

SCRIPTURE INTRO: Today we’re going to take a break from our study of the love of Jesus to look at a specific aspect of Christian life and devotion—giving.

INTRO: At our last Session meeting the elders were discussing the implementation of the electronic giving option.

In the course of that discussion, someone raised an interesting question:

If giving is an act of worship, and if electronic giving takes giving out of the worship service, is that a problem? Are we losing something?

That question prompted a lot more questions.

If families give electronically,

then where are the children of our church going to see giving practiced?

Theoretically, what if everybody used electronic giving,

would we insist the deacons keep passing the plate just for symbolism?

Is giving electronically or by a scheduled debit from your checking account

less worshipful than actually putting something in the plate at church?

If people give electronically, then what should they be doing during the offertory?

Should we tell people to get out their smartphones and when Mike starts playing click the “give” button?

We went round and around for about 30 minutes.

Then the elders said: Andrew, on the Sunday we introduce this, we want you to preach on giving and address the topic of electronic giving and give some practical biblical instruction.

So I started reading all I could find on the topic of electronic giving and worship, but frankly, there’s barely anything written at all.

I found lots of information on how more and more churches making available.

I couldn’t find anything written specifically on the question:

Does electronic giving take something important out of the worship service?

So, I decided to look at the Bible—always a good thing.

And then I looked at church history, to see how the church through the centuries has applied the Bible’s teaching on giving to the worship service itself.

I was very surprised by what I discovered.

I came to some conclusions that I did not expect.

I’m going to share those, but I don’t want us to lose sight of the really big issue:

There are few things that give us a clearer window into our hearts than money— what we do with it and how we follow God’s commands to give it away. There are few things that reveal more about what we really think God is like, and how well we understand the Gospel.

For all of us, self included,

money and giving are things that we struggle with all our lives as Christians. Even when we’re pretty satisfied and comfortable with what we are giving, the Lord has a way of stirring things up, and challenging us again.

He uses the Word and his Holy Spirit and opportunities to make us examine this very sensitive, very personal, and very spiritually revealing part of our lives.

And out of all of the stories about money and giving in the Bible

there are few that are as convicting and thought-provoking as this one about the poor widow who Jesus saw putting two coins in the collection box.

This was a woman great in God’s kingdom, who really believed and really trusted, and who expressed it in the most concrete, worshipful way— she gave to God all she had.

Let’s look at this passage and subject and answer two questions:

1. Where should you give?
2. Why should you give?

The second question is the most important.

MP#1 Where should you give?

Do you have to give in the worship service itself?

Do you have to put something in the offering plate when it is passed?

Is that better than giving electronically to your church? Is it more worshipful?

The biblical answer is that you should give

wherever your church finds it most convenient for you to give.

And that does not have to be during the worship service.

Giving is certainly an act of worship, it's a way of declaring God's worth—
but it doesn't have to take place during the worship service itself.

In fact, through most of church history, the collection of offerings
has not been a part of the formal worship service.

Let's go on a quick history tour starting with our time and working backwards,
looking at the way the church has approached the collection of offerings.

There was an article in Christianity Today about the history of the offering plate,
written by Dr. Mark Rogers, PhD in historical theology from TEDS—Dr. Nyquist
Rogers says passing the offering plate is an American invention that came into
existence in the 1800s. So as a church practice, it's 150 years old and American.
Dr. Rogers says that in America during 1700s as state support of churches was
phased out, churches covered the general operating expenses in one of two ways.
One way was to rent pews. Church members rented their pews annually.

The closer to front, more expensive. Free in very back or balcony. (Bad for us!)
The other common way was what was called the subscription book.

A book was passed around everyone would write down an annual pledge.
When it came to expenses for the work of the deacons,
collections often taken on Communion Sundays for the poor.

But what's significant is that before the invention of the offering plate,
the most common way this pew rent or subscriptions or offerings for poor
were collected was by an offering box in the narthex.

So before or after the worship service, members would drop in offerings,
not during the worship service itself.

Let's move to England and the 1600s, the time of the Puritans.

If your church heritage is Baptist, Congregational, or Presbyterian, then
your spiritual forefathers were the English Puritans.

They produced a document called the Westminster Directory to guide worship
for evangelical Protestant folks in England during that time.

What's interesting is that you can read through the entire order of service from call

to worship to the benediction and there is not a single mention of taking up a offering as an element of worship.

In fact, the very last line of the Directory makes this comment:

The collection for the poor is so to be ordered that no part of the public worship be thereby hindered.

In other words, don't take up a collection during the worship service.

Do it some other convenient and inconspicuous way.

Now if we keep going back in church history, look at the worship services of the Protestant Reformation—Calvin's service and Martin Luther's service—you will not find a single mention of taking up an offering in worship.

And when you go back farther, into the Medieval church and the Catholic Mass, that very elaborate order of service, again no offerings were taken in worship.

How were offerings taken? In various ways, mostly collection boxes in the narthex.

People bringing money to the church at different times and occasions.

