

Lessons from a “Penny”

Intro: Many years ago Benjamin Franklin in Poor Richard’s Almanac coined the famous saying, “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Of course, a penny could buy a whole lot more in Franklin’s day than now. Now a penny’s value is so small that if most people see a penny on the ground in front of them they would not consider it worth the effort to pick it up and put in their pocket.

But tonight I hope to make that worthless “penny” an object lesson that will remind you of three important lessons. In the ancient world, governments also minted coins for use in commerce; and occasionally Jesus used those coins to teach important lessons to the people.

A lesson about giving

And He sat down opposite the treasury, and began observing how the multitudes were putting money into the treasury; and many rich people were putting in large sums. And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which amount to a cent. And calling His disciples to Him, He said to them, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all the contributors to the treasury; for they all put in out of their surplus, but she, out of her poverty, put in all she owned, all she had to live on.” (Mark 12:41-44)

The widow’s mite

You know well this story of the “widow’s mite.” Of course we can see that there were two coins. Mark is writing in Greek; so he uses the Greek coin called the “lepton” which was the smallest copper or bronze coin in existence in Jesus’ day. It was minted during the time before the birth of Christ. Though there would have been many of them minted, the metal quality was so poor that very few have survived (ISBE “money” 406). Mark goes on to explain for his Roman readers that the amount the widow gave would be equivalent to what Romans called a “quadrans” (translated “cent”).

But how can we put the widow’s gift in perspective in her own culture?

The smallness of this amount is seen relative to the common day-worker’s wage, the denarius (Mt. 20:2).

And when he had agreed with the laborers for a denarius for the day, he sent them into his vineyard. (Matthew 20:2)

Among the Romans a denarius would have been the equivalent of sixty-four quadrans. If one divides the work day into 12 hours, the monetary amount of the two lepta would be equivalent to what one of those workers might have earned in a little over eleven minutes!

Or, if you want to put that into modern perspective. The median hourly wage today is a little over \$15/hour. In eleven minutes the worker making median wage would earn \$2.77. Imagine that all you had to live on was \$2.77.

But notice what Jesus said about this woman’s gift?

He said she put in “*more than all the contributors to the treasury*” (v. 43).

A lepton itself was the smallest coin in the Palestinian culture; yet this woman, having only this amount to live on, surrendered it to the Lord’s temple for the assistance of the priests and ironically other needy people.

The widow certainly did not put into the treasury “more” in monetary value. Lots of denarii or shekels no doubt clinked in the horns that caught the contributions and channeled them down into the treasury boxes. But in terms of proportion, she gave “more”; because she gave all she had while the other givers gave out of their surplus!

The next time you look at that almost worthless penny, remember this truth!

The fact that we may not have what others have should not discourage us from doing what we can to serve the Lord. Sometimes people say, “My little bit won’t do much good.” But God accepts the little bit and honors it, if it all you can do. You don’t have to be wealthy to be generous. As Paul put it:

For if the readiness is present, it is acceptable according to what a man has, not according to what he does not have. (2 Cor. 8:12)

However if we have more God expects more of us. People who have thousands and give mites will one day be judged by that woman!

A lesson about courage

Are not two sparrows sold for a cent? And yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. (Matthew 10:29)

Here Jesus urges his disciples to think about the value of a sparrow. In the market place they could be bought two for a “cent”. Instead of using the word Mark used for the widow’s contribution, Matthew uses a different coin—the assarion. How much is that? Well take the widow’s two mites and double it! I take it people bought sparrows for food. They would have supplied a meager amount of meat in a small pastry or soup perhaps. A day-worker could have earned the money to buy that sparrow in a little over twenty minutes.

Now what is Jesus’ point? Two sparrows are not worth more than a cent; but they do not fall to the ground without God’s awareness! But if God knows what is happening to sparrows, how much more His children who are going forth spreading His word to others.

Again, put that in modern terms. Take the number we used in our first illustration and let’s double it. Now we’ve gone from \$2.77 to \$5.54 in terms of modern currency. Would you say your life is worth more than \$5.54?

And that is Jesus’ point exactly. Why should God’s people live in fear when we realize our incomparable worth to Him? Like the apostles we do not need to be afraid of what men can do to us; we need to have courage to speak up and stand up for what is right. Next time you look at that penny remember this.

A lesson about reconciliation with God

And He was also saying to the multitudes, “When you see a cloud rising in the west, immediately you say, ‘A shower is coming,’ and so it turns out. And when you see a south wind blowing, you say, ‘It will be a hot day,’ and it turns out that way. You hypocrites! You know how to analyze the appearance of the earth and the sky, but why do you not analyze this present time? And why do you not even on your own initiative judge what is right? For while you are going with your opponent to appear before the magistrate, on your way there make an effort to settle with him, in order that he may not drag you before the judge, and the judge turn you over to the constable, and the constable throw you into prison. I say to you, you shall not get out of there until you have paid the very last cent.” (Luke 12:54-59)

Jesus chided His generation because they were good at predicting the weather, but lacked the spiritual discernment to see what was happening to their nation. All around the signs of God’s impending judgment were being displayed. God had already sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the Christ. And now the very Son of God stood in their midst; but they seemed oblivious to His presence.

Thus Jesus urged His generation to quit waiting for someone else to tell them what to do and make their own decision. Then he followed with a powerful illustration from the physical world. Here is a man who has an opponent who is taking him to court. Which makes more sense—to simply postpone making things right, or to take preemptive action to avoid a court ruling? Jesus said the man who delays to settle with his opponent on the way will end up in debtor’s prison to pay off his debt. And in this case, he will not get out until the last “cent” is paid! The “cent” here is that small “lepton” that the widow put in the temple treasury.

But what is the point? Jesus intended for His audience to make a spiritual application. God’s judgment is coming. Have the discernment to be reconciled with Him while there is time and opportunity.

Conclusion: And so a penny might not buy much any more; but it can still teach us three valuable lessons—a lesson about giving, a lesson about courage, and a lesson about reconciliation with God.

Have you learned those lessons?