

“The Meaning of Money”
Matthew 22: 15-22
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So ... what’s in your wallet? What does your money say to you?

What the coin said to Jesus was: “Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

The Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus in a trap when they send their disciples to him, along with the followers of King Herod. The disciples of the Pharisees try to bait the trap with some smooth talk, by saying,

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with the truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality” ¹

It doesn’t work. He’s aware of their nastiness, and is definitely on guard when they say,

“Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?” ²

The trap has been set, and Jesus is going to have to move nimbly to avoid springing it. Jesus asks:

“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?” ³

Jesus knows that they’re asking about a particular tax, one that can be paid only in Roman coin. Problem is, the coin contains an image and an inscription — “Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, high priest” — a person considered heretical by devout Jews.

If Jesus says “Yes, it’s lawful to pay,” he alienates the Jewish nation; if he says “No,” he risks arrest by the Romans.

¹ Matthew 22:16

² Matthew 22:17

³ Matthew 22:18

It's a lose-lose proposition.

But Jesus spots a way out. He asks the disciples of the Pharisees for the coin used for the tax, and they give him one — notice that the Pharisees are in possession of the sacrilegious coin, not Jesus! He asks them:

“Whose head is this and whose title? The emperor’s,”⁴ they answer, wondering what he’s getting at.

Then, in one quick move, he slips completely out of their trap.

“Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s”⁵

By saying that what is already the emperor’s should be given to him, Jesus avoids a direct yes or no response — one that would get him in serious trouble with either the Jews or the Romans. But in answering the way he does, he gives an indirect yes. He implies that paying this tax is not against the Jewish law.

But he then goes beyond the question asked by the Pharisees and says that what is God’s must be given to God.

Loyalty to God is on a different and much higher level of importance than simple earthly loyalty to the emperor.

What about the disciples of the Pharisees? They realize that Jesus has escaped. Amazed, they leave him and go away.⁶

There’s certainly a lot of meaning to be found in money. Jesus knows that money is a major factor in the shaping of our lives, and he focuses on it a great deal in his ministry, in fact, his focus on money is second only to his focus on the kingdom of God.

For Jesus, money is to be used: to pay taxes to the emperor, but also to advance God’s work in the world.

⁴ Matthew 22:20-21

⁵ Matthew 22:21

⁶ Matthew 22:22

Money is never an end in itself, a treasure to be socked away like a Continental Dollar for 235 years until it has grown in value 1,500 times. What would be the point of that? You are going to die long before you see that kind of appreciation and we all know that you can't take it with you.

The meaning of money is that it's an asset, a resource for us to put to work in the world. If you listen carefully, your money is saying, "Use me."

As good stewards we are called to use the resources that we have been given to advance the interests of "the master" in the world. That's precisely what it means to be doing in the work of Christian stewardship.

Everything we possess has been given to us by our loving Lord in a wild gesture of generosity. We don't really own anything ourselves, but instead we care for the things that belong to God for as long as we are allowed to walk this earth.

We relish them, we delight in them, we manage them ... but then we let go of them. So why not let go in a way that advances God's interests?

It's true that we have to give some coins to the emperor — death and taxes are two of life's certainties. But beyond this we have a great deal of freedom to exercise in the use of our assets, and it is good for us to learn how to be generous with the money we have.

Author Anne Lamott says:

"I know that if I feel any deprivation or fear about money, the solution is to give. Because I know that giving is the way we can feel abundant, giving is the way that we fill ourselves up." ⁷

The Rev. Dr. Samuel Lloyd, the former dean of Washington's National Cathedral, has some tremendous insights into stewardship,

⁷ Anne Lamott, author of "Traveling Mercies" and "Grace (Eventually)."

he makes the point that since we live in a consumer culture, we need help in learning how to be generous.

The poor can help us, since they tend to practice greater generosity than the rich.

The Bible can help us, since it recommends the tithe — a 10% gift that helps us to give in a disciplined way.

