

About the Story

Mark 12:41-44; Luke 21:1-4

Treasury

The “treasury” in this story was some kind of collection box for monetary offerings that people were bringing as part of their worship. It would have been located somewhere in the outer court of the temple. The actual treasury chambers were located in the inner court of the temple where no one but priests were allowed to go. The Temple was in the city of Jerusalem.

Offerings were used to support the Temple and the priests, as well as to provide help for the poor. According to their religious laws, Jesus’ people were required to tithe, which means they were supposed to give 10 percent of whatever they earned or produced.

Widow

A widow is a woman whose husband has died. In the days of Jesus, any legal rights a woman had were related to the legal status of her husband. She had no legal rights herself.

When a woman’s husband died, generally she did not inherit her husband’s property. If her husband had significant assets, it was not uncommon for those assets to be claimed by his brothers or other male relatives when he died, instead of going to her. The legal difficulties of widows are reflected in the parable of “The Widow and the Unjust Judge” (Luke 18:1-8).

Widows, like orphans and “aliens” (foreigners), were very vulnerable. If a widow had no adult son to support her, she often became desperately poor. The prophets condemned people who took advantage of widows: “Cursed be anyone who deprives the alien, the orphan, and the widow of justice” (Deuteronomy 27:19).

Right before this story about the generous widow, Jesus has criticized the scribes. Scribes had many of the same functions as lawyers do now. Too often they used their power to take advantage of vulnerable people like widows. So Jesus tells his disciples, in the hearing of all the people, “Beware of the scribes...They devour widow’s houses...” (Luke 20:46-47). The story of “The Generous Widow” comes right after Jesus gives that warning.

“Two copper coins”

The word used here in Greek (the original language of the story) is *lepta*. A *lepta* was the smallest coin minted in Judea at the time. Two of them were equivalent to one penny, a Roman *quadrans*, which was the smallest denomination of Roman coinage. It took 64 *quadrans* to make a *denarius* which was what a laborer got for one day’s work. And that was barely enough to feed a family.