

In God We Trust

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Matthew 22:15-22

Stewardship Sermon #3

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Money, money, money. . .it is always about the money!! Money has been a driving force in our nation, and the world for centuries. The Continental Congress authorized the first national coin of our United States in 1776. Benjamin Franklin was the designer of this pewter dollar that had stamped on it the inscription *fugio*, which in Latin means “time flies.” There was also a stamp of a sundial on the coin; I supposed to indicate the same thing.

Franklin must’ve anticipated how our money would seem to fly out of our hands one day. How could he know how quickly that \$45.00 would be used up at the gas pump, or that \$100 at the grocery store?

Today’s coins have a different inscription on them. One of the inscriptions is *E Pluribus Unum*, which translates “From many, one.” This makes sense when we think about our 50 independent, yet United States that make up our nation. However, I read an interesting story about where that saying way originally used and from whom we borrowed it.

According to an interview on the Discovery Channel with the curator of the State Department of Diplomacy, that saying was taken from the title page of a British book published every year by “Gentlemen’s Magazine.” The book was an anthology of articles/slogans and the meaning of the title was “from many articles, one book.”

So, that would be like today if we wanted to look for a new inscription on our coins, we could go to GQ? Or maybe use, “So...what’s in your wallet?” Who knows?

Well, the coin presented to Jesus may have said one thing, but to him it said: “Give to the emperor the things that are his, and give to God the things that are God’s.”

The Pharisees were up to their old tricks, trying to trap Jesus again. They were asking him an impossible question. There was a tax that had to be paid to the Roman government, and could only be paid with one of these Roman coins.

For the Jews, the problem laid with the inscription on the coin as well as the image of the emperor. The coins contained an image of the emperor and the words “Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, high priest.” This was considered blasphemous to the Jews who knew there was only one divine ruler, and that was God.

So, Jesus either risks saying “yes” to the Pharisees, it is lawful to pay the tax with this coin and alienating the Jews, or saying “no” and risking getting arrested by the Romans. It was a no-win question.

Well, Jesus was such a clever fellow, and he knew just how to answer these holier than thou Pharisees. He answered with a rather indirect “yes.” He said to pay to the emperor what is his, but then goes on to add to their question in his answer. He also says “and to God’s the things that are God’s.” This is a loyalty on a much higher level and one that rendered the Pharisees speechless and amazed.

The word “give” that is used in this passage actually translates from the Greek meaning “give back,” which would imply that all we have from God is God’s in the first place—it was given to us by God.

You know, money, for some reason, is always a subject that seems to be treaded upon lightly in church. I’m thinking you probably know me well enough by now, that I am not one to tread lightly when I feel strongly about something. Money was important to Jesus as well. The topic of money in the New Testament comes in right behind the Kingdom of God as topics that Jesus spoke and taught about most. Money was important to Jesus and it is important to us—albeit most likely for different reasons!

Money is an asset. Money can be used for all sorts of purposes. Then right out of the other side of my mouth, you will probably hear me say that stewardship is not about the money. Well, both sides of my mouth are speaking a truth. It is about money, but it’s not *only* about money.

The real question here is “what is due to God?” We read in our Old Testament lesson today (Gen. 28: 10-22) that Jacob pledged to give God one tenth of all that God had given to him.

One tenth—that is what we call a tithe. That is a very uncomfortable word for some people. Let me just say it several times so you will see that you really will not perish when that word is spoken. Tithe, tithe, tithe. There—we got that over with.

Tithing is uncomfortable. We are talking about giving 10% of our income to God. But it’s not just any ole 10%--the 10% you may have left over after the bills are paid and the groceries bought. It is not the 10% that you may have left over after you go out to eat and go to the movie or put gas in your car.

Tithing is giving your *first* 10% before you do any of those things. It is giving the *first fruits*, the best of what we have to God. Are your palms getting sweaty and your throats tightening up yet?

Ten percent is a useful standard that is used regarding giving to God, but there are some drawbacks to following this standard as well. Tithing is

too many times turned into a rigid, unyielding requirement that causes us to approach this whole stewardship notion with a sense of guilt. “Worst of all, it can cause us to treat giving what is God’s back to God with the same kind of special feeling which is reserved to the Internal Revenue Service” (Theodore Ts’o. Copyright 2000).

And what about the IRS? The government demands a far greater portion of our income than a tithe does. What if churches deducted your tithe straight out of your paycheck? And you think the church is losing members now! I think one of the reasons most of us despise paying taxes so much is that the money we pay to the government, is money taken out of our control. We no longer have a say how we are going to use that money—the government earmarked it before we even had it in our pockets!

But all this talk comparing taxes and tithing really does miss the point.

Thinking about tithing so we can increase the spending here at the church or better yet, just make our church budget for next year also misses the point.

Thinking along those lines makes it sound like our offerings are membership dues or a fee for a service—and that they are not.

So, how can we think about tithing and stewardship in a different way? Well, like I said earlier, it is about money and it’s not about money. It’s *more* than about money.

You’ve often heard stewardship referred to as a giving of our time, our talent, and our money. That is a true statement.

Are you not giving to God when you offer your time and wisdom to sit on one of the committees in the church or teach a Sunday school class or help out at a workday? You are offering your time and talent when serve any of those ways. Actually for some, though, taking out your checkbook and writing a check is often times much easier than actually giving of yourself.

But, my friends, God wants it all! You are to love the Lord your God with all you heart, all your soul, all your strength and all your mind.

In our reading from Genesis, “Jacob made a shrewd deal with God when he was down and out. Make me a rich man, Jacob said to God after his dream about a heavenly ladder out there in the middle of nowhere with not a penny to his name; make me a rich man and I will give you a ten percent cut. What a deal! Jacob and his people became wealthy and the deal was honored, more or less, by all his descendants.

Jesus was a descendant of Jacob, but Jesus never advocated the tithe. In fact, he viewed it as a way of defrauding God, of buying God off, as

though that was *all* we owed to God. “All that we have belongs to God,” Jesus would say. Life is God’s gift to us. How we live is our gift to God.

This goes back to the definition of “stewardship.” If we’re a steward of all our belongings that implies they really don’t belong to us; we’re just holding them in trust, temporarily. So, how then should we interpret the command, “Give to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s?”

“To live as a steward begins by abiding in Christ, abiding in the one who feeds the hungry and heals the sick, by being mindful of Christ’s presence each and every day in the choices we face. To be a steward is to live humbly and fearfully knowing that our responsibility is to manage God’s gift for a short time. It’s an awesome and yet exhilarating responsibility. And it should be fun” (The Rev. Randall Tremba, Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church, West Virginia).

IT SHOULD BE FUN, PEOPLE! If each of believes that God has put us here for a purpose, then using what God has given to each of us—being good stewards of those resources to fulfill that purpose should have meaning. It should be exciting and thrilling, and even fun! I know I always get a thrill out of spending someone else’s money!

To know that you are living the life God wants you to live through the stewardship of what God has given you is a gift. It is a gift to be cherished and a gift to be shared.

As you continue to pray this week about the way God is leading you to be a good steward, I invite you to not only pray about what your pledge to the church will be for the coming year in terms of money, but look at your whole life. Are you giving to God what is God’s? God wants more than just our money. God wants you. Amen.