

Bill Gates. You've heard of him? Bill Gates: the richest man in the world; the founder of Microsoft Corporation; *Time* magazine's person of the year in 2005 and one of the most influential people in the 20th century.

But perhaps what Bill Gates is mostly known for today is his philanthropic endeavors. A few years back he discontinued his role as the CEO of Microsoft so he could put more time into his charitable foundation, the *Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation*. This foundation is the largest charitable foundation in the world, with an endowment of \$37.6 billion! That's right, the foundation has an endowment of \$37.6 billion.

But what is most interesting is how much of his own personal money Gates has contributed for this endowment and others. According to a 2004 *Forbes* estimate, Gates is believed to have given \$29 billion of his own money, between 2000-2004, for charitable work. Did you catch that? *Twenty-nine billion dollars!*

To put things in perspective, that amount of money is more than the Gross Domestic Product of 116 countries of the world! There are only 77 world countries that have a larger Gross Domestic Product than the amount of money that Gates is estimated to have contributed in that four year period.

To say that Gates has given a lot of money for charitable work is an understatement. And yet, the billions of dollars he gives annually pails in comparison to how much money he has. Though it is

estimated that he gave \$29 billion dollars from 2000-2004, Gates is reportedly still worth \$56 billion. This means that he has contributed about a third of his money to charitable work.

As I reflect upon Gates' generosity, I am definitely impressed him. He has definitely given a lot of himself. But could it be that he has not given much at all? Don't get me wrong, I don't want to diminish what he has done in giving a third of his wealth for charity—even proportionally speaking, he gives more than most of us, I'm sure—but could it actually be that the large amount he has given pails in comparison to what others who have gone before him have done?

I'd like you to open the pages of your Bibles this morning to a short story in the Gospel accounts. We have come to our fourth and final Nameless Hero of the Bible, and it is one that is extremely profound. The story is all of four verses and yet those four short verses say more than just about anything else in the Bible. We read the story in **Mark 12**.

The context of the story is very interesting. Jesus is rebuking the Scribes and Pharisees because they loved recognition. They wore clothing that easily identified themselves as part of the upper crust of society. They loved to be greeted in the marketplaces and sit in places where they were easily recognized. It reminds me all too vividly of a story I heard about a college professor. Apparently, this college professor and his family had invited some students over to their house for Sabbath afternoon lunch, and one of the kids kept referring to the professor as "Mr. Brown" (of course, his name wasn't really Mr. Brown). Finally, the professor's wife took the student aside and quietly said, "**Please call him 'Dr. Brown.'**"

This is precisely what Jesus was warning against. These Scribes and Pharisees loved recognition. All of their actions were laced with self.

In the interest of self-disclosure, I see that tendency in my own life. I seek recognition and often catch myself craving attention. This is what tends to happen to those of us who are the modern “scribes”—the ones whose job it is to study and interpret scripture today. To me, Jesus warns, **“Beware of the scribes. . .”**

I don’t think it is coincidental that this is what Jesus was addressing right before our Nameless Hero shows up on the stage. Mark goes on to say that Jesus then **“sat opposite the treasury and saw how the people put money into the treasury.”** This was the Temple Treasury that people would make contributions to. It was located in the **“Women’s Court”** of the temple, so called, not because only women were there, but it was the farthest point in the temple in which women were allowed.

The ancient Rabbinic writings of the first couple centuries AD report that this treasury contained 13 trumpet-shaped chests that the people would deposit their offerings into. The offerings were for the upkeep of the Temple. Seven of them were for specific Temple improvements, while the other six were simply free-will offerings that could go towards anything.

Mark observes, through Jesus’ eyes, that **“many who were rich put in much.”** How could such an observation be made? Well, one of two ways. Either a large contribution could be detected because of the sound the money made—the literal word for **“money”** is the word for **“copper,”**

“**brass,**” or “**bronze.**” Thus, when someone deposited a large sum of money into the metal chests, you could definitely hear the sound reverberating throughout the treasury.

The other way that you would know how much a person was giving is because when they would contribute money to the specific fund for priestly service—the one that funded the priests wages—there would be a priest who was there, examining to see if the funds were genuine, ask you the purpose of the gift, and verify that the contribution corresponded to the prescribed sacrifice.¹ He would then direct you to put it into the proper chest. All this interaction was going on in the open, for everyone to hear if they so chose.

Could you imagine coming to church, and when we took up the offering, the deacons asking each person audibly how much was being given? So if I bring my tithe to church and the deacons are collecting it, Kevin would be going around, asking each person, “**How much are you giving? All right, Shawn Brace is giving \$5 million. Very good. Let me count it to make sure . . .**”

Maybe we should start instituting that here, what do you think?

