

THE SPIRIT'S GENTLE NUDGE  
The Widow's Mite - Luke 21:1-4

"I want you to run 'til it hurts -- run 'til you're tired. And when it starts hurting, then I want you to run harder. And when it really starts hurting, then I want you to run as hard as you can. And when you feel like you can't run any more -- that you are absolutely at the end of your rope, that your legs are going to drop off, then I want you to push yourself even that much harder. When you stop running, I want it to be because your legs won't hold you up any more -- that your breath is completely gone -- that you are empty, depleted and will fall in a pile."

When I think back on the words of T. Louis Moore, our High School track coach, it is my humble opinion he was just a little bit nuts. He had an uncanny resemblance to Mr. T in every way. He pushed every student, whether it was for track team success or just because you were facing the Presidential Physical Fitness Challenge, by constantly getting in your face and telling you that he thought you were lazy -- that you weren't giving 110% -that he would lop you off the team or give you an F if you didn't start getting serious. It was his constant refrain, even to students to me who were just trying to get an A in gym class. It almost made others quit the team. To be honest, Most people don't really want to work that hard.

Did you ever have a coach like that? Just curious -- If you have, then raise your hand.

But let me tell you something about Mr. T. Louis Moore. There aren't many other coaches that I've ever seen or known who could get more out of his runners. He produced some of the finest teams that the Philadelphia public schools ever knew. And, while he was always at your back and in your face to push, push, push -- at the same time, when he would see his runners in the halls or hang around with them after a meet, he was their greatest cheerleader. He was their biggest ally. He cared about their grades, he cared about their family, and he cared about them. And you know who those runners visited every time they went back to Philly? You got it. Mr. T. Louis Moore.

I had a history professor who was much the same. When it came to learning the subject, his demands seemed unreasonable. His assignments made you burn the candle at both ends. He ran his class like a drill sergeant. But, I want to tell you, that I learned more history from him than from any other educator in my 20 years of schooling. His demands really made me work; and hard work produced a deeper knowledge.

In our text for today, Jesus' makes just a brief and passing, yet important comment about giving as he observes a woman putting her offering into the temple treasury. *"I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put in more than all the others. All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."*

Jesus point was that while this woman was only putting two little copper coins into the inverted trumpet-shaped coffer at the temple, that, unlike so many of the others there that day, she wasn't just trusting God with the leftovers -- the spare change -- what she could live without. Her trust in God, like a demanding coach or professor, was propelling her, persuading her, igniting her to give to the limit -- even beyond what she could give. Everything. Not just her money -- but her very body and life were put in jeopardy by giving a self-sacrificially as she did.

Now some would look at this woman and scoff, "How dare you test God by giving away what He has given you to live on. It's like the History student who prayed for an A on his test when he hadn't spent even a minute studying." And there are those who foolishly look for miracles when God has already provided for them through natural means.

But not this woman. No. The Omniscient Lord Jesus peers into her heart and sees not careless foolishness nor a testing of God, but a heart that reflects His Own self-sacrificing love.

Consider that heart of Jesus. What do the scriptures say?

Philippians 2: "Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death-- even death on a cross!"

Made Himself NOTHING! Did you hear that word? NOTHING. The God of all Creation, who deserves all praise and honor and glory, became one of us -- took on human flesh and blood, took on the burden of human sins, bore the punishment that it all deserved and died the death that justice and holiness required. The greek word literally means "emptied" himself -- "poured Himself out" so that you and I could be saved from our sin and count on His promise of everlasting life.

Though she surely did not know the fullness of God's grace in Christ yet, a voice kept shouting in this woman's ear that that self-sacrificing love was the character of the God whom she loved. He was the One who had watched over Israel despite constant disobedience. He was the one who cared for them despite persistent failure. He was the One who was committed to be their God despite recurring acts of apostasy and unfaithfulness. The History of God's people had been a nightmarish regurgitation of ungodliness and immorality -- but still God kept offering His promises, His help, His blessings, His rescue, and finally, now, in the man who stood before her, His very own Son.

