

## GIVE IN SECRET

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen***Introduction**

“When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Be like the widow in the temple, who gave all that she had.”

It’s not uncommon to read or hear a message like this among Christians. Take a few moments to think about where you’ve heard something similar, or when you’ve spoken these words, yourself. Were you at church? With children? In a small group in your congregation?

*(Time for reflection)*

Giving money is an important topic for Christians to consider. All congregations need money to pay pastors, care for buildings, and support ministries. All people need encouragement and guidance about their relationship to money. Few things affect our daily life more. It seems appropriate that the Bible gives so much attention to money and giving.

Yet, it’s too common to see Bible passages taken out of context, turned into catchy slogans, and enforced as rules that Christians should follow. Take, for instance, that message above: “When you give, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, for God loves a cheerful giver. Think of the widow in the temple. She gave all that she had.”

If it sounds a little strange, it should. It’s made up of ideas from three different Bible passages. Yet, it sounds like a lot of stewardship messages that take

verses out of context to make a point about how Christians should give. Typically, the point of the message is something like: “Give more and feel good about it.”

Yet, when we combine biblical ideas about giving into catchy slogans, we fail to take each message seriously. In this summer Bible study, we’ll take a deeper look at three Scripture passages that are frequently used to reinforce certain “rules” about giving. We’ll consider why these passages don’t provide the neat, catchy rules that many of us have been told to follow. When we look deeper into each, we’ll see how they can give us far more insight into how and why our giving matters.

**As you prepare****Materials you may want**

Bible, open to Matthew 6:2–4

Note pad for yourself

One easel or large board for the group, to take notes during the group discussion (optional)

**Hymn**

This Little Light of Mine (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 677)

**Focus verses**

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know

what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

In this first session, we turn our attention to these three verses tucked into the middle of the Sermon on the Mount.

### READ MATTHEW 6:2–4 ALOUD.

#### **Talk about it**

In pairs (or all together if you're a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow five minutes for discussion.

1. What "rule" about giving emerges from this passage?
2. How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?

In my experience, this passage is used to encourage two rules about giving.

- Give in secret. Don't talk about your giving.
- Let others give in secret. Don't ask about their giving.

Did anyone come up with other giving rules that come from this passage? If so, share them with the group now.

We can agree that these verses have inspired many expectations—and sermons—about giving. Yet, when we zoom out and put these verses in context, we'll see that Jesus has a lot more to say than "give in secret" and that, in fact, he may not say that at all.

#### **A famous sermon**

Matthew records these verses in the middle of the Sermon on the Mount. Spanning three chapters (Matthew 5–7), it is the first and longest sermon by Jesus recorded in the Bible. After the adult Jesus is baptized (3:13–17) and spends time in the wilderness (4:1–11), he makes

his home by the Sea of Galilee. He recruits his first disciples and starts healing and teaching throughout the area. "His fame spread," Matthew writes, and he attracts large crowds wherever he goes (4:23–25).

One day, the crowds follow him up a mountain. According to Matthew, it's here that Jesus preaches some of his most memorable lines, including the Beatitudes (5:3–12), the Lord's Prayer (6:9–15), the verse about storing up treasures in heaven (5:19), the Golden Rule (7:12), and the passage about the lilies of the field (6:28). This long speech has become known as the Sermon on the Mount.

#### **Alms, prayer, and fasting**

Matthew 6:2–4 comes in the middle of the sermon, in a section that begins with these words: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven" (Matthew 6:1). With this introduction, Jesus then offers advice about three religious practices that would have been familiar to his audience—giving alms, prayer, and fasting.

**REPEAT MATTHEW 6:2–4.** Then read out loud the next two biblical selections about prayer (6:5–6) and fasting (6:16–18). (See "Good for the Soul," p. 22.)

#### **Almsgiving**

So whenever you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you. (Matthew 6:2–4)

#### **Prayer in Matthew 6:5–6**

"And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites;

for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and at the street corners, so that they may be seen by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### **Fasting 6:16–18**

“And whenever you fast, do not look dismal, like the hypocrites, for they disfigure their faces so as to show others that they are fasting. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you fast, put oil on your head and wash your face, so that your fasting may be seen not by others but by your Father who is in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

### **Talk about it**

3. Compare each set of verses. What similarities do you notice between how Jesus addresses almsgiving, prayer, and fasting? What phrases appear in all three sections?

The structure of each passage is similar. It goes something like this:

1. Don't be like the hypocrites.
2. The hypocrites do this practice to get noticed by others.
3. That's the only reward they'll get.
4. Instead, do your practice in secret.
5. God will see you and reward you.

### **Giving to the poor**

Recall how Jesus introduces this section in Matthew 6:1.

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven.”

During Jesus' time, Jews adopted at least these three prominent ways to “practice your piety,” which

is another way of saying “practice righteousness” or “make yourself right with God.” Though sinners, they had access to three rituals—alms, prayer, and fasting—to persuade God to intervene for their well-being in this life and to ensure their place with God after this life. When Jesus preached on the mountain, his audience would have been familiar with all three practices. Notice that Jesus doesn't take time to explain these practices. He says “when” you give alms, fast, and pray, not “if” you do.