Money is an important part of our spiritual life. We need to learn how to express our beliefs not only with our words, but with our wallets.⁸

So ... what's in your wallet? What's it saying to you? And how are you going to use it?

Dr. Samuel Lloyd notices that people will give generously when they believe that there is an important mission at work, and when they see real opportunities to advance God's interests in the world.⁹

This requires being clear about the mission and ministry of the church, and adding concrete details to the invitation of Jesus to give "to God the things that are God's."¹⁰

People will give with boldness and generosity when they see:

1. Mission projects that heal the sick and liberate the oppressed...
2. Christian education programs that shape the hearts and minds of children and adults ...
3. Worship services that glorify God and uplift the people ...
4. Fellowship activities that move people from isolation to community and from casual acquaintance to deep-spirited friendship.

These are all opportunities to advance God's interests in the world, and to serve a Lord of love and generosity by living lives of love and generosity.

⁸ Lloyd Samuel T. III. "Stewardship as a personal journey." Washington National Cathedral, 01-20-2006

⁹ Lloyd Samuel T. III. "Stewardship as a personal journey." Washington National Cathedral, 01-20-2006

¹⁰ Matthew 22: 22

We have been worrying a lot about money lately as we have followed the stock market on a daily, some on even on an hourly basis, with all its rapid ups and downs. It seems mostly down!

It can drive you crazy. What is a person to do? We can yell and curse about our losses; we can complain and play the blame game or we can make peace with it and understand that loss is a part of life and that life can be rediscovered in loss.

It brings into question what really matters, what really counts in life?

Rabbi Steven Leder in his book, "More Money than God," tells the story about one of his confirmation students who returned to Los Angeles after a semester of living in South America. He asked her what was the biggest difference between the village she lived in and where she lives in Los Angeles? She answered without hesitation.

"People are happier there, they have so much less than any of us, yet they celebrate more. They sing and dance more. Their families eat together. People take care of each other when they're sick, and they help their neighbors when they are in trouble."

How often do we sit down to eat as a family? How many of us know our neighbors, let alone reach out to them when they are in trouble?

When was the last time you sang and danced?

What is true wealth, if not friends, children, family, and a life spent helping and cherishing others?

Today in the midst of all the financial and economic turmoil, in the midst of this church's time of transition, we have a chance:

- to rediscover the meaning of money;
- to rediscover the meaning of life;
- to make peace and to understand that loss is a part of life and that life can be rediscovered in loss.

This is the day to stop wishing for a better life and to start making one. Don't wait until it is too late to be grateful for what you have. Ask yourself:

- Do you spent enough time with your spouse and children?
- Do you lose your temper with your children, your parents?
- Do you abuse your bodies with too much food and drink?
- Do you abuse your mind with too much television or too much gossip?
- Do you abuse the earth with too much careless waste?
- Are you really doing something for the poor and hungry? Do you at least grant them the dignity of looking into their eyes?
- Are you fair and just in your business dealings?
- Do you practice hospitality here at church and in your daily lives?
- Are you kind to strangers whom you will never see again, in line, in traffic, or on the telephone?

These are simple acts of goodness, but they ultimately are what make our lives and the lives of others so much richer.

Let us take advantage the opportunities that are right before our eyes:

- Opportunities to advance God's interests in the world;
- Opportunities to serve a Lord of love and generosity by living lives of love and generosity.

Take a look at a typical American coin and you won't see the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus, high priest."

Instead, you'll see the words "Liberty" and "In God We Trust."

The phrase "In God We Trust" challenges us to rely on our good and gracious God, and to believe that he will care for us in the future, just as he has cared for us in the past.

The word "Liberty" reminds us that we are free to be generous in our giving, as faithful stewards of the great abundance that the Lord has given us.

Let us trust in a loving and generous God; Let us do so with liberty to support God's work in the world.

“We make a living by what we get, we make a life by what we give.” ¹¹

That's the meaning of money.

Amen!

¹¹ Quote attributed to Winston Churchill