

## Ruth

The Book of Ruth is a great short read. At only four chapters long, it's easy to get through on a rainy Sunday afternoon. In the Bible story bearing her name, Ruth demonstrates remarkable character in her willingness to leave her native land and family behind, to go back to the native land of her mother-in-law, Naomi. She's given a choice, like Naomi's other daughter-in-law Orpah, to "return home... to go back to her people and her gods," (Ruth 1:12, 15). Instead of doing so, Ruth states – which is probably the best known verse in her story – "Where you go I will go, and where you stay I will stay. Your people will be my people and your God my God. Where you die I will die, and there I will be buried. May the Lord deal with me, be it ever so severely, if even death separates you and me," (verses 16-17).

I want us to understand something about the society and culture in those days. If you were a woman – a widow – with no husband, and no sons, you were second class at best. You lived day to day on the mercy of others. It was a man's world. Women didn't have rights to property. They didn't have specialized skills.

In Ruth, the women are out in the fields, trying to find the left-overs from the harvest. Not much changed socially between Ruth's time and Jesus' time. Women were still second class. Very rarely did they have property. With this in mind, let's look at our Gospel passage this morning, from Mark 12:38-44. **Read Mark 12:38-44.**

## Puttin' On the Ritz

Our passage this morning opens midway through a confrontation occurring between Jesus and the Pharisees at the temple. They've been questioning Him, poking fun at Him, trying to trip Him up. It's really telling that just ahead of our opening Mark records that "The large crowd listened to Him [Jesus] with delight," (Mark 12:37b). Jesus is making a lot of friends with ordinary people, but He's antagonizing the "powers-that-be." Antagonizing those in charge can be dangerous.

As He taught, Jesus said, "Watch out for the teachers of the law. They like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. They devour widows' houses and for a show make lengthy prayers. These men will be punished most severely," (verses 38-40).

The teachers of the law were weird birds. Basically they had this mindset that if they followed the Ten Commandments, they were a-okay to do whatever else they wanted to do. Now that's a really simplified view, but they operated from a standpoint that since they "scratched God's back," by following the commandments, He would scratch theirs. They thought if they did a good deed now and then, maybe throw a little extra into the offering box out of their excess, that God would see that and give them a blessing. In a nutshell, they thought God's favor could be bought.

And they loved recognition. We hear that over and over in the Gospel record how they loved to put on a show, with long tasseled robes, and extensive public prayers. They wanted their fellow Jews to pat them on the back, and say things like, “I love the new pulpit robe you’re wearing,” or “Is that gold thread woven into your stole?” and maybe a “That’s the best prayer I ever heard.” You get the idea. It was all about “Puttin’ on the Ritz,” as Irving Berlin, Fred Astaire, and Taco would sing it.

So Jesus comes along, and He throws a monkey-wrench into their works. “Watch out!” “Beware!” Jesus says. Don’t do things the way the Pharisees do them. The things the Pharisees are doing dehumanizes other people. The next thing we see in the Gospel lesson is that “Jesus sat down opposite the place where the offerings were put and watched the crowd putting their money into the temple treasury. Many rich people threw in large amounts,” (verse 41).

### **Silver and Gold**

In the temple courtyard they had these offering stations. They were metal. They were shaped like a horn, and when people threw coins in them – paper money wasn’t invented in those days so it was all coins – it made quite a racket. Coins in those days were made from copper, silver, and gold. Gold, of course, was – and still is – about the most expensive metal known to humanity. An ounce of gold today costs about \$2,708. For one ounce.

So, think about the amount of weight five quarter dollars weighs in your hand, and that’s about the weight of an ounce of gold – that little of an amount for \$2,708. It’s pricey. Anyhow, you have a coin that’s as heavy as five quarter dollars that you toss into this horn looking thing and it clinks, clanks, and bangs around as it rolls into the bottom drum of this massive metal barrel. If you’re wealthy, you’re chucking a few of these in – because remember, they have this mindset that if they scratch God’s back, He’ll scratch theirs.

And then there’s the folks, not quite so wealthy, who are throwing in the silver. The price of an ounce of silver today is pushing \$32. That’s getting a little pricey. I remember when you could get an occasional silver quarter in change at the store. Remember those big old Eisenhower dollars from when we were younger? I think some of those were like 20% silver or something.

They were pretty heavy. Something like that going into those collection barrels would make a great ringing sound. Throwing a bunch of those in the temple offering box would make any good Jew proud. It would make a lot of noise, just like the gold did. And then, there’s the copper coins. The only thing we have monetarily today that’s copper are pennies. That’s what we think of, anyhow.

