

# Your Money and Your Life

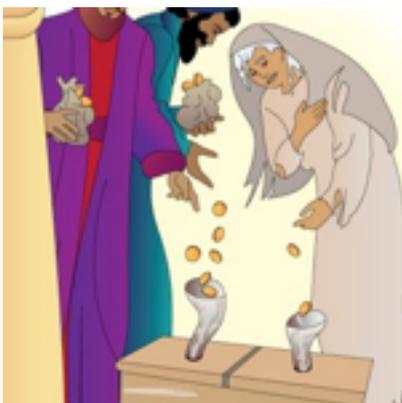
## Mark 12:38-44

Do you ever wonder about why you live in one of the richest countries in the world? Do you ever think about what it would be like in a third world country, living day to day on a subsistence wage, or having been driven out of your home by war, fleeing with only the clothes on your back? Every now and then I do wonder about this. But not for long. Because it's too confronting, and because it releases a whole cascade of questions, like:



- Is it just dumb luck that I have so much, and others have so little?
- Should it disturb me more that I live in a land of plenty and so many others have next to nothing?
- Am I going to do anything tangible to show that I care for those who are poor, or am I just going to accept that this is just the way it is?
- What message does my lifestyle give to others who will never know me, but who are affected by how I live?

I could also frame these questions in terms of St Paul's, and the wider church. We are a wealthy congregation. We have been remarkably blessed. We have a generously supported staff team. We are located on land that has risen in value exponentially in recent years, and in front of us are incredible opportunities for redevelopment. How is it that we have so much, and there are other Christians who have no church building, no staff to serve them, pastors stretched across thousands of members, no money to support welfare programs, persecution and in the worst cases, death?



These are not easy questions. I'd like to push them away. I don't want to think about myself, or my church, so critically. Today I would have much rather simply preached on the subject of generosity, I would have talked about how Jesus was closely watching how the crowds were putting their money into to the temple treasury. I would have noted how Mark tells us that the rich casually threw in large amounts of money, tossing the coins away like rubbish, but the widow came and carefully placed "two very small copper coins, worth only a cent." This was "everything, all that she had to live on;" for others their plenty was just a fraction of their overflowing abundance that they possessed. And then I would have asked you to consider how

God was calling you to live and to give sacrificially, especially in the light of our current deficit in offerings, and our 2016 budget.

It might have been easier to preach about money, but this text is about a whole lot more than money. And giving. It is about you and I and the totality of our lives, our lifestyles, our church, our denomination and what motivates how we live, what we say, and how we give.

Throughout the gospel of Mark, but especially in this chapter, Jesus is fighting a running battle with the religious leaders, the scribes and the Pharisees. The Pharisees were religious purists, who had a burning desire that God's law was complied with and live out. There were into dotting I's and crossing t's. And making sure that everyone else did to.



So what's wrong with that? Well, the problem is that the Pharisees majored on the externals, on outward behaviour, rather than on the changed heart. This is what gets Jesus so worked up: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former." These religious leaders are tenants who don't share the fruit of God's grace. They are trying to preserve their power and influence in the face of Jesus' teaching about the kingdom of God. They are doing everything but displaying God's love.

And so today, Jesus strategically places himself in their power base: at the temple, the Canberra of their day. And he cautions his disciples to beware of teachers of the law. Why? The Message captures the spirit of Jesus' words: "They love to walk around in academic gowns, preening in the radiance of public flattery, basking in prominent positions, sitting at the head table at every church function. And all the time they are exploiting the weak and helpless. The longer their prayers, the worse they get. But they'll pay for it in the end."

As a pastor, it's not possible to hear these words and not feel accused by them. Why am I a pastor? What is at the heart of my ministry? How am I serving all people, not just my congregation, but the community around us, the poor, the mentally ill, the lonely, the difficult? Or am I just playing it safe, enjoying the recognition that comes with the work that I do, at least from you?



Jesus then turns his attention to the temple. He knows how it works. The temple needs money to pay the bills. And so anyone who worshipped at the temple was expected to pay the temple tax. These funds enabled an amazing building to be built and maintained from quite a small population. But it was a huge burden for vulnerable people. Especially this woman, a widow. Jesus tells us that she "gave out of her poverty...[she] put in everything, all that she had to live on." Was it right that she did this? Was it right that the temple effectively added to her destitution by placing this demand on her? Could not grace have been shown to her, and the tax been waived? After all, doesn't God "defend the cause of the fatherless and the widow, and love the foreigner residing among you, giving them

food and clothing." (Deut. 10:18) How does requiring this tax from someone who has next to nothing show love? At least God himself was not going to abandon her. Unlike the teachers of the law who devour widow's houses.