No, I don’t think it’s a very good idea. Of course, for those who were giving a lot, it was a glorious experience for them. They were given a golden opportunity to boast of the large sums of money they were contributing without really ever having to say much. No matter the vehicle by

¹ James R. Edwards, *The Gospel According to Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 380-381.

which the amount of their gift was revealed, it was an opportunity for them to pet and pad their pride.

Such a thing never takes place with us, of course! Well, maybe. I don't know how many times I've just shaken my head as I enter the Seminary building in Michigan. I know it's not the only building in the world that warrants such a reaction, but this building is the building where we train the future pastors of the Seventh-day Adventist church—a church that prides itself on being God's last-day movement.

I am not sure if anyone has ever been to the Seminary since it was rebuilt, but if you were to talk in the back door—or front door, I'm not sure which is considered the front and which is considered the back—you would see on the left-hand side of the entry way a nice, big plaque that lists all the names of people and companies that contributed thousands of dollars for its building. I'm not sure what the minimum amount was in order for someone to get on the plaque, but rest assured these people gave tens of thousands of dollars.

Occasionally there is simply someone listed as “anonymous,” but only a couple.

And the question comes back to me, hitting me squarely in the face: **why do we crave recognition for such things?** Much like those people in that treasury who Jesus was observing, we excitedly allow people to know the millions of dollars we contribute just so they will be impressed with our generosity. Maybe I'm way off base here, I don't know.

But it is interesting to note that the Greek word for “**money**” that Mark employs here is also utilized in another well-known passage of scripture. Turn with me there very quickly to **1 Corinthians 13:1**, where Paul writes, that “**Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a clanging cymbal.**” What is the same Greek word that is utilized? The word for “**brass.**” Anything devoid of love is worthless and like a sounding brass—which is precisely what was happening as these rich people’s clanging brass echoed throughout the treasury that day.

“**But pastor, you’re being too hard on them,**” you say, “**Jesus didn’t rebuke them. He simply went on to say that another person gave more.**” The context of the passage—where Jesus rebuked the scribes for being too full of self—leads me to believe that Jesus was also rebuking the rich for arrogantly depositing their wealth. They were full of self—which is completely antithetical to *agape* love.

Fortunately, the story doesn’t end there. Just as Jesus silently observes the crowd of rich folk—and, by the way, I’m using the word “**rich**” because that is precisely what Mark calls them—along comes an old woman, gingerly moving toward the treasury. She approaches the chests and timidly declares to the priest how much she is going to deposit. Her voice is barely audible and he has to ask her to repeat the amount a few times. She is extremely embarrassed by the small amount she is giving.

But, alas, she slowly limps towards one of the chests, and, ever so discreetly, slips a few coins into it. There is hardly sound that comes from her gift. The noise of the crowd drowns out any

indication of how much she would have given. And then she slips away, almost completely unnoticed.

She is not entirely unnoticed, of course. While she was doing it, Jesus kept His eyes firmly planted on the old lady. He listened to how much she declared to the priest—**two mites, or roughly 1/64th a day's wages**. In our modern times, we would equate that to a little more than one dollar. *One dollar* in the form of two coins.

Being poor, the women would only have been required to give one of the coins. This would especially be attractive since there was no social security system in their society, and no aid to widows. She could have easily deposited one coin into the chest, and slipped the other one back into her pocket. Instead, she gave all.

By now, you no doubt have noticed the common theme that has run throughout these Nameless Heroes. The Little Lad gave up his whole sack lunch. The widow of Zarephath gave up her last meal for Elijah. The four friends were willing to go to any extreme to friend for Jesus. And now, this poor widow gave up her two mites—she gave up everything—for God's work.

What about you?

So I can hear you thinking right now, "**So here comes a sermon on Tithes and offerings!**" Not quite! Even though I am required by law to preach a sermon on tithes and offerings at least once a year (I am, of course, kidding), I would be doing you a disservice if I simply focused on that.

The truth of the matter is, what we put in the offering plate is merely a reflection of the heart. What God desires of us is our whole heart, not just a few dollars we may put in the tithe envelope.

Should we make it a priority to be faithful in our tithes and offerings? Yes, of course we should! But God asks us to give so much more than that.

One of my favorite quotes from *Steps to Christ* is on page. 46, where Ellen White writes, “**But what do we give up, when we give all? A sin-polluted heart, for Jesus to purify, to cleanse by His own blood, and to save by His matchless love.**” That is what we surrender when we give our all to Christ! We give Him our sin-polluted heart, our nothingness that belongs to us, and, in exchange for that, He gives us a pure and clean heart, purchased by His own blood.