The phrase “give alms” is sometimes translated “give to the poor.” It referred to a direct donation from the giver to the person in need. Beggars were an accepted part of the social structure in Jesus' time. Alms were the primary means of assisting the poor. For Jesus' audience, hearing about “alms” or “giving to the needy” would have brought to mind this kind of direct interaction between the giver and the receiver.

It's important to remember what image these words would have conjured for Jesus' audience, because it may be different from what comes to mind when we hear these words today.

### **Talk about it**

4. In pairs, share what images come to mind when you think about giving to the poor.

### **Different time. Different charity.**

The very concept of charity has changed significantly since Jesus preached about alms on a hillside in Galilee. Today, much of our charitable giving goes to organizations. Giving to the poor usually means giving to a church or another organization that carries out programs to benefit the poor.

Only a portion of our donation will end up in the hands of someone who is poor. We're okay with that because we think organized programs are more effective at helping people deal with poverty or get out of poverty. We usually frown on giving to beggars in the

street, preferring that those who are poor seek help from the organizations we support.

Today, we tend to “give to the poor” by donating time or money to organizations that do one of three things:

- give away immediate assistance, like food, clothing, utility assistance or medical care.
- help people find jobs or otherwise become self-sufficient.
- advocate for government to spend more of our shared tax resources on programs to help the poor, and to pass other laws that benefit those who live in poverty.

When we compare this type of charity to almsgiving, two significant differences appear.

### **Less contact with the poor**

Today, our ways of giving to the poor involve less direct interaction with the people who are poor. Almsgiving, on the other hand, was specifically a way for the donor to interact with the recipient. In fact, the interaction was the primary focus of almsgiving. Jews in Jesus’ time understood that God was present, or incarnate, among the poor. To interact with the poor was to interact with God. The importance of this act was so great that, by Jesus’ time, many Jewish texts considered almsgiving to be of equal or greater value than sacrifices made in the Temple.

Through alms, individual Jews interacted with those who were poor and thereby interacted with God. Observant Jews would have seen beggars as an opportunity to carry out an important ritual: giving alms. (See “With You,” p. 6.)

According to Matthew’s gospel, this understanding of alms was at the heart of Jesus’ ministry. In Matthew 25:31–46, Jesus tells his disciples that they will ultimately be judged on the basis of one factor—whether

they fed the hungry, welcomed the stranger, gave drink to the thirsty, and visited the prisoner. If not, he says, God will say, “Truly I tell you, just as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me” (Matthew 25:45). Then, he says that God will send them “away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life” (46).

For Jesus, there was something important and unique about interacting with those who receive our gifts. We should take note of this. If our giving does not include interactions with those who are poor, we may be missing something that was vital to Jesus’ understanding of how people interact with God. (See, “Because We Love,” p. 19.)

### **More focus on change**

The second difference between almsgiving and modern charity is the goal of the gift. Much of our charity today is aimed at change. We try to change an individual’s situation by supporting programs that give him food during a period of unemployment or help her get education to become more self-sufficient.

We try to bring change to many by reducing poverty in entire communities and nations. We have different ideas about how to do this (Improve our schools? Increase wages? Build affordable housing? End wars? Strengthen the social safety net?) but the goal is the same: to eliminate the factors that perpetuate poverty. Often, we speak of “ending the cycle of poverty.”

Almsgiving was not used as a way to end poverty for anyone. In his book titled *Charity*, theologian Gary Anderson says that this would have been unthinkable for Jesus and his followers: “To think of poverty as a social problem that could be solved was not really imaginable in the mindset of pre-modern man.”

In a society with no instinct to end or reduce poverty, almsgiving provided a socially acceptable way for society’s most vulnerable to have their basic needs met. In that time and place, family networks determined

one's social status, way of earning a living, and access to resources. Those who received alms, such as widows and orphans, were typically estranged from these familial networks or without them altogether. Almsgiving was an acceptable way for the society to deal with their need.

Our ideas about charity have changed. For the past 2,000 years, Jesus' concern for the poor has inspired Christians to organize new ways of responding to poverty. From shared community treasuries among the early Christians to hospitals and orphanages in the Middle Ages to advocacy networks and social enterprise today, Christians have expanded their imagination of what is possible and responded to poverty in new ways. (See "Stretching the Broth," p. 16.)

Yet, all of this came later, after Jesus preached on the hillside in Galilee about giving your alms in secret.

### **Beware of your motivations**

#### **READ AGAIN MATTHEW 6:2-4.**

We've concluded that Jesus was not talking about the type of charity we do today. Instead, he's talking about a spiritual practice called almsgiving. It's a practice that we don't do today, at least not in the same way that Jesus and his followers did.

If we turn Matthew 6:2-4 into a catchy slogan about giving to charity in secret, then we miss the rule that Jesus was trying to convey. This rule was about much more than giving. It is summed up in the verse that introduces this section of the sermon: "Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven."

