

**October 22, 2023**  
**“Kindom Currency”**  
**Psalm 99 / Matthew 22:15-22**  
**Pastor Tim**

Four or five years ago, Amy and I bought Gabe a three-section toy bank to start teaching him the basics of budgeting. You know, to encourage him to be INTENTIONAL about what he did with the little bit of money we were starting to give him – and still do – as a weekly allowance.

Full disclosure, Gabe will be the first to tell you that we almost always forget to actually give it to him each week. And so we’re constantly having to play catch up, and maybe we’re teaching him to stand up for himself, to demand what is owed to him!

But I digress.

You may have seen some version of this bank, or maybe have had one yourself – but Gabe’s has three separate sections labeled “Share,” “Spend” and “Save.” And he divides up his allowance evenly that way, a third to each section.

Now, one of the upsides of this system for Gabe, of course, is that there is no section for expenses. No rent. No utility bills. No grocery or clothing bills. No transportation costs.

And no taxes, as I think about our reading from Matthew’s gospel this morning. That’s as it should be. That inevitable budgeting lesson will come soon enough.

Did you know that Ben Franklin was not the first to use the phrase “death and taxes”? That distinction apparently belongs to Christopher Bullock in his earlier 18<sup>th</sup>-century comedy play called “The Cobbler of Preston.”

Franklin’s use is certainly the most famous. You know the one, from a letter he wrote in 1789: “Our new Constitution is now established, and has an appearance that promises permanency; but in this world nothing can be said to be certain, except death and taxes.”

Taxes remain a certain reality, and a sticky subject. And make no mistake, the Pharisees meant for their question to be sticky for Jesus.

Wary of him, again, as always, they – along, we're told, with the Herodians – plotted to entrap him. We know, right, about the Pharisees, the Jewish religious leaders who were strict observers of Jewish law.

The Herodians were a non-religious group of Hellenistic Jews, sharing with the Pharisees a desire for Jewish political independence within Roman occupation, but differing with them in wanting a member of the Herodian dynasty to rule. The Pharisees wanted to restore a descendant of David to the throne.

They found common ground in seeing and treating Jesus as a threat to their power and to their plans.

"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?"

The Pharisees' questions of Jesus always center on what is lawful; they are, after all, keepers of Mosaic law.

In first-century Palestine, again, under Roman occupation, Jews paid religious taxes to support maintenance of the Jewish temple and political taxes to the government in Rome. Taxes on land and customs – and so-called "head" taxes, levied annually based on a census count and so paid by every person for what Ruth Hamilton calls "the privilege of being a subject of the Roman Empire and of supporting the cost of Rome's occupation."

The tax in question here is presumably the head tax.

It was the equivalent of a laborer's daily wage, and it had to be paid, of course, with a Roman coin, the denarius, which had Caesar's image stamped on one side and the following inscription on the other: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus, most high priest."

The disciple Matthew, the tax collector, was likely a collector of customs taxes. A publican, like all tax collectors who worked at the behest of Rome, despised by the

Jews. Considered ritually unclean for their interaction with the Gentile Romans. Considered traitors for collecting money on behalf of the occupying power – and on top of that, notorious for raising taxes to pad their own pockets.

There's a reason Jesus called tax collectors to his cause. And there's a reason he caught flack for it.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" YES or NO!

It's a trap. Again, it's meant to be a trap. The Pharisees and Herodians have thought this through. Their question is very carefully crafted.

If Jesus says it IS lawful, he will offend the religious Pharisees who considered it both BLASPHEMOUS, because it involves support for a foreign, godless government, and IDOLATROUS, because it featured the emperor's graven image.

And not only that, he will likely offend and even turn away many of his followers who are tired of paying this burdensome tax. Many of whom are looking for a Messiah to lead the revolt they've been longing for.

If he says it IS NOT lawful, he will offend the political Herodians who are eager to avoid rocking the boat with their Roman occupiers so they can get the ruler they want. And more importantly, of course, he will defy Roman authorities because, you know, it WAS unlawful not to pay those taxes.

Potentially punishable by death.

"Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?"

As the Pharisees' questions of Jesus always center on what is lawful, Jesus' answers always center on what is life-giving.

He asks them to show him the coin. And noting that the image and title on the coin is the emperor's, he offers his usual mic drop: "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

We know it's a mic drop, because as often happens, the Pharisees and Herodians left him without another word. Rendered speechless in their amazement. Back to the drawing board in their quest to disrupt and ultimately end Jesus' influence, by any means necessary.

