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THE REWARDS OF HONOR

Mark 12:38-44

I begin this morning with a story about two prominent families who are members of a large membership church in another denomination. Both of the families are quite well-to-do. The Lord has blessed them quite well financially, and both have given generously to the church, both locally and globally. However, the families appear to have different attitudes toward their giving. Some years ago the first family decided that they wanted to give generously to their Conference and encourage outreach programs like evangelism and missions, so they established an independent foundation for these purposes, providing quite a considerable sum of money to start the foundation. They named this foundation after themselves, and when given the opportunity, made a 20 minute speech to talk about it. They continued to give generously to the principal, making what was a sizeable endowment even larger.

A few years later another wealthy family in that same church had a son that died at a young age. In his memory they gave the money to construct a chapel at a university in Africa. At the following Conference the Bishop for that part of Africa and several missionaries were present to acknowledge such a generous gift. Finally, the couple who gave the gift were called to the platform and introduced by their pastor. When handed the microphone, the husband said, "Pastor, if I had known this was why you wanted me to come to Conference today, I would not have come!" He then walked off the platform and was given a rousing standing ovation by the Conference.

And, as we contrast these two families and the attitudes we see regarding their giving, we see that both gave generously out of the bounty which God had provided them. I have even personally benefitted from the generosity of the first family through participation in several training events that their foundation has sponsored. Both were earnest in seeking to live out their faith in Jesus. That being said, there is no question that the second one more closely modeled the behavior which Jesus holds up as a model for us. The second family wanted no honor or recognition; they only wanted to give for the Lord's work.

We all know people whom we think go around with their noses in the air. Our perception is that they like to think that they are important, that they are more righteous or more devout than anyone else. Jesus warns us against going around calling attention to ourselves and our piety, for in doing so we have already received our reward.

In contrast, the one whom Jesus praises in our text is the widow, who quietly and humbly gave God two little coins. She did not give much, but her gift was significant in that she gave all that she had. She also can be a model for us in that she gave it quietly, without any fanfare, without calling attention to herself.

However, we all like to be seen, to be noticed, to be recognized. Human nature is such that we want to be popular, we want to be liked and to feel important. This is true in all stages of life, but it is especially true for our youth. This is why things have gotten so rough for them today--peer pressure is quite strong for them to go along with the gang, even when the gang is doing something completely contrary to God's will. But we must all be strong and seek out

God's will, be more humble, be less recognized, if necessary, and act like followers of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.

Years ago when I was in seminary I had a friend who was almost always late for things-- but what I remember most especially were her late entrances for choir rehearsal. But before I had been at Duke very long I heard that at times she simply waited around the Divinity School until after the choir practice had begun, and then she would come in late, so she could be seen by all. I am thankful to say that she grew past this practice soon thereafter.

But Jesus warns us against calling attention to ourselves. He tells us that when we do so, we have received all the reward that we can expect for what we have done, and will, in fact, receive the greater condemnation for our self-centeredness.

William Barclay, as he reflects upon this text, points out that Jesus warns us against three things in our Gospel lesson for today.¹ First, he warns us against the desire for prominence. It is still true that many people accept an office in the church because they think they have earned it, rather than because they desire to give themselves selflessly to Christ and to his church. These people view an office in the church as a right, rather than a responsibility. Such people often want the honor, recognition, and power which they think accompanies the position, but none of the responsibilities. Such persons are often all talk and little or no action, for they fail to realize the responsibility that come with the position, and all too often let the church down because of their failure to live into the responsibilities.

Second, Jesus warns us against the desire for honor. While we all like to be treated with honor and respect, a basic fact of the Christian faith is that we are to humble ourselves, rather than exalt ourselves. There is a story of a monk who was sent to become the abbot of a monastery. He was such an humble looking man that, when he arrived at the monastery, he was sent to work in the kitchen because no one recognized him. Without a word of protest and with no attempt to take his position, he went and washed the dishes and did the most menial of tasks. It was only when the bishop arrived some time later that the mistake was discovered and the humble monk took his rightful position. Those who would be disciples of Jesus Christ are to serve, rather than be served.

Third, Jesus warns us against the attempt to use religion for our self-gain. Jesus warns us that if we are to follow him, we are to see how much we can give on behalf of others, not see how much we can gain. We all have heard the stories of those who sent the PTL Club a substantial portion of their Social Security checks in good faith, not realizing that what they were doing was providing for the 24K gold plumbing, the crystal chandelier in the walk-in closet, and more for the Bakkers. Yet, as Gaston Warner once quoted the pastor of his youth as saying, "You know I was friends with Jim Bakker in seminary. I remember when he was a young man, full of promise and potential and a heart to serve God, and then I watched him slowly be consumed by power and greed, and I grieve for him."² Sadly, there are all too many people in the world today who have gone astray, either through the enticement of material wealth or by taking advantage of others by invoking the Christian faith. Jesus calls us to serve, rather than be served.

As we approach Veterans' Day, as we remember the 106th anniversary of the end of World War I, we remember our nation's heroes through the ages who selflessly gave of themselves, who put themselves and their lives on the line for the sake of their comrades and of

¹ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Mark* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1975), 301. While I use Barclay's outline, the illustrations for the first and third points are my own.

² Gaston, Warner, "Secrets of the Kingdom of God," [Mark](#).

our nation. The overwhelming majority of those who served did so out of a sense of duty. They felt like they were called to serve. They faithfully served our nation, not seeking glory for themselves, but to preserve peace and freedom for our nation and for others. I am reminded of the conversation I had this past Tuesday with my assistant in the Archives, who informed me that the day, November 5, marked the 80th anniversary of the day that her father-in-law was shot down during World War II. The good news is that Coy Newport survived. The bad news is that he was captured and spent the rest of WW II as a POW. He and countless others put their lives on the line for us and for our freedom.

These service men and women, in order to fulfill their responsibilities, have to be as Alyce McKenzie tells us Jesus' disciples are called to be in this text—All in! Both military service and discipleship to Jesus call for the complete and total giving of one's self to the cause. Both call for the complete giving of self in response to the call, just as the widow did as she gave her all to God in the temple.³

As Hugh Anderson says in his commentary on the widow in Mark, "The poor widow who offers her whole living to God contrasts markedly with the hypocritical and avaricious leaders of Judaism, and affords a superb example of complete loyalty and devotion to God's call. [Jesus] is addressing the disciples. . . . Discipleship involves absolute surrender to and trust in the God to whose will and purpose Jesus is about to commit himself absolutely in his passion."⁴

In this text Jesus calls us to be different from the world. He calls us to be humble, and not to seek honor and glory for ourselves. He calls us to be real with our faith, and not to put on a false show about it. After all, if it weren't for God, we would have nothing. In fact, we would not even exist. Without Jesus, we would have no hope for eternal life. We would stand under the weight of condemnation for our sins, and would face eternal punishment for our self-centeredness. So, rather than seeking honor and glory for ourselves, let us give honor and glory where it is rightly due--to God and to his Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who gives us life, who gives us hope, who gives us reason to live! Thanks be to God!

³ Alyce M. McKenzie, "All In! Reflections on Mark 12:38-44," [All In! Reflections On Mark 12:38-44](#).

⁴ Hugh Anderson, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1976), 286-87.