Remember that practicing piety refers to the acts you do to strengthen your relationship with God. Today, we may no longer emphasize alms, prayer, and fasting, but we still believe in the idea that we can and should take action to grow in faith and reorient our lives to God.

No matter what the act is, the rule is the same: Beware of your motivations. Don't do these acts in order to be seen by others.

### **Activity**

5. In 1 to 3 words, write down something you do as a spiritual practice. It could be alms, prayer, or fasting, but it might also be journaling, a morning run, or something else entirely.
6. Return to Matthew 6:2-4. Replace the words "give alms" with the words you wrote. See how Jesus' advice can apply to other practices.

### **Does "secret" mean "secret"?**

Doing things in secret is one way to avoid the temptation of unhealthy motivations. But did Jesus mean that we should always do all spiritual practices in secret? That's the catchy slogan that has emerged from this verse: Don't tell anyone about your giving. Don't ask about their giving.

Yet, if we take Jesus literally about giving only in secret, then wouldn't we also need to take him literally in verses 5-6 and avoid all forms of public prayer?

If praying in secret is a rule, we violate it every time we worship.

When we consider that Jesus is warning against unhealthy motivations, against doing spiritual practices *in order to be seen*, we can see that he may be using exaggeration to make his point. Take, for instance, the line "do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing." To follow that advice is physically impossible, but the image is evocative of the unhealthy motivations he is warning against. If you are worried about your right hand impressing your left, how much more will you be concerned about impressing other people.

### **Let your light shine**

If we use Matthew 6:2-4 to justify secretive giving, then we also ignore an equally important message from

the same Sermon on the Mount. If you sang the hymn at the beginning, you know this verse well.

**READ MATTHEW 5:14–16.** “You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

According to these verses, we are to let others see our good works. If charitable giving is a good work (and Jesus seems to think it is) then shouldn't others see it?

Christians treat giving as a spiritual act, a way of practicing our piety and reorienting our lives to God. We believe that everything we have comes from God and God calls us to share these gifts by giving to our churches and other worthy causes.

There are many ways in which sharing your giving experience can inspire others to give more and grow in their relationship with God. Think of all the Christian finance experts who share their giving experiences through radio, videos, and books.

Has your congregation ever hosted a workshop about financial and estate planning? This could be a great benefit to members who are burdened with worry about how to care for themselves and their family. (See “Live Generously,” p. 10.)

Likewise, many churches invite personal testimonies about giving during worship to inspire others in the congregation to support the church's important ministries. These are all ways in which talking about your giving can inspire others to give glory to God.

We get a much better set of rules when we read these two passages together.

The call to let your light shine in Matthew 5:14–16 does not dampen the warning that comes later, in Matthew 6:2–4. Rather, it makes the warning all the more necessary.

Doing good works and letting your light shine are crucial parts of a Christian life. However, Jesus cautions, there's a risk that comes with letting your light shine to glorify God.

The risk is that you'll start expecting others to shine their light on you. When you do good works, it's likely that you will be seen by others, and it will be tempting to let their approval become your motivation. Beware of this. If you want to progress spiritually, find a way to get your original motivation back.

### **Talk about it**

7. In pairs, respond to this question: Has there been a time when you realized that you were giving to charity for the wrong reason? How did it affect you? Did you make any changes to get your motivations in check?

### **Prayer**

Pray the prayer that Jesus taught in the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew 6:9–13.

Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name.  
Your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as in heaven.  
Give us today our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins,  
as we forgive those who sin against us.  
Save us from the time of trial  
and deliver us from evil.  
Amen.

### **Further reading**

*Charity: The Place of the Poor in the Biblical Tradition* by Gary Anderson, 2013, by Yale University Press. 🌿

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# BE LIKE THE WIDOW

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen*

## Materials you may want

**Bible**, open to Luke 21

**Note pad** for yourself *(optional)*

**One easel or large board** for someone to take notes during the group discussion *(optional)*

## Hymn

“Canticle of the Turning” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 723)

## Focus verse

### LUKE 21:1–4

*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 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.”*

This month, we turn our attention to a story that is commonly called “the widow’s mite.” Before you read the verses in the Bible, is there anyone in your group willing to tell the story in her own words? If someone else has a different version in mind, she is welcome to share, too.

When you’re ready, ask someone to read aloud from Luke 21:1–4. We’ll use Luke’s version for our

study. It’s similar to the version in Mark 12:41–44. If you like, read this version, too.

## Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you’re a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

1. **What rule about giving do we often take from this passage?**
2. **How do you feel about this rule?**
3. **Do you follow it?**

## Using and misusing the text

Many preachers and teachers use this story to encourage sacrificial giving, to say that Jesus wants us to give more of our resources (money, time, skills) to the church, just like the widow.

Sacrificial giving is about justice, they say. If the widow can give everything she has to live on, it’s only just that you and I, who have more, give more of our abundance.

In an article called “Widow’s Mite or Widow’s Plight,” André Resner says this story is a good example of a common problem in biblical interpretation. Our traditional use of a text can blind us from seeing any-

thing other than what we've always seen (*Review and Expositor*, Fall 2010).

