

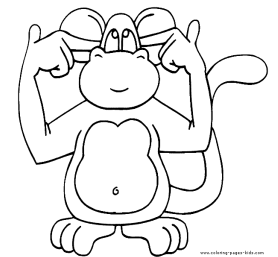
Mark 12: 38-44

³⁸ As [Jesus] taught, he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, ³⁹ and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! ⁴⁰ They devour widows' houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

⁴¹ He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. ⁴² A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. ⁴³ Then he called his disciples and said to them, "Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. ⁴⁴ For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."



Warning: Sermons over the next few weeks will mention money and stewardship and commitment and finances and faith and the work that God calls us to individually and corporately as followers of Jesus. If you're squeamish about money or any of those issues, you might want to censor what you hear.



Mark's Gospel this morning leads me to start by reading to you a few things I've come across recently.

The first is this Chicago Tribune article from earlier this week about a church in Alsip, IL.

Teeth in the Plate

A sermon preached by
James F. McIntire

Text:
Mark 12: 38-44

November 8, 2009



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**Church's money giveaway: Alsip pastor's cash prizes fill pews
Minister's focus is to help congregation pay bills and begin a
debt-free life**

November 2, 2009

By Lolly Bowean

Tribune Reporter

At Lighthouse Church of All Nations in Alsip, the congregation can get more than just prayer at the Sunday worship services.

If a lucky -- or "blessed and highly favored" -- churchgoer is in the right seat, they can also receive a cash prize.

At each of the three Sunday services, the Rev. Dan Willis pulls a number of one seat from a bag and the worshiper in that seat wins a cash prize. Two of the churchgoers win \$250 and the third gets \$500. The church gives away \$1,000 each Sunday, Willis said.

The cash prize is part of Willis' recent focus on helping his congregation pay bills and begin a debt-free life, he said.

"We've had soooo many of our people displaced from jobs, facing foreclosure," he said. "When people's faith was high, their debt was down. When their faith was down, their debt was high. I realized the two are connected."

Willis concedes the cash prize is a gimmick to fill the pews. But he's unapologetic about the plan, because it's working. On a typical Sunday, his church draws about 1,600 people to its three Sunday services. But since the money giveaway started, about five weeks ago, the congregation has grown to about 2,500 each week, he said. The money for the giveaway comes from the church offering. Lighthouse is a non-denominational church.

"If I can get someone in here and teach them and give them money, that's what I'm going to do," he said.

As part of the lessons, Willis set up a shredder near the pulpit to encourage church members to shred their credit cards and commit to stop spending. He talks about budgeting, tackling past-due bills and saving. He encourages the prize winners to use the money to pay down their bills, rather than splurge on new items. One Sunday, he gave away 15 savings accounts with \$25 already in them. And he had bank representatives at the service so church members could set up accounts.

"The Bible says even an ant stores up in the summer so it can live in the winter," Willis said. "Even an ant can teach us. Even an ant knows how to save. We, with intellect, don't know how to do it. When people see that in Scripture, it takes on a whole different level."

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The second is this from England – “Letter to a Prosperity Preacher” dated September 14, 2006 which I found online – here are some excerpts:

Thursday, September 14, 2006

Letter to a Prosperity Preacher

Dear [Sir],

I heard you preaching in 1994 during, what I was told, was a period when you were re-evaluating your theology and placing yourself under the guidance of more 'orthodox' pastors, preachers and theologians. It was said that you had followed the teachings of the heretical Kenneth Copeland who stated that 'You don't have a god in you. You are one.' Apparently, you had also told your dying father that it was his lack of faith that was killing him (of Cancer).

Nevertheless, nothing in your behaviour or teaching on that day in '94 - or since - revealed much of a change. The thing that sticks in my mind, beyond lots of people falling over, is the introduction that you gave before passing round the collection buckets. I'd estimate that it took about 30 minutes as you sought to encourage us to be generous and explained about the new TV transmitters that could be bought if we gave enough. It certainly wasn't much shorter than the 'real' sermon later in the evening. ...

I have to confess that I didn't give anything. It may be my British sensitivities, but it all struck me as a little less than tasteful. It may have been the fact that I'd spent the afternoon in a homeless shelter, but I didn't really give a toss if you got a new transmitter or not. ...