If you keep going back to the very earliest worship service known, you get all the way back to 150 AD and the writings of a man named Justin Martyr.

He describes the service and then when it is over here's what he says:

"Those who are prosperous, if they wish, contribute what each one deems appropriate and the collection is deposited with the president and he takes care of the orphans and widows and those who are needy."

So they take up a collection. And it's on Sunday after worship, but Justin doesn't indicate it was part of the formal service. And furthermore, the fact that it was collected while they were all gathered seems a matter of convenience.

So let's move back into the New Testament itself. Just one key passage.

In 1 Corinthians 16 Paul is making arrangements for a collection to be taken for needy believers in Jerusalem and here is what he tells the Corinthian members:

Now concerning the collection for the saints: as I directed the churches of Galatia, so you also are to do. On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper, so that there will be no collecting when I come.

At first glance, this might appear to support a collection in worship.

It mentions the first day of the week—which was the day they gathered for worship.

Could imagine deacons taking collection, putting aside, storing up, til Paul comes.

But there are two problems. Says literally, "on one Sabbath." Calvin says:

Paul means that they should contribute, one on one Sabbath and another on another; or even each of them every Sabbath if they chose. For he has an eye, first of all, to convenience, and farther, that the sacred assembly, in which the communion of the saints is celebrated, might be an additional spur to them.

Give on the day of worship, spur you, inspire you—but how often, convenience.

No indication this is a required element of the worship service.

Second, many commentators say put it aside and store up directed at the individual. Get a cigar box or coffee can and start putting aside money for this offering, and then bring it all and give it when Paul comes so he can get it to Jerusalem. Paul's practical concern in these verses is convenience and effectiveness.

What about Temple worship during the time of Jesus and in the Old Testament? Well, this story of the widow gives us a window into how offerings were collected. Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts. Alfred Edersheim, famous historian who focused on New Testament era says that in the temple court, under a covered portico, 13 bronze trumpet-shaped receptacles. Throw money in and funneled down into a treasury. These 13 had signs over them indicating what gift designated for. Point is, the collection was taken in temple complex, in worshipful setting, but not in the service. They used a bunch of boxes outside the sanctuary.

What about the Old Testament? Well, certainly there are the animal offerings brought by worshippers that were integral part of Old Testament service. That's a complex issue, because those animal sacrifices foreshadowed Christ. Parallels in our service not passing plate, but confession, sermon, communion. In fact, Deut 14 acknowledges bringing animal too inconvenient for most people. They brought money so the Levites could purchase animal for them. Did giving in offering box in temple courts. Can read in 2 Kings 12.

And when it came to tithing, the vast majority of their tithes were not put in the temple collection boxes, but given to the Levites living in towns of Israel. Which made it much more convenient for typical Israelite and the Levites. They didn't have to give in Jerusalem and then re-disburse to many towns. It was a more direct and cost-effective way of giving. So their tithes served the worship of God by supporting the Levites, their tithes were to be given with worshipful hearts and expressed the worthiness the Lord, but their tithes were not given in the worship service itself.

Passing an offering plate as an element of the service is a wonderful tradition. But that's what it is, a tradition, and a fairly new one. We'll keep doing it. A solid biblical and historical case can be made that the church can use convenient and expeditious methods of collection—that would include electronic giving.

That brings us to the really important question:

MP#2 Why should you give?

This story in Mark is about motive.

The widow is contrasted with others who were giving for different reasons. In the verses immediately before, Jesus criticizes the religious leaders for making lengthy prayers so that people will admire them for their spirituality. The motive for our religious acts is on his mind.

I just told you about those 13 bronze trumpet-shaped receptacles.

Notice that little detail that the rich people would throw in large amounts.

It doesn't take much imagination to understand why they threw it in. Money was in coin. If you threw in a large amount, all of those silver and gold coins would clink and clang in that bronze container and people would hear it. It would sound like a slot machine.

Folks would say: Wow! Did you hear that! What big giver! Who is that?

Jesus does talk about how much this widow gave—and we will too.

But what impressed Jesus most was her motive.

That's what set her apart from many who were giving their offerings that day. And your motive for giving is what is most important to God.

That's true of all of our obedience. God wants us to obey for the right reasons.

So before talk about why we should give, talk about some of the wrong motives. Sometimes we give to be seen—just like the rich in this story.

We give out of pride. Out of a desire for respect. To be known as generous.

There are always subtle ways we can let people know.

Another motive is guilt. Maybe hear a missionary talk about the great needs he has.

You feel vaguely guilty because of your lavish spending. Not good steward. But you really don't want to examine our lifestyle, make any changes.

So you make a gesture gift. Write a check.

And that way you don't have to think about it any more.

And it gets rid of the guilty feeling.

Another motive is fear. If you don't give, God is going to make you pay.

I was talking to some members of our church once who told me that they grew up in a church that used fear to motivate people to give. Minister would say: If you don't tithe, God will take it out of your hide.

Your car will break down or your house will catch on fire—

He will force you to part with your money if you don't do so voluntarily.

