

Kingdom Economics: Paying Our Dues

*A sermon preached by Emily Hull McGee on October 22, 2017
on Matthew 22:15-22 at First Baptist Church on Fifth, Winston-Salem, NC*

About two weeks ago on a beautiful fall day in Northampton, Massachusetts, a small crowd gathered in the intersection of Main and Pleasant Streets to bear witness to the unexpected. A local carpenter was there — a 28 year-old wiry guy named Paul Viditch — and Paul's hands gripped two massive stacks of cash. \$389 to be exact, in denominations of \$1 and \$2 bills, the amount of his last roofing paycheck. And just as the clock struck 5:00, Paul flung the money up into the air with delight written all over his face, and cackled as all those pictures of George Washingtons and Thomas Jeffersons came raining down to an expectant crowd just ready to catch all they could.

Later when Paul was interviewed about this experience, the question of course was asked, "Paul, why in the world did you cash a paycheck and then make it rain down upon a group of total strangers? If you wanted to give it away, there are a zillion agencies and organizations who could have put it to good use. What compelled you to do such a thing?" "This is like a big wad of my problems!," Paul had shouted, just before tossing the money skyward. "I have a lot of money anxiety," Vidich said before the event. "Money is a large part of the way that I think... This fills me with anxiety, doing this, and that's part of the reason I think I want to do it; I have this money obsession that feels unhealthy." But the onlookers —

ranging from the mildly curious to those who had come with duct-taped shoes to catch as much cash before it blew away — didn't seem to share Paul's assertions; they just grabbed their unexpected cash and set off into the night.¹

You and I may not share Paul's tactics to address what he calls his unhealthy obsession with money, but I feel confident in saying that all of us, at some point or another, have had a complicated relationship with the money we have.

For some of us, that relationship began in the early stages of our lives. A number of us gathered yesterday to celebrate the life of Martha DuVal, and I told of her Depression-era upbringing of scrimping and saving and resourcefulness that forever shaped how she lived her life with the things she had. Like Martha, perhaps a childhood experience with poverty has fueled for you a career-long hunger to prove yourself by earning more and more and more. Or maybe your family had ample resources, which made you stand out among your peers in ways that were isolating or uncomfortable.

For others of us, the relationship we have with money became most challenging as we began to earn it regularly and use it to provide for self or family. You might be one who just can't seem to hold on to your money once a paycheck comes in, finding countless ways — some disciplined,

¹ Story about Paul Viditch and the \$389 found here: <http://www.gazettenet.com/Money-Toss-in-downtown-Northampton-13075852>

others not so much — to spend every dollar in some capacity. In contrast, you might be the saving type, relentlessly stockpiling what you earn to save for a rainy day, a disaster, retirement, whatever, but often struggling to be generous in your everyday life because of that.

For a number of us, the relationship we have with money is at its worst in times of transition or crisis. Maybe you felt some financial freedom upon the early days of retirement, but feel anxiety as each year passes and your life savings begin to dwindle. Or you are like many for whom a paycheck is never enough to cover what you need, for whom hundreds in a car repair bill would send you into financial crisis and thousands in health care costs would bankrupt you. Perhaps you spiral into a panic with every call from a debt collector, every movement in the markets, every annual review that holds potential for a raise, every conversation with a family member when a will is being determined.

Regardless of how we relate to money, there's no doubt that money identifies us — the haves or the have nots, the 1% or the 99%, those who play the Stockmarket and those who play the lottery. It has this power of ranking us in a hierarchy of value, suggesting that some lives are more valuable than others. Money separates us from each other, as illustrated in that old episode of the TV show *Friends* where three of the six friends with more stable jobs wanted to go to nicer restaurants, see more expensive concerts, and enjoy finer clothes... and the three with less felt left out, resentful, misunderstood, hurt. It shapes the rhythms of our life,

the opportunities to which we have access, the long-term well-being of our families, the goals and priorities we hold in our living. Money sharpens our opinions about how it is used. And far too often, money manages us — governing all manner of emotions (from anxiety to fear to anger to hope to exhilaration), creating our sense of self and worth and identity, framing our relationships with friends and family, and most problematically, confusing our allegiance to God.

I imagine some measure of this understanding about money must have been in Jesus's mind that day, when the Pharisees and Herodians questioned Jesus in what they thought was a surefire trap. We know that these moments of tension between Jesus and the religious and governmental authorities have been building for some time now. Jesus had ridden into Jerusalem — right into the hotbed of religious activity — where on day one, he lashed out in anger towards the money-changers in the Temple, furious at their attempts to monopolize and monetize access to God. Over these past six weeks, we've listened in on the aftermath of that moment. Increasingly, Jesus's parables have gotten more intense. Stories of workers in vineyards and wicked tenants, kings with indebted slaves and wedding banquets, all have pointed to Jesus's deeper questions about the nature of authority, of indebtedness and fruitfulness, of the stark difference in the kingdom of God and the kingdoms of this world.