The very next sentence she goes on to write, “**And yet men think it hard to give up all! I am ashamed to hear it spoken of, ashamed to write it.**” If we truly understood the one-sidedness of giving all to Christ, we would think it was the easiest thing to do in the world. We give Christ nothing, and He gives us back everything! Sounds like a pretty good deal to me!

Of course, the story of the widow’s two mites doesn’t end there. Jesus, who has been quietly observing the humble lady, calls His disciples together and tells them that this woman, though giving only two mites, has given more than all the rest of them.

Interestingly, Mark gives no indication that this woman has heard Jesus' words and, in fact, seems to indicate just the opposite. Jesus tells this to His disciples, as the lady walks off. She has no idea that God has accepted and appreciated her modest gift. She humbly walks away, embarrassed by the meager gift she left.

But God accepted it, of course, and He definitely appreciated it. Christ declares that some how, some way, this woman gave more than all the rest of those who had been depositing gifts that day. In some strange way, the economy of heaven is backwards. Otherwise, how could Jesus declare that this woman gave more than everyone else? How could it be?

I was reading a commentary on this very story and I came across a sobering quote that, I believe, reveals the incredible truth that Jesus shared with His disciples. Listen to what this author writes in response to this woman's actions: **"For Jesus, the value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver."** Did you catch that? I'd like to read it again so it sinks in with you. **"The value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver."**²

Please plant that squarely in your mind, friends. *The value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver.* We see this is so abundantly clear in this poor widow's gift, who ashamedly left two mites, but gave up *all* for God.

A little while back, I was reading a book about a man who lived in the 19th century. A man of modest means and education, he wanted to be used by God in His service in whatever way possible. He was a bit unorthodox in his practices and methods of sharing the gospel, but one

² Ibid.

story caught my eye about him. Toward the beginning of his career, he started a children's ministry that ministered to young inner-city "hellions." One man visited the children's ministry and later shared his observations about it. He described the experience as thus:

... The first thing I saw was a man standing up, with a few tallow candles around him, holding a [black] boy, and trying to read to him the story of the Prodigal Son; and a great many of the words he could not make out, and had to skip. *I thought, if the Lord can ever use such an instrument as that for His honour and glory, it will astonish me.* After that meeting was over [he] said to me, "*Reynolds, I have got only one talent: I have no education, but I love the Lord Jesus Christ, and I want to do something for Him; and I want you to pray for me.*"³

This man felt like he only had one talent and, indeed, the person who observed him said he would be astonished if God could ever use him. But even though the man only had one talent, he wanted to use it for God's work. He was willing to offer his one talent—all the he had—to God. He was willing to give up everything, which could go a lot further than many of us who have multiple talents but only surrender a few of them to God.

Who was that man? I'm sure you already know. I mentioned him in my last sermon: **Dwight L. Moody, the great Christian preacher of the 19th century.**

This is the same Dwight L. Moody who, a short time later, had the president-elect Abraham Lincoln visit his children's ministry. Lincoln wanted to see Moody's ministry because he heard so much about it. All this, from a man who claimed to have only one talent but wanted to give it totally to God.

³ Lyle W. Dorsett, *A Passion for Souls* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1997), 66, 67.

You see, the reality is, friends, the person who empties self and humbly offers him or herself to God will do more than anything Bill Gates could ever accomplish. What was that quote again from the commentator? *The value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver.*

So am I simply admonishing you to give up everything? Well, interestingly, there is another point in this story that we cannot and must not miss. A word that is used in **verse 41** is an entry way to a deeper, even more beautiful truth. The word for “rich” is also utilized in Paul’s second epistle to the believers in Corinthians.

I’m sure you are all too aware of the verse. But notice that word “rich” again in **2 Corinthians 8:9**, which gives us a beautiful insight into God’s character. **“For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was *rich*, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich.”** You see, friends, Jesus Christ was one of those rich people. He is worth far more than the \$56 billion that Bill Gates is worth. Jesus’ wealth far surpasses anyone on *Forbes*’ richest person list. And yet, He gave *all of it up* as a sacrifice for us.

Yes, Jesus, who walked on Heaven’s golden streets, gave it all up to walk on the dusty roads of this earth. Jesus, who sat on the throne of the whole universe, wearing a golden crown, gave it all up to be nailed to a tree and wear a crown of thorns. Jesus, who enjoyed the constant companionship of His Father, gave it all up and cried out, **“My God, My God, why have you forsaken Me?”**

The truth of the matter is, this poor widowed woman who gave up everything was simply a reflection of Jesus. She gave up all for the Man who would eventually give up all for her.

