

“Charity or Stewardship?” Mark 12: 42-44 Nov. 25,’18 Hope, Wake Forest

In the 17th century, in Cambridge, England, there was a man named **Thomas Hobson**. He rented horses. That being the normal mode of transportation at that time, he was one of many people who engaged in this business, but he established himself in history by doing things a little differently. Evidently, most people in this business allowed customers to walk thru the barn and rent the horse of their choice. Mr Hobson tired of this, as people kept choosing select, preferred horses, wearing them down, and leaving other horses without enough exercise. So he established a policy which didn’t allow you to choose your own horse. You had to take the one closest to the door, the next in line. Soon, his competition realized advantages, and began to do likewise. This became known as **Hobson’s Choice**...which has become a common phrase even in our day. It means there really is no choice at all. As far as Mr. Hobson was concerned it was “take this horse, or take none at all.”

Now when we bow before the foot of the cross, wash in baptismal waters, and declare Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord. We are presented with something of a Hobson’s Choice. All Christians must acknowledge that they are stewards, managers of all that they have. All God’s blessings, time, possessions, skills, talents, bank accounts, whatever..They are all gifts entrusted to us.. on loan, so to speak...and they are to be managed in a manner which gives glory to the Giver.. glory to God. **We don’t really have a choice about this...except to be responsible or irresponsible...faithful or unfaithful.** No real Christian can, with any integrity or honesty, ever say that all this stuff..my time and talent and money..is my own, for my pleasure alone.

It is certainly clear that the **poor widow in our text**, putting her two little copper coins in the temple treasury, understood this. Can you imagine her surprise to know that here, 2,000 years later, we are still talking about that gift. I suspect that at the time she was a little embarrassed about her little gift. The same way you might hope that no one would see you drop a few pennies in the offering plate when everyone else was putting in lots of green. But, there was a man watching who could see not only her pennies, but her heart. And in that simple moment she would inspire generations of Christians to reflect on her faithfulness.

You notice I said, “*faithfulness.*” You might have expected me to say, “**generosity**” After all, she gave all she had. That was certainly generous. But that would not be entirely accurate. You see, “**generosity**” is related to “*charity*”... while “*faithfulness*” is related to “*stewardship*”

My goal here today is to have you think long and hard about this distinction. Think first about charity... Charity suggests a rather condescending attitude, doesn’t it? When you think of charity the image that comes to mind is of people who have a lot giving some of their extra resources to the people who don’t have much. Like cleaning out your closet of clothes that you haven’t worn in two years and giving them to Good Will.. That’s charity. Charity is something understood and recognized in the community..providing food and shelter for the homeless etc. When one endows universities and the arts with generous gifts it is called philanthropy. And it’s a great thing! The Church is often the beneficiary of charity. The IRS categorizes your offerings as charitable giving. This is all well and good. There is nothing wrong with charity. I would encourage you to be charitable. But I want you to understand that this has very little to do with stewardship!

The poor widow in our text was not being charitable. She was being faithful. This was not the wealthy giving to the poor. She WAS the poor. If she had been thinking in terms of charity she

We give because of **our needs...gratitude..** but also the need to be **responsible**. As I said, we're not talking about charity, but stewardship. And a steward, a manager of things entrusted to him, has a need to be responsible. A steward is a servant. He must answer to someone. Nothing we have we really own. It is all been entrusted to us. And it is imperative that we handle it all responsibly, as the Master might wish.

As I said, this is all about **OUR NEEDS...**the need to express **gratitude**, the need to be **responsible..** and perhaps most of all the **need to be faithful.. full of faith and trust**. This is why it is so important that our gifts get beyond the level of token charity, beyond the level of left-overs. We really need to push ourselves in our giving to the point where one might wonder if it is prudent and sensible to give so much. That widow who gave her two copper coins had to go home that night not at all sure how she was going to eat the next day! How do you explain that to anyone? except in terms of faith and trust.. a deep and abiding confidence that God's gracious care would always be sufficient. That's my point... What she gave was not charity, but an exhibition, an illustration of faithfulness... **full of faith that God would always be there for her**.

