

Mark 12:38-44 St Marc 5.5.24

This is now my fourth and last Sunday with you – and I want to thank you for welcoming you into your church fellowship for this short time.

While I have been here I have been looking at 4 passages that I think have meanings that are often missed.

In Week 1 we looked at the well-known passage about the good Samaritan, but looked at it, as Jesus intended, through the eyes of the older brother. We saw how our resentment of that God is doing in others (especially those who don't deserve it) can leave us outside in the cold away from the heavenly party.

In week 2 we reflected that the instruction “an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth” was not a command to take revenge, but a limitation to the degree of revenge. We recognised that, with the example and strength of Jesus we can go beyond this and take control in the name of love and forgiveness.

In week 3 We saw that the Samaritan woman that Jesus met at the well, who had had 5 husbands and was living with someone else, was not immoral, but doubly abused: firstly by the men who had dumped her and then by the society that judged her.

Now, on my final Sunday with you, our passage, from Mark's Gospel is one that you may have heard of as the “Widows Mite” or the “Widows offering”. In the temple between the Court of the Gentiles and the Court of the Women were 13 trumpet shaped containers which were used for collecting money from the worshippers as they came in. Jesus watched many wealthy people coming past and making a big show of throwing in large sums of money. Then came a poor widow who put in 2 of the very smallest coins they had – worth a fraction of a penny. Jesus called his disciples and said “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. ⁴⁴ They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything—all she had to live on.”¹ Almost every time a church has a stewardship campaign or asks the congregation to consider giving more, the preacher will use this passage and make 2 points:

1. God measures our giving, not by how much we give, but by how much we have left. The wealthy gave out of their surplus and were not really expressing any real importance to God's work.
2. The widow is a remarkable example of someone who is so committed to what God is doing and to the worshipping community that she is prepared to give all she has.

I would suggest that the first point is right, if our giving to the church doesn't cost us anything, if we are just tipping God, then then we don't really value the work that we are giving to.

However, the second point misses the meaning that Mark is showing us – Jesus is not commending her sacrifice, he is condemning the worshipping community for their failure of care to a vulnerable member.

To understand what I mean we need to go back a few verses. In my bible these are arranged as a separate paragraph, with the widows offering separated from the previous verses by a

¹ [*The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)*](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Mk 12:43–44.

Mark 12:38-44 St Marc 5.5.24

new heading. We need to remember that the headings are not part of the original text and, whilst they can be helpful, they can also separate thoughts which are supposed to be linked together. Just two verses earlier Jesus criticises the Teachers of the law for the appalling way that widows were treated. “Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted in the market-places,³⁹ and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honour at banquets.⁴⁰ They devour widows’ houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. Such men will be punished most severely.”² Repeatedly in the Old Testament, widows and orphans are singled out as being in special need of being looked after because they would have no means of supporting themselves. There was no welfare state, so God’s people are to reflect God’s compassion for caring for them and making sure they are OK.

In proverbs 15:25 Solomon says: ²⁵ The LORD tears down the proud man’s house but he keeps the widow’s boundaries intact.³ Having lost the protection of their husbands, widows were vulnerable to being exploited and having their land reduced or taken away from them – but God, in his care for the vulnerable, makes sure there was no erosion of the widows land. The Teachers of the Law, above all others, were charged with reflecting the character of God – of living out the Law that they taught. We don’t know how they were doing it – perhaps calling in their husbands debts or buying their property too cheaply so they could buy food, but rather than protecting the widows they were trapping them into poverty.

No sooner had Jesus said this than he saw an example of what he had been warning about. A widow, who was almost destitute, came to the temple and, knowing she couldn’t go in to the temple without putting something in the offering, put in the meagre amount she had to live on. The wealthy were giving what they wouldn’t miss, she was giving what she could not afford. Jesus wasn’t commending her generosity – he was condemning a system that meant that the poor were further impoverished through being part of God’s people.