I know you all see the bad theology in that—but sometimes we think that way.

Our giving is a fire insurance of sorts. It keeps God from getting mad at us. Another motive, maybe the flip side of fear is to manipulate God.

God will have to bless me if I give. He'll have to bless me financially.

Or he'll have to make this or that go well with me. Prosperity Gospel.

So there are lots of wrong reasons that we give. Fear, guilt, pride, manipulation.

So why should you give? What are the right motives?

You should give because you love the kingdom of God.

Because you believe in the Gospel.

Because you want Jesus Christ to be glorified in his church and around the world.

Because your heart is full of gratitude for being saved and being part of family.

Your motive for giving has to be the same thing that motivates you to spend freely on other things—because you want to.

Imagine for a minute that you have received an unexpected windfall.

Your rich uncle in Ponchatoula has sent you a big check—to his favorite nephew.

What do you dream about doing with that money?

Do you dream about investing it for a rainy day, having that financial security?

Is that what you dream of spending it on? A solid, blue chip mutual fund.

Do you dream about spending it on a fun Florida vacation with family?

All those great memories you can build while the kids are little.

Do you dream about buying that motorcycle you've admired?

Summer is here, what better way to see God's creation than on two wheels?

Here's the real question: Do you ever dream about how you could spend it for the cause of the Gospel? Now I can give more to the ministry of my church.

Now I can support that missionary I met. Are those things ever in your dreams?

I'm not saying really devout Christians don't want to buy other things.

But what God wants is for you to give for the advance of his kingdom and out of gratitude for your salvation with the same delight and freedom that you have when you are spending your money on other things you love.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to spend money on things you really love?

It's easy for me to spend money taking Allison out to eat—

I hate spending money on Roundup or deodorant.

The Bible says: God loves a cheerful giver.

That's what he wants. He wants us to come to a place where we cheerfully want to give our money away to the causes of his kingdom.

That's what motivated this widow—not pride, fear, guilt, or manipulation—a cheerful love for God and his kingdom and a desire to serve him

with her money. That's why she caught Jesus' eye.
Christianity is a religion of the heart. God wants us to obey from the heart.

So does that mean that the amount you give is not important?

No it doesn't mean that. The amount is important.

Because if your heart is really in something, you will give generously.

So, how much should you give? Let's put the question of tithing aside.

It's complicated and I think it clouds the issue.

The Bible does not give us a box to check with a dollar amount beside it.

Instead it calls us to live by faith when it comes to giving.

Just take this story as an example.

How much did the widow give? Two small coins—all she had.

Does Jesus then turn to his disciples and say—Now, you must give everything.

No. He says look at this widow. Look at her love and faith.

Or think about Zaccheus—remember his story. Tax collector who believed.

Very wealthy man. He said: I'm going to give half of all I have to poor.

Jesus says: This day salvation has come to his house.

Then does Jesus say: Now, if you are really Christian, you will give half.

No. But here is an example of a man changed by the Gospel.

Or in Acts we read of those who sold land and property and gave all to apostles.

Is this then followed by a command to do the same when church has need?

If you have land or a lake house you have to sell it and give proceeds to church?

No, but what an inspirational example of faith and love.

So over and over in Bible are stories of generous giving commended by God,

praised by Jesus Christ, held up as examples to inspire us to live by faith.

C.S. Lewis said what this means is that you must give at such a level
that it makes a difference in your lifestyle.

There should be things you can't buy or can't do because you're
giving that money to the work of the kingdom of God.

If your lifestyle is the same as other people who make the same as you do—
if you have the same cars, the same house, same clothes, same vacations—
then there is something wrong with your giving.

Your giving should make a difference in your lifestyle.

That can be scary.

Think how much courage it took for the widow to put in all she had.

She put in her two copper coins, went in to worship—

and then came out after church and said, OK, Lord, it's time for lunch. And she trusted him to provide.

Where do you get the courage to give generously?

In the Gospel. In the Gospel we see God giving his Son for our salvation. He will not challenge us to give generously of our money, and then turn around and be stingy with us. He's proved his generosity by giving us his Son.

As I was reading through these historic orders of worship—started at 150, Justin, read probably 15 of them up to 1800s I ran across something that surprised me. Many of them had element of worship called the offering.

When I first saw it, I thought, aha—here it is, passing the plate. But it wasn't.

The offering was not taking up a collection or the people giving gifts to God. The offering was the placing of the bread and cup on the Communion Table.

The usual practice was not to have it sitting here all through the first half of the service, like we do.

But after the sermon, as Communion began, the bread and the cup were ceremonially brought out and placed on the Table.

That action was called the offering. If music was played, that was the offertory.

In other words, the offering was historically not what the people give God in worship, but what he gives us.

We come to worship with empty hands, we come as hungry beggars, we come with mouths open, undeserving, diseased by sin—and God gives us the broken body and shed blood of his Son.

So what greater incentive do we need to respond with gratitude to his gifts?