



Preach **Matthew** sermon

(Year A Proper 24)

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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.

Money, coins and paper, have always has someone's image on it; the Queens head on our coins and notes. American dollars bear the inscription "In God we trust" they also carry a picture of George Washington. Of course there has to be an exception to prove the rule - Euro notes are faceless! There is just an outline of the countries and a landmark.

In the ancient world this image and inscription carried much greater significance than today. For the Jews there was a moral and religious objection to such imagery as offensive, and Caesars claims to deity with an underlying objection to the occupation by the Romans.

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.

So there is a very odd alliance between these two groups with opposing political and religious objections who test Jesus with their question. If he objects to paying tax then he will be condemned as a revolutionary. If he consents he is a heretic.

Jesus answer is both subtle and brilliant, in that it defuses a dangerous situation and makes a telling point against his opponents.

For us there is a danger in understanding our choices in the light of this teaching. We have far more choices than the two extremes of political revolutionary or other worldly piety, which the Jewish leaders try to offer to Jesus. Part of the issue is to know what can be achieved now and what cannot. We all have choices in what we buy, fair-trade or not. Some of us have choices in investment; some of us have opportunities to lessen our tax bills. For Christians there are ethical and moral considerations as well as legal ones. Most of



us have no choice but to pay our tax - although many of us enjoy rendering to God that which is "Caesars" by consent and gift aid!

Jesus uses this opportunity, as he so often did to widen out the discussion from smaller things to bigger issues. He accepts the limited and dubious authority of Caesar as relatively unimportant and easily resolved to the far greater claim of the true Lord whose authority is total, all encompassing.

Jesus does talk about money and material possessions a lot in the gospels and yet it had far less power and usage then - goods were also used as a medium of exchange for example we wouldn't thank you for dead animals and birds on the offertory plate now, and if you tried to pay for your meat at the butchers with your home grown vegetables you probably wouldn't be eating meat that night! But Jesus did see that money and possessions are important - they are not morally neutral. Money can do good if used wisely. It can pay for preaching the gospel, healing the sick, feeding the hungry. But only if it is used wisely, only if it is shared.

Keith Tonduer says that Jesus wants us to use money to show God's love to more people but the world loves money and uses people to make more money. Having money gives us power and freedom. Once we have sufficient to make choices we do have the power - even in something as simple as buying a cup of coffee. If we buy the cheapest we have the power to spend the £1 we save on something else. If we buy fair trade we have the power to provide an education, clean water and healthcare for children in a far off country who we will never meet but who will be eternally thankful. If we have access to a farmers market we can ensure our farmers get a fair price for their hard work.

It's no use saying that these are issues for other people who aren't in my position - how ever little or much we have we do have choice and in this country it is generally the poorest who are proportionately the most generous.

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; our choices are wider than piety or revolution. We certainly do not find freedom by swapping Caesar's face for our own. For Christians the issue is how does our money serve God and reflect his image by worshipping him, and showing his love for my neighbour, and myself/my family. In this world too often the priorities are reversed; what my family need, what my family want, what my family would like, then a token in the Christian aid envelope, and a £1 for the church

For those of us who are leaders in the church we need to look to the dollar for a challenge. American dollars bear the inscription "In God we trust" they also carry a picture of George Washington. 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. Does our use of all our money, not simply the proportion we give to our church reflect God's image and the need to live simply and humbly before God, do justice and love mercy?

For our regular congregation to honour God in all the things includes our money. We cannot refuse to deal with money as "unspiritual" because it bears another image, or it's personal. Money is a profoundly spiritual issue and 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. 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. There is nothing godly in the privatisation of personal finance, keeping it part from what we believe. The church does need money for the good things it does. But we talk about money not because we need it but because we need to learn to give more and to use all our money for good, our spending as well as our giving, even than the church needs to receive in order to show God's love by our ministry

Some visitors here may find money difficult, some because they are embarrassed by what they have, others through experience or circumstance find it hard not to save or spend compulsively. Levels of personal debt have never been higher and church families are not immune to county court judgments and threatening letters. Money has to be dealt with, in our spending and saving patterns, our giving patterns and our lifestyle if we are to follow Jesus' teaching and make our money work to show God's image. The increasing tendency of people to consume more and become slaves to materialism and always be anxious about debt, money and keeping up is not what God wants. He wants us to have healthy relationship with money as servant not our master.

There are many aspects of the Christian life that are difficult, the call to forgive, to love unconditionally, to put God first in your life and others second - money should be relatively easy. But it isn't; our money reflects our priorities and it can have a will of it's own - remember Jesus teaching "You cannot worship God and Mammon" or Money as we would call it. Who does your lifestyle, your giving, and your spending show you to worship?

Amen

