

Choose How You Relate  
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March 22, 2020

Mark 12:13-17 Common English Bible (CEB)

A question about taxes

13 They sent some of the Pharisees and supporters of Herod to trap him in his words. 14 They came to him and said, “Teacher, we know that you’re genuine and you don’t worry about what people think. You don’t show favoritism but teach God’s way as it really is. Does the Law allow people to pay taxes to Caesar or not? Should we pay taxes or not?”

15 Since Jesus recognized their deceit, he said to them, “Why are you testing me? Bring me a coin. Show it to me.” 16 And they brought one. He said to them, “Whose image and inscription is this?” “Caesar’s,” they replied.

17 Jesus said to them, “Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and to God what belongs to God.” His reply left them overcome with wonder.

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So, this is our second week of virtual worship. Last week seemed to work for most folks, not perfect, but ok. We’re still working on improving things and possibly expanding our worship capabilities. We’re learning a lot and trying to move at lightning speed, and we appreciate your suggestions, support and especially your patience.

In only a week, the world as we know it has changed so much and it is still changing daily, hourly and it can feel scary. I want you to know that I feel it to. When you turn on the news, there’s too much negativity – images of people hoarding, statistics of people dying and what appears like incompetence and chaos from the institutions that we trust and on which we rely. And then there’s the social isolation. It’s more than difficult for all of us, even self-described introverts. As an extrovert, it’s very hard to not be around people. I feed off the energy of others. I enjoy being in crowds; sitting at Union Station, sipping an iced tea and people watching. Seeing all kinds of people going to and fro, wondering where they’re going, what’s on their daily agendas and who they’re likely to encounter. Watching such things on TV or via the Internet helps, but it’s not the same.

So, we’re having to learn new ways of living. I’m learning to curb my “news” intake. I think this is smart for all of us. Too much NEWS can be harmful to your spirit. Pick one or two preferred news sources and limit yourself to 60-90 minutes a day. Read news versus watching it – it makes a difference.

Above all else - It's important to remember that there is just as much positivity out there as negativity. I appreciate stories, videos and pictures of puppies playing, motivational quotes and people doing good in the world because there ARE a lot of people doing great things. I'm hearing from you all about how you're holding up, how you're connecting and keeping yourselves involved in life....and how you're helping one another. That's the focus during this time. We have choices during this pandemic as to how we're going to behave and how we're going to think. We CAN get through this; we WILL get through this; and we will choose to do it selflessly, with love and compassion for humanity.

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Our Lenten devotional study has been Lent in Plain Sight by Jill Duffield. Each week, we are reading daily devotionals and prayers focusing on particular objects. This past week, the object has been coins.

When was the last time that you looked at coins? Unless you're a numismatist (that's the term for someone who studies currency), you probably haven't really looked at coins and examined them for a while. As a kid I remember being enamored with coins; the images, dates, words, etc., but when I got into the workforce and started earning a regular paycheck, coins were less exciting.

How many of you use or even see coins now a days? As we begin this week's readings, I thought about how rarely I use coins in our digital and credit-based society. It seems like paying for things with paper currency or coins is happening less and less all of the time. I never carry or use coins. In the rare instance that I use cash and receive change, I have a little change purse in my car where I dump the coins. Then, I will give the coins to people on street corners who are asking for change; I'll pour out a bunch of coins and hand them out. But I don't actually use coins for currency – as part of commercial transactions. Now if you would have asked my mom about coins, she would have said that she carried a change purse full of coins and she'd carefully and preciously take the time to count out pennies, nickels and dimes when making purchases. She had a check book and a credit card. But she carried cash as well, including the change purse full of coins.

What about finding coins? If you see a penny do you pick it up? There's the saying, "see a penny, pick it up, all the day, you'll have good luck." Do you pick it up for luck...or do you pick it up because you need the penny? Because you need money? If I see a penny, I usually don't pick it up. Why? Because it's just a penny. Just a penny. That money isn't worth my time or the effort of bending down to pick it up. It's just a penny! Now if it were my mom, she would pick it up. If I were with her, she'd have made me pick it up for her.

