

"JACK BENNY'S BEST LINE"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The springboard for today's sermon is the famous story of the widow's mite. It's a good time to take a look at this story for we're approaching that time of the year when we'll be thinking about our pledges and our gifts to the Church for the coming year. The widow's mite. It's about money and giving. Or, is it?

DEVELOPMENT

I begin with a confession. I don't like preaching about money. I think it tends to reinforce the stereotype that ministers are always after money. And so there are a lot of jokes about ministers and money. A little boy swallowed a penny. His mother said, "That's all right. Call the preacher. He can get money out of anybody". That's the sort of thing I'm talking about. Here's another. A man sitting next to a minister on a plane, and the engine sputters. The passengers get nervous and begin to panic. The man turns to the minister and says, "Can't you do something religious, like taking up a collection?".

Years ago a man said to me, "I'm going to tell you why I don't pledge to the Church". I said, "You don't have to tell me". He said, "I want to tell you. Years ago my dear old mother..." ("Here it comes", I said to myself) "My dear old mother was called on by the preacher and he got her to make a pledge, a big pledge, to the Church. We were dirt poor. She had to take in sewing at night to make ends meet and put food on the table. She worked and worked hard to pay that pledge...to meet her commitment. It broke her health and finally killed her. That's why I don't make a pledge to the Church". How would you feel after hearing a story like that? Would you be tempted to say, "It's believable...I can see that...it fits the stereotype." I don't like preaching about money, but sometimes it's necessary.

AND A COMMON COMPLAINT

And, of course, there's that common complaint, "The only time the Church ever pays any attention to me is when it wants my money". I know that that is true for a lot of people. They really feel that way and that saddens me. Not that we ask them for money, but that they think that we don't care about them. I dread the Financial Canvass time because we're going to get word back from some people who say, "The Church is interested only in my money". Most of these people are given attention in other ways, some significant ways, but that's the message they give the callers. All of this makes me sensitive about ever mentioning money.

But there's even a more personal reason which causes me to get cold feet which I share with you. Reinhold Niebuhr expressed it many years ago in a book entitled Leaves From the Diary of a Tamed Cynic. Niebuhr became one of America's most prominent thinkers, but he began his career as a pastor of a little Church in Detroit and Leaves From the Diary of a Tamed Cynic is a journal of those days in that parish.

He wrote that he had great difficulty with financial campaigns, because he couldn't get around the fact that when he preached those lofty, Biblical, theological, idealistic sermons about stewardship, what he was really talking about was his own salary. I've never forgotten that and each year it comes back to haunt me. That means I can't say certain things that I hear being said in other Church Fund-Raising Campaigns, such things like, "This is a Crusade for Christ. This is going to build the Kingdom of God". I have trouble say-

ing that because I know it's in the budget. My salary is in the budget along with some fifty other things that are necessary in running a religious institution like this in New York City. Things like organ tuning, elevator maintenance, coffee for the coffee drinkers, Con Edison and Fuel and telephone service. I can't, in honesty, equate building the Kingdom with giving to a Church budget. I have to be honest and admit that the Kingdom is going to come even if you don't pledge. I may not eat, but the Kingdom is going to come.

So I probably wouldn't be preaching on this story of the Widow's Mite, two weeks before we launch our 1986 Financial Canvass if I didn't feel it was really necessary to do this. The last time I preached on stewardship was about ten years ago and I feel it's time to do it again.

AND HE SAT DOWN AT THE TREASURY

Back to the story from Mark's Gospel. "And He sat down at the treasury..." Who sat down? Jesus did. The treasury was that receptacle in the Temple in which you put your money. Our Jewish friends to this day don't take up an offering in their services. You put money in a jar or in a box at the rear of the Temple. "And, He sat down opposite the treasury and watched the multitude putting money into the treasury".

"Many rich people put in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two copper coins, which made a penny. 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 treasury. For they all contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, her whole living."

