

*An Invitation to Love*

*For the children:*

In the scripture today, Jesus tells us the most important thing to remember.

Do you know what he says? He says the most important thing to remember is to love God and to love other people, the same way we love ourselves (Mk. 12:30-31).

Let me show you a good way to remember that.

Hold your arms up, like your reaching up to your mom or dad. Now look up even higher and imagine God there. Then stretch your arms out toward other people. Finally, give yourself a hug.

Now, let's try that as we say the words, "Love God, love others, love self."

Love God, love others, love self.

According to Jesus, that is the most important thing to remember.

Let's pray:

*Thank you, God, for loving us. Help us to love you and to love others and to love ourselves. Amen.*

One of the legal experts heard their dispute and saw how well Jesus answered them. He came over and asked him, "Which commandment is the most important of all?" Jesus replied, "The most important one is Israel, listen! Our God is the one Lord, and you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your being, with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, You will love your neighbor as yourself. No other commandment is greater than these." The legal expert said to him, "Well said, Teacher. You have truthfully said that God is one and there is no other besides him. And to love God with all of the heart, a full understanding, and all of one's strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself is much more important than all kinds of entirely burned offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered with wisdom, he said to him, "You aren't far from God's kingdom." After that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.

While Jesus was teaching in the temple, he said, "Why do the legal experts say that the Christ is David's son? David himself, inspired by the Holy Spirit, said, 'The Lord said to my lord, 'Sit at my right side until I turn your enemies into your footstool.' David himself calls him 'Lord,' so how can he be David's son?" The large crowd listened to him with delight. As he was teaching, he said, "Watch out for the legal experts. They like to walk around in long robes. They want to be greeted with honor in the markets. They long for places of honor in the synagogues and at banquets. They are the ones who cheat widows out of their homes, and to show off they say long prayers. They will be judged most harshly."

Jesus sat across from the collection box for the temple treasury and observed how the crowd gave their money. Many rich people were throwing in lots of money. One poor widow came forward and put in two small copper coins worth a penny. Jesus called his disciples to him and said, "I assure you that this poor widow has put in more than everyone who's been putting money in the treasury. All of them are giving out of their spare change. But she from her hopeless poverty has given everything she had, even what she needed to live on."

Mk. 12:28-44 (C.E.B.)

*For the adults:*

Many people try to find a set of rules to follow that will make it easier to live a better life, a successful life. If you're one of them, you're not alone. There are countless "How To" books on the shelves of libraries and bookstores:

- "How to Decorate like Martha Stewart."
- "How to Cook Cajun."
- "How to Buy a Car."
- "How to Raise a Child."
- "How to Organize Your Life."
- "How to Laugh at Yourself."

Each book has its own list of things to do and not to do. They provide lists of rules to follow. It's as if we are so thirsty for rules and structure that we'll actually pay someone to tell us what to do!

In our text today, a man asks Jesus for a set of rules to live by (Mk. 12:28). And just like him, people often try hard to be a Christian by doing all the right things.

- Some do that by going to church every week.
- Some do that by being honest at work.
- Some do that by treating strangers with respect.
- Some do that by raising our children to live by the "golden rule."

Some people want to read the Bible as if it were a self-help book. But that only works until they learn it says to love completely (Mk. 12:34).

Seriously, can you imagine a self-help book that says to "love with your whole heart and soul and mind and strength" (Mk. 12:30)? How many books tell you to completely immerse yourselves with passion in any activity? None. That's because a book like that would never sell. We don't want to do that. We want to reserve a little for ourselves. We want to maintain some control over our lives.

And if a Church tells us to give up all we have, we begin to suspect it's really a cult and not a church. It's not safe to give our all – even if that is what Jesus says.

The truth is, Jesus calls us to simply love. Love God, love others, love self (Mk. 12:30-31). And if we want to know what love looks like, he invites us to pay attention.

It's because Jesus is paying attention that he sees love lived out when the woman walks into the temple that day.<sup>1</sup> She comes to give her two coins (Mk. 12:42). But something about the way she does it – the length of time she stands there, maybe, or the way she cradles them in her hand like her last two eggs – something about the way she does it lets Jesus know this is the end for her, that it is everything she has. So when she surrenders those coins and turns to go, he knows she has nothing left.

