

The Meaning of Money

Matthew 22:15-22

Ypsilanti First United Methodist Church

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In today's gospel reading, Jesus says, "Show me the money." Actually, what he really said was, "Show me the coin."

And 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."

What Jesus was talking about was the meaning of money. What Jesus wants to know is what does our money mean to us?

In today's gospel reading, The Pharisees are trying to catch Jesus in a trap so they ask him "Tell us, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" (v. 17)

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

"Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?" he asks (v. 18). 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, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest" —

This inscription is considered blasphemous 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. It's a lose-lose proposition.

But Jesus, being Jesus, spots a way out of this dilemma. He asks the disciples of the Pharisees for the coin used for the tax, and they give him one — Holding up the coin, Jesus asks them "Whose head is this, and whose title?" "The emperor's," 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" (vv. 19-21).

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.

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 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.

The meaning of money is that it's an asset, a resource for us to put to work in the world. If we listen carefully our money is saying, "Use me." "Use me to build God's kingdom." "Use me to do Christ's work." In the Kingdom Assignment 2 that we celebrated a few weeks ago, we all saw this truth beautifully illustrated. Only we didn't use money, we used our stuff— assets from our lives, our shelves, our closets, our creativity—we used these items to do Christ's work and the result was astonishing! More than \$20 thousand dollars that we have shared with the poor and needy in our community and around the world. But the result also shows us that amazing things are possible when we use our assets, our money, our resources to do God's work in our world. The results also show us that the most important thing we are called to do with our resources, our money, our assets is to use them—use them to build God's kingdom, and do God's work here on earth.

Now in case you haven't already guessed, this is a stewardship sermon. And that being the case, let me just say that good Christian stewards are people who use the resources that they have been given to advance the interests of Christ in the world.

The truth is that 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....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 —like it or not, we still have to pay taxes, this has been true at least since the time of Jesus. But beyond this, we have a great deal of freedom to exercise in the use of our assets.

In addition it is good for us to be generous with the money we have. "Giving is the way we can feel abundant," says writer Anne Lamott. "Giving is the way that we fill ourselves up."ⁱⁱ

Scripture helps us to learn about giving as the Bible recommends the tithe — a 10-percent gift that helps us to give in a disciplined way. Money is an important part of our spiritual life, and we need to learn how to express our beliefs not only with our words, but with our wallets as well.

So the question today is what's your money saying to you? How are you going to use it? And despite these hard economic times, as well as the stock market crisis, our money is speaking to us now more than ever, saying "Use me." "Use me to build God's kingdom, and do God's work here on earth."

Take a look at a typical United States coin, and you won't see the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, august 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 God will care for us in the future, just as God has cared for us in the past. It calls on us to trust more in God than in money.

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.

In a loving and generous God we trust, with liberty to support God's work in the world. That's the meaning of money.

Over the next few weeks you will be hearing more about using your money in our church. On Sunday November 16th, you will be asked to make your commitment to our church operations for the coming year. For 2009 we are once again asking that you prayerfully consider raising your investment in our church by 1% of your income.

The point is to challenge yourself to increase your giving to the church by 1% of our income for 2009. The point is to think and pray about what percentage of your income God is calling you to give as you grow one step in your spiritual development. As you grow one step in your investment with God.

Remember that our money talks—telling us to use it—use it to advance God’s kingdom. Use it to do God’s work in the world. And when we use money for God’s work, amazing things can happen; our lives and the world can be changed. We learned this with our second Kingdom Assignment and the 20 thousand dollars God blessed us with through the use of our stuff for God’s work.

How will you use your money? What will your investment be?

Think about it, pray about it and challenge yourself to increase your investment with God through our church by 1% of your income. Think about it, pray about it and trust in God, for I know God has lots of work for us to do and I also know that God is counting on us to come through with our money, our assets, our very lives—all for Christ’s sake.

That’s the meaning of money. Amen.

ⁱ As quoted in [Homileticsonline.com/ Oct1908B.TXT](http://Homileticsonline.com/Oct1908B.TXT)

Other Sources:

Boring, M. Eugene. “The Gospel of Matthew.” *The New Interpreter’s Bible*. Nashville: Abingdon, 1995, 419-420.

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