What if Jesus is pointing to a bigger injustice? In a society where widows were to be cared for, what if Jesus is mad that the widow would give up everything she has—and that the temple would allow it to happen? What if *that* is the injustice?

In this month's Bible study, we'll take a cue from Resner and consider what we may be missing because of our preconceived notions about this story. (See "What Makes Jesus Mad," p. 26.)

### When and where

#### READ AGAIN LUKE 21:1–4.

In the Gospels of Luke and Mark, this story appears during the last week of Jesus' life. It is set a few days after Jesus enters Jerusalem on a donkey to the crowd's cheers of praise. Within the week, he would be arrested and put to death after sharing the Passover meal with his disciples. Until then, he spent his days going to the temple, teaching his disciples and others who gathered with them. That's where we meet him in this story.

For Jesus and his fellow Jews, the temple in Jerusalem was arguably the most important place on earth. Individuals and families brought their sacrifices, and the priests carried out the ritual actions required to make those sacrifices satisfactory to God.

The temple comprised a massive complex of gathering spaces, marble walls, columns, and staircases. Jesus would likely have been teaching in these outer areas of the temple complex. Women were only allowed to go as far as the Court of Women, which contained the treasury where people deposited coin offerings into dedicated receptacles. This is where Jesus encountered the widow.

The timing of this story is also important. It is the festival of Passover, arguably the most important and busiest time of year in the temple. Thousands of Jews would have come from throughout the Roman Empire

to bring sacrifices and enjoy the party. For those who wanted to celebrate Passover to its fullest, Jerusalem was the place to be.

Jesus was practically guaranteed a good crowd when he showed up to the temple each day during the Passover week. His message, however, was a direct challenge to the pomp and fanfare around him. His teachings during that week were highly critical of the temple and the religious authorities. Passover was their time to shine, but Jesus was not playing along.

### Tensions are high

The story of the widow's mite follows a series of tense interactions between Jesus and the religious authorities. Luke writes:

*Every day he was teaching in the temple. The chief priests, the scribes, and the leaders of the people kept looking for a way to kill him; but they did not find anything they could do, for all the people were spellbound by what they heard. (19:47–48)*

Among his more provocative remarks, Jesus predicts the destruction of Jerusalem (Luke 19:41–44). He then makes a big scene when he flips over the tables of the moneychangers (Luke 19:45–46). (John puts this scene near the beginning of his gospel). Then he tells a parable that seems to be critical of the temple authorities (Luke 20:9–19). They try multiple times to trick him into saying something unlawful so they can have him arrested. Jesus doesn't fall for it. Then, Luke writes:

*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 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."*

### What the text says and does not say

Our goal in this Bible study is to see how our precon-

## WHAT THE TEXT TELLS US

1. Jesus sees rich people and a widow making offerings.
2. He explains that the widow has just given up everything she has to live on.
3. He says this is different from the rich people giving out of their abundance.
4. He says that the widow has given “more” because her gift is a greater proportion of her assets.

## WHAT IT DOESN'T TELL US

*(add your/your group's thoughts to this list)*

1. How Jesus feels about the widow's actions.

ceived notions can keep us from seeing what's actually there.

So, let's make a chart (See above). On one side, we'll put what the text is clearly telling us, based only on Luke 21:1–4. On the other side, let's put what we do not know.

In these four verses, Jesus does not tell us whether he likes the widow's offering or the rich people's offerings. Popularly, we assume that he is praising the widow when he says that she has “put in more than all of them.” This, however, is a preconceived notion that we bring to the text.

From these four verses, we don't know if Jesus is pleased with the widow's offering. However, if we accept the idea that he is pleased, then we have to accept this conclusion: Jesus likes the idea of a widow giving up everything she has to religious authorities, even when that gift makes her destitute.

### **Talk about it**

Are you comfortable with this conclusion? Does it match your understanding of Jesus? Based on Luke 21:1–4, do you see any evidence that Jesus wants us to

follow the widow's example?

We've considered that these four verses may provide little evidence that Jesus admires the widow or wants us to follow her lead. Yet, is there any evidence that he dislikes the widow's offering?

We find some important clues by going back two verses in the story. Recall what happened earlier at the temple, during Jesus' tense back-and-forth with the chief priests and scribes. Having failed to get Jesus arrested, they presumably gave up. Luke says, “they no longer dared to ask him another question” (Luke 20:40). Jesus, on the other hand, would not let it go. He turned to his disciples, and without lowering his voice, made a bold statement about his challengers. You can almost hear the derisive tone in Jesus' voice:

*Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love to be greeted with respect in the market places, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation. (Luke 20:46–47)*

This is the moment when Luke says, “He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the

treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins.” Then, as if to underline his point about the scribes, Jesus says,

*“Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 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.”* (Luke 21:3–4)

Here, the repeated reference to widows deserves our attention. Just seconds before seeing the widow in the temple, Jesus was blaming the scribes and priests for devouring the house of widows. Then he looks up and sees the widow making her offering. Could it be that her offering is the perfect illustration of what he was just saying?

