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Andrew M. Davis

Sermon Notes

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An Obscure Widow's Timeless Gift

Luke 21:1-4

Anyone who knows me knows that one of my favorite movies is "It's a Wonderful Life" ... shown every Christmas on TV, it's become a seasonal favorite among many Americans

It was shot in 1946, directed by Frank Capra. Capra loved to elevate the common person, to celebrate Mr. Everyman... as he did in other films like "Mr. Deeds Goes to Town" and "Mr. Smith Goes to Washington." But his recipe of elevating the common person, showing him to be worthy of respect, showing that his life is worth living and that his deeds are worth knowing... those themes reach a pinnacle in "It's a Wonderful Life."

The film focuses on George Bailey, who lived his whole life in a common little town named Bedford Falls. He is shown to be a hard-working capable, intelligent man who cares for others and is loyal to his father and sacrificially faithful to his promises. But he yearns for something more... he wants to escape that small town scene and see the world... he wants to achieve great things: build long bridges and towering skyscrapers; he wants to do SOMETHING WORTHWHILE WITH HIS LIFE; in fact, he is desperate to escape what he sees as commonplace mediocrity and go do GREAT THINGS SOMEWHERE ELSE

Yet the life he is living there in Bedford Falls is far more worthwhile than he thinks... as the President of "Bailey Building and Loan," a financier for simple homes that common folks live in and raise their families in, he is making a massive difference.

At one point, though he has no desires to waste his life following his father's footsteps running the "Bailey Building and Loan," he passionately argues for its existence against the villain of the movie – Henry Potter – the rich man who wants to shut the Building and Loan down.

"Just remember this, Mr. Potter, that this rabble you're talking about, they do most of the working and paying and living and dying in this community. Well, is it too much to have them work and pay and live and die in a

couple of decent rooms and a bath? Anyway, my father didn't think so. People were human beings to him."

Well, George Bailey ends up, as far as he's concerned, TRAPPED by the Bailey Building and Loan; and, as far as he's concerned, wasting his life in Bedford Falls doing very ordinary things.

Then a financial crisis hits his business and his personal life, he has reached the end of his rope. His hopes are crushed and his dreams turn to ashes, and he considers taking his life. But an angel named Clarence comes and restores his will to live by showing George what the world would have been like if he'd never been born, and therefore, what a wonderful life he's had... that the ordinary every day work and caring he's done for others really does matter in the grand scheme of things.

This was exactly what Frank Capra, the movie's director, sought to do in most of his movies... elevate the common, unsung person by showing them the grand value of their ordinary lives.

But no one has ever done that better than Jesus Christ. No one knew that preciousness of every single human being and every single day on earth better than Jesus did. And his judgment of the meager offering made by an unnamed widow as recorded in Luke 21 is clear evidence of this.

Here we get a foretaste of Judgment Day, when some obscure people who did precious works of sacrifice for the Lord will begin to shine for all eternity.

Your daily life matters eternally

Your small gift matters eternally

Your work matters eternally

This summer: Encounters with Jesus

Basic concept of the series: Jesus is the Savior of the world, who came down from heaven to save sinners by dying on the cross for them. Each and every one of us must have a transforming encounter with Jesus by faith... we must each come to a place of recognition that apart from Christ, we are lost... but that in Christ we will live eternally... and that life is full, rich, and abundant

Jesus Christ lived, died, and rose again almost two thousand years ago. We cannot have a normal encounter with him as we do with people who are alive today. But there is an overpowering connection between Jesus and the Bible... the Apostle John calls him "The Word"

John 1:1 In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

Only by the Word of God can we know anything about Jesus Christ

It is by reading the Bible, and especially the Gospels – Matthew, Mark, Luke, John – that we can have an encounter with Christ; but that only happens by faith

Now this summer, we have already seven sermons in this series, “Encounters with Jesus” ... this is the eighth in the series.