That's the story of the widow's mite, and it's about money and giving, isn't it? Or, is it? Well, suppose it is. What does it say?

First of all, it holds up two kinds of people - those who give a lot out of their abundance and one who gives a little out of her substance. And if this is a text about giving money, then it says that you're not giving until you feel it, until you give out of your substance.

Do you remember...I think it was United Way or some other community organization that had a slogan (borrowed from the Southern Baptist Church probably), "Give until it hurts". And then a little later another slogan came along and topped that, "Give until it stops hurting". You could say that those who give out of their abundance give until it starts to hurt and then they stop. And those who give out of their substance give until it stops hurting. They've gone beyond sacrificial giving. That doesn't mean anything to them. They don't see giving as being a matter of sacrifice; for them, giving is a joy!

AND: GIVING IS A JOY

There are a lot of people like that. I've known people who postpone doing things that they would like to do because they feel a responsibility to give the money instead to something very important to them, some cause they hold in great regard. They don't think anything about it; it's no big deal, because giving is not something that hurts them; giving is something that brings them joy. It give them fulfillment to think that they can be a part of something that is greater than themselves. And that's why they give out of their substance, and it doesn't hurt.

C. S. Lewis represented this view when he wrote:

"I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditures on comforts, luxuries, amusements, are up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditures exclude them."

That's what this Lesson of the Widow's Mite is saying, if it's about giving. It says, give until you feel it. If you're not feeling it, then maybe you're not giving enough.

It says the same thing another way when it talks about those who give out of their abundance. It doesn't think very much of giving out of your abundance. "They contributed out of their abundance" the text says. And says it pejoratively, the reason being, that it doesn't cost you anything to give out of your abundance. The government has seen to that. "It is more deductible to give than to receive".

In fact, giving out of your abundance is kind of like tipping. That's what it is, it's tipping. The husband reaches into his pocket, pulls out two coins, can't put them in the plate...the usher is looking. So he asks his wife if she has a dollar. He takes it, folds it, puts it on the side of the plate as it goes by...you can't see the denomination. That's tipping. The tipping model is all right, if you do it right. That's what the tithe is...really. Tithing is tipping. A lot of people are not going to like me for saying that, but that's what it is. I'll give the Lord 10% of my income. Anyone who has ever tithed knows that that's out of your abundance, that it's not going to kill you.

The tipping model is all right, if you do it right. Like at a restaurant that Sara and I once attended many years ago, a very fancy restaurant. They know how to make you tip right at that restaurant. When the bill came I saw I was going to have to use my VISA card. So as I filled out the charge slip I sensed a crowd gathering around the table. I put the tip in the proper box and added up the total. The Maitre d' took the slip, looked at it. He then handed it to a waiter who looked at it, who in turn handed it to another waiter, who handed it to the bus boy. They all looked at it. I think some of them even rolled their eyes when they looked at it. I felt terrible...somewhat embarrassed. I almost said, "OK, guys...give it back and I'll push it up to 15% percent."

"They gave out of their abundance" our text says. That's tipping. If this story is about giving money, then it says, those who give only out of their abundance aren't really giving. You aren't really giving until you give out of your substance. That's what it says, if that's what this story is about.

WHAT THE STORY IS SAYING

Is that what it is saying? I don't think so. All of that's good stuff and it needs to be said, but I don't think that that's what the story is all about.

It's a story about giving, all right, but not money. It's a story about giving yourself. Do you think that Jesus was really concerned about your money? Was He a fund raiser? No. Jesus was concerned about you. Jesus wants you to give your life.

I think if He were concerned about raising money He wouldn't lift up the widow as the model; He would lift up the people who gave out of their abundance, because they're the ones who gave the big bucks. That's the way you raise money. If they were good Jews, for instance, they gave ten percent of their abundance to the Temple and that's a lot of money. You can raise a lot of money if ten percent of the well to do people's abundance was given to you. If you are interested in raising money, then, the widow is not your model. She gave everything she had. That added up to one penny. That's all she had, she couldn't give any more. One penny. If you give out of your abundance you keep giving - year after year after year.