### **The widow’s plight**

Widows were among the most vulnerable people in Jesus’ place and time, though some had means (e.g., John Mark’s mother in Acts 12:12-13). When Jesus identifies the widow as “poor,” he uses the Greek word *ptoche*. This was a word used for those whose poverty reduced them to begging. In the social structure of the time, a woman’s family relationships determined her social status, where she lived, how her household earned a living, and what assets she had to spend. Widows and orphans, deprived of vital family relationships, were especially vulnerable to losing the social and material supports they needed to survive.

In light of this need, Jews and early Christians were known for placing a high priority on serving the poor. In last month’s Bible study, we looked at the spiritual practice of almsgiving. It was based on the Jewish belief that God was incarnate among the poor, so much so that many Jewish writers said that giving to the poor was equal to bringing a sacrifice to the temple.

This idea was reinforced in the early church. The book of James says: “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to care for orphans

and widows in their distress, and to keep oneself unstained by the world” (James 1:27). (See “The Early Church in Jerusalem,” p. 22.)

In saying this, James echoed a long Jewish tradition of placing alms at the center of Jewish practice. Jesus’ own ministry seems to reinforce this worldview in which interacting with the poor is the best way to please God. Recall from the June Bible study Jesus’ final words to his disciples in the Gospel of Matthew. He says in no uncertain terms that God will judge them based on whether they feed the hungry, heal the sick, and visit the prisoner.

### **Pleased or disgusted?**

The popular reading of the widow’s mite says that Jesus was pleased by the widow’s offering. Yet, when we consider how Jesus felt about serving the poor, especially widows, we can imagine that the sight of the widow giving her last coin was not pleasant at all. We can imagine that it may, in fact, have violated Jesus’ ideals about how the temple should function.

Let’s review the scene. Jesus is teaching in the temple during Passover. The scribes and priests are trying to have him killed. He can hardly stand the sight of these hypocrites, parading around in their long robes, expecting everyone to treat them with respect while they take from widows and allow the temple to violate one of the central tenets of the Jewish faith: care for the widow and orphan. Then, as soon as he’s said all this, Jesus looks up and sees exactly what he’s been talking about—a poor widow giving away everything she has to those same priests.

Could it be that Jesus is mad at the widow for giving it away? We don’t know. What Luke tells us is that Jesus is furious at the religious leaders who perpetuate a religious system in which it would be acceptable for a widow to lose everything she has for the sake of the temple.

Jesus expressed this anger immediately before he sees

the widow (Luke 20:46–47). The anger is confirmed by what he says after the widow makes her offering.

**READ LUKE 21:1–4 AGAIN, THIS TIME CONTINUING ON TO VERSES 5 AND 6.**

*He looked up and saw rich people putting their gifts into the treasury; he also saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. He said, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them; 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.*

*When some were speaking about the temple, how it was adorned with beautiful stones and gifts dedicated to God, he said, “As for these things that you see, the days will come when not one stone will be left upon another; all will be thrown down.”*

Seen in this context, it seems likely that Jesus is not advocating for anyone—rich or poor—to give *more* to the temple. Instead, he is questioning the very premise that the temple is worth supporting at all, at least in the long run.

In fact, by centering on the widow as the focal point of this story, have we missed Jesus’ point entirely? Could it be that Jesus is far more concerned about the bigger picture—a religious system that has turned its back from its primary obligation to care for the poor? Could it be that the widow is not a role model? Could it be that Jesus is more concerned with changing how the church treats the poor, and less concerned with how individuals give to the church?

**Talk about it**

How do you feel after hearing this interpretation of the widow’s mite?

If you accept that the widow is not a role model, what do you lose? What do you gain?

**What about the widow?**

If the widow is not a role model for us to follow, then what

do we do with her? Do we pay less attention to her?

To the contrary, Jesus seems to be saying that we should pay more attention to the widow. If this passage has anything to say to us today, it is calling us to pay more attention to the most vulnerable, to those without rights and resources. It calls us to take notice of how they are impacted by churches and other systems in which we have power and influence.

Yet, the attention Jesus calls for is not to turn the widow’s story into a generic message about our giving behavior. When we do this, we turn our attention away from the widow’s situation and instead start worrying about our own generosity. We start to ask ourselves, “Are we giving enough?”

What if Jesus’ message is this—pay far less attention to whether you qualify or are recognized as generous, and far more attention to meeting the needs of the poor? Jesus seems to want religious communities in which those with abundance give enough that the community can and does care for the poor and vulnerable.

If we want to follow Jesus’ example, we will show up where decisions are made and where our faith is proclaimed, just as Jesus showed up in the temple during Passover, and demand that sufficient resources go toward serving the poor and vulnerable.

In this way, Jesus calls us to focus even more on the widow and those she represents. We are not, however, to turn them into stories that inspire us to be better people. We are to see them as they are when they are suffering to the point of destitution. And, we are to see ourselves as we are, inspired and called by faith to demand justice, especially from our churches and religious leaders.