Her sacrifice is complete, so complete, he calls his disciples over to witness it (Mk. 12:43).

That's why we know about her today, that nameless woman. She gave all the little she had, holding nothing back, which makes her last penny a fortune in God's eyes. She goes well beyond tithing. She is a percentage giver, though. She gives one hundred percent, not just ten percent.

---

<sup>1</sup> Much of what follows was originally found in Leonard Sweet's sermon, "The Widow's Mite." I found it in *Homiletics*, October-December 1997, (Vol. 10, No. 4). I used it in my sermon, "The Widow's Mite."

And while she is generally admired for her generosity, I cannot help but wonder. Are we really supposed to admire a poor woman who gives her last cent to a morally bankrupt religious institution? Is it right for her to surrender her living to those who live better than she? What if she were someone you know, someone of limited means who decides to send her last dollar to a television preacher? Would that be admirable, or scandalous? Would it be a good deed or a crying shame?

It is curious to me that nowhere in this passage does Jesus praise the widow for what she is doing. He simply calls his disciples over to notice her, and to compare what she does with what everyone else is doing. He invites them to sit down beside him and contemplate the disparity between abundance and poverty, between large sums and two copper coins, between apparent sacrifice and the real thing. He doesn't put anyone in the wrong. He doesn't dismiss the gifts of the rich. He simply points out that the major characters are minor givers, while the minor character, this poor widow, turns out to be the major donor of them all.

When Jesus leaves the temple with his disciples that day, his public ministry is over. In four days, he will be dead. He will uncurl his fingers from around his own offering, and give up the two copper coins of his own life.

If you ask me, that's why he notices the poor widow in the first place. She reminds him of someone, someone whose face he sees in the mirror.

- It is the end for her;
  - and it is the end for him, too.
- She gives her living to a corrupt church;
  - he is about to give his life for a corrupt world.
- She withholds nothing from God;
  - neither does he.

It takes one to know one. When he looks at her it is like looking in a mirror at a reflection so clear that he calls his disciples over to see. "Look," he says, "that is what I have been talking about. Look at her."

He couldn't have picked a less likely role model for them. If he had asked them to look around and identify where they see God's love, they would never have guessed. There are major characters in that room, after all. There are doctors of the law and patrons of the arts, rich people and smart people, people with names and faces – any one of them a better bet than the thin woman wearing rags. She is a minor character if there ever was one. "She's the one," Jesus tells them. "The one without a penny to her name, she's the one to watch."

I keep wondering if I've seen her. It would sound better if I told you I've been looking for her, but that's not true. She isn't one of the people I typically look for; she is more like one of the people I try not to see. But now that Jesus has pointed her out, she is harder and harder to miss. The problem is, I am never positive it is she. Only she knows that for sure, but there are certain clues, I think.

She is not a main character, for one thing. While her appearances are memorable, they are all cameos; if you have no peripheral vision, you may miss her altogether. Sometimes she is a he; sometimes she is a child; sometimes she is even a scribe. Now you see her, now you don't. So, if you want to spot her you have to watch, really watch, because you never know where she will turn up next.

The second clue is that she is usually giving something away: her time, her heart, her living, her life. The general rule is that you cannot see how much it costs her, but it is almost always more than you think.

The third clue is that what she is doing rarely makes sense. It's as if she gets her orders from some other planet, where superior beings know things we do not know – such as how to let go of the little that you have in order to receive the more you do not, or how to trust what you cannot see more than you trust what you can.

You can probably come up with some more clues.

Here is what you do, though. You sit down somewhere where you can get a good look at whatever is going on, and you pay special attention to what is happening out on the edges of your vision. Maybe you crunch your eyes just slightly and you ask yourself: “Where is Christ in this picture?”