Anyway ... [I need to ask] a question that I had on that day and which has stayed with me ever since. I'm quite embarrassed to ask it because it is incredibly simple and I've rarely seen it asked by theologians and scholars, or used by those people who unceasingly seek to attack ministries like yours. Here's my question: **Can I have your money?**

Please don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about the money that belongs to your ministry. I'm only talking about your own personal finances. I know it sounds crazy, but let me try to explain why I thought of that question back in 1994 and why it still stays with me today.

If I had given to you that day it could only have been around £10 [\$20] anyway; I was not in paid employment at the time. Even today, I don't make enough to give a lot to our local church. By contrast, I'm told that your ministry receives \$60-\$100 million in donations per year. Wow! That's a lotta money. I imagine that you receive next to nothing of that. 0.5% maybe? As I said, I wouldn't want the 100 million, just whatever your cut is. I'm told that in one night, your 'crusades' (can we talk about that word some time?) might take in \$400,000 just in cash! I'm only asking for 0.5% of that. Research suggests that \$36 million is pledged by partners each year.

Buying your own private jet can't be cheap (even the operating costs are £1.5 million [\$2.7 million] a year), but I'm sure it helps that your ministry is a charity so you're not paying any tax. I know that at your ~~shows~~ crusades you are adamant that no money from the Collection goes to you, but into the ministry. Of course, the ministry buys copies of your books and tapes from you (from which you collect the royalties) and sells these at the meetings. I didn't now charities can do that sort of thing.

I also heard recently about the house you were building on over 6,000 square feet of land. Apparently, it includes 7 bedrooms, 8 bathrooms and a basement garage with enough space for ten cars. It seems that because this Pacific mansion is considered a "parsonage," that you don't have to pay for it. The ministry - to whom all of that money goes from collections - is shouldering the bill for land, construction and property taxes.

So, here's the thing... If I give you my £10 [\$20], I receive £100 [\$200] back (according to your word from the Lord) and you only get £10 [\$20]. That's not gonna get you very far, though I suppose

lots of tenners [20 bucks] soon add up. *However*, if you give me (for example) a meager £1 million [\$1.8 million] then **you receive back £100 million [\$180 million]!** And here's my pledge, I will give back to your ministry 50% immediately. I will give 49.5% to charity and I will keep 0.5% to cover my administration costs. Isn't that a great plan?

I really can't see any catches, and as they are gifts there's no taxes! Am I missing something, Pastor? Is there any reason why this wouldn't work? If you give all of *your* money to all of those people who've given to you, then we'll all end up with more money!

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<http://anabaptist.lifewithchrist.org/2006/09/14/letter-to-a-prosperity-preacher.html>



The third is this article by John Frankel from CNBC on MSN Money posted on September 13, 2006. The article is entitled "Preaching the Prosperity Gospel: Forget damnation. Joel Osteen wants you to be happy, healthy and wealthy."

Preaching the prosperity gospel

Forget damnation. Joel Osteen wants you to be happy, healthy and wealthy.

By John Frankel

Joel Osteen says his ministry has never been about the money. But the Houston preacher's "prosperity gospel" has struck a chord among the 61% of American Christians who tell pollsters they believe God wants them to be financially prosperous. "The debate

about God and wealth is big and it's getting bigger," says David Van Biema, co-author of [a September] cover story in Time magazine titled "Does God Want You to Be Rich?" Van Biema says the debate is being propelled, at least in part, by Osteen's book, 'Your Best Life Now.' "That book really took the whole question of what's known as prosperity gospel out of a little subculture of evangelicalism and put it out there for everybody," he says.

As pastor of Lakewood Church, Osteen has attracted one of the nation's biggest congregations. And with his best-selling book and regular appearances on religious broadcasts, Osteen is considered the "most watched preacher" in America.

Religious traditionalists shudder at what they see as the materialism behind the message, but that hasn't deterred Osteen's faithful, 40,000 of whom flock each weekend to non-denominational services in a converted NBA arena.

"Yes, I believe God wants us to succeed and excel," says the boyish and soft-spoken son of a Pentecostal preacher. "That doesn't mean we're all going to be millionaires or that you're going to be the president of your company. But I believe God wants you to rise higher than your parents."

Success has come quickly for the 43-year-old Osteen and his wife, Victoria. Osteen was operating cameras in the Houston church where his father preached at the time of his father's death from a heart attack, in 1999. Osteen, who didn't finish college and never attended seminary, says there was no doubt that he'd succeed his father as senior pastor.

The younger Osteen's message of positive thinking and living was apparently just what the congregation wanted.

