

October 25, 2020 | Sanctuary worship service

TEXT: [Matthew 22:15–22](#)

TITLE: Personal Finances

By the Rev. Dr. Randy Bush

How often do you actually think about what is on the coins or currency you use each day? We can tell at a glance a nickel or dime from a quarter. We always double-check to see whether we're paying with a George, Abe, or Alexander Hamilton. But I don't think about money much anymore, mostly because I don't carry much money anymore. Honestly, my business transactions are more impersonal than ever before. No cash; no counting out coins; mostly just debit cards, credit cards or the occasional check.

We don't think a lot about coins anymore. And we certainly don't think about what's stamped on a coin like they did back in the time of the Jerusalem temple, such as in the debate we heard about between Jesus and some Jewish religious leaders. Now, knowing the context is important here. Remember by this point in the gospel story, Jesus has already entered Jerusalem. He'd caused a stir by riding on a donkey into the Roman-occupied capital city while a crowd proclaimed him to be the Son of David and thus the true king of the people. It was a provocative gesture done right under the noses of a skittish Roman army. The Jewish leaders had already tried to get Jesus to silence his followers, but he'd told them that if the crowds were silent, the very stones would cry out instead.

So in an effort to defeat this revolutionary rabbi, the Pharisees and Herodians tried to skewer Jesus on the horns of a dilemma. They set before him a no-win question: Should we pay taxes to the emperor or not? Now, no one ever likes to pay taxes. Some people, even people in high elected offices, have been known to go to great lengths, possibly illegal lengths, to avoid paying taxes. Back in Jesus' day, the people of Palestine already had to pay a temple tax, a tax on their land and harvests, and a customs tax when they sold their crops. But once the Romans took over, they added an imperial tax—something that supported the very army and structures of oppression that made everyone's life miserable. There had already been at least one uprising protesting this hated tax. Now, surrounded by a crowd in a tense capital city, the question posed to Jesus appeared to have no good answer. Say "yes" to the tax and incur the wrath of all who hate the Romans; say "no" to the tax and expect the Romans to be knocking on his door that night for fomenting insurrection.

But Jesus rightly called his questioners "hypocrites" and then asked them to tell him whose image was on the coins they carried in their purses. We don't think much about whose image is on our coins: I'm sure the Pharisees and Herodians didn't think much about what was on their coins. But suddenly everything revolved around two sets of images—the image of the emperor and the image of God. That's when Jesus said "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's, but give to God what is God's." Oh, there's a lot to unpack there!

Let's go back to money itself for a moment. Money's a funny thing. Originally people traded things—commodities—so much wheat for so much wine; a load of lumber for a lamb or steer. Even today, in some places of desperation, people revert back to this old

system of bartering. In refugee camps, money is scarce, so you barter with tangible things like powdered milk or blankets. Anyway, at some point coins of metal were minted and determined to have a set value, due to their weight and the worth of their silver or bronze. Later paper bills were created—funny I.O.U. documents printed on flimsy paper that only worked so long as someone else would accept these I.O.U.'s in exchange for more scraps of paper.¹

If you stop and think about it, money is a social contract. It depends on at least two people agreeing to mutually accept a set value for a basically worthless scrap of paper—for entire societies to accept that a \$1 bill is worth \$1 in goods, and so on. Money is social. But now comes the question Jesus raised: Whom does money serve? What is its ultimate value? That's a complicated topic, so Jesus simplified it by narrowing the question to one of images: Whose image is on the coins you are asking about? If the image of the emperor is on a coin, then it must belong, in some sense, to him and thus should be paid to the emperor. But everyone listening was a person of faith, so Jesus went one step further. If those coins were stamped with the image of man, Caesar Augustus to be precise, then where can they find the image of God? Jesus said, "Give to God the things that are God's." So where do you find the image of God so that God could be paid just like the emperor?