This “encounter with Jesus,” however, did not occur between Jesus and the widow at all... as far as we know, she never knew that Jesus was watching her put her copper coins in the offering, and never heard the comments he made to his disciples about her

Rather, the encounter with Jesus here will be all of us as we all him to search us and know our hearts when it comes to our own level of sacrificial giving

I. Jesus the Judge of All Giving

A. The Account

Luke 21:1-4 As he looked up, Jesus saw the rich putting their gifts into the temple treasury. ² He also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins. ³ "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

B. The Image of Jesus Sitting and Watching and Commenting is a Powerful One

1. Jesus is the Judge of all Humanity

John 5:22 The Father judges no one, but has entrusted all judgment to the Son

2. Jesus will call every one of us to account for everything we do in our lives

2 Corinthians 5:10 For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

3. This definitely includes our MONEY ... but also our TIME and our ENERGY... how did we spend it? Did we SACRIFICE???

4. So the powerful image of Jesus sitting in the Temple area and watching all the giving and judging it... is ESSENTIAL

C. Jesus Summoned His Disciples So He Could Instruct Them

Mark 12:43 Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others."

1. He wanted them to learn something from this widow... he was making her an object lesson for their benefit
2. By the Holy Spirit inspiring Mark and Luke to write this encounter down, it is also clear he wants all of us throughout all time to learn the lessons of giving that he was about to teach them

D. Understanding the Physical Setting

1. Jesus is sitting opposite where the offerings were put
2. According to Jewish historical records, there were thirteen trumpet-shaped chests into which offerings could be made... the trumpets were made of metal and all the offerings were given in coins, so the sound of the offerings resounded

E. This Account is Sandwiched by Jesus' severe rebuke of the religious leaders and his prediction of the destruction of the temple

1. Jesus sees everything... he has "eyes of blazing fire" (Rev. 1)
2. He sees the religious leaders plundering the poor and needy

Luke 20:46-47 "Beware of the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and love to be greeted in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. ⁴⁷ They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely."

3. He sees Herod's grandiose temple with its lavish, costly stones

Luke 21:5-6 Some of his disciples were remarking about how the temple was adorned with beautiful stones and with gifts dedicated to God. But Jesus said, ⁶ "As for what you see here, the time will come when not one stone will be left on another; every one of them will be thrown down."

4. He speaks clear words of judgment on the entire religious system that will soon come crashing down
5. He knows full well that the widow's offering would be used by corrupt men... but he still praises her for giving it

F. Jesus Notes the Giving of the Rich as Well as of this Poor Widow

1. The rich were pouring in large quantities of coins... they would rattle loudly as they went down into the treasury
2. Remember that Jesus often people who announced with trumpets what they gave so that people would honor them
3. But along comes a very poor widow—the text highlights her poverty three times; Jesus looked up and saw her; focuses his eyes on her, watches her actions

G. Her Gift

1. The text says the widow put in two copper coins... two “*lepta*” ... the smallest coin they had in their currency
2. It referred to 1/16th of a denarius... a day’s wage for a common field laborer... so her gift was worth less than one hour of work
3. It was enough to buy a little bread to eat, but not much... and it was the smallest gift she could possibly have given
4. As those two little copper coins went down the trumpet-shaped chute, they could barely be heard in the commotion of all the rich people putting in larger, heavier, and vastly more coins

H. Jesus’ Comparison of the Gifts

1. Jesus frequently used people as an object lesson... like calling a little child to have him stand in the midst of the disciples and using that little child as an object lesson of humility and greatness
2. So, he used this woman as an object lesson on giving
3. As the Judge, he rendered a verdict on the size of her gift
4. He mixed in his supernatural knowledge of her condition

Luke 21:3-4 "I tell you the truth," he said, "this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

5. He knew she was going home to no further resources... there was no backup plan; she gave it all!!
6. Jesus’ verdict: SHE PUT IN MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE
 - a. That would have been a shocker to anyone who heard him
 - b. It’s not like he didn’t know math or basic rules of currency

- c. Gold was worth more than silver, silver worth more than copper
- d. Large coins weighed more than smaller coins, and were thus worth more
- e. He knew all that... he didn't need the TABLES OF WEIGHTS AND MEASURES we all have in the back of our Bibles to tell us what a talent was, and a denarius, and a lepton... he knew very well that in absolute value, she put in the least—a sum so insignificant it would have made almost no difference in the function of the Temple
- f. BUT in his spiritual economy, she put in MORE THAN ANYONE ELSE... because of her level of SACRIFICE

II. Some Timeless Lessons on Giving

A. Jesus sees everything and watches all our giving

I have seen this plaque up in many kitchens over the years

“Christ is the head of the home, the unseen guest of every meal, the silent listener to every conversation.”

1. So he is also the silent Judge of all our giving patterns

Hebrews 4:13 Nothing in all creation is hidden from God's sight. Everything is uncovered and laid bare before the eyes of him to whom we must give account.

