

October 18, 2020
Rev. Kerry Smith

Matthew 22:15-22
Greenland Hills United Methodist Church

Enemies of Gratitude: Greed

Matthew 22:15-22

New Revised Standard Version

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, "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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, "Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax." And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.

We have started biking and I have noticed that in the middle of the bike trail, there is a yellow painted stripe. That way it is easy to see which side of the path you are to be on. When Jesus talks about money, I feel like he is getting on my side of the path. He is getting a little too close and getting too much into my business. Jesus does that a lot, especially with money, possessions, and things that I think are mine, mine, all mine. Jesus talks about money more than anything else except the Kingdom of God. 16 of Jesus' 38 parables are about money. 1 of every 7 verses in the Gospel of Luke talks about money. Scripture references money more than 800 times. It is one of the most talked about things in the Bible for a simple reason. Our perspective on money matters to God.

The reformer Martin Luther said that humans need to experience three conversions in order to fully live our faith and respond to God's grace: a conversion of our heart, a conversion of our mind, and a conversion of our purse.

There's something deep inside us that cringes at the suggestion that what we have doesn't belong to us. If we work for it, we want control of it, and we don't trust other folks to know how best to spend it. We have been that way since the founding of this country, remember taxation without representation? The new Americans didn't want to be taxed without getting a say-so.

If you think you don't like paying taxes, meet the residents of Jerusalem during Jesus' time. Israel is an occupied territory, a Roman province. The Romans let the Jews have their temple worship, but they are taxed unfairly to support the Roman capital, and they enjoy very few rights, because they are not truly Roman citizens.

There is a group of Jewish religious leaders determined to overthrow the Roman government and to kick them out of Jerusalem. On the other side are the Herodians, the Jews who have benefited rather nicely from the Roman occupation. As you might imagine the Jewish religious leaders and the Herodians did not get along very well. The only thing that they agree on is that Jesus needs to go. So, they team up and plant a question in the crowd, a question about paying taxes to the Romans. If Jesus says it's unlawful to pay taxes, then the Romans will snatch him up for being an instigator. If Jesus says that it's fine to pay taxes to the Romans, then the religious zealots in the crowd will stone him for going against God's Word. It's a no-win situation for Jesus.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the Roman emperor?" Jesus answers their question with another question, as he is prone to do: "Anybody got a coin?" Jesus isn't about to do a magic trick, he has nothing in his wallet. The religious leaders couldn't dig into their pocket to produce a coin because they found the actual coins offensive. Roman coins had the image of Caesar on both sides, along with the words that Caesar was divine. For these religious people, the very coin was blasphemous to their beliefs and offensive to their sense of identity. If they have a Roman

coin, they have exposed their hypocrisy in front of the crowd.¹ They nervously hand Jesus the coin, and he looks at it as if he's never seen one before. "Who is this on the coin? There seems to be someone's picture on this coin." The word in Greek is icon. Jesus asks them whose icon, whose image is on this coin? Well, duh. It's the image of the emperor.

That word icon is also used three times in Genesis in reference to human beings created in God's likeness or God's image. Jesus is saying, "Give to Caesar whatever bears Caesar's image, and give to God whatever bears God's image." Jesus isn't talking about taxes at all. Give to God what has God's image on it. This is bigger than a tax, bigger than a picture on a coin. This is a question of what belongs to God. All the stuff that we hold onto and think that it is ours, who does this stuff really belong to?

We have to decide whom we serve. We have to decide that what we have, what we are, what we do, what we think – it all belongs to the One who knew us before we were knit together in our mother's womb. So, what belongs to God? We have to answer that question and then find a way to put it back in God's hands.

Giving to God reminds us that God has given us everything we have. Giving back to God is an expression of our gratitude. Some people have a hard time being generous. The world's stingiest man went Christmas shopping. Everything was too expensive but there was a \$50 vase on sale for \$2 because the handle had broken off. He bought it and asked the salesman to ship it so his friend would think he had paid \$50 for it and it had been broken in shipment. A few weeks later he received a thank you letter that said, "Thank you for the lovely vase. It was so nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

Holding on to our stuff, our money, our possessions, with our hands tight can be an enemy of gratitude. Greed can keep us from being truly grateful. We give to God because it is what God says to do. God wants us to give regularly, generously, and sacrificially out of all God gives us. Not because God needs what we have, but because we need to give it. What we do with what we have directs our heart.

All that we have is God's and it is because of God that I have anything at all. God gives us 100%, why do we have such a hard time giving God 10%? When I give to God's church here at Greenland Hills, I am giving back to God what is already God's. I remember taking a Crown financial class years ago where I learned that when I did not tithe 10% of my income to God or did not give joyfully it was a sign that I was still trying to do things my way, not God's. God has given me everything. God has given us everything. 100% of it is God's and 10% of it given back to God is seen as standard, but there are Biblical examples of faithful giving that far exceed the 10% mark.

When I was in seminary at Perkins at SMU, I did my internship at Oak Lawn UMC. There was a man there named Lawson Metz. I remember Lawson sharing during worship how his check to his church was the first check that he wrote each month. It was the first bill he paid. I remember him saying that he trusted God that there would be enough money, and there always was. He talked about tithing and giving 10% of income to God. He said that he started tithing because his heart was not right with God. He had to trust God and have faith that he would be okay without the money that he knew was to go to his church. God would take care of him. I remember watching as Lawson and his wife Betty knelt at the altar after giving his pledge to God and to God's church for the upcoming year.

Lawson and Betty prayed for a long time and after worship I asked Lawson what he was praying for. He said that he prayed that he would trust God and that his faith would grow. I

¹A Preacher's Guide to Lectionary Sermon Series. P. 70.

learned from Lawson that my giving to God had to be done first and that it had to be done regularly. We give in response to the gifts that God has given to each one of us. We also give to remember to whom we belong.

We are all created in God's image. That means all of who we are, all of who we will be—our lives, our work, our money, our time, our talent, our very being, our hearts and minds and soul and strength—all of it belongs to the one who created us. We give to God to continually try to resist the power of money to define us, to tell us what we are worth or not worth, and to tell us to whom we belong. We give to regularly remember that we bear the image of Christ. Thanks be to God, Amen.