**What about sacrificial giving?**

If the widow is not a role model for sacrificial giving, does this mean that Jesus does not want us to give more of ourselves to the church, including time, talent, and money?

No. It just means that we can't use this story to make that point. The Bible gives us many other verses that offer specific, if competing, opinions about how much we should give away. Consider just a few:

- A rich man asks Jesus what he must do to obtain eternal life, and Jesus tells him to sell everything he owns and give it to the poor. (Mark 10, Matthew 19, Luke 18)
- Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for not being able to care for their parents because they've given all of their property to God. (Mark 7:10-13)
- Paul tells the Christians in Rome to present their bodies as a living sacrifice to God. (Romans 12:1)
- In Acts, Paul tells the church leaders at Ephesus to practice a trade and earn their own income so that they don't depend on charity but can instead offer charity to the weak. (Acts 20:35)
- The Old Testament introduces the concept of tithing, or giving a portion of income to serve the larger community. (Deuteronomy 14:22)

An entire Bible study series could be devoted to exploring the different opinions about sacrificial giving in the

Bible. Our experience with the widow's mite should remind us, however, to be cautious about coming to quick conclusions.

For now, the important consideration is this: The story of the widow's mite may not be a call to sacrificial giving. It may be a revelation of how mad Jesus gets when the temple does not serve the poor. If we make it a story about personal giving, we fail to see that Jesus is talking about community accountability. We fail to see that Jesus is far less concerned with who gives enough, and far more concerned with how the religious community uses what it receives.

### Prayer

God, our creator, you reveal yourself in anger and encouragement. Open our hearts to accept your challenge of seeing the poor and vulnerable as they are, and seeing our churches and institutions as they are. Give us the courage to be angry and the energy to help bring about change. In your name, Amen. 🌿

**Emma Crossen** is the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School, and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.

## WELCA @ ELCA Youth Gathering, July 15-19 2015



Youth can learn about human trafficking in the Community Life area at the Cobo Center and adult leaders can enjoy a space just for them. Tell your congregation's group to find Women of the ELCA at the ELCA Youth Gathering.

Women of the ELCA



# GOD LOVES A CHEERFUL GIVER

NO CATCHY SLOGANS *by Emma Crossen*

## Materials you may want

**Bible**, open to 2 Corinthians 8-9

**Note pad** for yourself

**One easel or large board** for someone to take notes during the group discussion

## Opening hymn

“We all are one in mission” (*Evangelical Lutheran Worship* 576)

## Focus verse

### 2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

In this session, we’ll look at Paul’s second letter to the church at Corinth, from which we get one of the most succinct and upbeat slogans about giving: “God loves a cheerful giver.”

## READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:7

### Talk about it

In pairs (or all together if you’re a small group), share your responses to these questions. Allow 5 minutes for discussion.

What rule about giving do we often take from this passage? How do you feel about this rule? Do you follow it?

“God loves a cheerful giver.” It’s short and upbeat. It fits nicely on a pew envelope or thank-you card, and it makes a memorable sermon title.

It doesn’t tell us what to do. The sentence is not a command. Rather it reminds us of God’s preference. Yet, as the phrase is used, it usually carries a tone of criticism or condescension toward another person. Today, “cheerful” usually refers to someone who is openly happy and optimistic. It’s one thing to feel cheerful. It’s another thing to be told to feel cheerful. “God loves a cheerful giver” usually implies that “You’re not being cheerful enough,” “You should be happier,” or “Stop worrying and enjoy giving away your money.”

## Cheerful, willing, and eager

The Greek word translated as “cheerful” is *hilaron*. 2 Corinthians 9:7 is its only appearance in the Bible. In the society in which Paul wrote, the word *hilaria* was used to designate festival days. The idea of amusement and celebration resonates with our contemporary understanding of cheerful. If we read verse 7 in its entirety, we see another dynamic implied by *hilaron*.

*Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*

Paul contrasts “cheerful” with “reluctant” and “under compulsion.” A cheerful giver, then, is one who gives willingly and eagerly.

So we can change the slogan to “God loves a will-

ing and eager giver.” Even with this additional explanation, the slogan still sounds somewhat condescending. It’s one thing to be willing and eager. It’s another thing to be told to be willing and eager. It still puts the burden on *you*, the giver, to have the right attitude about your gift. Donors bring legitimate concerns to their giving. Is Paul dismissing these concerns? Is he saying, “Cheer up. Don’t worry about it. Just give. Be happy.”

Of course, it should come as no surprise that Paul was not writing a catchy slogan. He probably did not intend his words to be used 2,000 years later as a general rule about giving. To the contrary, he was writing to a specific group—the church in Corinth—to evoke a specific response about a specific gift: a collection of money for the church in Jerusalem. (See “Prayers Made Tangible,” p. 10.)

