

"With Mite of Ours Can Naught Be Done"

Text: Mark 12:41-44

"Oh, the depth of the riches both of the wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out! ³⁴ For who has known the mind of the LORD? Or who has become His counselor? ³⁵ Or who has first given to Him and it shall be repaid to him? ³⁶ For of Him and through Him and to Him are all things, to whom be glory forever. Amen." (Romans 11:33-36)

Dear Fellow Saints – those who have been declared to be sin-free by a just and holy God, who based his immutable declaration solely on the goodness of his Son, Jesus Christ:

As we continue to celebrate the Reformation and the uniquely Christian *redirection* it returned to us (looking to Christ, rather than to ourselves for our sin payment) consider first this morning one of the verses of that most famous Lutheran hymn – a Mighty Fortress:

*With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected
But for us fights the Valiant One, Whom God Himself elected.
Ask ye, Who is this? Jesus Christ it is, of Sabaoth Lord
And there's none other God; He holds the field forever.*

Note, again, the emphasis on direction. Looking to ourselves and our own strength or goodness, nothing at all can be accomplished against sin, death, and Satan. Our loss was certain. Looking, on the other hand, to Jesus, the battle against sin, death, and Satan is already won.

Still for some reason we are continually drawn back to, and enticed by, the foolishly damning notion that our own good works play some sort of role in the payment for our sins. Our text for this morning – the account of the Widow's Mite – affords us the perfect opportunity to restudy something as simple as the role of our church contributions in our justification and salvation. Our study this morning will center on the theme: *With Mite of Ours Can Naught Be Done*, and we will find that this paraphrase of a line in Luther's famous hymn verse is, at the same time, both absolutely right and absolutely wrong. Our study will be based on our text for this morning, found recorded in the 12th Chapter of Mark's Gospel:

^{ESV} **Mark 12:41-44** *And he (Jesus) sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. ⁴³ And*

he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. ⁴⁴ For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

So far God's Word. In preparation to be filled and strengthened by a study of these words, so we pray: **"Sanctify us by your truth, O Lord. Your word is truth."** Amen.

Surely the words of our text for this morning are familiar to you. What Christian hasn't heard, from little on, about "the widow's mite"? But what did it *mean* to you? What does it mean to you *now, today*? This is one of those rather simple accounts whose intended meaning and application is nonetheless inexplicably elusive. In other words, we get it, but we don't get it.

I recall reading something, many years ago, something along the lines of: *"The Widow Went Home and Starved to Death."* You will probably agree with me that the idea implied is rather disturbing. We actually aren't told what happened to the widow in our text after she placed everything she owned into the temple offering. Most Christians simply refuse to believe that anything bad could have happened to her, especially after her selfless act of generosity was commended by Jesus himself. In fact I would suspect that a solid majority of Christians, if asked what they believed happened to the widow in the weeks and years to come, would probably paint a very satisfying "happily ever after" picture. Many of us grew up somehow believing that she lived out the rest of her days in relative comfort, blessed miraculously by God himself in much the same way that the widow's bin of flour and jar of oil never ran dry as long as the drought lasted in Israel and she fed the Prophet Elijah. Most of us tend to think in such terms – as evidenced also by artist's renditions of the event. Most ascribe a "disinfected" look to the whole scene – an immaculately clean, attractive, well-dressed woman, sometimes leading an equally beautiful youngster in a fine set of clothes. The addition of a child is disturbing, since it adds to the drama and poignancy of the widow's offering. It also, unfortunately, adds to what we are told in Scripture. We are not told if the woman was young or old, childless or a mother. For the purposes of this lesson, none of that mattered.

Artists typically render their impressions of this event with images of what we *want* to be true, and that then tends to be the sort of message we take from this text: *give lavishly and you will live happily ever after.*

We like stories like that. We like things that are neat and simple and happy. Many misguided clergymen tend to like such interpretations of this text because it gives them the means to leverage additional contributions from their members - with the added incentive that all will be well with you, *on earth and in heaven*, if you but contribute lavishly to the church.

Only Jesus doesn't say that here, does he? In fact he doesn't imply anything of the sort – here or elsewhere. His promise about life on earth is that it will often be hard for the Christian (John 16:33). He did, in the Sermon on the Mount, assure us that if we would **"seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, all other needful things would be provided for us"** but his point here had everything to do with relativity of giving and the condition of the human heart. It had nothing to do with trying to extract more money from the temple worshippers, and it had absolutely nothing to say about the forgiveness of sins and how that forgiveness was or is earned.

