

# Faithfully Given

Luke 20:45 – 21:4

Rev. Rick Hull ~ Faith Presbyterian Church ~ August 4, 2019

<sup>45</sup> In the hearing of all the people he said to the disciples, <sup>46</sup>“Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. <sup>47</sup>They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>21</sup> He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; <sup>2</sup> he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; <sup>4</sup> for all of them have contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.”

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After I shared about teaching Expository Preaching in an Ethiopian Seminary, and leading a training workshop for pastors last January, several friends asked if I would be doing those programs here, too. Well, as far as I know now, the answer is “no.” Without a doctoral degree you don’t teach in American seminaries. And most pastors and church leaders are pretty confident that they already have what they need to keep a church going.

I was deeply blessed to be able to share with brothers and sisters in Africa, but in the western context, I’m probably not qualified. No harm. No foul. Just the reality.

Last spring, I shared that thought with a friend I’ve known for almost 50 years. Each year, he spends about a month teaching in a Mexican seminary. He’s Anglo, and fluent in Spanish.

He told me that he’s had my same regret. And one day he told a Mexican professor about it as they walked across campus. The wise old man thought for a moment, then smiled and replied, “*You know, we have a saying here: ‘If the thoroughbred is not available, any burro*

*will do.’*” I told my friend: “*That’s really encouraging... I think.*”

Today’s passage is a story about inadequate and small contributions. I’m not going to call this dear little widow a “burro,” but I do want to celebrate that her gift is more than generous! In the words of the old professor, “*...it will do!*”

So, here’s my thesis right up front: “***No gift, faithfully given, is ever too small, too weak, or too broken.***” If you like to take notes, write that one down!

This is the story of a very small gift, given by a very poor widow. She had nothing to offer, *and she offered it!* And the blessings that grew from that gift are beyond counting.

## Here’s the scene:

Jesus is on His way to give the greatest and most costly gift possible. The cross looms just over the horizon. A widow comes to the Court of the Women, to worship and to give.

Widows are not employed, they have no standing, and we have no idea how she cobbled her gift together. We know nothing about her, except that she is among the most vulnerable citizens in town. As an act of worship, she approaches the offering box. She holds two small copper coins. They are the smallest coin there is, *and* the smallest gift that was acceptable in the Temple Treasury.

Jesus watches both the rich and the poor at their worship. And then comes the humble widow. She is small, quiet, and simple. She leaves her tiny gift and then turns back unnoticed. And, for the centuries to come, we’ll be telling her story! In the original language, Jesus’ analysis is striking! What He said was: “*Her gift is more than all the others put together...*” In God’s economy, this small offering is huge! By simply offering what she had, she now defines the meaning of sacrificial stewardship for every disciple of Jesus!

Now let's dig a little deeper. This scene is often thought of as a contrast between the rich and the poor. But that is **NOT** the story! Nowhere does Jesus judge the rich for having something left over after making their gifts! Those gifts may also be gifts of the heart! What He **does do** is to note the personal cost of the widow's gift: *"she gave all she had to live on ..."*

The contrast here is not between large and small gifts, but between givers and takers. The widow and the rich folks were **Givers**, offering what they thought was right. But some of the "teachers of the law" (the ones who knew what spiritual faithfulness required) were **Takers**. They were prideful, arrogant, and merciless – foreclosing on widows' homes! And the message Jesus gave to His disciples, to all of His disciples, is: *"Those guys aren't us!"* They will be punished!

The *takers* are judged. The *givers* are honored. And sacrificial giving becomes both our model and our vision!

Now let's go back to my thesis. And let me broaden our thinking beyond the offering plate. **No gift, faithfully given, is ever too small, too weak, or too broken.** In other words, when we commit our lives to Christ, we give it all ... everything! I love that old hymn refrain that sings: *"All to Jesus I surrender, all to Him I freely give ... I surrender all. I surrender all. All to Thee, my blessed Savior, I surrender all."* That's what this story is all about!

### **No Gift, Faithfully Given, is ever TOO SMALL.**

Sometimes we think that what we have – or what we are – is just too small to count for much. Or it won't count until we make it large enough!

We Americans, in particular, are impressed with the big things. Our aspirations are gargantuan! *"Would you like to super-size that...?"* Our sales pitches are all about reaching out for more, and bigger, and better ... with more options ... in the *"large economy size..."* The smallest kid is chosen last for the pick-up basketball game.