Little did she know, at this time, the extent that the arms of His Son would stretch to win her -- the amount that He would give to secure her a place in His eternal kingdom.

But St. Paul certainly understood when he wrote in 2 Corinthians: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich." And later in 1 Timothy: "There is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all men --"

There was a young boy who lived with his elderly grandmother in a small town. Every Sunday the grandmother would take the boy to Church and after they would go downtown and get an ice cream cone, which was a special treat. On one particular Sunday, grandmother was not feeling well. She told the boy that he would have to go to Church by himself today and she gave him two nickels, one for the offering plate and one for an ice cream after Church. Now as it happened the boy needed to cross an old wooden bridge in order to get to Church. As he was crossing the bridge that Sunday, as boys will do, he was watching the river below, skipping, hopping - generally not paying attention. All of a sudden he dropped one of the nickels. The nickel fell to the bridge and as luck would have it found a small crack through which it fell into the river below. The boy dropped down and put his eye to the crack. He watched helplessly as the nickel fell into the river below. As the boy got up and put the other nickel in his pocket he said, to no one in particular, "oh well, there goes God's nickel."

"God's nickel." This was the way so many were treating the temple treasury and the way so many today give their offerings to God -- giving out of their wealth -- giving what they can spare -- giving the loose change -- but not giving off the top, not giving as much as they possibly can, not giving til they felt it. They were not offering to God their very selves and entrusting Him

with every hope and dream. They were just giving a little money that they probably wouldn't even miss.

But this faithful woman was impelled by a different voice. It was kinda like Coach T Louis Moore, driving her onward to be the best that she could be -- persuading her by the image of her God and her knowledge of His love, to reach deeply into her trust and give generously out of her poverty. This voice, to my view, was the Spirit of God. And inside He said to her, "Woman, the God whom you serve is the God of heaven and earth. His graciousness has reached out to you and your people throughout the ages -- from generation to generation. Remember how he brought manna and quail through the arid, barren desert to feed His people. Remember how He multiplied the flour and oil in the jug of a woman who housed God's prophet. Remember how, not long ago, you saw Him take five loaves and two fish and feed five-thousand men and their families. This is the God who cares for you -- this is the God who calls you to trust in Him -and as you lay into His arms everything you have, you will find that you will be truly rich in His Spirit. Your cup will overflow.

In the latter part of the 17th century, German preacher August H. Franke founded an orphanage to care for the homeless children of Halle. One day when Franke desperately needed funds to carry on his work, a destitute Christian widow came to his door begging for a ducat—a gold coin. Because of his financial situation, he politely but regretfully told her he couldn't help her.

Disheartened, the woman began to weep. Moved by her tears, Francke asked her to wait while he went to his room to pray. After seeking God's guidance, he felt that the Holy Spirit wanted him to change his mind. So, trusting the Lord to meet his own needs, he gave her the money. Two mornings later, he received a letter of thanks from the widow. She explained that because of his generosity she had asked the Lord to shower the orphanage with gifts. That same day Francke received 12 ducats from a wealthy lady and 2 more from a friend in Sweden. He thought he had been amply rewarded for helping the widow, but he was soon informed that the orphanage was to receive 500 gold pieces from the estate of Prince Lodewyk Van Wurtenburg.

When he heard this, Francke wept in gratitude. In sacrificially providing for that needy widow, he had been enriched, not impoverished. In trusting God beyond what he thought He could, he found that His God was even that much bigger than he thought.

Such is the case also for you and me. God's Spirit cries, like a persistent Coach from within, -- cries for us to lay all into the hands of our loving Savior. Not just our money. Not just our time. Not just our talent. Everything. And as the image of our self-sacrificial Savior is displayed before us in Word and Sacrament, our hands are moved to give generously to His work so that others, too, may know One who emptied Himself, made Himself NOTHING so that we might be filled to the full -- so that our cup runneth over -- so that we might know abundant life and the peace that passes all understanding.

God grant it, for Jesus' sake. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.