

# Sounding the Giving Trumpet

By Brent MacDonald ©2021



Temple Model<sup>1</sup>

The temple was the pride of Israel's religious rulers. Many would assume that within the temple precinct, the dwelling place for God's name, the Holy of Holies, would be the specific focus of their pride. Yet, these religious rulers had turned the temple into a business, using it to extort money and goods from Israel's people. For them, the offerings in front of the Holy of Holies were a necessary burden. Instead, they found joy in the Court of the Women.

Temple rules allowed no Gentile beyond the soreg (fence) that surrounding the temple proper. Similarly, they allowed no woman beyond the Court of the Women. While the name seemingly implies this was a court only for women, it rather meant this was a place where Israel's men and women could gather.

Inside this court was the temple treasury. The sights and sounds of men and women giving here were music to the ears of Israel's rulers. While the Law demanded many gifts, including the temple tax, religious leaders and the Torah

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<sup>1</sup> Model at Israeli Museum in Jerusalem. Photo by Brent MacDonald, ©2013.

encouraged freewill gifts. The same priests who turned the temple tax into a business, with their monopoly on minting and selling approved currency, also encouraged freewill giving. Of course, using these gifts was under their control, whereas the law defined the use of prescribed gifts.

We don't have full details of how the religious rulers "encouraged" freewill gifts, though the Mishnah implies they created a series of rules that mandated some. For example, if you set aside money for one gift or taxes, but then misplaced it (even stolen), they held you obligated to replace it. For example, you sent your gift to the temple via a messenger, but someone robbed that messenger. You now still owed what you had previously sent. But, if you fortuitously recovered the previously lost gift, even if you had already replaced it, they demanded the recovered amount too. The religious rulers claimed the original gift was a dedicated gift, still belonging to God, so you were still under a duty to give it. So much for a freewill gift. People likely gave many so-called freewill gifts under compulsion from these religious rulers. And, remember, they exempted themselves from many giving and taxation rules.

Mark and Luke both have Jesus' comments about the poor widow who gave all. The immediate context flows from His earlier condemnation of the scribes. These He rebuked for loving showy long robes and preeminent public recognition at feasts and in the marketplaces and synagogues. He further noted they liked making pretentious long prayers, such prayers drawing attention to themselves rather than focusing – as all prayer should – on God. Last, Jesus also says these same individuals devour widow's houses.

**Mark 12:38** And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces <sup>39</sup> and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, <sup>40</sup> who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> All Scriptures are from The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV). Copyright © 2001, 2006, 2011, 2016 by Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers. All rights reserved.

**Mark 12:41** And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup> And a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. <sup>43</sup> And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. <sup>44</sup> For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

**Luke 20:45** And in the hearing of all the people he said to his disciples, <sup>46</sup> "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and love greetings in the marketplaces and the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, <sup>47</sup> who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation."

**Luke 21:1** Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the offering box, <sup>2</sup> and he saw a poor widow put in two small copper coins. <sup>3</sup> And he said, "Truly, I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all of them. <sup>4</sup> For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on."

Jesus called out the religious rulers for failing to judge with the right judgment. Couldn't they see that a simple righteous prayer focused on God was better than all the pompous long-winded prayers in the world? Couldn't they see right teaching was more important than titles and popular recognition?

The example Luke and Mark follow up with shows the same. Couldn't everyone see the widow giving much out of her poverty is greater than portentous and

pretentious people public flaunting their proportionally insignificant giving out of their wealth?

Note two points. Nowhere, here, does the text say that poor people must give all they have. This passage doesn't address why the poor widow was giving. Many commentators praise her for spontaneous generosity, which, though possible, isn't necessarily probable. Though Jesus knew her reason for giving, he never provided this as it's not the focus of his remarks. Because of the earlier remarks on religious rulers devouring widow's houses, it's just as likely she was on the receiving end of some compulsion by these religious frauds. Regardless, we do know why the religious rulers gave – always for the public recognition (having exempted themselves from most of the mandated gifts or taxes, making “freewill” gifts far easier for them).

Matthew addresses much of the same giving issue using another account of Jesus' teaching...

**Matthew 6:2** “Thus, when you give to the needy, sound no trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may be praised by others. Truly, I say to you, they have received their reward.

Jesus often, almost continually, spoke figuratively.<sup>3</sup> While possible a generous giver could have this announced with a literal trumpet on a city street, it's farfetched. That Jesus mentions the same trumpet-sounding in a synagogue proves the latter. Synagogues were under strict rules for people's conduct making a literal trumpet unlikely. This returns us to the temple treasury.