### **A gift for Jerusalem**

2 Corinthians is addressed to “the church of God that is in Corinth, including all the saints throughout Achaia” (2 Corinthians 1:1) and was probably written around 57 C.E. Paul founded the church in Corinth approximately five years prior to writing this letter. During that time, he wrote an earlier letter to the church, which appears in the New Testament as 1 Corinthians. He also visited the church at least once. At the beginning of 2 Corinthians, he refers to this as a “painful visit” and urges the church to forgive the person in their community who caused the pain (2 Corinthians 2:5–8).

Paul has a long history with the church at Corinth when he writes 2 Corinthians. Our focus verse comes from chapters 8–9, in which Paul is writing about a specific monetary collection called the “ministry for the saints.” This collection was a major project in Paul’s ministry. He mobilized several Gentile churches, including those at Corinth and Macedonia, to take a special collection over several years to benefit the church in Jerusalem. Paul wrote about this offering:

### **READ 1 CORINTHIANS 16:1–4**

*Now concerning the collection for the saints: you should follow the directions I gave to the churches of Galatia. On the first day of every week, each of you is to put aside and save whatever extra you earn, so that collections need not be taken when I come. And when I arrive, I will send any whom you approve with letters to take your gift to Jerusalem. If it seems advisable that I should go also, they will accompany me.*

Jerusalem was the capital of Judea, a region largely populated by Jews but under the authority of the Roman Empire. Judea is where Jesus carried out his ministry. The church in Jerusalem was made up of Jewish Christians. Though he devoted his ministry to building churches among the Gentiles, Paul had a special concern for the Jerusalem church. In his writings to the Gentile churches, which make up much of the New Testament, Paul suggests that the Gentiles owe a debt of gratitude or compensation for the spiritual blessings that the Jewish Christians gave them.

In writing about the “ministry for the saints” Paul says: *At present, however, I am going to Jerusalem in a ministry to the saints; for Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to share their resources with the poor among the saints at Jerusalem. They were pleased to do this, and indeed they owe it to them; for if the Gentiles have come to share in their spiritual blessings, they ought also to be of service to them in material things. (Romans 15:25–27)*

But we’re getting ahead of ourselves. Let’s return to 2 Corinthians 8–9, which was written before the offering was complete. In 2 Corinthians 8:1, Paul says that the Macedonian church has already turned over its offering. In the next two chapters, Paul reveals that he is concerned that the church at Corinth won’t follow through on its portion of the offering. This is the context in which he writes, “God loves a cheerful giver.” In chapters 8 and 9, Paul shows why he is concerned and

what he's doing to make sure the gift happens.

### **Talk about it**

Read out loud each set of verses and, as a group, answer the corresponding question.

#### **2 CORINTHIANS 9:3–5.**

What steps is Paul taking to make sure the Corinthians are ready to turn over their offering for Jerusalem? Why is he concerned?

#### **2 CORINTHIANS 8:16–19.**

Who are the brothers whom Paul refers to in 9:3?

#### **2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–8.**

Why does Paul mention the church in Macedonia in his letter to the church in Corinth?

### **Persuading the Corinthians**

This portion of the letter is an excellent example of rhetoric, or writing intended to persuade and impress Paul's audience. Paul is not just communicating the facts—he is playing to the emotions of the Corinthian church. Specifically, he appeals to their pride and competitive spirit. He starts by making sure they know that the Macedonian church has already turned over its part of the offering. Paul says, “Their abundant joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part” (8:2). He appeals to the Corinthians' pride by praising them for their spiritual gifts and, in the same sentence, points out that the Macedonians exceed them in producing material offerings. “We want you to excel also in this generous undertaking” (8:7).

Lest the Corinthians feel inferior, Paul gives them credit for the Macedonians' generosity. In 9:2, he says he has been bragging to the Macedonians about the Corinthians' eagerness and that “your zeal has stirred up most of them.” Even so, Paul goes on to explain

that he is sending the brothers ahead to make sure the Corinthians follow through. “Otherwise,” Paul says, “if some Macedonians come with me and find that you are not ready, we would be humiliated—to say nothing of you” (2 Corinthians 9:4).

By praising the Corinthians and comparing them to the Macedonians, Paul is using rhetoric to evoke a specific response. He wants the Corinthians to give willingly and eagerly when he arrives with the Macedonians to collect the offering and take it to Jerusalem.

### **Talk about it**

In small groups, respond to these questions:

What do you think about Paul's message? Have you ever been part of a group that pledged to make a donation to another group? Was there any disagreement about whether to proceed? How would your group have reacted to receiving a letter like this?

Moving on from 2 Corinthians 9:5, Paul's rhetoric turns toward God. He moves away from the logistical details (that is, sending the brothers) and the relationship between Paul, the Macedonians, and the Corinthians. In 9:6–15, he focuses on what this collection means to God and how God's laws are revealed through the collection.

#### **READ 2 CORINTHIANS 9:6–15**

This is where our catchy slogan appears: “God loves a cheerful giver.” In the context of the large passage, we can see that Paul is using this general statement about God to evoke a particular reaction from the Corinthians. He wants them to follow through on the collection for Jerusalem so they don't embarrass him or themselves. Paul is not saying, “Always be willing to give, no matter what.” Rather, “God loves a cheerful giver” is a form of rhetoric intended to persuade a group within his community about an offering that was important to the entire community.