The church had 6,000 congregants and an annual budget of \$10 million when Osteen took over. In the seven years since, the

budget has ballooned to \$75 million. Weekly collections bring in \$1 million, and another \$20 million arrives each year in the mail.

The income allowed the church last summer to take on a 30-year lease and allocate more than \$90 million to renovate the former Compaq Center where the Houston Rockets used to play.

"I'm just overwhelmed by it," Osteen says of his meteoric success. "I tell Victoria all the time -- you know, we don't feel any different -- but, you know what, this is something unusual happening. I just believe that faith in America is at an all-time high and that God's just doing big things."

His weekly TV broadcast is the "No. 1 inspirational program nationally," according to his Web site. But the big bucks come from books. "Your Best Life Now," published by Warner Faith, has been a best-seller since 2004. Osteen has signed a book deal with Free Press, an imprint of Simon & Schuster, that could bring him more than \$10 million for a follow-up.

The proceeds from his writings allowed Osteen to stop taking his \$200,000-a-year salary from the church.

"I'm glad that people are willing to invest in this message," Victoria Osteen says of the 4 million or so buyers of "Your Best Life Now." "And I believe this (as-yet-untitled) book is going to be even greater than his first book."

The new book will no doubt help the Lakewood Church bookstore expand on its \$3.5 million in annual sales. But the Osteens say that's not why the follow-up book is being written.

"We know, like anybody else, to use the media, to use every avenue that we can to reach the public," Joel Osteen says.

Osteen is certainly savvy about marketing. It was he who first put his father's sermons on TV. Lakewood Church today features a state-of-the-art production wing that allows Osteen's can-do

message to be seen in every U.S. market and in 150 other countries.

Osteen has done more than anyone to spread the prosperity gospel into the Christian mainstream, says journalist Van Biema. His article in Time cites a recent survey that found 61% of American Christians believe God wants them to be financially prosperous. "The more shocking finding from the study is that 31% of Christians think that if you give God money now He will return it to you later, in spades, so to speak," Van Biema says.

"That really is not part of standard, orthodox Christianity," adds Van Biema. "There had been some brakes on (Christianity) moving toward materialism, but those brakes are gradually being released and you're seeing more and more people saying 'Well, why wouldn't God want us to be rich in this lifetime.'"

"When Christianity becomes as materialistic as the culture at large then you lose that counterweight, and there's really not as much holding it back, so that seems a little bit dismaying," Van Biema says.

<http://articles.moneycentral.msn.com/Investing/CNBC/TVReports/PreachingMessageSelfWorth.aspx?GT1=8579&wa=wsigin1.0&v=410>



Remember today's Gospel lesson? The story about Jesus watching the widow put her two mites – her last penny – into the Temple's offering box? What's that about, anyway? Is it about putting every last cent you have into the offering plate? Is this a model which Jesus wants us to emulate? He doesn't say so, does he? No, he doesn't. He says simply: "she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

He says nothing like “go and do likewise” which he says when he tells the lawyer the story of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:37). There is no invitation in this text to imitate the widow, no statement that Jesus “looked on her and loved her” which is what Mark says of Jesus interaction with the rich man who wouldn’t sell what he had in order to follow Jesus (Mark 10:21), no remark that she is “not far from the kingdom” which is where he says the scribe is when he answers wisely that loving God and self and neighbor are the great commandment (Mark 12: 34).

Joel Osteen and other “Prosperity Gospel” preachers seem to have forgotten this story – or at the very least they have misinterpreted it. This is not about a prosperity Gospel or about giving away money as a gimmick to get people into the pews or about that young man’s suggestion that the preacher give him back just a tiny percentage of the preacher’s salary. *No, this is not about giving up all you have to the religious institutions that we have created to the point that it hurts you.*

When I was serving as an associate pastor at First UMC in Germantown, Philadelphia, I met Larry – a nearly homeless, elderly man who attended church fairly regularly. Larry lived in a neighborhood rooming house and had some mental health issues but in the congregation he felt safe and welcome. Often he would sit in the first or second pew on the pulpit side. I watched him one morning as the offering plate came his way. The usher offered him the plate. Larry clicked open the tiny change purse he had pulled from his pocket and turned it upside down over the plate. Nothing fell out – nothing at all. He smiled and the usher went on to the next pew.

Wow, I thought, what an image. I told the story in our staff meeting later that week, how moved I was that this man who had nothing was willing to empty his purse into the plate even though it was empty. The other associate pastor chuckled a bit. “Ah, yes, she said, “I remember watching Larry one day when the plate came by and he reached up to his mouth, popped out his false teeth, and put them in the offering for the day. The ushers were pretty

surprised – and I’m sure the money counters for the day got a shock that afternoon as they emptied the plates!”

