

The widow's mistaken offering?

By [David Heim](#)

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The passage (Mark 12:41-44) about the poor widow who put “everything she had” in the temple treasury was among the lectionary readings a few weeks ago, and it’s a frequent text for stewardship sermons. The example of the widow’s generosity seems clear enough, and it’s part of the church’s standard repertoire about sacrificial giving.

But Fergus Kerr suggests that the story is about not generosity but exploitation.

Kerr, a Dominican theologian and author of the influential book [Theology after Wittgenstein](#), edits the [New Blackfriars](#) theology journal. He often contributes a lead essay, a short piece titled simply “Comment.” These brief essays are invariably delightful theological excursions, often occasioned by the passing of a fellow Dominican, the anniversary of a major philosopher, or something else that crossed his scholarly mind.

In his latest comment (in the November 2012 issue), Kerr observes that the incident with the widow occurs during Jesus’ visit to the temple. Just prior to the passage is Jesus’ warning that the scribes of the temple “devour widow’s houses”; just after it is Jesus’ prediction that the stones of the temple will be overturned. From the literary context, Kerr says, it appears that the widow is impoverishing herself to contribute to an institution that is corrupt and doomed.

“Rather than commending the poor widow for giving her all to the temple,” writes Kerr,

Wasn't Jesus like an Old Testament prophet raging against religious institutions that were so pervasively unjust that, instead of protecting the most vulnerable, like the widow, they could mystify them into supporting the very system that exploited them?

I’ve read lots of commentaries and heard many sermons on this passage, but I’ve never heard the widow’s story put in this context.

There's a stewardship message in this reading too, but not the usual one. It might ask: What doomed and exploitative institutions—or movements or ideas—are we being duped into supporting?