The challenge in any teaching on giving is to encourage those who should give more to do so, while ensuring that those who cannot give more (or are giving too much) are supported. Now I know that Allwell, as the church treasurer, will be telling you soon that in order to pay for your new chaplain there needs to be an increase in the church income. The advantage of being a locum chaplain is that I have nothing to gain from encouraging you to re-assess your giving level and I won’t be around to be upset if you disagree with me.

I haven’t got time to show all the scriptural justification for what I am going to say – but you can go away and look it all up if you want. Money is an important issue in the bible – in fact the bible talks about our attitude towards money more than faith, hope and love combined – so I have summarised it into 3 broad categories:

² [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Mk 12:38–40.

³ [The Holy Bible: New International Version—Anglicised \(1984\)](#), electronic edition. (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1984), Pr 15:25.

Mark 12:38-44 St Marc 5.5.24

Tithing/First fruits

Talking about a wealthy man who couldn't give up his lavish lifestyle to follow Him Jesus said "you cannot serve God and Mammon" (a word that encompasses wealth and possessions as well as money itself) It isn't having wealth that is the problem – it is when having (or wanting) wealth becomes the priority which affects our decisions and our availability to God. Most of the teaching in the bible about money and possessions is not about releasing more money for the religious institutions – it is about releasing us from the grip of money and possessions. Whether we have lots of money – or very little, it has the capacity to enslave us and to become more important than our walk with God. In our seriously materialistic world, we need to hear clearly the warning from St. Paul that the love of money is the root of all evil.

We often treat money and spirituality as separate issues – but the bible is very clear that our attitude to money and wealth is a spiritual issue – and we cannot get our relationship with God right without being prepared to have a right relationship with money. When we become Christians we offer our whole lives back to God and describe ourselves as stewards, rather than owners, of our possessions. This is where tithing comes in – Put simply, Tithing is giving back to God a proportion of income (usually 10%) as a recognition that everything we have comes from him, that everything we are (and have) is available to him, and we trust God to continue to provide for us. First fruits had a similar intention – a farmer would offer to God the first part of his harvest in thanksgiving for what he had already received ,and in trust that God would continue to provide. (In Malachi 6 God accuses the Judeans of robbing him by not giving their tithes -and identifies this as a lack of trust – if they had trusted God for the rest they would have risked the cost of the tithe.)

The principle remains today that giving God a proportion of our income as an expression of trust and commitment is the norm for Christians. It both rescues us from our tendency to make money our idol and releases sufficient funds for God's work.

Freewill offering

For Christians who are serious about following Jesus, setting our tithing level is determined by our income and not by the needs of the church and other causes. On top of our tithe we may want to express our thanks to God for something he has done – or we may want to respond to a need in the church, the need of an individual, or a need somewhere else in the world ,by giving extra. This is a freewill offering . Our free will offering and comes on top of our tithe (not instead of it)

Equality in giving

In our Gospel reading, The wealthy were giving what they wouldn't miss, the widow was giving what she could not afford. The system was wrong because the rich were not giving enough to gain spiritual benefit from their giving and the poor, who were not in a position to give, were still pressured to do so.