Jesus wants his Father's house to be "a house of prayer for all nations." All welcomed freely, not taken advantage of. He wants his people, of the old



covenant and the new, in the words of the scribe who got it, to “love God with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.”

Jesus wants this for all of God’s people, and because he wants it he lives it for all people. He loves God fully, passionately, with his whole heart, his body too. He offers himself up as the living sacrifice “to take away the sins of many.” He loves his neighbours, all those created in the image of God, fully and completely. He leaves nothing behind, and he abandons himself totally to his Father. All that he had to live on, even his life. Only this radical action could change hearts, and people, and institutions, and the world, and redeem and recreate the entire universe.

This text is about giving. But Jesus’ gift, first of all. It is about what he has given to remake us and the church of which we are a part, a people who individually and corporately love God with all our heart and understanding and strength. This is who we are called to be.

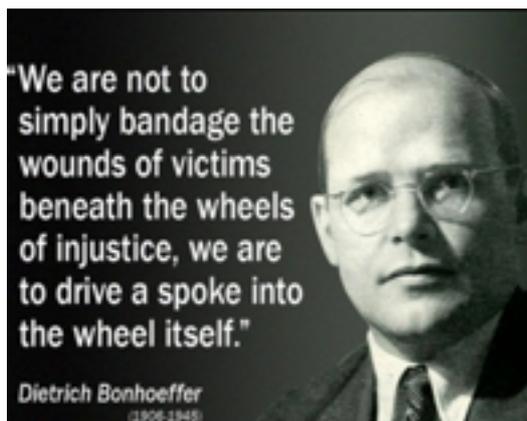
What does this mean, then, for the way we live, for the way we spend our money, for what we give away, whether to the church or to charities, or to people in need? What does it mean for us as a congregation: in the things that we consider are our priorities? What does it mean in terms of the incredibly valuable land on which we are situated, and what we might do with it to bring glory to God and be a servant-hearted, sanctuary-place for those who have been chewed up and spat out by life?

You will read in this edition of *Sunday Extra* that one of the resolutions from LCA General Convention was that congregations “welcome new arrivals from refugee backgrounds to their communities and that they work to understand their specific needs and actively support them in their resettlement.” From the beginning of next year, some 12,000 refugees from the crisis in Syria will be resettled in Australia. Perhaps some of them might be housed in Box Hill, or near where you live.



Helen Lockwood, from the LCA’s Commission on Social and Bioethical Questions issues this challenge to the church: “We see it on our news broadcast every evening — people fleeing their homes, escaping violence and chaos, desperately hoping that there is a better life. Our own church in Australia was founded by religious, economic, social and political refugees, with subsequent waves of immigrants... It is not okay when people are tortured and persecuted and driven from their own country. It is not

okay when children are starving and dying. It is not okay when people are discriminated against because of race, religion or gender.



The question for us as individuals and as church is: When do we speak up and when do we act? As Dietrich Bonhoeffer says, “We are not to simply bandage the wounds of victims beneath the wheels of injustice; we are to drive a spoke into the wheel itself.”

Or what about another opportunity, right now? This week I met with some St Paul's members as we planned how we might welcome new residents into our community, young adult students who will soon be living in apartments dotted around the church. Many of them will be a long way from family, from familiar culture and food, totally out of place. We talked about they could see God's love in action through our hospitality and friendship, in the name of Jesus, a Thursday evening meal and friendship, a bridge to God's love, from us to them. If you are interested in this, talk to me.



Where to from here? That's the question I would like you to ponder, to pray about, to process. Make these words that we are about to pray a start, as together we seek to trust our whole lives, our heart, our understanding, our strength, to God and to his glory.

Let us pray:

Change my heart, O God, today.  
Transform the patterns of my thoughts  
so that I reflect your will in all I say and do.  
Shake out my apathy;  
sweep away any bitterness, cruelty and greed.  
Change my heart, O God, today.  
In Jesus' name I pray.  
Amen.