

## *Living Discipleship*

### Part One: *Monopoly*

Matthew 22:15-22 October 22, 2017 Pastor Roger Barkley

Jesus was just a child when Rome decided to impose an occupation tax on the people of Palestine.

After all, it cost a lot of money to maintain an occupying army in a distant land: men, food, chariots, horses, armor and uniforms, spears, swords, prisons cells – and all those incidentals no one thinks of like hammers and nails and ropes for cross, and whips ... it all adds up.

So, to cover costs, Caesar ordered that each year every man, woman and child pay one day's wages, a denarius.

This was a particularly hated tax, especially because it was a humiliation to have to pay for the soldiers who are occupying your land and brutalizing your people.

For poor people, already crippled by taxes and officials' corruption, this might mean another day without food.

And, of course, the tax had to be paid with a silver Roman coin that bore the image of Tiberius with the inscription "Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus, Chief Priest" – an affront to devout Jews.

Since the Ten Commandments hold that we not have any graven images, Roman coins were not to be used for any Temple business.

That's why money changers set up tables on the outer fringes of the Temple so that worshipers could enter the temple to leave offerings or pay temple taxes without carrying images of Caesar onto holy grounds.

The incident that Michael just read from Matthew 22 immediately follows three parables Jesus told in response to attacks from religious leaders.

We looked at one of those parables last week, "The Parable of the Wedding Banquet".

Now a group of Pharisees joins forces with the Herodians to lay a trap for Jesus.

The Herodians were a non-religious, political party that supported the Herodian Dynasty – you remember King Herod, never going to win the “nice guy of the year” award.

These were strange bedfellows for the devout Pharisees, but perfect co-conspirators for this trap.

*Matthew 22:15-17 (The Pharisees) sent their disciples to (Jesus) along with the Herodians. “Teacher,” they said, “... Tell us then, what is your opinion? Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not?”*

The people would have cheered if Jesus had sided with the Zealots, who insisted that a faithful Jew should not pay this tax, but then the Herodians would have turned him in to Roman authorities for sedition.

But if he sided with the Herodians and said, yes, pay the tax, then his popularity would take a nose dive and the crowds following Jesus would turn against him.

What was Jesus’ response?

*Matthew 22:19 Show me the coin used for paying the tax.” They brought him a denarius....*

Let’s pause right there and think about what’s just happened:

Where is this conversation taking place?

On the Temple grounds.

And who just whipped out a Roman coin with its graven image?

A Pharisee.

As the Pharisee held out the coin, I can imagine Jesus glancing at the coin, then tilting his head a little and looking at the Pharisee with a “really?” look.

Apparently, the Pharisees were quite happy to do business with Caesar’s coin, and to carry it right into the Temple.

Without speaking another word, Jesus just exposed the Pharisee as a hypocrite, and he could have left it at that.

But instead, Jesus continued by giving us a lesson in priorities amidst the complexity of our responsibilities.

Matthew 22:21a *Then he said to them, “So give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s,...*

In fact, we do have civic responsibilities.

We are obliged to pay for all sorts of governmental services, even things that we don’t personally need, and sometimes things we don’t agree with.

Jesus objected to the Pharisees’ hypocrisy, but he did not deny civic obligations.

But he didn’t leave it at that, because his answer continued.

Matthew 22:21b *... and to God what is God’s.”*

The pious Jews objected to the Roman coin because it bares a picture of Caesar and a proclamation of his divine position.

His challenge, then, came from his implied question, “What do we know that bears the image of God?”

The Bible opens with the proclamation that it is we who bear God’s image.

Genesis 1:27 *So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them.*

So, Jesus is not advancing some idea about a clean separation of religious life from civil life – separation of church and state, as this passage has sometimes been badly misinterpreted.

No, this a reminder that while we have civic responsibilities, in the end it all belongs to God.

And in particular, we are the ones minted in God’s image, and we are to give ourselves to God.

Jesus' call to discipleship is a challenging one of giving ourselves fully to him – that it is only in living in his ways, by putting him first in our life, that we experience the full blessings of life.

*Matthew 16:24 For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it.*

So, just as the three preceding parables each highlight how his pious critics may put on a good show, they may in fact have turned their backs on God, and Jesus turns this trap about money into a similar lesson.

Jesus actually talked more about money than any other topic in the Gospels.

Why?

Because he understood that our relationship with money shapes who we are.

