

# THE ONE TO WATCH

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1 Kings 17:8-16; Mark 12:41-44

October 26, 2008

Jesus preached a sermon once that was kind of like the Sermon on the Mount. Only he didn't preach it on a mountaintop or a hillside. But he preached this sermon on a plain, says Luke. A level place. Standing eye to eye and heart to heart with plain old, common, ordinary folk. People like us -- like you and me. And this is what he said: **'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'**

They learned about this at a little country church in Wayne County a few years ago. Because attendance had fallen a bit over the summer. And they had lost some people. Two families in the church had moved away. One to take a new job in North Carolina. And the other, a retired couple, wanted to be closer to their children and grandchildren. And both families were just "the salt of the earth." Faithful, supportive, generous they were -- the kind of people the church depends on.

So it was hard for the church. Because when someone moves away it changes things. It changes things when someone you love and care for is not there week after week. When your children graduate from high school and go off to college it changes things. Or when your best friend moves across town and goes to a different school, things change. It just isn't the same.

And that's how it was at this little country church over in Wayne County. Part of the family had moved away. And it made things a little harder for the church in another way, too. Because both of these families were so generous in their giving. They were tithers, mind you. They gave their tithes (the tenth of their income) every two weeks to the church. Before they paid their utilities, and insurance, and cable TV (or anything else), they put their ten percent, their tithe, into the offering at church. They did it, they said, because it helped

them remember that *everything* they had was a gift. Everything came from God. And they worked hard at their jobs, mind you. But they believed it was God who gave them the health and ability to do their work. It was God who gave them the ability to earn money so they could help other people. Saint Paul, the great apostle, said that in the bible. And they believed it. They did.

So when they moved away they were missed. *Everyone* missed them. The whole church missed them... from the oldest member to the youngest. Because everyone just thought the *world* of these people. And the truth is they got a little behind with the budget because they left. Because ... well, you know how it is. The cost of living was getting higher and higher. Utilities were up. And the price of candles went up. And paper for the bulletins and ink for the printer, light bulbs for the sanctuary and the Sunday School classrooms had just skyrocketed, I think. And Sunday School books had gone up more than a dollar a piece. And gasoline and oil for the lawnmower went up, too, just like everything else. It was costing them more and more just to be a church. And they needed to catch up before it was too late. (Does that sound familiar?)

So the preacher decided one Sunday to encourage folks to give a little extra. Whatever they could. "No amount is too small," he said. "Come to think of it, no amount is *too big*, either. So if you can give a little extra it would really help us all. Because we're all in this together, you know." And to give them a little added incentive he said, "The person who gives the most this morning will help us worship God in a very special way. Because I'm going to let that person do something. The one who makes the biggest contribution this morning will get to choose the hymns. All *three* of them," he said.

So the ushers came forward and passed the plates from pew to pew. And they brought the tithes and offerings forward and handed them to the preacher as the people sang the doxology. "Praise God, from whom all blessings flow..." And the preacher lifted the offering up toward heaven and then placed it gently on the altar. And when he bowed his head to pray, the poor man nearly swallowed his teeth! (All three of them!) Because he looked down at the offering plate and saw a deceased president staring back at him. And it wasn't Washington, or Lincoln, or Jefferson, or even George W! It was someone else. *He* wasn't sure

*who* it was, really. But in the corner of the bill was the number 1000! A thousand dollar bill!  
From 1928!

Can you imagine what a bill like that would be worth these days? He was so excited he nearly did a little dance right there at the altar. And he turned around and said, "Hallelujah! Somebody put a thousand dollar bill in the plate this morning!" And he was almost in tears. He said, "I want to say thanks to the person who gave us this generous gift." And he stood there waiting for someone to speak up. But no one did. No one said a word. Until finally Miss Daisy, a poor and rather elderly woman who lived all alone, timidly lifted her hand. And the pastor asked her if she would come forward and join him at the altar.

Miss Daisy slowly made her way to the front of the church. And the pastor thanked her on behalf of the whole congregation. And everyone stood and showed their appreciation for what she had done. And other people came forward and shook her hand and hugged her. It was a wonderful moment in the life of that little church. A ray of hope. A breath of life. A sure and certain sign that the church was alive and well, even in the toughest of times.

And the pastor said, "Miss Daisy, I made a promise before we received the offering. I want you to pick out three hymns...." And before he could say another word, Miss Daisy pointed to three of the best-looking young men in the church and said, "I'll take *him* and *him* and *him*."

