

## What Jesus Says To Do With Your Money

Matt 22

At St. Mark's, Austin; Oct 22, 2023

My favorite teacher in elementary school was Mrs. Meeks. What made her so special was that she understood at a profound level what makes the average 2nd grade human being tick, which is to say she knew exactly how to motivate us to learn, how to keep us from misbehaving, how to be ensure we were kind to one another, and it all revolved around one fundamental philosophical tenet: Bribery.

The form that philosophy took for Mrs. Meeks was that she printed her own fake money. She handed it out to reward us for good behavior. She called them funny bucks. They were laminated strips of green paper, designed using every feature that Microsoft Paint from Windows 95 had to offer, including, of course, the glowing countenance of Mrs. Meeks herself right there in the center where American presidents typically reside. Every Friday while we were in the cafeteria for lunch, Mrs. Meeks would set up The Funny Bucks Bazaar where we had 20 minutes to spend our money on candy and bouncy balls and all other manner of plastic delights.

I cannot think about rendering unto Caesar what is Caesar's without thinking about the glowing countenance of Mrs. Meeks on those laminated green funny bucks.

On the surface of this story, we have yet another attempt by the religious and politically elite to catch Jesus in a trap. If he said yes, to pay the tax, Jesus was vulnerable to the fringe, revolutionary left within the people of Israel, those who wanted to overthrow the yoke of oppressive Rome no matter the cost. Surely Jesus didn't want to make himself out to be an enemy to Israel's independence. On the right, he was vulnerable to the Herodians; that is, the loyal-to-Rome, Jewish politicians who considered a refusal to pay taxes an act of war against the empire. If Jesus said don't pay your taxes, there's no doubt the Herodians would immediately go running to tell mommy and daddy who history proves would not hesitate to throw the hammer down.

And Jesus, as ever, threads the needle with winsome elegance. You could take Jesus' famous phrase to mean something like: Sure, pay your taxes, Jesus says, but remember that the state's authority is limited and temporary when compared to God's. He gives both sides just enough to avoid inciting violence on either side. One can't help but wonder if avoiding violence wasn't the whole point.

But I think there's something deeper going on in this story that emerges if you sit with it long enough. Put yourselves not in the shoes of the Pharisees or the Herodians, but of just a neutral bystander. Imagine yourself not as one of those cynically searching for ways to stamp out the influence of an emerging political threat—like, apparently, everyone elected to serve in our House of Representatives, but instead you are someone who is genuinely interested in Jesus, and genuinely interested in what it might mean to be a disciple, what it might mean to live a holy life, and to experience the depth of joy that seems to be available to those who follow him.

And imagine also you are someone who is somewhat confused by and anxious about money. That you find it strange that it seems like it's all anyone wants and yet we never actually talk about it. You notice that people organize their entire lives around it yet it doesn't appear to make them happy. And you see Jesus cornered by this media swarm and someone asks him a question about what to do with their money and you think, "Boy I'm

actually quite interested in what he has to say.” You hear the famous line: “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s and to God the things that are God’s.” And then you begin walking back home. And you’re repeating this line to yourself, turning it over and over in your hand like a prism, to see what other kinds of light might emerge from it.

A quick note on our translation. The Greek word—*apodote*—here translated “give,” more famously translated “render,” really more accurately means to return; to give back. Give *back* to the emperor that which is the emperor’s, and give *back* to God the things that are God’s.

So you’re walking, and you’re meditating on this line. You might ask yourself, Well what else has Rome given me? Rome has given you a lot more than coins. And it’s been a mixed bag, to be sure. On the one hand, Rome has given you roads. Infrastructure. The *Pax Romana*; that is, relative peace. But they have also kept you under their imperial thumb. They have threatened your way of life, your culture, your traditions. They have made you sacrifice to its gods. To swear allegiance to its Caesars. Maybe giving back to Caesar what is Caesar’s is a radical way of saying you don’t need to be defined by this occupation. You don’t have to be defined by who your oppressors say that you are. Whatever Rome has put on you, give it back. Dust off your feet.

But then, of course, you’ll move on to the second half of that famous phrase, and you’ll ask yourself the question: Well, what is God’s? What has God given to me? Well, you know the answer to that question. It’s, well, everything. Everything good at least. God has given you this life. This world. These people. God has given you every blessing. Every talent. Every cent. Every grace. Every wonder. Every moment. Every breath.

And that might get you thinking about Caesar again, because, wait a second, does anything really belong to Caesar then? Does this denarius really belong to Caesar just because he had his face imprinted on it? Maybe in some extremely limited, temporary sense. Isn’t it just iron, or copper (or whatever I don’t know what they made the coins out of) taken from the earth that God made? Is this land that falls within the boundaries of this empire really *belong* to the emperor? Does the property we own really *belong* to us? Maybe in some extremely limited, temporary sense.