Most of us are preoccupied with money in one way or another: financial status, worries about bills, saving for retirement, who has more, should we be more generous, how do I earn more.

Especially in the west, we may feel that how we spend our money is our business and no one else's.

But that raises its own problems.

First, if we forget in whose image we have been made, we may be tempted to believe that we are no more than the sum total of our possessions.

My bank account, my neighborhood, my make of car give me my worth and value.

And what follows on the tail of that belief is destructive to our happiness, our spiritual health, and to our society.

Paul Piff is a well-known and respected researcher on social behavior who has explored how our attitudes and behaviors change as we gain wealth.

If you'd like to learn more about his work, I suggest that you Google his TEDTalk ... it is excellent.

In one famous series of studies, he had volunteers play a game of Monopoly.

Two players enter a room with a Monopoly board set-up.

One of the players is randomly selected by the toss of a coin to begin the game with twice the money as their opponent.

Not only that, they are given two dice to roll rather than the other person's single die.

It's not hard to imagine how the game proceeds, with the privileged player quickly acquiring more and more property, and more and more rent – eventually driving the other player to bankruptcy.

But what is striking is how the privileged player's behavior evolves as he or she continues to accumulate wealth.

For example, they become physically expansive with their body posture and gestures.

They speak louder, often slapping the table when they finished their turn.

They tend to make a display of their money – often counting and re-counting their resources while the losing player looks on while awaiting their turn.

There is a bowl of pretzels on the table, and as the game progresses the privileged player eats more than their counter-part.

Maybe those things aren't a big surprise, but the real study was about what came after the game was over.

The two players are left in a waiting room where a dish of candies sits on a coffee table.

The players are told that those were reserved for a group of children who are completing an exercise down the hall.

Sometimes the losers would sneak a candy or two, but the privileged player showed little reservation about digging in, eating way more candies than the loser ... taking candies from a child.

When researchers conduct a post-game analysis with the two subjects, the privileged player (who, remember, started with twice the money and had two dice rather than one) tends to talk about their skill, ingenuity, and crafty investment strategies.

As the former slaves were about to enter the Promised Land after centuries of slavery in Egypt, God gave this warning:

*Deuteronomy 8:17-18 You may say to yourself, “My power and the strength of my hands have produced this wealth for me.” But remember the LORD your God, for it is he who gives you the ability to produce wealth, and so confirms his covenant, which he swore to your ancestors, as it is today.*

No one is entitled because they’ve accumulated more wealth ... and those of us with more wealth (which we are in the United States) especially need to be reminded that all our talents and opportunities come from God.

The Old Testament and New Testament teach about money because our relationship with money molds us.

Paul Piff did a number of other studies about how wealth can reduce empathy and our sense of social connection and responsibility.

One was at a pedestrian crosswalk where, for a couple of days, a researcher stepped into the crosswalk as traffic approached while observers videotaped and tracked the make of cars that either stopped for the pedestrian or who kept driving.

Expensive cars were four times more likely to plow ahead than people with cheaper vehicles.

His research did similar studies at four way stops, where expensive cars were far more likely to go out of turn.

He did other studies to measure empathy and generosity, repeatedly demonstrating that as we grow in wealth we become less generous and less connected to our community.

For example, even after contrived games like Monopoly, the winners were shown to be less generous than the losers when encountering a staged incident on their way home.

I'm not going into them right now, but all sorts of other studies show that the more generous we are, the happier, more resilient and healthier we become.

First we possess our wealth, then our wealth possesses us.

This is why Jesus was so concerned about how we manage our money.

If we and all that we own belong to God, then for the time we are given control over our resources we are called to use them faithfully for good, which helps those in need and helps us.

In four weeks we will have our annual Stewardship Sunday where we make our estimates of giving toward our 2018 budget.

In our church, we don't lay a guilt trip on anyone.

We speak frankly about our budget so that anyone can see where every dollar is spent.

And we speak honestly about giving because this is an essential part of who we are and the kind of person we become.

What we ask is that you and your family spend some time considering your values.

And then we ask that you spend some time asking yourself how your giving of time and money line up with those values.

It can be an eye opener to line up our calendar and our VISA statement with what we value most.

If your financial giving or time commitment are out of whack, then I encourage you to bring it to a healthy, faithful place where you are supporting what you value most.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's – our taxes pay for the society in which we live.

And give to God what is God's – that is you, that is me, made in the image of our Creator.