

THE EARTH IS THE LORD'S - The Midas Trap and How to Avoid it - Part two

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IT'S NOT WHAT YOU *DO* - IT'S WHAT YOU DO *FIRST* THAT MATTERS

1 Kings 17:8-16 - "Then the word of the LORD came to him, [9] "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." [10] So he arose and went to Zarephath. And when he came to the gate of the city, behold, a widow was there gathering sticks. And he called to her and said, "Bring me a little water in a vessel, that I may drink." [11] And as she was going to bring it, he called to her and said, "Bring me a morsel of bread in your hand." [12] And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." [13] And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But *first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son.* [14] For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" [15] And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. [16] The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, according to the word of the LORD that he spoke by Elijah."

OK. You don't have to be a theologian to realize there's nothing specifically mentioned about giving to a local church in this Old Testament text. Fair enough. But a couple of things still need consideration. After all, why did the Holy Spirit superintend the inclusion of texts like these for church-goers like you and I?

And I think there are two broad unchanging principles that form the heart of this account:

First, plainly speaking, this is a very **material** text. It's very earthy. It's about having enough **food**. And, even closer to home for many, it's about those times it's obvious to us we **don't** have enough physical resources for our present demands. It's a clear story about **lack**. It's about **need**. The **container** may be different. It's a jar for this widow where we may consider a **bank account overdrawn** or a **payment** larger than our capacity or some **pesky pastor** calling us to deeper stewardship. But we get the idea behind the concern of this widow. Times can be demanding. They can be tough.

Second, this is a text about how **priorities** can become disguised so we might not clearly see what needs to be done **first** when we are staring at our resources - especially when we're staring at the **limitations** of our resources. What we see as our limitations can throw us off balance and make **good decisions** difficult and **excuses** easy. Hence the title of this teaching. It's not what you **do**. It's what you do **first** that matters. This point will form the heart of this teaching.

1) **NEVER WAIT FOR ABUNDANCE TO BEGIN HONORING GOD WITH WHAT YOU PRESENTLY HAVE**

The opening word of the Lord to Elijah is strange - **1 Kings 17:8-9** - "Then the word of the LORD came to him, [9] 'Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, *I have commanded a widow there to feed you.*'"

Weren't there any rich families in Zarephath to care for Elijah's needs? Where there no families living on larger farms with bumper crops or bursting herds? Couldn't God find anyone with more than one small jar of flour and two mouths to feed one last meal just before starving to death? Who sends anyone to someone like that for material provisions?

Clearly, God wants to use a starving widow to feed others. But isn't that just like God? Most of us would have seen her as desperately **needing** food. Not one of us would have picked her to be the **supplier** of food. She is as poor as anyone could be. Not only does she have very little to eat, she doesn't even have **fuel** to cook the food she has. She's scrounging around to gather whatever sticks she can find. She has no servants to send out for

wood. There is no one else to care for her.

All of which raises a fascinating question. Is God sending Elijah to this widow to take care of *Elijah*? Or is God sending Elijah to this widow to take care of the *widow*? I mean, God has supernaturally fed Elijah before with no help from anyone else, thank you very much. No. It's this *widow* God wants to teach. And it's the *widow* God wants to bless. Elijah is just the means.

Something else. Be careful to note God *prepared the heart* of this widow in advance so she would know she was responding to the word of the Lord, and not just the demand of Elijah. We aren't given the details, but the text is clear. This widow knows she is hearing from *God - 1 Kings 17:9 - "Arise, go to Zarephath, which belongs to Sidon, and dwell there. Behold, I have commanded a widow there to feed you." "I have commanded...."* This has already been done *before* Elijah gets there.

So why send Elijah to this poor widow? That part seems easy. He wants to bless and care for the needs of this widow, and He wants her to obey her way into blessing. He doesn't want to just wave a wand over her head. He wants her placing her *faith* in His word *before* she sees God's provision. And the command to give to Elijah what she knows she can't afford to give is the tool He uses to accomplish this end.

