

Believe It or Not! Money Grows in Fish, Not on Trees? Sunday, 7/24/22

Last week we unearthed the priestly plot to kill Lazarus, a man who had already died, but was then raised back to life by Jesus. I challenged you to replace your bucket list with a Lazarus list, aiming to embrace your life in Christ in a new way, as if you had died and been raised back to life.

Our first reading is one of the few examples in the Bible where the miracle (a coin from the mouth of a fish), was rather incidental to the main point of the teaching, in this case regarding paying the temple tax. Yes, it's another one of those money sermons. Money and our relationship to it seems to be just about everyone's least favorite topic for a sermon, and yet the Bible is full of writings about money, with Jesus talking more about how we think about and use our money than what would seem to us to be more pressing social issues. Why is that?

It's because the writings are really not about money, but rather our hearts, and specifically our identity and allegiances. The ways we earn and spend money, and even the ways we feel and talk about money, reveal a complicated tapestry of family histories, our place in contemporary culture, and our bottom-line values. The reason Jesus talked so much about money is the same reason we're uncomfortable talking about our relationship with it: what we do with our money, and why we do it, speaks to the true affections of our hearts. And the truth is that it seems to be human nature to say we value one thing but behave in a way that betrays that value. The charitable word for that behavior is hypocrisy.

There's a joke that pastors occasionally pull out of their hats during the fall stewardship drive: When an American Christian is baptized, what's the last part of them to go under the baptismal water? Their hand, with a tight grip on their wallet or purse.

As much as we say we love Jesus and our neighbors, our relationship with money is one of the hardest things to surrender to God's control. So as we hear what Jesus had to say about taxes this morning, try to look beyond the questions about taxes and think more generally about your allegiances that your relationship with money reveal.

The Temple Tax mentioned in our first reading was something instituted in Exodus 30 as an offering to maintain the tabernacle, which was where worship took place and sacrifices were made prior to the construction of the first Temple. The Temple Tax was required of all

male Jews over the age of 20.¹ In New Testament times, the tax was two drachmas, which was about two days wages.² Perhaps you could loosely compare the Temple Tax with the apportionments we pay to the Minnesota Annual Conference, which is our share of the cost of supporting the world-wide mission of the United Methodist Church.

Jesus and Peter would have reasonably been expected to pay the Temple Tax as committed adherents of Judaism. Not everyone did pay the Temple Tax, and someone who was constantly on the move, like Jesus, might have paid the tax elsewhere,³ just as we file our taxes today in many different ways. So the question put to Peter by the tax collector was a reasonable one and not offered to entrap or trick them.

Jesus begins with a response that's not too surprising: Jesus and his followers are no longer obligated to pay the Temple Tax because they are no longer obligated by the law but are now children of God. That's why he says, "The citizens are free."⁴ Christians are citizens of God's Kingdom, not conquered subjects.

But here's where things take a surprising turn. Jesus tells Peter to pay the tax anyway. Why? It's a question of identity and allegiance. Jesus was a loyal Jew, and he wanted to demonstrate solidarity with the Jewish people. And even though the Temple would eventually be destroyed, it still had a necessary part to play, even in the lives of those first Christians.

The same Christian ethic appears in many of Paul's writings and in our own behaviors today, following the pattern of 1 Corinthians 6:12: "Everything is permissible, but not everything is beneficial."⁵ There are many things that Christians are technically allowed to do, because we've been set free from the Old Testament law. But when doing those things causes others to stumble, we refrain, out of love for them. Back then it was things like eating food that had been sacrificed to idols. But today, you might refrain from ordering a beer because you know that a friend you're with has just recently entered recovery for an addiction. When you do that, you're telling your friend that your love for them trumps your

¹ Exodus 30:14

² Craig Keener. *The IVP Bible Background Commentary: New Testament* (p. 92). Intersociety.

³ Ibid

⁴ Matthew 17:17:26. New Living Translation (2nd Edition).

⁵ 1Corinthians 6:12. New International Version.

right to order a beer.

Do you remember that Easter People live in an “upside down Kingdom?” By agreeing to pay the Temple Tax, Jesus showed us one more example of how things work differently in the Kingdom of Heaven, where the citizens gladly set aside their individual privileges and rights for the sake of loving others. This is a hard teaching, and regardless of any political affiliations or inclinations you might have, it’s especially hard to swallow in our American experience that has enshrined individual liberties above most other values. How does this teaching set with you? If you’re not occasionally wrestling with this in your life, perhaps you should be.

This wasn’t the only time Jesus was confronted with the question of taxes. Our second reading is again from Matthew, jumping ahead to chapter 22, beginning with verse 15 in the New Living Translation. {Read Matthew 22:15-22 NLT}

This time, Jesus faces a “heads I win, tails you lose” question, and the problem is represented on this coin, the Denarius. The coin had an image of Tiberius Caesar on it which proclaimed him as a God.⁶ It would have been blasphemous for a devout Jew to even have one of these coins, so it’s more than a little funny that the Pharisees had one to hand Jesus.

On the one hand, if Jesus approved paying the tax to Caesar, he could have been accused of blasphemy and accommodating the occupying government of Rome. On the other hand, if he denounced the tax, he could have been arrested and executed by Caesar.

So at the heart of it, this question, once again, has little to do with taxes and everything to do with identity and allegiance. Is Jesus a Jew, or is Jesus a Roman sympathizer? Is Jesus committed to the welfare of his fellow Jews, or is Jesus simply a puppet for the Roman occupiers?

What does it mean to “give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God?”⁷ It doesn’t mean that Christians should stay out of politics. Political participation is one of the ways American Christians have of participating in the governance of our country.

It does suggest that we should generally obey the rules of our local governments.

⁶ <https://patternsofevidence.com/2021/05/07/jesus-and-taxes/>

⁷ Matthew 22:21. New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

When Jesus broke the law, it was to correct the interpretation of Jewish religious law, not the laws of civil government.

But there is a meaning with much greater import here for all Christians that has nothing specifically to do with money or politics. When Jesus said, “give to God what belongs to God,” he clearly meant everything! Earthly governments are entitled to some limited things from its citizens and residents, like taxes, but in the Kingdom of God, the King is entitled to not only everything we have, but also all that we are- our whole persons.

Think of it this way: Images of our government, such as flags, presidents, and buildings, are on our coins, so they belong to our government. But the image of God is imbedded in every person’s life, so we ourselves belong to God. We may owe the government our taxes, but we owe God our very lives!⁸

Identity and allegiance. Are you primarily an American who owes your allegiance to the American government? Or are you primarily a Christian, who owes your allegiance to Christ? Clearly, you can be both an American and a Christian, but when push comes to shove, which do you choose?

Jesus’s teaching on taxes suggest a radical realignment of our hearts. We must be willing to sacrifice individual liberties for the sake of showing love for our neighbors, especially the least, lost, and left out. And we must give our primary allegiance to God, to whom we owe our very lives, even as we seek to live as responsible citizens within our government.

These teachings might offend you. There’s much in what Jesus taught that was designed to offend the status quo. But as American Christians, we’ll only find true freedom when we more fully accept our identity as Christians and align our lives accordingly.

What are some ways that you show allegiance to America? How do you show allegiance to God? Please take some time now to reflect on that.

⁸ <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/mark/economic-issues/taxes-and-caesar-mark-1213-17>



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