**'Do not judge, and you will not be judged; do not condemn, and you will not be condemned. Forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap; for the measure you give will be the measure you get back.'**

The widow at Zarephath did that, you know. She gave a gift that was costly and rare. A gift that brought something like a glimmer of hope or a breath of life to someone else. And all because of a preacher's promise that God would provide ... even in the worst of times, when life was hard and money and food and water were scarce.

And of all the people living in Zarephath, this woman was surely one of the last you would ever expect to give such a rare and costly gift. Because she was a widow. And widows

had no income. No social security. No pension. No government assistance. She didn't even have the help of her family and friends. Because times were hard. And she was alone. Except for her child, a young boy she was trying so desperately to feed (and provide for) day after day. The truth is this woman had nothing extra, nothing to spare. And yet the preacher asked her to give. (Isn't that just like a preacher? To ask for money at the worst possible time? When he knows good and well people are *struggling* just to get by?)

You know what happened... There was a terrible drought in those days. It hadn't rained in so long that the ground was cracked and hard and the streams had run dry. And Elijah, the preacher, wondered into town. And he saw the woman there at the city gates gathering sticks. And he said, "Pardon me, ma'am, but I need a drink. Could you please bring me some water in a jar?" And believe it or not she went to get some water for the preacher. And as she went to get the water, he said, "Oh, and while you're at it, bring me a little cake of bread to eat."

And that did it. The woman stopped. And she turned to Elijah and said, "Look mister, I don't have any bread. God knows I'm telling the truth. All I have is a handful of flour and a wee bit of oil left in the bottom of the jug, and that's it. That's all I have. I was gathering a few sticks so I could go home, and build a fire, and cook that last little bit of flour and oil to make one last meal for my boy and me before we die."

And the preacher said, "That's okay, ma'am. I understand. You go right ahead and do just that. But first make *me* a little cake of it and *then* you can make some for you and your son. Because this is what God says. **"The jar of flour will not be used up and the jug of oil will not run dry until the day the Lord sends rain on the land."**

Isn't that just like a preacher?

There was a woman who used to call us and ask for help with her groceries and medicine when we were at Beverly Hills. She called lots of churches, she told me, but none of them would help her. So she saw our listing in the yellow pages and decided to call us. And she would call and leave these long messages on the answering machine -- so long she had to hang up and call again to leave the rest of her message. And she'd quote scripture and tell us

that God was going to bless us in a wonderful way because God said in his Word to help the widows and the orphans. But she wasn't either of them -- a widow or an orphan.

She was forty years old and she lived in one of the city housing projects with her mother who was "sick." She couldn't take a job she said, "because I have to stay here and take care of my mother." So I would take them a couple of boxes full groceries every time they called. And I would go in and talk with them a bit, and have a prayer with them, and tell them to call if we could do anything for them.

And then one day the woman told me that they gave everything they had -- nearly all of their monthly income -- to Television preacher. Because he had convinced them that if they gave their money to his ministry, God would bless them. And he wouldn't just bless them, mind you. He would bless them *financially*. A hundred fold, at least. If they gave their money to him, God would pour out his "treasures" upon them. And so this woman talked about the new home they would have. And all the money God was going to put in their bank account. And all the things they were going to do with all of that money.

And I asked her if they had ever thought about asking the TV preacher to help them with their groceries and their medicine. And she said, "Well, yes. I've called them and asked them, but they said they don't really do that kind of thing"

"Well ... did you tell them you support their ministry with your offerings?"

"Yes," she said, "But that's not what their ministry is for," she said. "God put them here to do something *bigger*." ✕ It's sad, really, when you think about it. This man promised them riches beyond their wildest dreams... and all in the name of God, mind you. But he wouldn't even help them buy a loaf of bread.

But make no mistake, this preacher (Elijah) was different. He didn't promise to make her rich and famous. He didn't tell her God would turn her little cottage into a mansion, or that God would grant her every wish. But Elijah simply told the widow at Zarephath that God would care for her (and her son). God would not leave her. God would provide. God would take what she already had and it would be enough.... And it was. For she did what Elijah told her to do. She went home and made bread. And it was enough. **There was food every day**

**for Elijah and for the woman and her son. For the jar of flour was not used up and the jug of oil did not run dry.** God kept his word.

