

WHAT BELONGS TO GOD

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Matthew 22:15-22

Today we are going to talk about money. Specifically, we're going to talk about currency because money and currency are two separate concepts. And then I want to tell a story. It is my favorite story about American currency.

As I said, money and currency are two different concepts (although we use them interchangeably). Money is an intangible concept which describes the movement of wealth through an economy. Currency, on the other hand, is the physical or tangible manifestation of the intangible concept of money. Money is an idea. Currency is something we can touch and hold.

Money has been part of human history for about the last 5000 years. Before that, human beings relied on a system of bartering—a direct trade of goods and services. The earliest currency was not coins but other items that could be easily traded such as animal skins, salt, or weapons.

Around 600 BC, we know that the kingdom of Lydia in Asia Minor was minting what is regarded as the first official currency. This currency facilitated trade and helped the Lydians become one of the richest empires in that part of the world. Paper currency appeared in the 13th century AD in China during the Yuan dynasty. Interestingly, while our currency is inscribed with in “God we trust,” the Chinese currency was a bit more direct with the warning that “Those who are counterfeiting will be beheaded.”

Money and currency continued to develop through history. Alexander Hamilton established the first central bank in the 1790s. The gold standard was adopted in the 1870s. And when I was a kid, you would get a free toaster for opening a bank account. Today we have credit cards and electronic payments with many people, young people especially, carrying around less cash and making payments with their phones. We have no idea what will happen next.

As I said, my favorite story about currency has to do with American paper currency. First of all, paper money isn't paper. It is a blend of cotton and linen. For over 100 years, the single supplier of paper for paper currency to the U.S. government has been the Crane company—known to most of us as a stationery company.

For decades, Crane's principal supplier of the cotton that was required for currency paper was denim—as in blue jeans. Crane would purchase denim scraps from Levis and others manufacturers and incorporate it into the currency paper.

This is why American paper currency is the most durable in the world. There is something romantic about hard-working denim being the backbone of our dollars.

But something happened in the 1990s that changed all that. Denim became contaminated and it was unable to be used in our currency. So what happened? Spandex. Skinny jeans. Yes, they say that fashion comes at a price, and the price almost brought down the U.S. economy. People started wearing stretchy, shapely jeans, and Crane could not find a supplier of pure denim. We talk about stretching a dollar, but it doesn't work literally. So today, Crane purchases their cotton straight from the source and bypasses fashion altogether.

We are talking about money and currency today because in the scripture reading Jesus uses a coin as part of his teaching. He holds up this coin and asks whose head is on this coin.

Our reading starts off with the assertion that the Pharisees were out to get Jesus, and they hatched a plan to trap him with his own words. They even elicited the assistance of the Herodians in their scheme.

The Pharisees were a religious group who believed in a strict adherence to God's law. We often find the Pharisees mentioned along with the chief priests and the scribes. But the Herodians are a surprise here. The Herodians were a secular group who were supporters of Herod, the person placed in power by the Romans to administer Judea. The Herodians were like his political base. These two groups were indeed strange bedfellows.

Together, they approach Jesus. They initiate their conversation with flattery. They tell him, *Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.* Did you hear all that? It was pretty thick. They tell Jesus that he is sincere and a teacher of the truth of God and he is impartial to all people. These are all good things. But if you haven't figured it out, they are just buttering him up for the real reason that they are here. They want to trap him with a question. And the question is this: *Tell us, then, what do you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?*

This is a no-win question. If Jesus answers "yes," that he believes that it is indeed lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, then he will anger and alienate the common people. For it is these people who are forced to live under Roman rule and who loathe the tax burden imposed upon them by these foreigners.

On the other hand, if he says "no," then the Pharisees and Herodians could hand him over to the Roman authorities on a charge of sedition. And they would get rid of the Jesus problem.

Jesus, of course, sees through their chicanery and asks his own question. He says, *Why are you putting me to the test?* And then adds, *you hypocrites*. He calls them hypocrites because while they know and teach who God is, they do not do what they teach. Instead, they seek to entrap this man whom they already admit teaches the way of God.

Jesus refuses to answer their question. Instead, he asks them to show him the particular coin that was used to pay the tax. Someone produces such a coin. It is a denarius. Jesus says to the crowd, *Whose head is this, and whose title?* Everyone knew that it was the emperor's likeness on the coin. Inscribed on the coin were the words "Tiberius Ceasar, son of the divine Augustus." Then, sounding somewhat like the wise king Solomon, Jesus says to the crowd, *Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperors, and to God the things that are God's*. It is over. The Pharisees and the Herodians walk away stunned with amazement.

So, what happened here? Did Jesus managed to wiggle out of the trap they had set for him? Did he proclaim that God and politics should be kept separate? Did he say that we as Christians should always respect the civil authorities? Possibly. But I do know that he says this: if the emperor represents the things of this world, then, by all means, hand it over. But if something belongs to the realm of God, then it should go to God. As we read in the Psalms, *The earth is the Lord's... and those who dwell therein* (Psalm 24:1). What we have to figure out is what is it that belongs to God. What belongs in God's realm. And that answer is simple. It is us. All God desires is us. God has no interest in our cars or our homes or our iPhones. Remember the words that Jesus tells the Pharisee lawyer. He says the greatest commandment is this: *You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind* (Matthew 22:36).

All God desires is our hearts. God desires that we give ourselves wholly to him. As we read in the words of the prophet Micah, *What does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God* (Micah 6:8).

When Jesus holds up the coin, he asks whose image this was. It was the emperor's. So therefore, give it to the emperor. After all, it clearly belongs to him. What Jesus didn't do was to hold up a person and ask whose image was on this. The answer would be God's. We are made in God's image. As we read in the creation story, *So God created man in his own image in the image of God he created them; male and female he created* (Genesis 1:27).

When the Herodians and Pharisees came to Jesus, they asked the wrong question. They asked about the emperor. The real question is, should we, who are made in the image of God, give ourselves to God? And the answer is yes.

Earlier in our service, we celebrated the holy sacrament of baptism. Baptism is the root of the Christian faith. As the Presbyterian Book of Order describes it,

baptism is “a sign and a seal of incorporation into Christ.” We join the church through baptism. John Calvin said that baptism is a sign of God's wondrous grace, it is the outward sign of an invisible and inward grace. When I stand before you performing a baptism, you can't see God's grace, but you do see the sacrament and know it is there. As a seal, baptism is like the wax seal on an old letter; it identifies the sender. One who is baptized is marked by God as belonging to God. When Jesus was baptized in the Jordan River, a voice from heaven declared, *This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.* Baptism is a sign and a seal that we have been chosen by God.

We don't have to be perfect or righteous to be claimed by God, because none of us are. God claims us as we are.

In our baptism, God speaks and says, This is my child, my beloved, with whom I am well pleased. For parents bringing their child to be baptized, or even for an adult being baptized, these words mark the beginning of a great journey on which they are about to embark.

For us here today, that journey continues. We have to remember that our baptism is God showing God's love for us. As the baptized children of God, we are called to live in ways that are distinct from the ways of the world. That which is the emperor's can go to the emperor. We go to God.

As the apostle Paul tells the Galatians, *For in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith. As many of you as were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus* (Galatians 3:26).

On this day we need to remember and rejoice in our baptism and celebrate that the God who created us continues to claim us, continues to love us, continues to make us his own. Since God has claimed us, let us give ourselves to God.