As Ruth Hamilton writes, Jesus' answer "bursts the strait jacket bonds of yes/no, either/or. It puts the emperor firmly in his place in a much broader universe ruled by the Most High God. It proclaims God's reign over everything and everyone. It takes a 'gotcha' question meant to entrap and ultimately kill, and opens it up into life-giving instruction about the relationship between us and the Creator."

LIFE-GIVING instruction.

And just as his questioners had unwittingly prophesied when they approach him in flattery, Jesus does indeed teach the "way of God in accordance with truth."

Using the currency of Rome as his visual aid, Jesus points to currency of an altogether different kind. Call it KINDOM currency.

Currency used to build the coming kindom of God, the kindom of heaven. The kindom of love. Another Way. A better Way marked by love and compassion, justice and peace.

Currency used to pledge allegiance to a higher authority. A higher power. A higher law.

And the lesson with Jesus' lesson is that WE are that currency. As the denarius was stamped with Caesar's image, so are we stamped with God's. *Imago Dei*.

"Give to God the things that are God's."

We are God's! We belong to God and therefore to each other, and so we are God's currency in the world.

Who we are in the world is a reflection of whose we are.

To give ourselves TO God is to LOVE God – as Jesus says, “with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.” With ALL of ourselves.

And to LOVE God with all of ourselves is to love LIKE God – as Jesus further reiterated in quick summary of Jewish law, all 613 commandments: Loving our neighbors, each other, as we love ourselves. Even our enemies, even those we can't stand.

Honoring that of God in each other as we honor that of God in ourselves.

That is what it means to love God and to share, spend and save our lives as currency for God's kingdom. Another way. A better way.

That is Jesus' LIFE-GIVING answer to the Pharisees' and Herodians' DEATH-DEALING question, echoing the prophet Isaiah: “Why do you spend your money,” and we might add here, your lives, OUR lives, “for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy? Listen carefully to me, and eat what is good, and delight yourselves in rich food. Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.”

So that you may live!

Taxes have a purpose, of course – in theory, to support the common good, the common infrastructure, of our shared life together. Nobody loves paying taxes. Nobody wants to pay taxes especially for what they see as wasteful, or certainly for purposes that go against the laws of their hearts – and mad respect to those who refuse to do so as an act of civil disobedience. For example, war-tax resisters who refuse to pay some or all of the federal tax that goes to the government's general fund – about half of which in this country goes for military spending, including weapons of war.

Some laws, as Dr. King readily asserted, must be broken to help pave the path to justice. Jesus himself, remember, turned over the money changers' table outside the temple as an act of protest against exploitation of the poor within an unjust economy.

Breaking unjust laws is one means of resistance to Empire, to the ways of Empire.

But Jesus is pointing here to a much broader view, a bigger picture, an altogether different economy where no one is left out. Where no one is treated with partiality, to use the Pharisees' and Herodians' phrase from our reading.

An altogether different economy where what's good for the earth, for Creation, is rightly understood as what's good for all of us.

Another Way, a better Way, WAY beyond the often cruel, inequitable, unjust, STICKY, confines of money and taxes.

The invitation in his response is to dream bigger, beyond the mere earthly question of what is lawful or not to the heavenly question of what is life-giving or not. What is loving or not. What is just or not.

That's not to say that the earthly, earthy, questions are not important. They are. They absolutely are. But when we focus our questions too much, or get stuck in them, we risk losing our connection to the Divine imagination.

Jesus' invitation, I think, is to consider the heavenly question first, because how we answer it ultimately impacts how we answer all the others. How we live, and how we love.

So what does it mean for you to think of yourself, to see yourself, as KINGDOM CURRENCY, made in God's divine image as co-creators of new and abundant life?

What does it mean – and would it mean – for you to SHARE, to SPEND, even to SAVE on behalf of the kingdom of love? Your money, your resources, your talents, your time, your life?

Now I realize that Jesus suggests elsewhere that those who save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for his sake, and for the sake of the kingdom, will save them. So maybe saving doesn't work so well here, but losing makes the point.

The invitation is to open our vision to the widest angle, the broadest view, the heavenly dream, of God's kingdom right here on earth. Where all belong, where no one, no creation, is left out.

And with intention – consistent, daily, prayerful intention – to live and love accordingly. To share, spend, save – or, in fact, LOSE – our lives for the sake of that kingdom.

May your intention, my intention, our intention, be as certain as death and taxes.

May it be so.