There were thirteen boxes in the temple treasury court, all marked so people knew the deposited gift's use. Two were for the mandated temple tax<sup>4</sup>, others for

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<sup>3</sup> Matthew 13:34; Mark 3:33-34

<sup>4</sup> Per Edersheim: “Trumpets 1 and 2 were appropriated to the half-shekel Temple-tribute of the current and of the past year.” The two shofar-boxes for collecting the mandated temple tax, the half-shekel tax, were located immediately inside the Eastern Gate, the primary entrance to the Court of the Women. This was likely a reminder that all Israel had a duty to pay this tax as part of God's people with access to His temple. This triple Eastern Gate was also called the “Gate Susan,” because it contained a beautifully sculptured relief of the Persian city of Susa (consider Esther). Some believe this is also the Beautiful Gate

mandated offerings<sup>5</sup>, and the rest for free-will gifts. Each box had a trumpet-shaped top. While some claim these spouts were bronze (or metal), I've found no evidence for or against this. Perhaps they think metal because our trumpets are so made. For example, Leen Ritmeyer, who makes some of the best temple architectural drawings (such as the one at the start of this article), says...

Thirteen wooden boxes with trumpet-shaped bronze funnels to guide the coins into the box were placed under the colonnades of the Court of the Women. This area was the actual Treasury. The sound these coins made against the metal would have indicated how much people offered to the Temple. (<https://www.ritmeyer.com/2015/05/15/the-treasury-of-the-temple-in-jerusalem/>)

The actual wording for these boxes was shofar-shaped chests. It's as likely the top was made from the same material as the chest or perhaps was a literal shofar (a ram's horn) adapted to a box's top for this purpose. Regardless, as you'll soon see, it wasn't necessary for the top to be metal for someone to see how much was given.

Esteemed Jewish researcher, Alfred Edersheim, in his work, *The Temple its Ministry and Services*, in the section *Court of the Women*, describes these shofar chests...

"These thirteen chests were narrow at the mouth and wide at the bottom, shaped like trumpets, whence their name."

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mentioned in Acts 3:2,10, but that's uncertain. Religious rulers wouldn't want beggars near the treasury, so it's more probable it was the triple gate leading up to the temple platform from the mount's southside, through Herod's hilltop expansion.

<sup>5</sup> For example, per Edersheim, "Into Trumpet 3 those women who had to bring turtledoves for a burnt and a sin offering dropped their equivalent in money, which was daily taken out and a corresponding number of turtledoves offered. This not only saved the labor of so many separate sacrifices, but spared the modesty of those who might not wish to have the occasion or the circumstances of their offering to be publicly known. Into this trumpet Mary the mother of Jesus must have dropped the value of her offering (Luke 2:22,24)..."



Graphic by the Jehovah's Witnesses<sup>6</sup>

Notice they aren't, what some assume and picture (as above), an open trumpet shape with the wide part up. They assume someone could easily pour in their gift. Instead, the narrow opening means the giver must stand there and willfully insert each coin as part of their gift. Someone sitting nearby would easily be able to see how much a giver was contributing, even more so if someone was dramatic in how they inserted each coin. The latter were those figuratively sounding their trumpets to announce their giving.

Wherever Jesus sat within the Court of the Women he could have easily seen this woman making her gift. According to Mishnah Middot 2, the whole court was 135 cubits by 135 cubits, or about 202½ feet by 202½ feet.

The Mishnah, written within recent memory of the operating temple, also notes...

Just as there were shofar-shaped chests in the Temple, so there were shofar-shaped chests in the provinces. (Mishnah Shekalim 2)

The Mishna with Obadiah, by Rabbi Shraga Silverstein, clarifies Mishnah Shekalim 2 by noting "chests, whose mouths were narrow at the top, like a shofar, whose mouth is narrow on top, and which "broadens out" (this, so that nothing could be

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<sup>6</sup> Graphic of widow giving from a Jehovah's Witnesses article on giving (<https://www.jw.org/en/library/jw-meeting-workbook/may-2018-mwb/meeting-schedule-may21-27/widow-put-in-more-than-all-others/>). Getting a small detail wrong, such as the trumpet box shape, is a secondary issue. Their main problem is their distortion of Scriptures with their New World Translation and a host of blatantly anti-Christian core doctrines.

taken from them).” He further notes the word translated provinces, according to the sage Maimonides (Rambam), meant “other cities of Israel.”

As Jesus noted, people wanting to advertise their giving could easily do so at the temple or in other cities of Israel. You could figuratively blow your trumpet at any shofar-box conveniently placed around the country. Their prevalence encouraged giving year-round and not only at the God-mandated times all men needed to appear before Him in Jerusalem or when the law needed a temple appearance and offering.

For God’s church, our giving is between us and God. Our generosity isn’t something we advertise or use to show off.<sup>7</sup> The continuing verses in Matthew say it best...

**Matthew 6:3** But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, <sup>4</sup> so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Stop blowing your trumpet and give.

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<sup>7</sup> Giving discretely and privately doesn’t exclude giving corporately, even as Paul encouraged believers in one area to pool their giving to help those in need elsewhere (1 Corinthians 16:1-2).