It is in that sense that our theme rings true: *With mite of ours can naught be done*. It is deeply disturbing that even many so-called Christians can read this text and imagine that this woman's gift had some sort of bearing on the payment for her sins – other than as a thank-you for the gift of forgiveness through faith in the Promised Messiah. How scandalous, how blasphemous, to imagine that man could buy God's forgiveness, that man could ever purchase that which only the innocent blood of Jesus Christ could earn. In fact if man tries to pay for the gift of forgiveness, he ruins it. He destroys it, utterly.

In a very real way it will always be true that God does not need our money, since he can accomplish whatever he wants to accomplish without us. He could turn the leaves on our trees to gold if he chose to do so (which would arguably improve the turnout for our fall workdays). What he offers us in connection with our church contributions is a means to participate in his holy work, which from first to last is *his* work. Jesus commended the woman's offering. What he was trying to teach his disciples in our text was to look also at church contributions through Christian eyes and Christian wisdom.

Like most of us today, his followers then were awed by the magnanimous (and very public) gifts of the rich. Jesus' point was that the rich could afford to be generous, because their generosity required no trust, no heart. This text is therefore about faith and trust, not about money. The rich had and have infinitely more than they need to survive. In modern terms, a million dollar contribution from a billionaire would in no way "crimp the style" of such an individual – though we would probably fall all over ourselves in

gratitude and praise were we to receive such a gift. (Think that through for a bit.) On the other hand, a couple of pennies dropped into the collection plate on a given Sunday would probably be regarded as almost something of a nuisance by the counting teams. A couple of pennies (or a couple of dollars, for that matter) are not going to pay the bills.

Jesus sees with different eyes; he sees with divine wisdom and understanding – wisdom and understanding that he seeks to share with us here today. He is concerned, again, not with the money but with the heart. To make it more personal, God does not want your *money*, he wants your *heart*. When God has your heart – when you and I have truly learned to trust our God – the money will flow naturally effortlessly and willingly.

Which brings us to the next truth expressed by our theme. *With mite of ours can naught be done* also rings absolutely true in connection with our own personal finances. How so?

I'm guessing that everyone here has experienced this phenomenon to one degree or another, but unfortunately many of us are slow to *recognize* or *acknowledge* the lesson. The lesson was probably first taught in connection with the manna provided for the Children of Israel in the wilderness. You will recall how Moses recorded in Exodus 16:16-18: **"This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Gather of it, each one of you, as much as he can eat. You shall each take an omer, according to the number of the persons that each of you has in his tent.'"**¹⁷ **And the people of Israel did so. They gathered, some more, some less.**¹⁸ **But when they measured it with an omer, whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack.**

Again, I suspect that most here have experienced this same sort of thing, even today. Work to gather more than you need (especially when doing so causes you to neglect other God-given duties) and the Lord will find a way to remove that excess from you. How he does this always seems ordinary and unavoidable – your cars break down, medical bills pile up, the kids need braces. The list is endless, but the bottom line is that the bottom line doesn't really change. As with the manna, **"whoever gathered much had nothing left over."** On the other hand, seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and even the little bit that you earn will, with God's blessing, without fail prove to be more than enough – **"whoever gathered little had no lack."**

The lesson, again, is that we work, but God supplies. Everything that we have is rightly regarded as a gift from God.

We return to the widow and her contribution. It has been well said that a faithless man can never match the widow's offering, no matter how much he gives. Faith that trusts God – faith that carelessly casts itself upon the mercies of God – is the key.

Do you want to get to the real nub of the trust issue here? Do you want to learn something about your own lack of trust? Ask yourself this: *Did it (or does it even now) occur to you that the woman's actions were irresponsible? Widows typically had no social safety net in those days, and they had little in the way of earning opportunity. She may well have had children that were dependent on her. Do you find yourself actually condemning her for the very actions that her Savior praised? Her puny offering, after all, did little or nothing for the temple treasury. Wouldn't she have been better off keeping it?*

Such questions pose deeply troubling insights into our own souls, don't they? They form a crystal clear window into our own personal lack of trust. Our inclination would have been – at best – to counsel the woman to give no more than *half* or a *tenth* of what she had, and to use the other half for her livelihood. At worst we would have counseled her to give nothing at all until the economic circumstances on the home front brightened considerably.

Jesus, on the other hand, loved the woman's absolute, unquestioning trust. How you and I ought to pray for the same. How you and I need the sort of trust that reasons that the very same Creator God who sacrificed his own Son to pay our sin debt would never deny us any of the lesser gifts, if such gifts would not prove detrimental to our spiritual well-being.

There is, finally, one way in which our theme ("*with mite of ours can naught be done*") does not ring true. God can and does use the trusting, willing offerings of his people to accomplish great things. With mites from his people (whether that "mite" is one dollar or one million dollars) God can and will supply the blessings necessary to preserve and advance the gospel ministry, here and abroad. Nothing in all creation is more important.