2. We need to live by faith... a vivid sense of the invisible Christ
3. This is the TRUE ENCOUNTER with Jesus in this text... picturing Jesus sitting and watching your giving, your lifestyle... and judging it

B. Jesus understands our true circumstances

1. He knew the rich gave out of their surplus and the widow gave all that she had to live on
2. So he also knows every dollar he entrusts to your stewardship... he knows what you give and what you withhold
3. Remember Ananias and Sapphira, who tried to lie to the Holy Spirit about money they chose not to give
4. We need to have an honest appraisal of our possessions and see everything the way God does
5. You can't give what you don't have... God evaluates based on actual resources

2 Corinthians 8:12 *For if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable according to what one has, not according to what he does not have.*

C. Jesus evaluates giving based on the level of sacrifice it entails

1. Sacrifice has to pinch... it has to make a significant change in how we live, what we do

2 Samuel 24:24 *King David said, "I will not sacrifice to the LORD my God burnt offerings that cost me nothing."*

2. The widow put in more than anyone else because of how much sacrifice it entailed
3. The rich who give out of their surplus put in less than the poor who give out of their poverty all they have to live on

D. A life of bold, sacrificial giving requires faith in God to meet future needs

1. Many have questioned the wisdom of the widow in giving "all she had to live on"
2. They say this was very unwise
3. But consider the case of the widow who cared for Elijah's needs during the famine:
 - a. God had commanded a widow in Zarephath to meet his needs

1 Kings 17:8-14 *[Elijah] called, "Bring me, please, a piece of bread." ¹² "As surely as the LORD your God lives," she replied, "I don't have any bread-- only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. I am gathering a few sticks to take home and make a meal for myself and my son, that we may eat it-- and die." ¹³ Elijah said to her, "Don't be afraid. Go home and do as you have said. But first make a small cake of bread for me from what you have and bring it to me, and then make something for yourself and your son. ¹⁴ For this is what the LORD, the God of Israel, says: 'The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the LORD gives rain on the land.'"*

Consider also the story of Hudson Taylor

He was a great missionary to China's inland regions, who God used to pioneer the faith-based missionary movement... "God's work done in God's way will never lack God's supply."

As part of his training for serving as a medical missionary in China, Hudson lived for a time in Hull, England, where he assisted one of the leading surgeons in the city, Dr. Robert Hardey. Once when the doctor was late in

giving Taylor his paycheck, Hudson was down to only a single coin, a half-crown piece.

That Sunday he attended church in the morning and spent the rest of the day holding evangelistic services in the poorer sections of Hull. Just after he concluded the final service about ten o'clock that night, a man who was obviously very poor approached him and asked if he would come and pray for his dying wife. Taylor agreed, and the two set out for the man's home. As they walked together, Taylor learned that the man and his family had literally no money for food at all.

Taylor immediately thought of the single silver coin in his pocket. He also contemplated the fact that he himself had almost no food of his own back at his lodging. He had enough porridge left for supper that night and breakfast in the morning but nothing for dinner later on Monday.

They entered a particularly rough section of Hull where saloons and cheap lodging houses abounded. At one tenement they climbed up a dilapidated flight of stairs and entered a wretched dwelling. There Taylor saw a scene of abject poverty and woeful misery. Four or five children stood around the room, their cheeks and temples sunken from malnutrition. On a pallet in one corner lay the exhausted mother. Her tiny baby, only thirty-six hours old, moaned rather than cried at her side.

Taylor's heart went out to the desperate family. He felt an inner impulse to help relieve their distress by giving them his lone coin but he resisted the prompting. Instead he tried to share words of comfort: "You must not be cast down because, though your circumstances are very distressing, there is a kind and loving Father in heaven who cares about your needs."

But his conscience was screaming at him: "You hypocrite! Telling these unconverted people about a kind and loving heavenly Father, and not prepared yourself to trust Him without half a crown. If only I had three coins, I would gladly give them two and keep just one for my own needs."

As Hudson stood back up the poor man begged him, "You see what a terrible state we are in, sir. If you can help us, for God's sake, do!"

Christ's instruction flashed into Hudson's mind, "Give to him that asks you" (Matthew 5:42). Surrendering to the prompting of God's Spirit, he put his hand into his pocket and slowly withdrew the single silver coin. Handing it to the poor man, he stated: "It might seem a small matter for me to relieve you, seeing that I am comparatively well off. But in parting with this coin I am giving you **everything I have**. Yet what I have been trying to tell you is indeed true—God really is a Father who can be trusted."