I'm pretty sure I saw her in the news a couple of weeks ago. Maybe you heard the story, too. Ruth Gottesman gave a gift to the Albert Einstein College of Medicine that allows it to become a tuition-free school.<sup>2</sup> Hers isn't a name that most of us would consider having enough to give a billion-dollar gift, but her gift is making a huge difference.

What impressed me the most was her demand that the school's name not be changed, that her name was not on any building. It makes a remarkable contrast to others who could match that gift.

Admittedly, it was a large gift. And I know Jesus is pointing to someone who made a small gift. But the way Ruth Gottesman gave her gift reminds me of those who do kind deeds behind the scenes, people who give in small ways all the time.

So maybe we think of the people in Gander, Newfoundland, a small town with fewer than 10,000 residents. On September 11, 2001, the town took in and provided space for nearly 7,000 passengers when planes were diverted from New York City. It is an amazing story of a whole town that gave what little they had.

Or think of the way Wendy Westman reached out to a fellow student.<sup>3</sup> Bill Price was feeling alone and she simply invited him to join her group of friends. He credits that small act for helping him become a successful psychiatrist.

And what about the story of Bethany Renfree. I heard her story just this week. She is currently the Legislative Director in the California Senate. I'm going to let her tell the story in her own words.

[Bethany Renfree's Story | Hidden Brain Media](#)

There are countless stories of people who engage in random acts of kindness, acts that have an impact no one can envision. And some of those acts take more sacrifice than others. They are the ones to watch.

You probably know some of those people. You may in fact be one.

- You may be one who makes quilts for MCC.
- You may be one who volunteers in the school.
- You may serve on community-related committees or organizations.
- You may be one who teaches in our Sunday School.
- You may even be one who gives a little money to our church.

I would suggest that when we give that way, we are learning about the depth and breadth and height and width of God's love (Eph. 3:18). Once we see it and experience it, we can begin to love like God loves.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://abcnews.go.com/US/bronx-nyc-medical-school-albert-einstein-college-free-tuition-ruth-gottesman/story?id=107549540>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.npr.org/2023/05/16/1176122566/kindness-good-news-caring>

You won't find that in any "how to" books, though. We find it when we learn to pay attention, looking for places where love is being lived out in small ways, when we look for the minor characters who are making major contributions, when we witness gifts by those who seem least likely to have something to give.

When we break bread today, we get another glimpse of that love. We see acted out for us the enormous love of God that comes to us in the form of Jesus. It's an all-consuming love that cost him his life.

His life is given for us.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

*Lenten Communion:*

The Worship Commission has invited us to celebrate communion each week during Lent as a community discipline. Each week we will offer a variation in how it is served as a means of exploring different facets of our celebration.

Today, we will be using unleavened bread, remembering that the last meal Jesus shared before facing the cross was the Passover meal. It was a ritualized meal that told the story of salvation through the story of the Exodus, when the people left Egypt in a hurry, leaving so quickly they did not have time for the bread to rise.

Randy L Quinn  
Hope Mennonite Church

## Selected Bibliography

Geddert, Timothy J. *Mark (Believers Church Bible Commentary)*. Scottdale: Herald, 2001.

Quinn, Randy L. "Everything We Have." Sermon preached November 12, 2000 at Deer Park-Wild Rose; based on Mark 12:38-44.

\_\_\_\_\_. "Not Too Far Off." Sermon preached November 5, 2000 at Deer Park-Wild Rose; based on Mark 12:28-34 (and published in my book *Voices Overheard* (CSS, 2023), p. 111).

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Penny for your Thoughts." Sermon preached November 9, 2003 at Sunnyside; based on Mark 12:38-44.

\_\_\_\_\_. "A Tale of Two Widows." Sermon preached September 28, 1986 at Altoona-Benedict-New Albany; based on Mark 12:38-44 and 1 Kings 17:8-16.

\_\_\_\_\_. "True Places of Honor." Sermon preached November 10, 1991 at First UMC, Saint John; based on Mark 12:38-44.

\_\_\_\_\_. "The Widow's Might." Sermon preached November 9, 1997 at Allen Blanchard; based on Mark 12:38-44.

Williamson, Lamar. *Mark (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching)*. Atlanta: John Knox, 1983.