The short answer is this: The image of God is found in all creation, and especially in the faces and lives of those around us. Protecting God's image seen in the human family around us is how we give to God what belongs to God. Now a longer answer: I recently read a review of a book called "Mill Town" by Kerri Arsenault. It's about a paper mill in the little town of Rumford, Maine—a factory that had been there for years, but a pollution source of dioxin that was dangerous to the workers and community. The book describes how the mill would hire older men to work in the bleach room. At first it was thought this was done because they valued the older men's experience and ability to do a difficult job. But the real reason was because the company didn't want to care for young guys who got sick. It was cheaper to hire the aged, who'd retire soon and die shortly after. Such was the case with the author's grandfather. Arsenault couldn't figure out why Rumford's citizens stayed—why they clung to their jobs with a prideful obstinacy. But then she realized that Rumford relied wholly on that mill. They traded their physical health for economic well-being because nobody had a real choice; the mill was their life even as ironically it took their life.²

The wages and contracts from the paper mill in Rumford, Maine were stamped with the company name so they had a rightful claim to those who worked for them. But their authority was not the highest authority, nor was their image the only one that mattered. The coin in the Pharisee's hand was imprinted with the emperor's image, so Caesar rightly had a claim to it. But his authority was not the highest authority, nor was his image the only one that mattered.

I mentioned at the beginning that finances today are largely impersonal—mostly the handing over of debit and credit cards or writing checks. There is little personal contact in all these exchanges. But our faith in Christ calls us to something different—something that changes impersonal finances into personal finances. Every transaction you make, ideally, should involve eye contact, perhaps a shared word or conversation with the

person you're dealing with. Money is the tool for exchanging goods; the real transaction is the personal one. To sell or buy something is an act of trust between people. You pay for something, you provide a service, you honor a commitment—all of these are ways to build up a world made in the image of God and to show respect to others who literally are made in the image of God.

Think of the charities you support now. Do you write a check and mail it off to Save the Children, UNICEF, the Red Cross, Special Olympics or your alma mater? Do you read off your credit card numbers to support Bread for the World, Presbyterian Disaster Assistance, Nature Conservancy, or Planned Parenthood? That's fine, yet those are likely bits of impersonal finance. Now think about personal finances. Where do your money, time and energy go that has a real face associated with it—someone whom you can see who is the direct recipient? Is it a place where you volunteer—where you serve a meal or help rehab a house? Is it a student you mentor or a person in distress you counsel? My wife Beth weekly drops off groceries to two shut-in elderly women at their homes. For over a year I've been writing to a prison inmate I've never met, and I can honestly say the best part of my ministry is spending time with our homebound members or chatting with many of you in person or on the phone.

There's a real need for personal finance—for personally focused giving and serving, especially in this crazy time of divisive politics and virus-necessitated isolation. Hopefully sometime last week you each received a simple white envelope from our church containing a Stewardship letter and pledge card. We ask for pledges because, yes, they help us budget and manage the church's resources wisely. But mostly it's not about fundraising; it's about faith-raising. Giving to the church is personal finance. You've seen where the funds go—to Sunday School and youth group kids, to LGBT and spiritual life fellowship, to community meals, chapel market free clothing, mission co-workers in Peru, anti-racism conversations for us all, worship services and pastoral care. Stewardship is a form of personal finances, reaching out to care for the image of God reflected in real people, real lives around us.

Caesar with his image on a bunch of coins only had limited authority. God alone has true authority, and God's image is all around us. So we give to God what is God's. Faithful finances are always personal finances. Think of money this way. You can squeeze a coin tightly in your hand and yes, you'll imprint on your skin whoever's image is on the coin. Or you can hand over the coin in faithful stewardship, and let God's image be imprinted on your whole being. May it be so.

AMEN

¹ "It's No Object", Richard Davies, *New York Times Book Review*, Money: The True Story of a Made-Up Thing by Jacob Goldstein, October 11, 2020, p. 19.

² "Death Trap," Emily Cooke, *New York Times Book Review*, Mill Town: Reckoning With What Remains by Kerri Arsenault, October 18, 2020, p. 19.