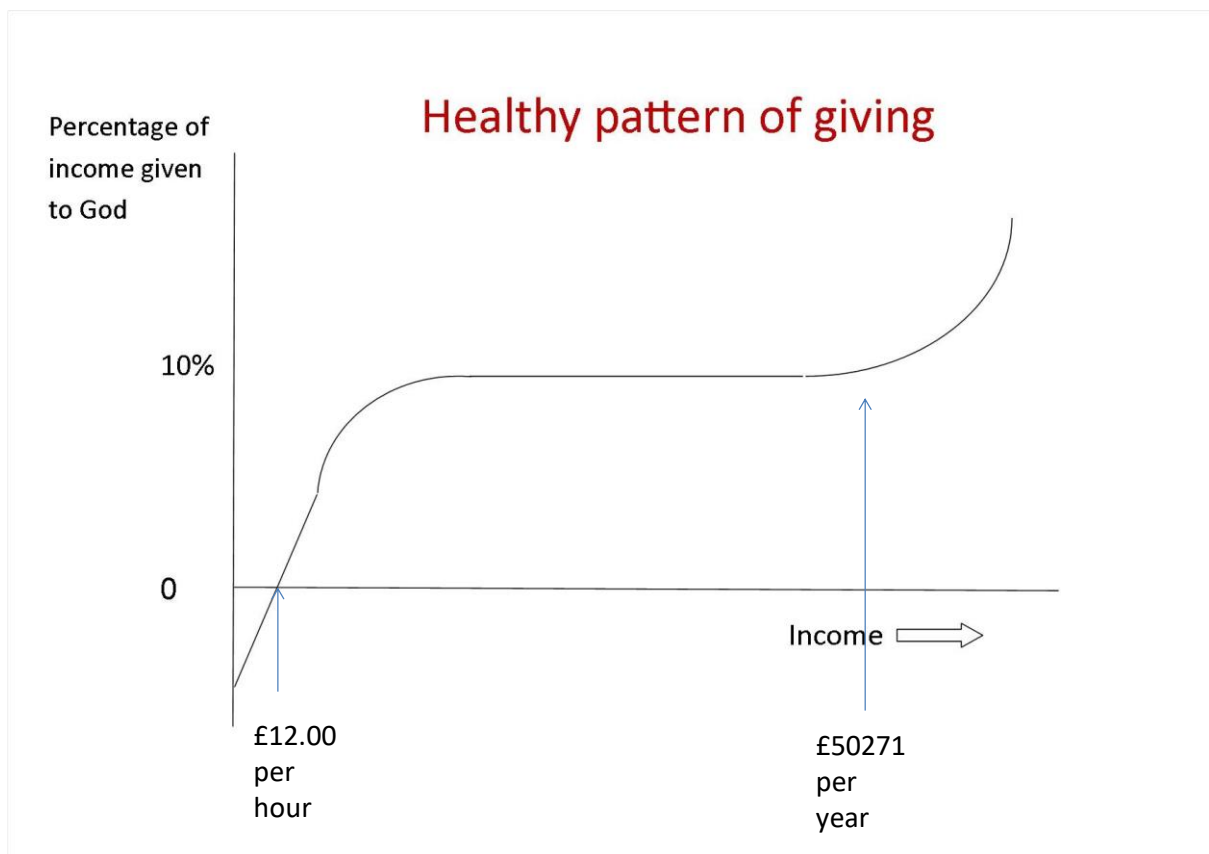
Conclusion

Mark 12:38-44 St Marc 5.5.24

So how can we come to an understanding of Christian giving which is true to the principle of tithes and also the importance of not putting pressure on those who cannot afford to give.

I want to give you some pointers – and some food for thought – I am not saying go away and do what I tell you – I am suggesting you go away and consider how what I have said applies to you: I made up this graph for a discussion group, and asked “Do you agree with the principle of it – and do you agree with the key points on it? I have made 2 assumptions:

1. Those who only receive enough to get by on should not be under pressure to give (They can, of course give in other ways: prayer, practical help etc. depending on their circumstances) – and possibly the church should be giving to them!
2. Tithing is of our net income. It would be very easy to get legalistic about this – and that would be a mistake because we all have different situations of dependants and responsibilities – but as a basic rule of thumb I would suggest that we tithe a percentage of that which is left when tax and mortgage/rent has been taken off.



I'm using UK figures as I don't know enough about the French situation – you will have to translate for yourselves. £12.00 per hour is what the Living Wage Foundation calculate as the minimum we need to get by. (This is higher than what the government deceptively call the National Living Wage) It seems fairly obvious to me that if someone only has enough to

Mark 12:38-44 St Marc 5.5.24

live on then, like the widow in our gospel, they should not feel obliged to give what they cannot afford.

The second figure £50270 is the point at which, in England, extra tax starts to come in and, I would suggest is also the point at which we should consider increasing our tithe beyond 10% - perhaps with an expectation that some of that increase will go to support those in the church who receive below the Living wage.

As I said this graph is a thought provoker, not an instruction. You don't have to agree with it – but you could use it to start reviewing your attitude to money and giving

In our Gospel the rich gave what they would not miss –the widow gave what she couldn't afford! Neither were healthy – where do you fit in?



£12.00
per
hour



£50270
per
year