And that is the reality of the Gospel, friends. God doesn't ask of us what He has not already done Himself. With our hearts overflowing with gratitude, thankful for the realities of Christ's condescension, we are compelled to surrender all to Him. And the all that we give—no matter how small it is—is infinite to God because it comes from a grateful heart. What are those words again? *The value of a gift is not the amount given, but the cost to the giver.*

Christ's gift to us is of infinite value because He gave *all* for us. Though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor. Does this compel us to do the same?

Back in the early 1900s, there was a Baptist preacher by the name of John Harper. He hailed from the wonderful country of Scotland—my home for one year—and he, like Moody, had a burden for ministry. A single father, whose wife died soon after she gave birth to their only child—a little girl named Nana—Harper accepted a call to become the pastor of the Moody Church in Chicago, actually. (This story is not in that same book that I have been reading about Moody, by the way; I came across it in another book.)

So Harper accepted the call, packed up his belongings, and with his six-year-old daughter, Nana, boarded a boat in Southampton, England, setting sail for the United States on **April 10, 1914**. Unfortunately, four days later—as many of you are, no doubt, well aware—that infamous unsinkable ship called the *Titanic* hit an iceberg and started taking on water. Everyone on board

became frantic. Panicking, they lowered the 20 lifeboats the ship was outfitted with—far too few for the number of people on board—and started loading them with women and children.

Harper carefully placed his daughter into one of the lifeboats, and as tears rolled down her cheeks, they said their goodbyes. As the only living parent of little Nana, Harper could have very easily hopped aboard the lifeboat and sailed to safety. He refused, however, instead yelling out to all the frantic people that all the “women, children, and unsaved” should get into the lifeboats.

As the ship took on more and more water, and it sank faster and faster, Harper, with life jacket on, became one of over 1500 people that jumped into the cold Atlantic waters. As people swam around, chaotic over the situation, trying to stay warm any way possible, Harper began swimming around from person to person, asking them if they were “**saved.**” In particular, he came up to one young man who was clinging on to a piece of debris from the ship, shivering from the near-freezing Atlantic waters. Harper cried out, “**Man, are you saved?**” The young man responded, “**No!**” and Harper cried out, “**Believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thou shalt be saved.**”

Harper continued to swim around, asking everyone if they were saved, hoping to bring them eternal saving in the shadows of temporal death. Eventually, though, he made his way back around to the same young man who was clinging on to the debris for dear life, and again asked, “**Are you saved?**” The young man again responded negatively, at which point Harper supposedly took off his lifejacket, gave it to the young man, and said, “**Here then, you need this more than I do . . .**”

That was the last time the young man saw Harper, as a wave swept him away, never to be seen or heard from again.

Amazingly, that young man was one of *only six people, out of the 1500 that jumped into the water*, that were saved when the *Carpathia* came to the *Titanic's* rescue.

A few years after the incident, the young man shared his story with those who were interested in listening. In no uncertain terms, he recalled, “**There, two miles above the ocean floor, I did believe on the Lord Jesus Christ for my salvation. I was John Harper’s last convert.**”⁴

John Harper literally did give up all for the sake of Christ—and he gave up all for that young man. All so he could understand the realities of God’s love.

Of course, Harper is nothing more than a faint reflection of the Father’s heart. Jesus gave us *His* lifejacket in exchange for a cross. It doesn’t seem like much—indeed, not a whole lot more than a poor widow’s two mites—but it was His everything.

And what is our response? As Christ has given us all, are we willing to give up all for Him? Who knows what giving up all looks like. It may mean literally giving all of our wealth to God. It may mean giving up all of our time, devoting every second of our lives to Him. That doesn’t mean, of course, that we have to live in a Monastery and refrain from doing anything other than read our

⁴ J. Matthew Sleeth, *Serve God, Save the Planet* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2006), 39. Cf. also <http://www.momof9space.com/titanic.html>, <http://www.spiritofgrace.org/Newsletters/titanic.htm>. Both websites accessed February 7, 2008.

Bibles or “share the gospel” audibly. But it does mean that everything we do is the outworking of our grateful hearts.

And so, dear friends, as we close this preaching series on Nameless Heroes, I am wondering if you are willing to be a Nameless Hero for Christ. No, you probably won't get your name on some plaque, boasting of the great things you've accomplished, of the millions you've donated. But are you willing to do *everything* for the Man who gave up *everything* for you?

I am not one for altar calls very much, but I want to take the opportunity, right now, to invite anyone forward who is eager to give everything to Christ, even if it's just one talent, one lifejacket, or two mites. God will use the feeble instrument that you are and do mighty things with a person who is totally emptied for Him.

Is there anyone who will come forward?