Now the harder question. Why is this account recorded for people like you and I. We live under the New Covenant, not the Old. We seem miles removed from a story from 1 Kings.

Except. And that leads us on to the second point:

2) GOD ISN'T HONORED AT ALL UNLESS HE'S HONORED FIRST

And this widow, like everyone else since the creation of Adam and Eve, could easily feel she didn't have the resources to give to God before attending to her own needs. And that's where this great text lands right in our own back yards:

1 Kings 17:12-13 - "And she said, "As the LORD your God lives, I have nothing baked, only a handful of flour in a jar and a little oil in a jug. And now I am gathering a couple of sticks that I may go in and prepare it for myself and my son, that we may eat it and die." [13] And Elijah said to her, "Do not fear; go and do as you have said. But first make me a little cake of it and bring it to me, and afterward make something for yourself and your son."

There are really only two important words in **verse 13** - "*first,*" and, "*afterward.*" These are words emphasising *time*. They're *sequence* words. They don't just describe *events*. They stress the *order* of the events. There is nothing wrong with her plan to provide for her physical needs - "*....go and do as you have said....*" It's not her *actions* that are wrong. God knows we have to work and we have to provide. We have responsibilities. Caring for her needs and her son's is perfectly right and honorable. The problem is different. It's her *priorities* that are scrambled. Do what you must do, but *start* with God. That's the message.

But it's also her *problem*. She's convinced she *can't* reverse her priorities. There isn't enough in that jar. And we need to pause right here. Because it's very easy to make the *gap* between this text and your present responsibility greater than it actually is.

Let me explain. Whether you have little or much you *are* this widow. There are people here this morning and you are like this widow because you have less of this world's goods than others. You can do a rough calculation of median incomes and you know the government places you on a poverty level. So there. You are like this poor widow, trying to have not too much month left over at the end of the money.

But that's not the **majority** of us here at Cedarview. Just stroll through the parking lot. Visit the homes. Skip up to the cottages. Peek into the restaurants. Read the brand labels on our clothes. We are all quite blessed. Thank you very much.

And that's all fine enough. My point is we're all still exactly like that very poor widow. And here's why. If you have very little you use it all. And if you have much you still use it all. And with little or much, you can't see the sense or even the possibility of **taking what you have out of circulation and giving it to your local church**.

The call to do this is just as hard and demanding for the millionaire as for this poor widow. And that's because if you have been blessed with much you are also **involved** in much. You have funds here and there. And they're funds **tied up** for your future. These are not just **extra dollars** coming out of some fountain in your living room out of which you can syphon off ten percent every couple weeks. And you can't imagine **cutting back on all you have going on** just to give to the Lord.

And so we learn how to calculate our annual **salary** down to the lowest possible number. But, and of course God **knows how our accountants and bookkeepers work their financial slight-of-hand**, this has nothing to do with how God is actually prospering us. God measures our stewardship by the total **financial kingdom** of which He's made us stewards.

So we're all like this widow. With little or a great deal, if we're going to honor God **proportionately**, and we're going to give to Him **first**, it's going to take a great deal of faith to rest down on the conviction that God's Biblical demand **is actually in our best interest**. Not one of us naturally believes that.

3) **THE ACCOUNT OF THIS WIDOW IS INSPIRED FOR OUR STUDY BECAUSE WE SO EASILY MISS HOW OUR FUTURE HAPPINESS IS ESTABLISHED**

1 Kings 17:14-16 - "For thus says the LORD, the God of Israel, 'The jar of flour shall not be spent, and the jug of oil shall not be empty, until the day that the LORD sends rain upon the earth.'" [15] And she went and did as Elijah said. And she and he and her household ate for many days. [16] The jar of flour was not spent, neither did the jug of oil become empty, **according to the word of the LORD** that he spoke by Elijah."

