



What Do We Give?

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Mark 12:38-44

We live amid a complex array of priorities and claims on our resources. We are stretched for time, finances, energy, attention, and calls to champion various causes. Where do we find balance and direction amid the chaos of cries to apply our resources? How do we direct our attention to God and God's purposes amid the varied needs around us?

The people of Jesus' day had many of the same issues laying claim to their resources and attention. They found different ways to answer the cries. Different groups within Judaism had varied answers to those concerns. The Sadducees accepted issues of power and economic well-being as central to their view that life was only lived in this world. One must therefore care for one's comfort. The Pharisees looked further toward the coming of Messiah and sought to live in order to be welcome at the inauguration banquet of Messiah's reign. Their legalism was directed to that end. The scribes and rabbis followed that line of thinking, yet often focused on their status within Judaism as all-important.

Jesus did not seem to share such concerns. In this passage of Mark, Jesus directly addresses concerns of status, importance and privilege. He addresses the legalism of the Pharisees, as well, though that may not be quite as clear on a surface reading. Rather than phrase his answer in terms of priorities, it seems he addresses the concerns behind our priorities. His answer cuts to the heart of it all. What are positioning ourselves to gain from our priorities, decisions, and purposes? When it gets down to it, what we are seeking matters more, for it directs the course of our lives.

The scribes in the story were not focused so much on offering anything to God, but in receiving recognition for their study and dedication. The Pharisees were focused on the blessings of participation in the Messianic banquet. The Sadducees were focused on comfort, power, and privilege. Neither focus was on discovering and fulfilling God's purposes. They were focused on self. They focused on personal benefits from their actions. As such, the quality of their offerings to God was meager, for they failed to address the issue of what God really wants. What quality of things have we offered to God?

The scribes were not necessarily the wealthy business owners of Jesus' day. They did not wield economic power over others. Jesus lays at their feet, however, blame for economic oppression of the voiceless in society. While they were not foreclosing on widows and orphans, they taught in such a way as to build up the powerful and encourage market rules which opened the door for greed and profit to trump mercy and justice. They allowed for injustice (ignoring the needs of others) by promoting the interests of the wealthy. Per Jesus' words, that made them as guilty as if they were the ones enacting injustice upon the poor. In looking out for their own priorities and well-being, they promoted injustice.

Jesus took his disciples to the Temple to watch people delivering their tithes and offerings. Many wealthy delivered large sums, but Jesus was unimpressed. He was not concerned for looking at the amount of the offerings. He was looking at motivation. Many giving much made a spectacle of their giving. God was less concerned with the amount of the financial gift, as the motivation behind it. As Saint Augustine said, "Charity is no substitute for justice withheld."¹ For many, their giving was about being seen by others and did not measure up to God's norms. It was for their personal benefit.

¹ <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/s/saintaugus148531.html>.

It seems most were concerned for God maintaining the status quo that benefitted them. They weren't as concerned with how the status quo impacted others. They were not as concerned with finding what God wanted of them or how their priorities and actions impacted the lives of others. They weren't as concerned with drawing near to God as with maintaining the blessings they already enjoyed. What kinds of blessings do we expect out of serving God?

Their service to God was focused on their own issues. It was focused on pleasing themselves. Their thoughts were on personal comfort, benefit, standing, position, reputation. Personal priorities drove their actions and directed their lives. Honoring God was a means to an end, not the point of their lives. They wanted to use God for personal benefit.

They were willing to adapt their lives around a pattern of legalistic interpretations to please God, but only in so far as it would generate the kinds of blessings and results they were seeking. They would follow the letter of the law without concerning themselves with actually molding their own purposes by the purposes and aims of God.

Jesus was not impressed, even with great financial gifts that arose out of injustice and a lack of love for others. Jesus wanted a wholesale change in attitude, perspective, and purpose. He wanted them first to give up on their personal self-interests and place their all before God in complete submission. As it was, they brought God the scraps left over from their self-centered actions. What would need to change so that our participation in the body of Christ pleases God fully?

The scribes were at fault, for in teaching God's Word, they adjusted the lessons to support the powerful for their own benefit. Jesus said that was reason for greater condemnation upon them. They were trusting the powerful to care for their needs, not God. In ignoring God's commands to care for those who most needed protection, they did not place their lives and well-being in God's hands. They placed their trust in the hands of people with the financial resources to care for their needs. They did not trust God to provide the way the widow did. Do we?

The widow came down to make her offering to God. By all rights, she had no responsibility to bring an offering. Most of the laws about tithing were linked to profits from trade or agriculture. It was the landowner who was responsible to bring the tithes of produce to the temple. This was then to be used to care for the landless. It was to provide for the priestly community who had no land apportionment, as well as the powerless and poor. Widows, orphans, and immigrants were to find needed resources at God's temple as the landowners brought a portion of God's generous provision.

There was no legal demand on her to bring a tithe. She brought an offering, anyway. Hers was not out of obligation. Hers was no gift out of her excess. Hers was no offering with bells and whistles to be seen and lauded by the crowds. Hers was a gift that expressed her complete dependence upon God. She placed all her resources at God's disposal, trusting that God would care for her needs and perform his will in her life.

Her focus in arriving at the Temple that day was to offer herself to God. She expressed her dependence, but lay down all her resources in confidence. She granted God full authority to work in her life. She lay down her all with no claims on God.

Are we ready to serve God according to her example? Are we ready to set aside all other priorities to seek what God has to offer and cast all our cares on Christ Jesus? Until we cast away our ulterior motives in seeking God, we are not really seeking God, anyway. We are just using God.

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