### **The Widow’s Coins**

Mark tells us, “But a poor widow came and put in two very small copper coins, worth only a few cents,” (verse 42). Different Bible versions translate the value of the

coins differently. The NKJV translates it as “two mites, which make a quadrans,” the CEB says, “two small copper coins worth a penny,” the KJV reads, “two mites, which make a farthing,” while the ESV states, “two small copper coins, which make a penny,” with the notation, “Greek two lepta, which make a kodrantes; a Roman copper coin worth about 1/64 of a day’s wage for a laborer.” It’s confusing! We know what a penny is. From collecting British coins as a kid, I know a farthing is ¼ of a penny. And a lepton is a Greek one cent piece.

All of these copper coins are practically worthless today, much like they were back then. The widow’s copper coins were probably about half the size of a dime, and very thin. So when she tosses these paper-thin tiny little coins that are no bigger around than a pencil eraser into the metal offering box, would it made a great racket throughout the courtyard like the gold and silver coins getting dumped into it? No. I suppose it would be about like hearing a pin drop on a concrete floor. If you have real good ears, and listen closely, you might hear it.

“Calling His disciples to Him, Jesus said, ‘Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on,’” (verses 43-44). I bet the disciples, and anyone else hearing Jesus say this, were shocked! All these wealthy guys are there plopping in copious amounts of gold and silver – those horn shaped metal collection boxes were jingling! And then the poor widow comes along and throws in an amount so minuscule that we probably wouldn’t waste our time to bend down and pick it up out of the Walmart parking lot.

### **Out of Their Abundance**

“They gave out of their abundance,” Jesus tells them, while “she gave everything she had.” The widow gave. She dug deep! After worship service, there was no trip to Cassano’s, or even Taco Bell, on her agenda. She had nothing left to live on, you see. She gave all of it to God. Now, no one expected her to give. No one would have blamed her for not giving – I mean, she needs to be able to eat. But she gave. She sacrificed what little bit of grain for a meal that that small amount of money would have bought her. She physically felt the depths of her generosity. She probably went to bed hungry that night, and the next – until someone in their kindness dropped a farthing or a lepton at her feet the next time.

This is in opposition to giving from abundance. The problem we have with stewardship in our society, generally speaking, is that we can hardly wait to get through it. So we can focus again on faith, hope, and Bible study. Let’s just get back to the real stuff. Talking about money and finances makes us uncomfortable. The bigger problem is that we haven’t truly yielded our selves fully to God.

What we do with the talents we have, the skills we have, and our resources – which God has given us – is the real stuff. If our faith – our Christianity – gives us a warm fuzzy feeling once in a while, but never touches our billfolds or purses, then I'm not too sure that we're letting Jesus be Lord of us. If I've got stuff that you need, but knowingly withhold it, where's the faith in action in that? And vice versa. If you have stuff I need – or others need – but don't share it, where's the demonstration of your faith?

## **We Have to Dig Deep**

If being Christian means we don't swear too much, or drink too often, but we're not moved to give more than we really can, then we've missed the mark. If following Christ means that we say certain things and believe certain things, but doesn't mean we're held accountable for our possessions as much as for our actions, then we're only superficial Christians. Most of us spend more time on the superficial stuff of faith – like debates, discussions, and feelings. But following Jesus is hard work. Christ calls us to dig deep.

We have to go beyond the superficial and into things of real substance. Real faith is risky, bold, and dangerous. The widow had faith. She believed God would take care of her, and because Jesus notices her – we know He took care of her. And when we follow the widow's example – and Ruth's example, for that matter – we open ourselves up to a life in which we give everything up for the glory of God. It's a mindset that says, "Lord, everything I have is Yours. Make use of me however You will."

If we're truly following Jesus, then we have to answer His call – similar to the way He called the rich young ruler a few weeks back. He loves us, He calls us to let go of anything which hinders a deeper relationship with Him. In that other story the rich young ruler couldn't do it. It's hard living a life of real faith. Yet God values the heart that's willing to release it all – even if the "all" seems like two little coins not even worth a cent. What "coins" do we find ourselves holding back from God? What things do we have that are difficult to surrender to Him because we think we won't have enough?

The Truth invites us to dig deep into our attitudes for giving and to realize that sometimes, like the widow, all we have is not enough – but more than enough. By giving up what we think we can't live without, we find freedom to truly live a life that glorifies God. And God – Jesus – notices and blesses that response. Because Jesus always takes great care of us!

**Prayer:** God of widows and strangers, You protect the oppressed and forgotten and feed the hungry with good things. You stand among us in Christ, offering life to all. Give us open hearts and minds to respond with love to the world, caring for those for whom You care. Amen.