

Enough is Enough

Pastor Paul Dinges,

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Mark 12:38-44

Picture a boxer, beaten-up and exhausted, many rounds into a grueling match. The bell rings, and he collapses onto a stool in the corner. With each round, his chances of winning have slipped slowly away. His opponent is just too strong, too fast. Silently, the boxer's trainer hands him a wet towel for his forehead and tends to his wounds. Then, he stops and looks into his eyes. A silent agreement passes between them. The trainer picks up another towel and throws it into the ring. Enough is enough.

Picture a small child, riding in a supermarket cart being pushed by his mother. He's been throwing a tantrum for the past 10 minutes. The other shoppers are looking at them with annoyance, but his mother goes on with her shopping as though nothing has happened. She knows how to handle the situation. She's seen it before. Her son - who's cried himself out by now - realizes he's not getting anywhere with this tactic. So, he stops, ending his fearsome crying jag with a pathetic whimper. Enough is enough.

Picture a man who's been struggling for many months with a disturbing thought. He's always enjoyed having a drink with dinner, but lately it seems that one drink has turned into two, or three or so many he's lost count. His marriage is on the rocks, his children give him disapproving glances and his boss is threatening to fire him because he's habitually late. He's troubled by the thought that maybe he's an alcoholic. A friend of his who's in recovery himself has said as much. He's told him about Alcoholics Anonymous and how it literally saved his life. He's given him his card and said, "Call me any time." The man fishes the card out of his top dresser drawer. Enough is enough.

Picture a husband and wife who have reached an impasse in their marriage. For years now, they've traced and retraced the same pathways, resurrected the same tired, old arguments. There seems to be no solution, no way out of the logical and emotional tangle into which they've collapsed. Over the years, one or the other of them has suggested they go to their minister for help, or maybe a therapist - but each time, one of them has been unwilling. Now, they look at each other, and both realize it's the only solution. They'll go to seek help, at last. Enough is enough.

In countless circumstances, saying "Enough is enough" is a good thing. It's a recognition that it's time to cease our pointless striving. It's a decision to move on.

Why is it that, in each of these instances, somebody's finally able to say, "Enough is enough" - but that when it comes to the accumulation of material wealth, most of us still believe the sky's the limit? "You can never be too rich or too thin," said Wallis Warfield Simpson, who married King Edward VIII of England (a decision that led to his decision to abdicate the throne). Most people - thinking of the deadly disease of anorexia - would disagree with the Duchess of Windsor on the too-thin part. But too rich? No way. To quote a character in one of Jesus' parables, "You can always build a bigger barn, right?"

The story of the Widow's Mite in Mark 12 is an example of someone declaring "enough is enough"

financially and thereby finding freedom. No doubt every resident of Jerusalem who knew this impoverished elderly widow worried on her behalf, thinking that she might not have enough to live on – except for the scribes, of course. The early verses of this week’s Scripture lesson contain a critique by Jesus of the worldly temple authorities. In verses 38-40, he scolds the scribes who live an opulent lifestyle, strutting around in lavish robes and gorging themselves at banquets, even as “they devour widows’ houses.”

The story is seldom retold, in full context, including this detail. Jesus has just remarked that no one should be forced to give herself poor. So, even Jesus himself, it seems, thinks the widow’s gift is too much, rather than enough. And yet ... and yet ... It’s her decision – her desire to give herself poor. No one – not even the scribes – would have said this woman ought to give up the very last coin she had, placing herself in abject poverty. But she does it anyway. She does it of her own volition.

Strange as it may seem to our own prudent, cautious selves, the poor widow decides that having nothing – absolutely nothing – is enough. It literally isn’t enough, of course. That’s the irony. Jesus is brutally honest about that, as he tells the tale. The mite, that tiny coin, is all this woman has to live on. By placing it in the temple collection-box, the widow makes a truly sacrificial gift. Because of her remarkable generosity, she guarantees she will not have enough. She may literally die as a result.

It’s akin to a decision Jesus himself will soon make, just a few days from the date he tells this parable. On this day, he’s teaching in the temple in relative peace, surrounded by his disciples. Just a few days later, as Mark tells it, comes the agony in the garden when Jesus implores, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want” (14:36).

