

## **Introduction**

Many years ago, Alaska had an earthquake that caused millions of dollars of damage. In the days and weeks following it, the governor received hundreds of letters demanding assistance and aid. The pressure of meeting those demands grew and weighed heavily upon him. But then he received a letter, different than the others, that lifted his spirits. It was from an eight year-old boy. It consisted of a 3-by-5 card with two nickels scotch taped to it and this message: **"Use these nickels wherever they're needed. I wish I had more."** That story fleshes out the text we read, Mark 12:41-44, and illustrates what I'm going to preach about today – the attitude we should have toward our assets. By assets, I mean the money and property we have.

## **Attitudes and Assets**

Our text is often titled **"The Widow's Mite"** and the parallel between her mite and that little boy's nickels is striking. Most of you know the story. Jesus went to the temple one day and sat down in the treasury. The treasury was located in one of the temple courts and contained 13 collection boxes with spouts. While sitting opposite those boxes, Jesus watched many rich people put large sums of money into them, which drew no response at all from Him. But then a widow came along and put two coins into one of the boxes. Those coins were called **"leptons,"** which means literally **"thin ones."** They were the smallest of all coins, worth about 1/16<sup>th</sup> of a penny each. This widow, in other words, gave less than a cent to the temple treasury.

But she doing so stirred the spirit of Jesus, so compellingly that He called His disciples and commented about it to them. His comment was essentially an assessment and notice what it was in verses 43-44. She gave more than the rich people did. That is a startling statement isn't it. Many consider Oprah Winfrey the most generous of all celebrities. It's estimated that she's given \$200 million to charities over the years.

That's a staggering amount of money. But let's compare her giving that amount with the boy giving the two nickels. What Jesus says here is like saying that the boy gave more than Oprah did.

That startling statement of His teaches us two things. First, He assesses how we use our assets. He cares about and evaluates whether we're generous or not. That is in fact, according to other texts, a basis of our final judgment. Second, how He assesses how we use our assets entails more than just how much we give. If that were the only factor He takes into account, He would have judged the rich people's giving to be greater than the widow's. There are at least two other factors He takes into account. One is the attitude we have toward our assets. He seriously considers that attitude in determining how generous we are.

So, let's have the right attitude. There are, in that regard, three basic attitudes we can have toward assets. Let's examine each of the three and then identify which one makes us generous in Jesus' sight.

### **What's Yours Is Mine**

The first attitude is, **"What's yours is mine and I'm going to take it."** This attitude says, **"I want what you have and I'm going to take it from you."** This is obviously the attitude of the robber, burglar, and thief. A few years ago, someone or more likely several someone's burglarized our house on Cover Drive. They took our television set and VCR and ate food from our refrigerator. They wanted what we had and took it from us.

Decent people, of course, wouldn't do that. The very idea of burglarizing a person's home would be reprehensible to them. But ironically enough, many of them actually have the same attitude that the burglar does. This involves the readiness of decent people to do evil when the conditions are right. That readiness comes into play when they want something that belongs to someone else and can justify taking it.

Someone told me that several Christian friends of hers knowingly violate copyright laws. They download songs to their iPods without

paying for them. They justify it by arguing that the effects on the artists are negligible. A Christian salesman takes a 20% cash rebate from a motel that is charged to an expense account his employer pays. He justifies it by arguing his employer doesn't pay him what he's worth.

It's clear isn't it?. Those who burglarized my home and those who download the songs and take the cash rebate have something in common. It's what Chuck Colson called "**the looter mentality.**" It's an attitude that says, "**What's yours is mine and I'm going to take it.**"

### **What's Mine Is Mine**

There's a second attitude we can have toward assets, "**What mine is mine and I'm going to keep it.**" When I say "**keep it,**" I mean "**use it on myself.**" This attitude says, "**You have your world and I have mine. You draw a circle around your world and I'll draw a circle around mine. You don't bother me and I won't bother you. You keep what is yours, if you have anything, and I'll keep what is mine.**" People with this attitude are consumers more than they are contributors. They keep more and give less than they should.

We see that in verse 44. Jesus explains why the big givers here didn't impress Him, "**for they all put in out of their surplus.**" Do you get what He was saying? Yes, they did give large amounts but it was far less than they could have given. They kept more and gave less than they should have in other words. Their attitude was, "**What mine is mine and I'm going to keep it.**"

That is the prevailing attitude today, not just of Americans generally but of Christians particularly. Richard Foster explains it well in his book *Freedom of Simplicity*: "**There is a heretical teaching that is an absolute plague in American Christianity. It is the dogmatic and unexamined credo that whatever we gain is ours to do with as we please. If we earn \$50,000, how we spend it is a private affair. Perhaps we will concede that it is legitimate for the church to talk about tithing, but the other 90% is none of its business.**"

A Christian family member of mine makes far more money than his wife and he need. Prompted by a question he asked, I suggested Jesus wants them to give their surplus away, not use it to live extravagantly as they do. He became defensive when I did and argued this. He gives his tithes and even offerings and that fulfills his responsibility to God and man. He can do whatever he wants with the rest.

