

Widow's walk: Mark 12:38-44

by [Mary W. Anderson](#) in the [November 1, 2003](#) issue

Jesus has warned before that the rich will have it hard at the entrance to the kingdom. Now he praises the poor widow's offering, and makes it clear that the standard measurement for assessing gifts is not how much we give to the work of God or how much we put in the offering plate, but how much we have left for ourselves. Those who give out of their abundance still have abundance left. And that's a problem.

Can it really be that the poor are praised, that this widow is lifted up, because she gave every bit of money in her bank account? Is this what it takes to follow Jesus? Why this preference for poverty in Jesus' teaching?

Does it sometimes seem that Jesus is romanticizing and idealizing the poor? Surely the poor would be the first to object. Life in poverty is what we all want to avoid, not aspire to. No one dreams of growing up poor, of living from government check to government check, of digging through garbage cans or living in run-down apartments with no heat.

The woman at the temple was not a *poor* widow; she was poor because she was a widow. My understanding of sociology and economics in first-century Palestine tells me there was no such thing as a rich widow in that culture. Women were totally dependent on their male relatives for their livelihood. To be widowed meant not only losing someone you may have loved, but more tragically, it also meant that you were losing the one on whom you were totally dependent. Widows were forced to live off of the good graces of other male relatives and anyone in the community who might provide a meal here, a little money there.

The two little coins in the woman's hand were probably all she had. The truth is—and the extremely poor know this well—those coins weren't going to change her life. When you've got so little, a penny or two isn't going to move you from welfare to work. She could be at peace and joyful in knowing she was able to give to the temple treasury, because with the coins or without them, she was still a dependent person.

Rich people, like most of us readers, can't say the same. My money gives me independence and freedom from living like a poor widow. I like it that way and my family likes it that way, so I will not be putting my entire paycheck in the offering plate on Sunday. But I've also seen poor homeless people in worship who are anxious to find an offering envelope so they can give the only dollar in their pocket toward God's work. When you're that low on the economic scale, giving isn't the problem, getting is.

The widow wasn't dependent on her money or her status in life; she had none of these. She was dependent on God and her neighbor for everything. She didn't have two feet to stand on, she didn't have bootstraps to pull up. She was totally dependent—and that's what Jesus pulls out of her story like a pearl of great price. This is what we are to be like before God—dependent on nothing but the grace of God. We are to be people without any resources except the riches of God's mercy.

The issue is not how much we have in the bank, but what that money is for us. Is it our heart, our security, our source of power, or is it a tool for our stewardship? Are we dependent on our money to give us all we want and need from life, or are we dependent on God to make us rich? If you follow me, Jesus teaches, you will walk in the way of the widow. Live lives that show in everything you do and say that you are dependent on God for all you have and all you are.

As good Americans we've been taught to celebrate our independence, but Jesus teaches us to celebrate our great dependence on God alone. If independence is a sign of strength and success, how can we possibly rejoice in dependence?

Our culture counsels us to become like the honored scribes, but Jesus counsels us to become like the dishonored widow. We are to model our lives on one we would normally overlook, being too busy admiring the lifestyles of the rich and famous.

The widow tossed the only shred of independence she had into the offering plate, but she kept intact her complete dependence on God and neighbor. She is our spiritual mentor standing there on the margins of all we hold dear. Her way is a life of faith grounded in the love of God, the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the communion of the Holy Spirit. It's a life lived in the conviction that we are stewards of all we have in our hands and our lives, not the owners of these things.

Where previously we connected dependence with oppression and depression, Jesus shows us that our dependence on God leads to joy and thanksgiving. If God is

running the universe and ruling my life, I no longer have to save myself, prove myself or justify myself. I'm the work of God's hands. I rest and work in those hands and I shall die in those hands. To be free of those hands would be death to me, because in them is life abundant.

We give thanks for the widow's great witness. May we be as free as she is.