## **We're in this together**

As a catchy slogan, “God loves a cheerful giver” is usually aimed at the individual giver. We use this slogan to encourage individuals to give joyfully, eagerly, or willingly. The burden of giving cheerfully falls on the individual.

When we use it this way, we miss a critical dynamic in Paul’s writing. On every level, Paul is saying to the Corinthians, “We’re in this together. Your gift to Jerusalem is part of a larger ministry to the saints. And I am going to do whatever it takes to make sure that we all follow through on this important ministry.” In saying to Corinth, “Don’t let me down,” he’s also saying, “I won’t let you fail.”

### **Talk about it**

In pairs, look at the following verses to answer these questions:

How is Paul showing the Corinthians that their offering is part of a shared project, that the whole community values the gifts they bring, and that the whole community is behind them?

**2 CORINTHIANS 8:1–4**

**2 CORINTHIANS 8:16–24**

**2 CORINTHIANS 9:1–5**

Last session, we looked at the story of the widow’s mite. We asked this question: What if Jesus is less concerned with individual generosity and more concerned with how the community uses its resources to care for the poor? What if the measure of an individual’s giving is found not only in how much she gives, but in whether she is holding her community accountable to use all its gifts appropriately?

It seems, here, that Paul shares the same concern. He models a leadership that looks at the whole community to identify where the need is greatest and to hold all members accountable for giving what they can

to meet that need.

Paul is leading and teaching his Gentile churches, spread throughout a geographic area, to understand themselves as part of the same body of Christ, each with gifts to bring to enhance the common good. He wants each of these churches to understand themselves as part of a single body with a responsibility to share their resources to care for those in greatest need among them.

Unity is a major theme of Paul’s ministry. In his first letter to the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

*For just as the body is one and has many members, and all the members of the body, though many, are one body, so it is with Christ. For in the one Spirit we were all baptized into one body—Jews or Greeks, slaves or free—and we were all made to drink of one Spirit....*

*The eye cannot say to the hand, ‘I have no need of you,’ nor again the head to the feet, ‘I have no need of you.’ On the contrary, the members of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable, and those members of the body that we think less honorable we clothe with greater honor, and our less respectable members are treated with greater respect; whereas our more respectable members do not need this. But God has so arranged the body, giving the greater honor to the inferior member, that there may be no dissension within the body, but the members may have the same care for one another. If one member suffers, all suffer together with it; if one member is honored, all rejoice together with it. (1 Corinthians 12:12–13, 21–26)*

In 2 Corinthians 8–9, we see the lengths to which Paul will go as a leader to ensure this happens. Yes, God loves a cheerful giver. Paul shows us, however, that the burden for giving cheerfully is not on the individual. The burden is on the community to structure its offerings and encourage its members in such a way that they are willing and eager to give of what they have to care for one another.

### Talk about it

What are the factors that prevent you from giving cheerfully, without reservation? Make a list.

How can your church community help to address those concerns?

### Prayer

God of Corinth, Macedonia, Jerusalem and (your city) \_\_\_\_\_, thank you for these letters of Paul that show how you have been present with your church through the ages. Help us to make our congregations into communities where we challenge and accompany each other to be willing and eager to give. In your name, Amen. 🌿

**Emma Crossen** the development director at the Courage Campaign. She studied ministry at Harvard Divinity School, and previously served Women of the ELCA as director for stewardship and development.

### Limits of Wealth

In a detailed study of the role of money in the early church, church historian Justo González summarizes the relation of faith to wealth in Christianity's first three centuries. Those were the centuries before the Emperor Constantine adopted Christianity as the official religion of the Empire and made it fashionable for the rich and powerful to become Christian. Gonzalez tells a story that is absent from most of our textbooks; the values he recounts are preserved today mostly in the monastic tradition, with its emphasis on the limits of wealth. Here are some of the limits placed on wealth by the early church as Gonzalez enumerates them:

1. Lending money with interest is universally condemned;
2. In giving to the poor, a Christian is lending God's own money back to God;
3. Money is not evil but it should not be accumulated or loved for itself;
4. Private property is OK but it should not be abused;
5. One should keep for oneself only what is necessary for life and all the rest, which is superfluous, should be given to the poor,

because all property ultimately belongs to God and we have done nothing to deserve it; money is a gift of grace;

6. To accumulate wealth is to pervert it, and to keep wealth is to be a thief.
7. Ten percent is the bare minimum that one must give; and, finally,
8. Some communities demanded that the rich give up all of their wealth to become Christian.

Justo L. González, *Faith and Wealth: A History of Early Christian Ideas on the Origin, Significance, and Use of Money*. (Wipf and Stock, 1990), pp. 226-229.

### Questions for discussion

Which of these principles are ignored by today's wealth-oriented society, with its focus on an individual's ownership and use of private property?

Do any of these principles demand that poor people give out of their poverty?

Do these principles center on individual donors or are they more communal, as is Paul's appeal in 2 Corinthians?