In the church it is the same. We are sometimes awed by the bigger and the better resourced. I have seen the blessings of those programs where the Adult Bible Classes draw hundreds, and the children's activities require buses for their outings.

And I've worked with churches that were poor, under-equipped, and under-staffed, but where Jesus was at the center of their life and witness ... and the blessings overflowed!

I heard of a German Sunday School teacher who had a tiny little class ... just eight little boys for him to give his life to. But, one of those little guys grew up to be Martin Luther! No gift, faithfully given, is ever too small!

I was on the phone recently with my brother, Pastor Tesfa, in Addis Ababa. He serves a tiny church in one of the poorest neighborhoods. They meet in a metal shed and have virtually no resources for ministry. If ever there was a definition of *"small"* they would be it. I asked him how the ministry was going, and he beamed through the phone.

*"It is wonderful! We have started a youth ministry outreach! We wanted to reach the street kids in our neighborhood. So we took a collection and raised 200 Bir – (that's about \$7 American) – and we gathered some clothes from our members – and we used the money to buy some food."*

*"Then we invited the kids to dinner. We helped them clean up. We gave clothes where they were needed. And before dinner, we told them about Jesus."*

*"There were 31 young people. And eight of them received Jesus as their Savior that night."*

No gift is ever too small!

**Here's the principle:** It is not the size of the resources on hand that counts, it is the size of the Hand that holds the resources!

**And here's the question** for each of us: What do you have to offer your Lord that has seemed hopelessly small?

### **No Gift, Faithfully Given, is ever TOO WEAK.**

Sometimes we look at our lives and realize that we are not only small, but also weak.

*"If I had just studied harder, or made better decisions, I'd have achieved more. But now I have so little to offer. If I was in better shape or better looking, I'd be more capable and well-received. I've told myself that bald is beautiful, but I do wonder. If I could do what you do ... perform like you"*

*perform ... If I had the kind of time ... or opportunity ... or talent that I wished for ... If I wasn't limited by circumstance ... or education ... or lack of resources ...*

The list is both depressing and endless!

Dwight L. Moody was one of the great American evangelists of the 1800's. He could barely read. But I have a book of his sermons, and he sets my heart on fire! This is where the **"burro"** shines!

Years ago a young couple in my church in Texas came to me to say that God had given them a burden to lead Junior High students. Not many people will answer the call to that work. And not many will be equipped for it either. Well, they were not equipped. They knew nothing of youth ministry.

They said, *"we realize that we don't have much to offer."* What they did was to offer themselves. We taught them what they needed to know. And they changed lives!

**Here's the question:** Is there something you have, or something you are, that seems helplessly inadequate? Would you offer it as a gift into the hands of the Lord?

My 97-year-old mother-in-law has just moved to Elk Grove to be closer to family. Barb and I have helped her move in. And one of the reasons that her Assisted Living apartment is looking more like home every day is that I regularly carry over a canvass bag full of tools when we visit. The hammer, the screwdriver, the tape measure, and all the nails, screws, and picture hooks are totally useless and ineffective when left in the satchel on their own! But each has a purpose. And all together they have made a lovely home in the hands of the Handyman!

**So, here's the principle:** It is not the adequacy of the tools on hand that counts ... but the skill of the hand that holds them. The Divine Hand that once fashioned miracles out of simple human stuff is still at work! And in His Hands, even our weak offerings can be the tools of blessing! *"I surrender all!"* Even the inadequate!

**No Gift, Faithfully Given, is ever TOO BROKEN.** This is the one that is so often hardest to imagine! We hide what is broken. It embarrasses us, and it is too painful to share. It is the place where we experienced great losses and wounds. Sometimes the breakage

shames us and persistent voices remind us where we've failed where we should have been different, and acted differently. And usually, it's true: we should have!

These are the broken things. All the ones that we voted *"least likely to amount to anything!"* ... and *"most in need of disappearing forever!"*

But, these damaging breakages are *also* like the widow's coins. They can be the most important gifts that we offer up!

Now, it's easy to believe that we are meant to be perfect and perfecting. It's easy to believe that the best gifts are without blemish. But, for believers, the old hymn keeps its steady refrain -- *"I surrender ALL..."* We don't have to be perfect -- only surrendered!