That's really the bottom line for us. We understand responsibility.. We understand gratitude. The deep, **often hidden need is the need to trust**. Simply, we need to give generously so that we must depend upon the faithfulness of God. It is really an empty and false piety to come to church proclaiming and celebrating the faithfulness of God, and then live in a way that suggests that the only thing we really believe in, or trust in, is the bottom line in our checkbook. Do you trust in God? Our stewardship of money speaks volumes about the depth of our trust.. about being faithful... i.e. full of faith and trust. **You and I can be full of faith and trust because God is faithful!** His promises are sure. You and I can be full of faith and trust because God declares us to be his children. We are princes and princesses in the royal house!

I like the story of the **mongrel dog** trotting along one of the lovely streets of Charleston, SC..with those ante-bellum mansions and lovely gardens.. the place oozes with big money. The dog encountered a couple of beautifully groomed French poodles being walked by the butler. The dog decides to trot up for a sniff.. and in dog language, says, "*Hi, gals, what's your name?*" *One said, " My name is Fifi.. That's spelled F.I.F.I.. The other said, " My name is Mimi.. That's spelled M.I.M.I.. and what's your name? My name is Fido..spelled P-H-A-E-D-E-U-X.*

This little guy **didn't need any lessons in self-esteem! and neither should you or I**. We are princes and princesses in the King's house. We have our names engraved in the Book of Life. We are so loved by God that he has taken us, mongrels and runaways, and gifted us with life and salvation. We are joint-heirs with Christ. And as such, we can trust our gracious Father God. He will never leave us as orphans.

May His unbounded love and generosity move us far beyond charity.. to true stewardship. All that His name may be glorified... and His kingdom come.! Amen. .

would have been making application to the temple authorities to get on the welfare list...she would surely have been eligible for food stamps and a thanksgiving basket! Obviously, her motivations came from a different source! I think she felt the need to be faithful!

Let me put it another way. I would suggest to you that there is **nothing particularly Christian about charity**. It is simply golden rule, ethical behavior..something necessary for the well-being of the community.. something that every religion encourages. And Christians may well be, even ought be, involved in all of that. But in the Church we should look at all this from a different vantage point. **We should be talking about stewardship and faithfulness...not charity.**

When you talk charity, the most effective way to do it is to tap into your guilt! Talk about how much you have and how little others have. How much you enjoy and how much the Church needs. When you focus on needs, you are talking charity. There are lots of fund-raising organizations in our world who have refined this into an art form. They have all sorts of strategies and tactics to separate you from your money. They are quite successful.

But I want to say something pretty radical here. The Church is not in the fund-raising business! And I don't think the Church ought to simply encourage people to be charitable. You see, the issue here is not the needs of the church budget. The needs may be very real. And you may have the money to meet those needs. But those needs should not be primary motivation for your giving! **The issue here is not the needs of the Church.. but YOUR needs! The needs of the giver. The need to be faithful!** If the church had no debt and all church workers were independently wealthy, you would still need to be a good and faithful steward.

What motivated that poor widow to give her last two copper coins? She was not stupid. She knew those few cents would not make any real difference in the temple budget. She gave because she felt she needed to do so. She gave because of her own needs!

And what are the needs of the giver? What are YOUR needs? First and foremost, the need to express **GRATITUDE**. I don't know the circumstances of your life. But I suspect that your life, like mine, is filled with a never-ending stream of blessings that can only be attributed to God's grace and mercy...your health, your home, your family, your job, your money, and above all, your faith, the knowledge of God's love and mercy, the peace in your heart. You know that you will never have to stand alone before the judgment seat of God. Oh, you'll stand before the judgment seat, but beside you will be your defense attorney, God's own Son, who will say, "*Hold nothing against this person. I have paid the price for all his sins.. I have covered over his faithlessness with my faithfulness. He is set free, for eternity.*" What a great God we have!

Now friends, there is no way for us to pay for that. And God doesn't need your charity. But we can give thanks! with our words and our deeds. We can be faithful in expressing our gratitude.

A preacher was making an appeal for funds in a large, affluent congregation. He invited them to bring their gifts to the altar. The response was generous... people filling the aisles bringing their gifts. Then toward the end came a little girl, poorly dressed, evidently not part of the mainstream of this wealthy congregation. She came forward and pulled off a little ring from her finger, placing it on the altar. After the service the preacher said to her, "*My dear, I saw what you did... it was a beautiful and touching gift, but you know, the response has been wonderful. We have plenty. You don't need to give up your ring. Here, take it back.*" She looked into his eyes with surprise, and then with a bit of anger, she said, "*I didn't give that ring to you or to this church!*"

There is a little girl, like the widow in our text, who **understood the difference between charity and stewardship.**