

When gifts go unrecognized (Mark 12:38-44)

Remembering the (anonymous) way of the cross

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While the rich give much that is little, a widow drops in little that is actually much. Jesus sees her by the temple treasury, this woman with her copper mites, but does anyone else? Her sacrificial gift goes unrecognized but to the eyes of Christ.

Are we willing to commit acts of sacrifice without being recognized? There's a sense in which we long to be validated. We want recognition. Recognition doesn't have to mean fame. But we want our story to be heard, for others to affirm who we are and how we've lived. We want someone—society, the world, the universe, someone besides Mom—to notice that we exist.

The desire for recognition is so very human, and so is the turn to pride that it can take. In the ancient catalogues, pride was regarded as the root of the seven deadly sins. According to Christian tradition, pride leads to the devil's downfall: he desires to be like God. So do Adam and Eve, in their own way. They long for the fruit that will grant them God's powers of judgment. It's the opposite of Jesus, who though he was "in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped" (Philippians 2:6).

The struggle against sinful pride is one few of us are ready to undertake. Our society has catechized us in the importance of self-promotion. Just recognizing the struggle against pride is a mighty accomplishment, one for the spiritual résumé. But the scriptures are clear: "pride goes before destruction" (Proverbs 16:18). And as the sage Sirach puts it, "the greater you are, the more you must humble yourself; so you

will find favor in the sight of the Lord” (Sirach 3:19).

The monks who went out into the deserts of Egypt in the 3rd to 5th centuries to seek Christ with their whole hearts, minds, and strength struggled mightily with pride. They called it a demon and rallied their best defenses of prayer and fasting against it. In one account, relayed in Benedicta Ward’s *The Desert Fathers*: “The devil appeared to a monk disguised as an angel of light, and said to him, ‘I am the angel Gabriel, and I have been sent to you.’ But the monk said, ‘Are you sure you weren’t sent to someone else? I am not worthy to have an angel sent to me.’ At that the devil vanished.”

“I am not worthy” expresses a keen biblical sentiment. It’s why Moses removes his sandals before the burning bus. It’s the words of Jacob, John the Baptist, and the centurion. It’s why Peter falls to his knees and cries at the great catch of fish, “Go away from me, Lord, for I am a sinful man!” True, “I am not worthy” can also be a cry of despondency, the fruit of an overly sensitive or stamped-on conscience. But at it’s best, “I am not worthy” expresses humility.

Maybe it’s time for us to remember that the way of the cross is the way of anonymity. Not the trollish anonymity that flings verbal Molotov cocktails from behind fake screen names, but the anonymity of doing small things with great love, without being seen. This is what the 20th-century spiritual master Dallas Willard was getting at when he wrote of the spiritual discipline of “secrecy” in *The Spirit of the Disciplines*.

[As I’ve talked to leaders in small town and rural congregations](#), I’ve heard stories of congregations impacting their communities in ways that are both profound and untold. One church I know, on realizing their endowment had grown beyond what they were comfortable with, began to periodically call the city offices and pay down months of residential utility bills that were past due. The people never knew who took care of their bills. Another congregation purchases milk for morning snack for all the kids in their rural school district. Only a scant few, among them the school superintendent, are aware of where the money comes from.

I’ll admit, I would probably prefer to boast a little. Slap a church logo on those milk cartons. After all, Jesus taught in Matthew 5:16: “Let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

But the “eyes of the Lord are on the righteous” (Psalm 34:15). God sees our sacrificial gifts. Shouldn’t that be enough?