

Giving

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Psalm 127

Mark 12: 38 - 44

In the Gospel passage Jesus attacks the religious people.
This something he had a reputation for. Perhaps, some might even say, was what got him killed.

But really, it's likely Jesus is just acknowledging the elephant in the room.
You know how there is something obvious, but who is the one who is going to say something...?

There was once an adult daughter in the car with her elderly mother.
The mother approaches a set of lights. The lights are red and she sails right through.
The daughter is stunned, but does not say anything. She doesn't want to undermine her mother and dent her confidence.
But when her mother approaches the next set of lights, and goes through the red again, the daughter gently says "Mum, do you know you just went through two sets of red lights...?"
The mother responds "Oh... am I driving?"

Jesus is naming what is going on.
He attacks the Scribes in the Temple.
Why? Because of their teaching...? Nope.
Because of their behaviour: their over-the-top piety.

"Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the market-places, ³⁹and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honour at banquets"

Jesus expects more of these people.
They are wearing their long robes, parading before everyone in order to be seen and admired.

Now, the Ministers here at St John's wear long robes!
What would happen if I paraded down Willis Street in my robe?
Do you think I'd get much *admiration*...?

We have had Ridho visiting for three months from Indonesia, and I want to share with you one of his observations. It is about a difference between New Zealand and Indonesia in how Ministers of the Church are treated.

"Pastors are also very close to everyone. In Indonesia pastors are highly respected (so that there is distance), if the pastor comes, the congregation will give a place and drink. But here it is different... Even pastors give a drink to those in the congregation, and I think these actions show humility."

I'd like to think we Kiwi Ministers are low on the "piety continuum"! What do YOU think?

In addition to over-the-top piety, Jesus attacks the religious people for something else.

We hear this rather strange criticism: "They devour widows' houses"

Mistreatment of widows is a big 'no-no' all the way through scripture.

The prophets Malachi and Isaiah both condemn oppression and exploitation of widows (Malachi 3:5 and Isaiah 10:1-2)

Strangely, the Scribes were not a group prone to exploiting the poor.

So where is Jesus' attack aimed?

It is possible to translate this passage "As for those who...devour widow's houses" in which case it might be a different group being referred to.

If that's the case then who?

One scholar makes an interesting suggestion: the accusation is against trustees who were appointed to look after estates, but who deducted more than was fair as their expenses.

Why then are they accused of false piety and not simple exploitation?

It's possible they said long prayers as an attempt to encourage potential clients to entrust them with their property.

So when Jesus says "for the sake of appearance say long prayers." It could suggest that they are not just doing so to make themselves look better, but that they have a motive of greed.

Jesus attacks the religious people for their over-the-top piety – and their greed. Greed for property (other people's property).

This could be why Jesus says "They will receive the greater condemnation."

For they are not just guilty of silly ostentatiousness – behaving like peacocks; they are guilty of preying on the vulnerable – behaving like hyenas.

In doing so they not only fail to love God, they fail to love their neighbour.

Having talked about widows in general, Jesus then talks about a particular widow.

It's possible this shift is explained by Mark bringing two accounts together – the common factor being Jesus teaching about widows.

Jesus spots the widow worshipping – she is making her offering into the Temple treasury – large trumpet-shaped collection vessels.

Jesus points out how extravagant her worship is, whereas what others offer as their worship costs them little.

Her offering is commended because it arises out of love for God and for neighbour.

We could interpret this as Jesus pointing out the *extent* of her giving: "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on." (v44)

But... emphasising this would suggest that our giving must be extreme – to the extent of hardship.

Perhaps it is more helpful for us to interpret this as Jesus pointing out the act of *giving* itself.

This makes sense given the previous verses about the religious leaders only interested in *receiving* – receiving attention and property. Jesus also implies that rich people threw their money in so that it made a loud/obvious noise in order to *receive* others' attention.

That shouldn't surprise us, since all of us naturally prefer to receive things to giving anything. If it's not material goods we long for, it's people's attention and praise.

While it may be more blessed to give than receive, at least some of us find it easier to receive than give.

But we follow Jesus, who shows in his own life that he received very little, and gave away everything.

We follow Jesus who gave up heaven's glory to be born to unmarried peasants in someone's guest room.

We follow Jesus who took little but lavishly gave of himself.

I'm not at all sure God is as interested in how much we give as in whether we give at all.

Some of us may be able to give generously.

Few of God's people can give sacrificially.

But all of us can probably give more, as we recognise all that we receive.

A father was at home and heard a strange noise in the next room, so went to investigate. He found his daughter with one end of a string tied around her front tooth and the other end to the door handle, and she was slamming the door shut. Each time she did this the string was 'twanging' loudly.

"What are you doing?" He cried.

"Trying to pull my tooth out" she replied.

He said to her "Is it wobbly?"

"Nope" she replied "Stand back!", and slammed the door again.

Twang

"Stop! Stop! Honey, why are you doing that?"

She stared at him "I need the money."

Jesus shows us a new economy – God's Kingdom economy.

Where it is better to give than receive.

Where people choose to give out of love for God and for neighbour.

Jesus isn't even promoting correct religious practice.

Think about it.

If we consider the whole Gospel story, we see that religious practices follows acceptance of God's love and forgiveness.

God does the giving.

God gives us His Son, who gives his life for us.

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." (John 3:16)

And in this new economy – this Kingdom economy – God gives to us first.

We do not give to impress God; or to earn God's love.

We do not give to be good, pious people.

We give because we have received so much!

We give out of love for God and for neighbour.

All of this is a central theological assumption about...
the meal of Communion.

God gives Jesus.
Jesus gives his life to save us.

We receive God's grace, incorporating us in the Body of Christ – the worshipping Church.
We give back in response – out of love for God and for neighbour.

So as we come to this holy meal, we recognise we are recipients.
We receive first.

But we are not only recipients.

If we picture ourselves this way, we behave like the Scribes – only interested in *receiving*.

Jesus commends *giving* as a sign of grateful worship in response to God who has given us everything – life, meaning, joy, hope.

One final comment.
This pattern of giving because we have received is at the heart of St John's Mission Statement (on p16).

Worship • Grow • Live • Share
*God gathers us to worship and grow our faith
so we can live and share Christ's hope for our world*

As we worship God, we more deeply appreciate all we are given,
and we offer to God and to our neighbour expressions of true and joyful generosity in our giving.

May we experience just how more blessed it is to give than to receive.