It doesn't make sense that Jesus would hold up the widow as a model for us if He was interested in raising money. So I don't think this story is about giving money. I think this story is about giving yourself to Him. You can see that when you get a "running start" on this passage. The way you get a running start is, you go back a few verses and begin there. Also, this little story comes at the end of a chapter and very often in the Gospels the incident at the end of the chapter is a "punch line". You won't get a punch line until you hear the whole story....so let's back up. Go back to where the Scribes ask Jesus, "What is the Great Commandment?" And Jesus replies:

"The Great Commandment is that we should give our whole being to God. Love God with your heart, and mind, and soul, and strength and your neighbor as yourself." "That's right" the Scribe says. "I agree". And Jesus responds, "Then you are not far from the Kingdom of God".

Now, what follows that is, first of all, a scathing condemnation of the Scribes and the Story of the Widow's Mite. The scribes illustrate who is far from the Kingdom. The widow illustrates who is already in the Kingdom of God. And the attack on the scribes is scathing. It hurts. It's not fair, really.

He talks about those who go about in long robes, something like mine, I suppose. He talks about them liking salutations in the market place. They like to be recognized in public and have people address them with their proper title. They like the best seats in the synagogues, the places of honor at the feasts. "Come right up here, Reverend, we have a place at the head table for you". They devour widow's houses. That is to say, they pay attention to somebody because that person might, out of gratitude, mention them in their will. That's called calculated service.

The people He described are very religious, but they are very far from the Kingdom of God. They aren't anywhere near it. They say they love God, but their behavior reveals that they really love themselves. That's the scribes and they are far from the Kingdom of God.

Then comes the story of the widow. Jesus says, "Sit down". It's as if He's talking to you and to me. "Sit down here at the temple entrance and I will show you what it looks like to be close to the Kingdom of God, what it really looks like to love God with your heart, soul, mind and strength and your neighbor as yourself".

And they sit there, Jesus and His disciples, a long time. Lots of people put in a lot of money. Jesus doesn't say anything because He is not talking about giving money. Then He says to the disciples,

"Come here...here she comes. Look. This one, right here."

And a humble woman,..no name, no status, no fanfare, no deals, no bargains, no conditions. She gives all she has. Jesus says, "That's what it's like to be in God's Kingdom." He's talking about giving yourself. He says there's no conditional giving of yourself. You can't say, "I'm going to give 5%, or 10% of my life to Jesus. You can't do that. Discipleship is not a contractual matter. It's a total, extravagant...almost reckless giving.

TODAY'S TITLE Which brings me finally to the title of this sermon, "Jack Benny's Best Line". You remember Jack Benny made a career out of appearing to be tight. Remember how he chased America's "depression blues" away with some of its skits. I remember one sketch he used over and over again, season after season, the same one...and we always responded. Confronted by a thief, a robber, the thief holding a gun to his head says to Jack Benny, "Mr. Benny...your money or your life". There's silence. The thief says again, "Your money or your life". Benny still doesn't say anything. The third time, "Your money or your life". And Benny says finally, "I'm thinking. I'm thinking."

The story of the Widow's Mite. That's what this story is designed to get you to do. Think about it. It wants you to ponder it. Giving out of our abundance. Giving out of our substance. It wants you to ask the question, when our financial canvass rolls into view two weeks from now, "Does Jesus really want my money.... or does He want my life?"

PRAYER And help each of us, O God, to answer that question in the way that would be most pleasing to Him, who is our Lord and Master, in whom we see life's highest hope and also its deepest meaning in human terms. In His spirit, we pray. Amen

METHODIST CHURCH

xth Street, New York, New York 10028

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- Coffee Hour
- Communion Preparation
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