I don't know what happened to the woman (and her mother) who used to call the church for help. My guess is they're still looking through the phone book for churches to call. And they're probably still giving to that same TV preacher who promises material wealth and success to anyone who will give to his "ministry." And it's a shame, really. Because they could turn off the TV and find a church, a local church they could be part of. A church that would help them hear the truth about the God who gives us the real treasures of his *love* and his *presence*. A God who loves them so much he gave his own Son to die on the cross, that they might have a new and everlasting life. And there in a local church -- whether it be Methodist, Baptist, Lutheran or Catholic -- they would hear about a God who loves them so much he will never leave them. And in that local church they would discover that even though their brothers and sisters in Christ are far from perfect, God works through them and reaches out through them to love, and care for, and provide for us even in the hardest of times. For you see, the Church is God's dwelling place. I'm not talking about the building, mind you. I'm talking about you, God's people. God dwells in you, church. God lives in you. You are not a business. You are not an organization. You are not a club, or a network, or an association of like-minded people. But you are... what does the scripture say? You are the Body of Christ. The living, breathing body of Christ made alive by the Holy Spirit.

That's what they would find if they would just open the door and walk down the street to a local church. Someone they could believe in. Someone who *keeps* his word, no matter what. A God who can be trusted always, in every time, in every place, in every situation. And they would find a God who can take what we already have and use it to make a difference in our lives and in others.

It's like the other widow you heard about this morning in the Gospel reading. Mark says the temple courts were crowded that day. People were there to put their tithes, their tenth in the treasury box. And some of them were really well off. I mean, some of these folks had money. Big money. And they were dropping huge offerings in the plate that day. Enormous amounts. Generous gifts. And then, he says, this poor widow comes along and puts in two

pennies. They weren't even pennies. They were more like half-pennies. Two little copper coins that didn't amount to anything, says Mark.

And yet, of all the people paying their tithes and offerings and pledges that day, Jesus said, "Look at her. Look at her. She's the one to watch. She has given more than all of the others." And you wonder... don't you wonder? How can he say that? Is he serious? It wasn't even a drop in the bucket compared to what the others had given. It wasn't even close.

"Oh, but it's more," says Jesus. "It's much, much more." Because that was all she had. It wasn't a tithe. It wasn't ten percent. It was everything. All she had to live on, says Jesus. But don't say it was only a penny. Because that isn't true. For you see, when the rich folk put their ten percent or more into the offering, they had something leftover. Ninety percent of their income, maybe. Nobody knows, really. But it's clear they had something. They had their savings. They had something extra. Something they could count on. (At least, that's what we like to think *we* have in *our* accounts.) But no matter how much they had, the widow had more. Because when she put her pennies into the treasury that day, she had nothing left. Nothing but .... faith. Faith in a God who keeps his word. Faith in a God who was real. A God who provides. A God she could trust. And *God* can do *more* with that kind of faith and two copper coins than he can with all the money in the world.

Do you believe that?

When you place your tithes and offerings into the plate, what do you have left? Are you counting on your savings to see you through? Or are you counting on a God who always keeps his word? A God who sticks with us even in the hardest of times?

Preachers ask you for money. Most of us don't like to. In fact, some of us hate it. But God tells us in the scriptures to do it. So we ask for your tithe. Your tenth. Your offerings for the Lord and his church. But I'm not going to do that. I'm going to ask you for *more*, church. I'm going to ask you to do what these two widows did and give God your *trust*. Give him your *faith*. Put your faith to *work* in your lives and in this church. *Give whatever it takes* for you to put your *hope*, your *confidence*, your *trust IN HIM*... Do *that*... and you will be amazed at the blessing, the *real* treasures God will pour out upon us...

A woman -- a stranger, I suppose -- showed up in church one Sunday with her two little boys. And they didn't fit, really. To be honest they looked out of place. Because the church was in fairly wealthy neighborhood. Big houses. Nice cars. And the church ... well, the church was a beautiful, stately, rather expensive looking building. And there was this woman with her two children.

And after the service she asked to speak to the pastor. When he sat down with her she handed him thirty dollars and fifty-six cents. And she explained to him that this was her tithe. She'd been staying in a shelter for battered woman for several days, she said. And she had just decided to move south, away from her family and friends. And away from her abusive husband. But before she went, she said, she wanted to ask for the church to pray for her. And she wanted to give her tithe.

And the pastor told he couldn't possibly take her money, that she should keep it for herself and her children. And she looked at him with tears in her eyes and said, "You don't understand. Even if I kept that ten percent, I wouldn't have enough money to provide for my sons. So I want to give it to God. Because I trust God. I'm trusting that God will give me a new life. And to *show* him I trust him, I want to give my money."

I think she was right. God is a God we can trust even in the hardest of times. So let's give him our hearts, our lives, our trust and our faith. Let's show him we trust him and know in our hearts that he will give us new life and enable us by his Spirit to be the church for others.

This is the word which is given for you. Amen.

SOLI DEO GLORIA  
BENEN, OBLSB

