treasury felt, especially if she was experiencing a time of hardship and challenge. By her witness, we know that it is possible to give of ourselves to others, even during difficult times, and live in faith, hope, and joy.

Closing Prayer

God of joy, sometimes it is hard not to spontaneously burst out into song, for you have been so good to us. Sometimes it is impossible to stop praising you, for you have abundantly blessed us. Be present with us and our neighbors in our times of sorrow and joy, leading us back to you, O God of grace. Amen.

Reflection Questions

1. Is Christian joy different from the way some in the world define happiness?
2. Have you experienced joy, even though your circumstances were challenging?
3. Why praise the woman in the temple for giving it all away? Should she have kept some for herself?
4. Benedictine Brother David Steindl-Rast said, "It is not joy that makes us grateful; it is gratitude that makes us joyful."²¹ What does this mean to you?
5. Why do you suppose that The Westminster Shorter Catechism in *The Book of Confessions* of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) teaches that the chief end of humans is to glorify God and to enjoy God forever?²²
6. Why didn't Jesus praise one of the big givers in the temple, instead of the woman who contributed two small coins?

21 David Steindl-Rast, *Gratefulness, the Heart of Prayer: An Approach to Life in Fullness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 204. (Also see David Steindl-Rast, "Want to Be Happy? Be Grateful," TEDGlobal, June 2013, video, 14:16, <https://go.ted.com/6Wup>).

22 *The Book of Confessions*, The Westminster Shorter Catechism, 7.001.

LESSON FIVE NOTES

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are approximately 20 lines visible. The paper has a slightly textured appearance with some minor discoloration or foxing, particularly towards the edges. There is no handwriting or other markings on the page.

*Suggestions for Leaders***LESSON FIVE: The Gift of the Woman Who Was Poor****Central Concept**

Christian joy grows from remembering and rejoicing in God's past acts of deliverance and from anticipating God's future deliverance.

In Mark 12:41-44, Jesus shines a light on a poor widow, who "out of her poverty has put in [the temple treasury] everything she had, all she had to live on." Generosity, gratitude, and joy abound!

Connect

(15 minutes) Invite participants to join in a game of word association, by responding aloud with the first thing that comes to their mind when you speak a word or phrase. Don't worry about speaking over one another—all voices welcome! Offer an example, such as, "I say 'joy' you say . . ." As leader, offer enough silence after each one for those who don't instantly respond.

joy	contribute
watching	abundance
money	poverty
rich	everything
poor	teaching
widow	gratitude
disciples	generosity
offering	Jesus

Clear a path across your meeting room. Invite participants to express an opinion about "which comes first" by going to either side of the room. Everyone must choose, and there are no right or wrong answers. Offer an example, such as "Which comes first—on one side, 'the chicken,' on the other side, 'the egg.'" For each pairing, once all have chosen, you will find a partner and tell each other why you chose what you did. (To include participants with mobility issues, be sure to ask them which side they choose and send an appropriate conversation partner to talk with them.)

Pairings

- Which comes first, giving time to a cause you support or giving financial support? (Pair with someone near you.)
- Which comes first, generosity or gratitude? (Pair with someone on the opposite side.)
- Which comes first, faith or action? (Pair with someone near you.)
- Which comes first, joy or generosity? (Pair with someone on the opposite side.)
- Which comes first, gratitude or joy? (Pair with someone on the opposite side.)

Consider

(15-20 minutes) Read Mark 12:41-44 aloud.

Ask your choice of these questions:

1. What is Jesus doing at the beginning of the story? It's not often we see Jesus doing this. Why might his action be significant?
2. The woman is both poor and a widow. What do you know from reading the lesson, or from your own knowledge, about the implications of either of those for a woman in Jesus' time?
3. What might Jesus be praising about her action?
4. What are some things you imagine might have motivated the woman's actions?
5. Joy is not mentioned in the story, but one might imagine joy as a motivating factor for the woman. How do you see joy shaping an action like this?
6. What motivates you to give? What motivates you to give more generously than usual?
7. What aspects of the Christian faith most make you grateful? Compel your generosity? Bring you joy?

(15-20 minutes) Engage conversation by reading or summarizing the following. Form small groups to respond to the questions below.

The study author raises the issue of the response of Christians to hardship, loss, "horrible" circumstances, and lack of resources, among other dire situations. Encouragement to be joyful and give thanks, no matter what your circumstances, can be challenging! The apostle Paul, in his letter to the Christians in Thessalonica, asks for such action: "Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances, for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thess. 5:16-18). It is helpful to remember that the early church was often in danger of persecution, and many in the early church believed the return of Christ was imminent. So, such exhortations spoke to the urgent need to hold on, to endure, to draw on the support of the community, and to trust in God's sovereignty.

Showing Christian joy may not be our first inclination, and God does not promise that all hardships will be removed, all situations will change for the better, all grief will end, all faithful followers of Jesus will be blessed with our picture of peace, joy, serenity, health, healing, and happily ever after. So, what is it that Christians draw on in challenging times and situations?

In the entry on "joy" in the *HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*,* Christian joy grows from remembering and rejoicing in God's past acts of deliverance and from anticipating God's future deliverance. In other words, it's not about us and this moment. It's about God and God's faithfulness. It's about Jesus and his life and teaching. It's about the Holy Spirit working in the world, even now, to bring about God's kingdom. It's about trusting that no matter what is going on in our lives, how we feel, what we are dealing with, underneath are "the everlasting arms." Those "arms" are very often the community of faith called the church that gives us a home, feeds us at the table of grace and joy, and surrounds us with love and support. And always remember: We are not alone. We live in God's world. In life and in death we belong to God.

Discuss in your small groups.

1. What might this mean for us when we feel despair and have a sense of hopelessness?
2. Where and to whom do you turn when you need help and hope?
3. What songs, hymns, or scripture come to mind that offer us this assurance? Make a list together for use in the closing time.

(5-10 minutes) Invite participants to name an insight from their small group and ask each small group to name a hymn of assurance. If possible, sing a verse of a couple of them.

Commune and Commit

(10 minutes) Check that everyone has a line of assurance from a song, hymn, or scripture to read aloud from the selections shared in their small group. Gather in a circle and read them using this litany response after each: "We are not alone. We live in God's world."

Suggest they keep their selection handy to read each day from now until the next gathering.

Close with the lesson's Closing Prayer.

* Jouette M. Bassler and Mark Allan Powell in *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Revised and Updated*, Mark Allan Powell, general ed. (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011).



Eternal Light Unveiled, Saykuthonie