Oh.

Does God require that you give ‘til it hurts? Give until your change purse is empty? Give until all you have left is your false teeth? And then give your false teeth so that you have absolutely nothing? Isn’t that a little beyond what God requires?

Jesus was probably appalled by what brought about the widow’s action in this story. We don’t usually read it like that, do we? A traditional reading of this passage holds out the widow as a model giver, as one who sacrifices everything for God, who acts tangibly on her desire to surrender all to God.

But hear the story in its full context. Jesus has just warned us: “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! *They devour widows’ houses* [emphasis added] and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.” (v 40) And now in v 42 he shows us just exactly what he’s talking about.

The widow in the story had been taught and encouraged by religious leaders to donate as she does – put it all in. But that’s a value system that Jesus condemns, this value system that motivates her action, and he condemns the people who have conditioned her to do it. The scribes, the religious leaders, the Temple which they control, have just taken the last of what this poor widow has – what she thinks she *must* give out of her religious obligation – they have successfully taken not only her house – “they devour widows’ houses” – but now their rules have taken her very last penny – “everything she had, all she had to live on.”

This is not of God, says Jesus. This is not God. This is not the God that Jesus has been teaching in his itinerant ministry. This is a god created by human greed and the obsession that we have for power and control. This is an example not of what Jesus wants us to do, but what he wants us to resist.

God does not want Larry's teeth. God does not want the widow's final penny. God does not want you to surrender your pay check or your pension checks or your Social Security benefits. And, guess what, your giving more does not earn you a better place in the kingdom, it does not increase what's in your pocketbook, and it does not bring you financial success and prosperity.

Growing Hope. (Take a look at the brochure.) In the Spring we began talking honestly and openly about our financial position at Hope Church, how our Finance Committee and Administrative struggle with the fact that we anticipate for 2009 that we will use \$80,000 from our Investment Fund to balance our annual budget. This morning I am introducing you to *Growing Hope ~ Part 2*. Last week, the Council approved our 2010 Budget and, unfortunately, we are once again depending on our Investment Fund to balance our income and expense columns.

At that Council meeting we had some conversation about stewardship and how we can begin to support our ministry with what we are able to realistically contribute individually so that we can do the work to which God has called each of us. And we began discussing in some detail what exactly it means for us as a congregation to financially support our larger mission as an Annual Conference and an international denomination. You will hear more about Annual Conference apportionments and the World Service Fund and the General Church Fund as we move through the coming new year.

But here's what I'm inviting you to do today and over the next few weeks. Consider what it would mean for us to be faithful to the stewardship God has in mind for us. What does it mean for me to commit financially to the mission and ministry of Hope Church? What does it mean if I accept the Finance Committee's challenge

to increase my giving by at least 9%? What if I stretch myself and increase by 10% or 12%? If I give \$50 per week, can I give \$55 instead? If I skip a latte and put that savings in the plate, maybe it lets my church move a bit more securely into the future. Wow.

God does not want Larry's teeth. God does not want the widow's final penny. God does not want you to surrender your pay check or your pension checks or your Social Security benefits or your children's inheritance.

Nothing that I am suggesting to you in these few weeks as I talk about stewardship and faithfulness and commitment is meant to imply that the church is supposed to be asking any of us to give away his or her last penny to any religious institution – that would put the Church in the place of the Temple as it sucks dry the widow. Nothing that the Finance Committee or the Administrative Council or your Pastor asks of you is about “give, give, give ‘til it hurts.” Nothing that we are about as Christians is relying on the promises of a false “Gospel of Prosperity.”

All God asks of us is that we *give our offering plate teeth*. I'm not suggesting that you put your false teeth in the plate like Larry. What God asks of us as Christians is that we put our gifts where our mouth is – that we give in a financially sufficient way that allows the ministry with which we have been entrusted in Havertown and in this world to have enough *bite* to make a difference. Our offering plate – our budget – our ministry – needs teeth in this world – a world which operates on money and not just promises.

Give the ministries of this congregation for 2010 a set of teeth that enables us to take hold of God's work in this world and make a difference. We don't need to give up our false teeth – we don't need to dump our last penny into the plate – but we do need to be faithful and determined in our giving and in our work together.

Give, not 'til it hurts, but give 'til and so we make a difference.

Amen.