



Preach **Matthew** notes

(Year A Proper 24)

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Psalm 96:1-9(10-13)
1 Thess 1:1-10

CONTINUOUS

Ex 33:12-23
Psalm 99
1 Thess 1:1-10

Matthew 22:15-22 (NIV) Render to Caesar

Then the Pharisees went out and laid plans to trap him in his words. They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren’t swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are. Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay taxes to Caesar or not?”

But Jesus, knowing their evil intent, said, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me? Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius, and he asked them, “Whose portrait is this? And whose inscription?”

“Caesar’s, they replied.

Then he said to them, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.

When they heard this, they were amazed. So they left him and went away.

In the preceding three parables Matthew has departed from his chief source, the Gospel of Mark but returns to Mark as he recounts the deft attempt of the religious and political leaders to trap Jesus on the legitimacy of paying taxes to Rome. This head tax (*kenson* = census) had to be paid using Roman coinage. To the obvious political implications of the question is to be added a moral – religious concern. The Roman coin carried an image and inscription of Caesar and this was highly offensive to the Jews as indeed was any human image. So much so that at least one Rabbi, Nahum ben Simai, argued that holiness was proved by not looking at a coin bearing an image.

This double whammy of political and religious objection is mirrored in the strange pairing of Herodians and Pharisees who test Jesus with their

question. The Herodians supported Herod, the puppet king under Rome and as such had a vested interest in the political status quo. Any denial by Jesus of the legitimacy of Roman taxation would be grounds for a charge of rebellion. It would appear that the Pharisees did not reflect one single opinion on the question of image bearing coins but they stand to gain by exposing Jesus as in breach of law if he affirmed payment of the tax in the required coinage.

Jesus answer is both subtle and brilliant, in that it defuses a dangerous situation and makes a telling point against his opponents. Again we see the rabbinic custom of answering question by question. To understand the answer we need to give some ground first. Jesus effectively states that taxes are to be paid just as Paul would later affirm the legitimacy of prayerful support for secular authorities. However, the



payment of tax to one who has the authority to require it does not of itself authenticate the legitimacy of that authority. We have much richer choices than the extremes of political revolution or other worldly piety, which the Jewish leaders try to offer to Jesus. Our bank is part of the immoral western refusal to cancel third world debt but its stock market performance helps pay my pension and for me keeping money under the mattress is not an option. Part of the richness of choice we have is to know what can be achieved now and what cannot. What is very interesting is that in Luke's version of Jesus trial one of the key charges against him is that he urged the non-payment of taxes to Rome. This gives us some idea of how Jesus attitude left its mark in Gospel tradition.

The power of Jesus reply lies in his use of an "*argumento e minore*" – acknowledging a less important point to illustrate a greater principle. In Jesus day monetary exchange, though significant was not as dominant a factor in human life and social exchange as it is today. The passage contains a significant play on words: is it right to give taxes (*dounai*) to Caesar? Give back (*apodounai*) to Caesar what is Caesars and to God what is God's. The Greek verb "give back" (*apodounai*) is used of the repayment of a debt and implies obligation. If the coin belongs to Caesar then let him have it, in the limited sphere in which he has authority. But render to God the things of God (*ta tou Theou*) in the totality of your obligations to him. The argument progresses from the limited and dubious authority of Caesar to acknowledgement of the totality of God's claim which in and of itself relativises the authority of Caesar.

Stewardship reflection

Years ago, just after the end of the poll tax demonstrations under Margaret Thatcher a community activist mentioned that he had withheld his poll tax in protest. Such opposition was successful and the poll tax was abandoned. However, it transpired that though the principle was established he still withheld his contribution as a well paid employee to the services which he took for granted as his right. Political protest and personal gain made a powerful combination. In removing one politician's face from his money he



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simply replaced it with his own.

Money is not morally neutral; it always bears someone's face. We must affirm its value as

a human good, a medium of human exchange that offers freedom and opportunity and choice. But two factors need to be borne in mind. Firstly, that my unrestricted exercise of that freedom may be oppressive to others. Secondly that over time money has become the primary means of human exchange. Increasing sophistication in money on a global scale though electronic banking and development of the credit industry has depersonalised our human transactions and concentrated more power in the possession of money. Money always bears someone's image and the temptation is to want it to bear our own. Neither handling an image, nor paying tax compromises our true freedom. We do not find freedom by swapping Caesar's face for our own.





Core

American dollars bear the inscription” In God we trust” they also carry a picture of George Washington. There is a double challenge here. Does the use of our money, what we actually do with it declare that we trust in God? To give in a planned, thoughtful manner that is proportionate to our income is a statement of trust. But we need also to ask a deeper question - whose face is on our money? It should not be ours. We should receive what we have as a gift and live generously, receive what we have as grace, and live graciously. It is then that we enter into the joy and the freedom of giving.

Congregation

Honouring God in all the things of God includes our money. But it is a sensitive area and one that has a tendency to provoke extremes of reaction. Some object violently to the idea of discussing money, other fall into the perils of prosperity teaching. For some money must be hoarded in quantity, others are embarrassed by what they have. Self-seeking and guilt are equally poor conductors of grace in this area of giving. The pound coin has a Latin inscription along the side: *Decus et tutamen* which means “an ornament and a safeguard”. This inscription goes back as early as 1662 and was put on the side of the coin as evidence or safeguard that the coin had not been clipped. The value of a coin could be reduced by shaving the precious metal off the side of the coin!

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Planned giving is the safeguard, the *tutamen* or safeguard that we do render to God all that is God’s in the area of financial discipleship. When we do not review our planned giving it is akin to shaving or clipping the value of what we give to God.

Fringe

Because the tax coin bore Caesar’s image some religious people did not want to touch it. Today people often want to keep financial matters private and separate from their faith. We have to handle money; the question is how we do it. If I do not teach my children about sex or drugs or the genius and joy of music it does not mean that they do not learn, it simply means that they will learn about it from someone else and their values which may be far more hazardous than mine! There is nothing godly in the privatisation of personal finance, keeping it apart from what we believe. The church does need money for the good things it does. But we do not talk about money primarily because the church has financial needs. Money is not about giving to a need but about us needing to give. ■