Here’s the kicker, which you’ve been able to see coming. If God has given you everything, what is Jesus telling you to do in this passage? That’s right. Give it all back.

What could Jesus possibly mean by this?

Of course this is about far more than money, but let me first say what it might mean for how we think about money. I remember so vividly the rush of earning a funny buck. I remember the feeling of that sweet, sweet laminate in my hand. And the delicious back burner dialogue that ran in my head throughout the week imagining just what I’d decide to spend it on the coming Friday. It was mine. And it was power.

The trouble is, most of us never really grow out of that mentality when it comes to money. It’s just becomes a lot more stressful. We’re not spending money on G.I. Joe’s and trips to Chuck E. Cheese—that’s right, if you saved up enough you got to go to Chuck E. Cheese—but we spend it on mortgages and tuitions and taxes and

groceries and second mortgages and boats and 17 different streaming services, and hospital bills and, if you're me, then also lots of bike stuff—like seriously who knew bike stuff cost so much money. Definitely not Anna.

Matthew 22 helps us see the two main problems with how we think about how we spend our money. And they lie in the words “our” and “spend.” First of all, it's not *our* money to begin with. If it is, it's only in some limited, temporary sense. But money, like everything else, is something we look after for a while but that we can't keep. It's not a matter of whether to keep it or give it away—it is only a matter of who to give it to.

Which leads to the second problem, with the word “spend.” To say we “spend” money gives us a sense of power, of authority, of confidence, that our spending brings something from the outside world into our realm of ownership and authority. That's a lie. A word that more accurately describes what we do with our money is *invest*. Which is to say, to spend money is always taking some kind of risk, that this new set of bike handlebars is really going to make me happy, that this private school tuition really *is* going to better prepare my child than this public school would, that this vacation condo is going to be a gift to our family and friends and not a millstone around our neck. We invest in possibilities. There's never a sure thing.

Instead of spending our money, God here calls us to give it all back to him. I don't think that means give it all away, though if you're rich enough Jesus has been known to make that kind of demand too. I think for most of us it means trying to make every dollar we spend an investment in the possibility of God's kingdom. There's nothing wrong with buying house. That's fine. What would it look like to make your home into a little outpost of God's kingdom, a little training ground for faith, hope and love. But a second home, I don't care, just make it a laboratory of joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, and kindness for all who pass through it. Invest in a top-tier education, but then ask yourself, what does it look like to use this education to pursue justice, to enact mercy, to stand for peace. Pay your taxes. Jeff Bezos, if you're listening, pay your taxes. Taxes fuel our public infrastructure and make available basic services that make life livable for many. Give to charities, because they provide for those the government leaves behind.

And do give to your church, for this is a community of transformational belonging in Christ. Today is the start of our 2 week church stewardship campaign. It's the time that we ask you to set aside a little time to plan, pray, and consider what financial commitment God is calling you to make to this church community for the following year. Moses or whoever wrote Leviticus tried to make this a simple calculation for you by just telling everyone to set aside ten percent for the priests and the temple so the worshipping life of a community could function. So, you know, do that if you can. Make it simple. But whatever percentage you're able to manage to support the mission and ministry of this parish, don't miss the broader point Jesus is trying to make here. Just because you're supposed to give some percent to the church, doesn't mean you're not still supposed to give everything back to God. Not ten percent. 100 percent.

I said this is about far more than just what to do with your money. It's about what to do with your whole life. But if you start thinking about your money in this way, I think you might find that the rest of your life might start following behind. Give everything back to God. Invest your whole life into God. What are you good at? Be good at it for the sake of God's kingdom. Don't just give God your spare time. Give God every minute, through being an attentive parent, a loyal friend, a loving partner. Make your life into a living sacrifice, an offering unto God.

Every week in the middle of our liturgy someone in the congregation processes bread and wine and money to the altar. Bread, wine, and money represent our daily life and work. The fruits of our labor. And they are our offering to God. Then the priest prays and God transforms the bread and the wine into something different. The body and blood of Christ. And then those gifts are offered back to you for the nourishment of your soul. The money is transformed into mission and ministry for our community. We offer what we have. And God turns into gifts and gives it back to us. We give everything, and God gives us himself. And the cycle goes on and on and on and never stops. This is the abundant economy of God.

So invest in this economy. Invest everything you have and everything you are into the possibility of God's kingdom. Why? Because that which is in God lasts forever. And in the end, nothing else does.

Amen.