And today's story is no different! For you see, the threat Jesus posed to the religious and political powers in Jerusalem was real, and it created

strange bedfellows united in a desire to neutralize his authority. The Pharisees were critical and particular observers of Jewish law, and the followers of Herod Antipas would have been supporters and sympathizers of Rome, the government that occupied and governed these holy lands.² Both groups were threatened by the stirrings that Jesus provoked in their people, and so they lobbed him a question, rife with implications about money and power and religion and politics and authority. "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?"

You could almost hear the glee in their voices when asking, a 'gotcha' question if there ever was one! If Jesus said no, then he's branded a revolutionary under the Roman government and hauled in for treason. If he said yes, then he's a collaborator, purely a puppet for the government and not a true observer of Jewish law. Because that tax they're asking about was a Roman imperial tax administered by Jewish authorities to, ironically enough, financially support Roman occupation of Israel. It amounted to one denarius, a day's wage. That denarius used to pay the tax bore the face of Tiberius Caesar and the inscription, when translated, says this: "Tiberius Caesar, august son of the divine Augustus and high priest." Do you hear the significance and dissonance there? Faithful Jews,

² All four of the commentators on this passage, "Matthew 22:15-22," in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Volume 2, Chapters 14-28*, pp. 188-193, offer compelling and helpful historical context for the question posed to Jesus. I used information provided by all in this section of the sermon, so do read more of their insightful work! The four writers are Keith Erickson, Richard A. Floyd, Douglas T. King, and David J. Lose.

bound to the Lord in Abrahamic covenant and guided by the words of the Ten Commandments through Moses, must pay a tax with a coin bearing the picture of another leader and the proclamation of his divinity, thus breaking the first two commandments in the process. So either way Jesus answers their question, they are sure he's caught.³

Subverting their expectations, Jesus answers their question with a question — "who's face is on the coin? And what is his title?" I have to imagine that if you're a Pharisee at that moment, your stomach drops. With a quick answer — "the emperor's" — you're admitting the blasphemy you've contributed too, and now you've been called out! Which makes his response all the more biting: "give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's."

In a day and age where our relationship with money is complicated and a Christian's moral relationship with the government under which it lives is fraught, oh how I wish Jesus had just picked a side! How I wish Jesus had just affirm my own opinions, to suggest the very relationship with money and power and religion and politics and authority that I'd prefer. How easy it would be if he'd said, "just pay the tax when you like the elected leader and approve of their plan to spend it, but resist paying the tax when you don't," or "hold tight to your money if you think you've got better things to do with it, but relinquish it if you don't." How helpful it

³ Ibid.

would have been if Jesus would have rounded out his response to include some best practices on money management too — 15% to retirement, 20% on your mortgage, 10% in savings, 10% to the church, and so on. C'mon Jesus — it's either this or that, right or wrong, just be clear so we know what to do!

But the economics of the kingdom give space for subtlety, for the recognition of the both/and, the ambiguity of competing loyalties within which we live and move and have our being. I hear Jesus saying that we're to give to the emperor what belongs to the emperor — but that's it, no more. Don't give the emperor and the empire more loyalty than they are due. In contrast, we are to give to God what is God's. But what is God's is everything, right? The Psalmist reminds us that "the earth is the Lord's and everything in it." Therefore, our duty to empire and all the trappings therein is always, always subject to and contingent upon our highest responsibility and belonging, which is first to God.

Because no matter how great the country, how high the dollar, or how far it stretches, the face of a leader stamped onto our currency pales in comparison to the very image of God stamped onto each and every one of us. From the earliest moment of human history, God proclaims that all humanity is created in the image of God and bears the Divine mark. We belong to God, God calls us beloved, and God values each and every one of us more than money ever could. In the kingdoms of this world, money changes in value and in its value to us — the market rises and falls, our

bank accounts are flush or flimsy, the way we use money can range from stockpiling to spending. But in the kingdom of God, the image marked upon each of us at creation is a value that no one can take away, no matter our accounting!

So how then might we have a better relationship with our money, with those to whom we share it, and with the emperors and empires to which it is given? I read this week of a pastor who preached this text and exhorted her congregation to take out their credit card or debit card, grab a Sharpie, and mark it with a cross. That way, she said, we are reminded that all we have and are is God's, and all that God has and is is also ours! It had the effect of triggering a pause for her members. Anytime they got the card out to purchase something, it gave them a moment to think about that mark, the mark of belovedness upon each of them as God's children, and the mark their money would make in the world. You might think it became a burden, but for many, it served as an empowering of who and whose they are, no matter how much they spent or saved! One even said that it drove home the truth of how his faith shapes his everyday life, even down to the money that powered it.⁴

Because at the end of the day, when all the money is counted — money showered down from a guy in a street, money earned in a lifetime of work, money inherited, spent, or saved, money fretted over and money

⁴ Great story shared by David Lose at his blog here: <http://www.davidlose.net/2014/10/pentecost-19a-money-politics-and-religion/>

faithfully given — the mark it makes upon us pales in comparison to the mark already placed there by the One who gives us life in abundance. And the value of that? Priceless!