Why?

It's about our relationship and attitudes toward money. What does money mean to us? Even a single penny?

It all depends on our circumstances...our lot in life. How we were taught to handle and treat money. Are your attitudes influenced in any way by religion or faith? If you're someone who claims to believe in Jesus and follow the way of Jesus, then faith should play a part. How did Jesus treat money or speak about money?

Jesus knew that coins, Roman Denarii at that time, were the monetary currency and used for purchasing items just like we understand currency today. In today's reading from Mark, Jesus looked at the coin handed to him by either a Pharisee or Herodian, had them confirm its image and wording, and said, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." In that simple statement, Jesus said everything that we'll ever need to understand about how we should relate to money.

Yes, money has value and is necessary because we have made it so; so use it to eat, to have shelter, to survive. But what does the coin actually mean to you? It's image, it's wording – do they carry meaning? If yes, what?

Jesus acknowledges money's existence in the world (it's existence according to humans), but Jesus better understands it as yet, just another thing that ultimate belongs to God **for all things are of God**. Jesus sees beyond the coin in his hand. He chooses to see more than just what is before him. He sees the systems surrounding the coin. He sees the emotions generated from the coin.

Money is value, gold is value, silver is valuable because humans declare it and buy into the belief. We could easily do the same thing with daffodils, or pigeons, or square pieces of plastic. Can we see the bigger picture beyond a coin?

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We're all familiar with the story of the widow's mite. Later in this chapter in Mark (vv. 41-44), Jesus is seated at the treasury, observing the crowds make their offerings. Many rich citizens were putting in large sums of money, but a poor, old woman put in only two mites, two copper coins, worth barely anything. This story so often is used to teach about generosity and its rewards – the two mites were more valuable than all the money given by rich citizens because the poor, old woman had so little to give in the first place.

There is much truth in that. We're taught to look at the poor, old woman's relationship with money. One or two coins has so much value to her, yet she still donates the money to the city's treasury instead of perhaps buying herself some bread. Did she give willingly to the treasury or out of obligation? We're not sure. But we're taught that she had a faith BEYOND the coin. Amen. That's so true. The two mites were God's anyway, so if she gave them to the treasury or bought herself some bread, either way her faith in God, not the coins, was enough.

While we look at the poor, old woman's relationship with money, let's not forget to look beyond like Jesus did. Look at the system and the emotions. The Roman treasury and Roman citizens apparently thought it was perfectly okay for a poor, old woman to give ANY AMOUNT of money to the treasury. As a poor, old woman she should be receiving charity or support, not giving two precious coins to anything or anyone but herself. While we praise the woman for giving, we should be chastising the system for taking! The system is putting more value in those coins than in the woman.

It's for reasons like that that Jesus became angry and cleared the temple courts in every one of the gospels. Jesus made a whip out of cords and chased people and animals alike from the temple not because of money itself, but because of the hows and whys associated with the money! A system that cheated, exploited and hurt people. The sale of animals for sacrifice was being done solely as a business and not as a spiritual service. It was the relationship with money – a relationship that was corrupt and sullied. That's what made Jesus angry.

How we relate to money is very important because it's our attitudes toward money that will support how we use it. Like the parable of the rich fool in Luke (12:16-21), what good is hoarding money in silos? Can it really buy you a good life? We must be smart and practical with money, like Jesus taught. Money is not to be cherished or worshipped; we cherish family, friends and serving others. Money is to be used wisely and generously; give us this day our daily bread – that's all, our daily bread is enough because we have faith that God will provide. Money satisfies a selfish, right-here and right-now mentality, but is utterly worthless for our eternal lives.

Money doesn't have to be the root of all evil. If we respect it and understand it to be of God and used by us in worldly systems, we can choose to see beyond the coin's physical attributes and have it bless not just us, but all of humanity.

Choose to see the positivity, the blessings and the good works in coins. It's very simple, give to God what is God's – absolutely everything.

AMEN