A short time after, he will be on the cross, when this happens: “At three o’clock Jesus cried out with a loud voice, ‘Eloi, Eloi, lema sabachthani?’ which means, ‘My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?’ ... Then Jesus gave a loud cry and breathed his last” (15:34, 37). Can you hear the sound of Jesus’ own mite falling into the collection-box?

The Stewardship Committee of Jack Stotts’ church in Texas – in the early days of his ministry – was opening the envelopes that contained pledge cards they had just received in the annual campaign. When they came to the card of Mamie Cades, they were dismayed. It seemed the amount was far more than Mamie could afford.

Mamie, as Jack described her years later, was a tall, homely woman who always wore threadbare dresses that looked to be decades old. She lived by herself in a house that was in terrible repair. Everyone assumed she was poor – which, by most definitions, she was.

“Somebody’s got to talk with Mamie and tell her she can’t afford this gift,” one of committee members said. “She ought to keep the money. The church doesn’t really need it, and she could use it to fix up her place. You go tell her, Pastor.”

With some trepidation, the young and inexperienced pastor set out to do just that. He arrived at Mamie’s ramshackle house and sat down in her parlor. He could hear the wind whistling through cracks in the walls. Stotts told Miss Cades (for he would never have dreamed of calling her by her first name in that place and time) of the Stewardship Committee’s concern. A look of dismay came over her face. “Would you take my joy away from me?” she asked.

It was a modern-day Widow’s Mite parable. It taught Stotts something valuable that informed his later work as president of McCormick Theological Seminary, tasked with raising major gifts. He told this story in an address to the “Embraced by Abundance” stewardship conference in Phoenix, Arizona, August 2002.

Thanksgiving Day is this Thursday. And it's an excellent opportunity for us all to declare, "Enough is enough." When we keep the holiday well, we make that statement not out of a sense of deprivation, but rather out of deep gratitude. We look around us, count our blessings, and realize that, yes indeed, we have been blessed. But our possessions are not the source of that blessing. It's our relationship with a living, loving God.

What such a God gives us in life, in terms of material wealth, simply must be enough. Think about that for a moment. Truly think about it. Would a God whose very nature is abundance give us anything less than enough? The spiritual challenge for us lies in meeting our generous God where God truly is - not where our own greediness may lead us.

The book of Revelation spins a colorful picture of a heavenly city that's about as far removed from the widow's mite as possible. This city - God's city - is positively glittering with material wealth: "The wall is built of jasper, while the city is pure gold, clear as glass. The foundations of the wall of the city are adorned with every jewel. ... And the twelve gates are twelve pearls, each of the gates is a single pearl, and the street of the city is pure gold, transparent as glass" (Revelation 21:18-21).

All this opulence, though, is beside the point. It's utterly insignificant because of the far-superior glory described in the verses that follow: "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb. And the city has no need of sun or moon to shine on it, for the glory of God is its light, and its lamp is the Lamb."

Of what value are streets of glittering gold and gates of shimmering pearl in a city lit by the glory of God? Maybe the widow with her mite imagined how she would walk those golden streets one day soon, and how - even if she could have contrived to take that tiny coin with her - it would be utterly insignificant. To her, the only treasure worth pursuing is the glory of God. And that - for her and for us - most certainly is enough.

Let's consider one final way that enough may truly be enough this Thanksgiving. It has nothing to do with money. For some of us, it may be true that there's a friend or family member with whom we've had a falling-out. Maybe we haven't spoken to that person for a very long time. Or maybe, when we have spoken, even the most innocent of conversations quickly degenerated into an argument - not just any argument, but the same intractable disagreement, endlessly replayed.

Maybe in a few days we're going to sit down for dinner with that person on Thanksgiving Day. Or maybe there's little chance that person will be there - although, by rights, he or she really should be at that table.

Whichever of those alternatives may be the case, there's still time between now and then for us to declare that enough is enough. There's still time for us to just let it go, to let the other person have the satisfaction of winning the argument. Life is too short to allow envy, jealousy, anger, or feelings of personal woundedness to get in the way of gratitude to God, whose very nature is abundance. So, I pray this Thanksgiving you will adopt the attitude of the poor widow and declare "enough is enough!" - whether it's regarding money or relationships. Because indeed, enough is enough. It really, truly is!