Instantly joy flooded Taylor's heart. He went back to his apartment, ate his next-to-last bowl of porridge as a late-night supper, knelt at his bedside and reminded God of the teaching of Proverbs 19:17: "Dear Father, Your Word promises that he who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord. Would you not allow my loan to be a long one? Otherwise I will have no dinner tomorrow." Then, being completely at peace, he had a restful night of sleep.

The next morning, while eating his final bowl of porridge, he heard the postman's knock at the door. A moment later his landlady came in with a small packet for him. Inside he found a pair of kid gloves folded inside a sheet of blank paper. As he removed these, a gold coin – half a sovereign, worth four times the amount he had given to the poor family the previous evening – fell to the floor.

"Praise the Lord!" he exclaimed as he picked it up. "Four hundred percent for twelve hours' investment; that is good interest!"

4. This stops us from criticizing the widow for giving everything she had to live on... even if she spent those two copper coins on bread to fill her stomach, it would soon be gone... in any case, she would have to rely on God to meet her needs for the rest of her life
5. So Paul encouraged the Philippians that God would replenish the money they sent him

Philippians 4:18-19 [your gifts] are a fragrant offering, an acceptable sacrifice, pleasing to God. ¹⁹ And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.

- E. There will be massive surprises on Judgment Day! Some hidden heroes will emerge
1. If the widow gave more than anyone else, it must be true that there are MANY unsung obscure heroes and heroines whose sacrifices for Christ are UNKNOWN to us
 2. Heaven will reveal them to us... the humble servants that no one knew
 3. 1 Chronicles has ten chapters of genealogies containing names of people we've never heard of... I believe the lesson is clear that God knows his unnamed obscure people... he knows everything about them, and their acts of service to him

1 Corinthians 1:26 Brothers, think of what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth.

4. So in heaven, God will GREATLY HONOR the sacrificial service of some unknown servants of his... and say that they gave more than anyone else
5. I imagine an obscure woman who cared for dying people during the Black Death in the 14th century in Europe... she nursed them at great risk to herself when others fled for their lives... she eventually caught the disease herself and died... we know nothing about her; but she will be honored as someone who gave more than anyone else
6. Many rich, powerful leaders in Christendom will take a much lower place in heaven, because they gave out of their abundance, not to the same level of sacrifice that others did

III. Applications on Sacrificial Giving

- A. Come to Christ before you think to give anything to him

Matthew 20:28 The Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

- B. Ask God to Search You and Know Your Giving Patterns
- C. Understand that Giving is Measured by Sacrifice... God is not impressed by amounts but by what level of sacrifice it was to you
- D. All Giving Begins with Self-Denial and Self-Offering

Romans 12:1 Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.

- E. Trust God to meet your needs as you live sacrificially
- F. Beware of worldly reasoning in giving

Randy Alcorn, *Money, Possessions, and Eternity*: "Suppose you were a financial counselor. Today, you have two appointments; first with an elderly women, then a middle-aged man. The woman's husband died six years ago. She says, 'I'm down to my last two dollars. I have no more money. The cupboards are bare. These two dollars are all I have to live on, yet I feel as if God wants me to put them in the offering on Sunday. What do you think? What would you tell her? Likely you'd say something like this: 'That's very generous of you, dear, but God gave you common sense. He knows your heart, that you want to give, but he wants you to take care of yourself. He knows you need to eat. I'm sure God would have you keep those two dollars and buy food for tomorrow. You can't expect him just to

send down food from heaven if you give up the little money he's already provided. God wants us to do the sensible thing.'

Your next appointment is with a successful, hardworking, middle-aged farmer whose crop production has been excellent. He tells you, 'I'm planning to tear down my old barns and build bigger ones so I can store up my surplus crops and have plenty saved up for the future. Then I can retire early, take it easy, maybe do some traveling and golf. What do you think?'"

You might say something like this: "Sounds good to me! You've worked hard and the Lord has blessed... it's your business, your crops, your money. If you are able to save up some and retire early, by all means go for it! Maybe I can do that myself someday!"

Doesn't our advice sound reasonable? But you know that Jesus covered BOTH OF THESE CASES! And our reasonable American Christianity answers will not look so good on Judgment Day.

G. Honor unsung heroes and humble servants

1. Don't look down on poor people, old people, sick people, weak people, disabled people in their service to God