That's the second attitude people can have toward assets, **"What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."**

### **What's Mine Is Yours**

But that wasn't the widow's attitude was it? Notice how Jesus summarizes what she did in verse 44: **"But she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on."** Actions reflect attitudes. What she did demonstrates the third and final attitude we can have toward assets, **"What's mine is Yours and I'm going to give it."** When I say **"yours"** here, I mean **"Jesus'."**

This attitude says: **"What I have is His not mine. I don't own the money and property I have; He does."** People with this attitude recognize that Lordship of Jesus over their lives. It isn't their paycheck; it's His. It isn't their car; it's His. It isn't their home; it's His. It isn't their stock portfolio; it's His. It isn't their savings account; it's His. And on it goes. They believe the assets they have are His not theirs. Consequently, they do with those assets what He directs. That in turn makes them contributors more than consumers.

### **The Right Attitude**

Those then are the three attitudes we *can* have. The question is, **"Which one *should* we have?"** Which is the right attitude – the one that is consistent with reality, with the nature of Jesus?

It certainly isn't the first one, **"What's yours is mine and I'm going to take it."** If I download songs without paying for them or take a cash rebate that belongs to my employer, I'm breaking the eighth of

the Ten Commandments. I'm a thief. I'm stealing.

The second attitude isn't the right one either, **"What's mine is mine and I'm going to keep it."** That attitude is contrary to the Bible's ethic of love. James Mullholland explains why it is in his book *Praying like Jesus*: **"One of the most difficult ideas for those of us in prosperous countries to accept is that our prosperity is built on the backs of the poor. The reason I have so much more than I need is because someone else has so much less than they need."** He's right about that. We have a connectedness with the world's poor. Our prosperity is built on their backs. The only reason so many have less than they need is because so many have more than they need.

We see then that the third attitude is the right one, **"What's mine is Yours, and I'm going to give it."** That is the one that's consistent with the nature of Jesus and the economic realities of our world. So, we should embrace it. Embracing it requires two things.

First, we must believe something. That something is about how generosity is measured. The opening words in verse 44 reveal a fundamental principle of human life. The reference point of generosity is how much we keep, not how much we give.

I've discovered in conversations over the years that few Christians are open to what I've just said. Almost every one I've shared it with in fact has rejected it without even considering it. It's difficult for us to accept because it implies something we dislike. When we keep more than we should, we aren't generous no matter how much we give. That's disturbing I know, which is why many Christians either ignore it or deny it out of hand – without giving it any thought.

But we need to give it thought. Our challenge is this. Examine our text objectively and carefully. Being as unbiased as we can, apply good logic to the things that are said and done in it and identify what their implications are. Those implications then give us understanding or knowledge, which is the basis of firm belief. I speak from experience. I don't believe what I believe because I want to. At one time in fact, I

didn't believe it. But then I exegeted our text objectively and carefully, which gave me understanding, which changed what I believed.

Embracing the right attitude toward assets requires a second thing. We do something. Act according to what we believe – that generosity is measured by how much we keep. Doing that is a two step process.

First, we keep enough assets. What is enough has a reference point. That reference point is the needs and desires of a person who has a kingdom mind and heart, a mind and a heart like those of Jesus, not of our culture. So, we determine what those needs and desires are by examining Scriptures like Proverbs 30:8-9, Philippians 4:10-13, and 1 Timothy 6:6-8. We then keep enough assets to satisfy those needs and desires. That is the first step in acting according to what we believe.

The second step is that we then give the rest of our assets away. When I say give them away, I mean devote them to making disciples of Jesus and meeting the needs of the oppressed and poor. If we have more than enough assets, we dedicate the **"more"** to that. This involves settling a host of issues including how we should give and to whom.

So that's how we embrace the right attitude toward assets. We believe generosity is measured by how much we keep and act accordingly. John Wesley is our model for this. When he was young man, he determined Jesus wanted him to keep 28 pounds a year and give the rest away. So that's what he did. At first, he was making 30 pounds a year and giving 2 away. But in later years, he was making as much as 1400 pounds and giving 1372 away. It's clear why he did what he did. He had the right attitude, **"What's mine is Yours and I'm going to give it."**

## **Conclusion**

I leave you in closing with an epitaph that's inscribed on a man's tombstone in Warwickshire, England: **"Here lies a miser who lived for himself and cared for nothing but gathering wealth. Now where he is or how he fares, nobody knows and nobody cares."** Don't be like that man. Don't take it or keep it. Give it instead.