A pastor I know served a large congregation in his town. He was a model pastor, and a kind of mentor to me. We were all heart-sick when his sexual misconduct was discovered. Sadly, that does happen in every profession. And often it destroys lives. He gave it to the Lord. He confessed it and took responsibility. He went through counseling and repaired his life and his relationships. Today, he has been the source of hope and renewal to others who have had the same struggles. We give God the broken things of our lives!

The breakage may be done to us by people, or by circumstance. Sometimes we have done it to ourselves. And we would hide it, or deny it, or delete it if we only could! But there is another possibility -- that we take hold of the things that have held us, and offer them up into the healing hands of our Lord! We give Him the broken things. We surrender all.

Do you know the term "Faceted Glass?" We built a sanctuary in one of the churches I served, and at the center of the chancel platform was a 35 foot tall Faceted Glass window. I didn't know the concept until we were designing it. Then our Building Committee traveled to San Jose where the window was being fabricated in 14 sections. And the artists put us to work on it.

You "facet" the beautiful, expensive glass pieces in the most counter-intuitive way. You break them! And this is serious breaking. You put on heavy gloves, pick up a beautiful chunk of colored glass, and beat it with a hammer! The edges chip. It looks awful. And you feel like a villain doing it.

But it is at the broken edges where the light sparkles the brightest!

There is a lot I'd like to forget, or never repeat again. But sometimes those are the places where the light of our Lord can shine the brightest!

How many grieving hearts have been soothed by the fellowship of a friend who has known the same grief, and held onto a trembling brother or sister at the graveside? How many lives have been lifted (sometimes even saved) because an imperfect person became an available, transparent witness of the healing renewal of the Lord?

I remember standing in a church kitchen years ago, as a member of our congregation shared her heartbreak. I reflected on my own tragedy, and suggested how she might be feeling. She said, "*You really understand, don't you!*" And I shared the hope I had held onto in the Savior. That's light through the broken chips! Those are the gifts we place in our Lord's hands!

**The principle here** is both simple and surprising: The cracks are where the light shines through – the broken places can be beacons of hope!

On my staff in Seattle, we had a recovering drug addict. He had given his life, his condition, and his sins to Jesus. And he was changing the lives of broken street people.

**So here's the question** for us all: What has been hurt, and has been broken for you? What might our Lord shine a new light through?

This morning, we will come to the Communion Table. And we will hear again the great Pauline declaration that, "*I received from the Lord what I also delivered unto you . . . .*" That's the Bible introduction to the greatest celebration any of us will ever make, cherishing the greatest gift that was ever given on planet Earth!

But, I want to add another invitation along with it – that this morning as we each walk down the aisle toward the Sacrament of Grace, we come not only to **receive**, but also to **give** . . . surrendering all to the One who is our Blessed Savior . . . bringing all we have, and all we are, to once again place it in His loving Hands . . . knowing, with certainty, what that dear widow declared, that . . .

*No gift, faithfully given, is ever too small for our Lord to bless, too weak for our Lord to use, or too broken for Him to work His miracles!*

Amen.

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## “The Next Step”

*A Resource for Life Groups and/or Personal Application*

1. Read Luke 20:45—21:4 again. What stands out to you? This is a well-known story across the Christian Church. Do you see anything new in it?
2. Jesus describes significant differences between “givers” and “takers.” Are there ways – even subtly – that we are tempted to become “takers” . . . or to support or encourage “taker” thinking? How do we resist the temptation?
3. Beyond giving monetary gifts (large or small), what other kinds of giving could be represented by the widow's generosity?
4. This story is about sacrifice. What does sacrificial giving look like in comfortable suburbia? What kind of vision or courage does this giving sometimes require?
5. Have you seen God do great things with “small” gifts? Where? When? What happened?
6. Rick spoke about the “adequacy of the Hand that holds the tools.” Where have you seen God's Hand at work in the “inadequate” or “weak” things?
7. The “broken” and wounded chips and cracks in life are where the light can shine through the brightest. Have you seen this happen?
8. Why do we feel a natural reluctance to give small, weak, and broken things as gifts to our Lord? How can this be overcome?

## Table to Table Question

*A question for kids and adults to answer together*

In worship on Sunday, we give “offerings” – gifts of money to be used in God's work. What are some other ways that we can give gifts that God can use to bless His people and His world?