God grant each of us then the strength of faith and the rock-solid trust necessary to cast ourselves recklessly upon him and his good promises. God grant us the wisdom to put all earthly wealth in its place – literally and spiritually – and to value that which he himself values above all else. This

has been the example of the saints that went before – the heroes of the Christian faith who were given the grace to walk in trust and faith as God's chosen people. This is the trust and the faith for which we pray, so help us God. Amen.

Scripture Readings

ESV **Micah 6:6-8** "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? ⁷ Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" ⁸ He has told you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?

ESV **Acts 6:1-7** Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. ² And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." ⁵ And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. ⁶ These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. ⁷ And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.

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The 24th Sunday after Pentecost – November 4, 2018

The Opening Prayer by the Pastor

The Opening Hymn 463- (Verses 1-2, 4-6) (Red Hymnal)

"For All the Saints"

The Order of Service – Supplement page 12ff. (Brown Hymnal)

The Scripture Lessons: (Printed on the back page of this bulletin)

The Old Testament Lesson: (Micah 6:6-8) Christians of all ages have struggled to rightly understand and rightly teach the proper relationship between our salvation (which is earned by Christ and given to us freely) and our own good works (which serve as our natural "thank you" for what our God has done for us and given to us). So our first lesson teaches us that there is nothing we can do to earn God's favor, while also reminding us of the will of God for our lives here on earth. Obedience is how Christians seek to thank our God.

The Psalm of the Day – Psalm 121 (Supplement Page 42)

The New Testament Lesson: (Acts 6:1-7) Our second lesson ties the Old Testament Lesson to the sermon text – all of which is wrapped in the message of the Reformation and All Saints Sunday. The point here is that God has given specific gifts to all of his children. Every one of those gifts has tremendous value, and God's Church is left the poorer whenever and wherever His gifts are not put to good use.

The Confession of Faith -

The Apostolic Creed – page 15. (Brown Hymnal)

The Pre-Sermon Hymn – 616 (Stanzas 1-5) (Red Hymnal)

"Forever with the Lord"

The Sermon – Text: Mark 12:41-44 (Printed on the back of this bulletin)

"With Mite of Ours Can Naught Be Done"

The Offertory – (Supplement page 16 insert)

The Post-Sermon Hymn – 342 (Red Hymnal)

"Chief of Sinners Though I Be"

The Prayers of the Day followed by the Lord's Prayer

The Benediction

The Closing Hymn - 616 (Stanzas 6-8) (Red Hymnal)

"Forever with the Lord"

Silent Prayer

Welcome! - We warmly welcome any visitors who might be with us this morning and invite you to join us every Sunday at this time. St. Paul is a congregation in fellowship with the Church of the Lutheran Confession (CLC) – a conservative Lutheran synod with churches and missions throughout the United States, as well as Canada, India, and Africa. We are glad you are here. Thank you for letting us share the Word of God with you. Please record your visit in our Guest Book, and come again!

Attendance – Sunday (40) Average (41)

This Week at St. Paul:

Today	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Worship Service
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time
	-11:30 a.m.	– Outreach Committee Meeting
Wednesday	-6:00 p.m.	– Confirmation Class
	-7:00 p.m.	– Midweek Bible Study
Next Sunday	-9:00 a.m.	– Sunday school and Bible Class
	-10:00 a.m.	– Sunday Worship Service w/Communion
	-11:00 a.m.	– Fellowship and coffee time

CLC News – Pastor Michael Wilke has returned the call to Our Redeemer's of Red Wing. Pastor John Hein is considering the call to Trinity of Spokane. Vacancies currently exist in Red Wing, Spokane, and Morris, with an additional vacancy pending in Bowdle/Ipswich with the pending retirement of Pastor Mark Gullerud.

ILC Visitors Day – Immanuel Lutheran College in Eau Claire is hosting its annual Visitors' Day this Friday, November 9th. Please see Pastor Roehl for more information.

Outreach Committee Meeting – The Outreach Committee is scheduled to meet this morning during the fellowship hour. All members are encouraged to participate, regardless of whether or not you have attended meetings in the past.

Looking Ahead – Our Annual Thanksgiving service is scheduled again this year for the Wednesday before Thanksgiving – November 21st – at 7:00 pm. Advent services this year will be in the form of "enhanced Advent-related Bible studies" on the three Wednesdays after Thanksgiving, November 28, December 5, and December 12. Our Annual Church Christmas Party is scheduled for Saturday, December 1. Please see Cindy Ollenburger or Sandy Roehl for additional information.