Believe me, I know of all the twisted prosperity teaching that if you give God \$100 you'll get back \$1000. And you'll never hear that out of my mouth. And the strange thing about it is if that were always automatically true the foundation for robust faith is destroyed. God is turned into a cosmic accountant who just does the math and mails you the cheque.

The text never says this poor widow suddenly became rich. We **do** read her needs were met until the rains returned. But here's what this wonderfully relevant text **does** say. This widow was **protected** by God Himself. God blessed her and God preserved her little family as she put Him first with her material goods.

In other words, by her sacrificial obedience she brought everything about her life and her family **under divine care in a very special sense**. And she found that what she did in obeying the Lord only **seemed** sacrificial at the moment. It brought her life's greatest joy and contentment just as **faithful obedience always does**.

So how is spiritual life formed? Where does God's divine touch rest down on your life? And I would guess that, just like this poor widow, there are people here this morning who would never dream spiritual destiny - a God shaped future - is formed - not in the prayer room - not at the altar - but during that seemingly uneventful slot in the worship time when the offering plate is passed around.

And that's because, for many of us, with all of life's material demands pressing in on us with both threat of disaster and promise of investment return, it's easier to offer God a prayer time than an honest **proportionate**

*offering **first** - before we tend to the rest of our own agendas.*

That request from Elijah puts everything on the line for this poor widow. It's a demanding request, reaching right to the bottom of all her resources. She has a choice. And all of God's promise and provision are on the line. It's not enough that she offers some tiny left-over for Elijah. He's not asking her just to **feed** the prophet. He's asking her to feed him **first**. This is a text about **priorities**. Nothing else will be right for this widow if she **works her way eventually to Elijah**. It's the **trust of her heart** that's being called for.

There is no other way to get our hearts than to ask for our material possessions **first**. Nothing else makes us **honest** with our Creator/Redeemer. Our hearts are **whole organic things**. They can't be split up into segments like a tangerine. I can't ask to have God honor and bless these six segments while I remain in control of these other four.

I'll tell you what I believe is specifically from the Lord for many people in this sanctuary right now. You're trying desperately to figure out the reason for the slight measure of God's manifest blessing and presence in your heart. And the core issue is you're trying to peel off **segments** of your being where you want God's touch and grace manifested - "Bless my marriage. Bless my children - keep them close to you. Heal my spouse. Please help me with my classes. Help me find a job. Please bless my business." And on and on it goes. **"Please keep these six segments of the orange under your blessing!"**

And then, when the offering plate comes around ***I will just keep these four segments of my financial domain under my discretion, thank you very much.***"

And you can do that. And God will not **force** his will into all you have going on with your wealth. But you need to know this. Not only will God let you keep your treasured four segments of your orange - He will return to you the **other six segments you so desperately call upon Him to bless and honor**.

And just like that little myth of King Midas and the way he forgot he couldn't touch the food he needed to nourish his life without turning it into inedible gold, you will find the **whole** of your life - even as it continues to prosper - **indigestible and unsatisfying**.

One other thing. I believe we're meant to see two optional endings to the account of this widow in the face of Elijah's request to honor the Lord **first** with her resources. She doesn't have to. And if she chooses not to - if she calculates the demand is just too high - she will have her chosen meal with her son. And she will secure her future for that short time. Then, like each one of us, she will die. And so will her son.

Or she can honor the demanding call of **first** stewardship to the Lord through Elijah. That means she **won't** be able to feed herself and her son **first**. And she, no doubt, felt the risk of that deep in her heart. But as she honors the call of the Lord in the **sequence** of her priorities she makes the joyful discovery that she secures her life **long-term**, not **short-term**.

But it didn't **look** like that when she obeyed Elijah. It never does.

So sit down today - don't wait, thinking it will get easier later on - and talk about this with your wife or husband or best friend. For your own soul's sake calculate what will represent an **honest monthly portion of whatever total wealth God has placed under your stewardship** - and start honoring Him with that **first**. Save your heart and your whole life **long-term** and finally begin to bring God's blessing on the whole of your existence.