

What Were They Thinking?

Matthew 22:15-22

October 19, 2008

Today is the third Sunday of our annual *My Hands Are Christ's Hands* Stewardship Campaign. We chose as our theme this year "The Seasons of Our Giving" and it has provided us some wonderful imagery.

Today we contemplate that season of summer when the trees offer us their gifts of shade and fruit. The summer of our giving is that which involves our giving so that others might have and so that others might be awakened to God's presence in their lives. While this giving involves all that makes up who we are – all that we have been entrusted to care for – the emphasis is primarily upon our financial support. Next week, when we consider the final season of our giving – fall – that is when we will consider the other aspects of who we are and what we have – our skills, our interests, our giftedness – our time – our hands and hearts in service.

Martin Luther once noted that we are in need of three conversions: our hearts, our minds and our purses. Billy Graham phrased it this way: "If a person gets his attitude toward money right, it will straighten out almost every other area in his life."

Sir Winston Churchill once noted: "We make a living by what we get; we make a life by what we give."

John Updike wrote: "In America, it is hard to achieve a sense of enough!"

And, Maya Angelou notes: "The New Testament informs the reader that it is more blessed to give than to receive. I have found that among its other benefits, giving liberates the soul of the believer."

And so these two strange bedfellows approach Jesus in the temple one day in an attempt to make Jesus look bad. The Herodians and the Pharisees are indeed a strange tag-team. The Pharisees were devout Jews whose primary role was to interpret the Torah. They didn't have much use for the Romans and especially the Roman government.

Not much is actually known about the Herodians. They seem to be primarily a secular political party supportive of the government – that is, supportive of the Roman occupation and the taxes levied to support it. The Pharisees and Herodians didn't think the same about taxation and yet together they went to Jesus and they asked him his opinion about the payment of taxes to the emperor.

What brought them together was their mutual concern about the influence and popularity they sensed this Jesus attaining. They assumed that Jesus had to have some sort of political agenda ("Why else would he be touring the countryside, making speeches, and hugging all those children?")¹ And so, they went to Jesus to try and trip him into making a political misstep. They went to him in hopes of making him look bad.

The Jews resented the idea that they had to pay taxes to this despised government on their own land. The tax they were supposed to pay in this case amounted to about the amount a common laborer made working one day. The tax could only be paid with the denarius - a coin that had Caesar's image on one side and his title and divine status on the other. The very coin itself was offensive to the Jews. They considered it to be a breaking of one of the Ten Commandments which prohibited graven images. Because of their attitude about the Roman coin most Jews refused to use them. Besides, they had their own temple currency.

And so, these two groups – the Pharisees, represented by their disciples, and the Herodians square off with Jesus. They start with a compliment, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth.” (That wasn’t what they really believed, but they wanted the people standing around listening to think they were giving Jesus a fair chance.) “Teacher, is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?”

They thought they had him. They thought they had schemed up a pretty good question to anger one side or another of those who were listening. If he said that the tax should not be paid to the Roman government, he would have been in trouble with the Roman government represented by the Herodians. He would have been perceived as siding with the revolutionaries trying to overthrow the Roman government – potentially someone who might be able to rally the opposition.

On the other hand, if he said “yes” he would have been in trouble with most of his following. He would have lost face with his constituency.

Knowing the real motivation behind the question, Jesus asked to be shown the coin used for the tax. Jesus held up the coin and he asked his questioners whose head was on it. It’s helpful to know at this point that the Greek word which we translate as “head” is a word from which we get our English word icon. Some have suggested that perhaps “a better translation of Jesus’ question would be, ‘Whose image is this on the coin?’”

Because, you see, the word “image” allows this text to reveal to us a deeper fundamental truth of our faith. If we give the coin to the emperor because it is his image on it, then what is it that we give to God because God’s image is on it? ...

“In other words, we give to the emperor the coin because his image is on it, and we give to God ourselves because you and I are created in the image of God, both male and female. Jesus is not only refusing to play the win-lose games of the Pharisees, but he is backing it up with a more profound truth: we owe the one who made us our very lives – not just (our) money, but everything of who we are.”²

We are God’s coin. We are what is God’s! We give to God what is God’s when we take seriously what we do with all that God has entrusted to us: our possessions, our skills, our resources, our minds, our bodies, our decisions, our motivations, our time, our feet, our mouths, our eyes, our prayers, and yes, our hands. Stewardship is based on the belief that all we have is God’s and we are responsible to God for what we do with it – not just the portion of our time and resources that we give to the church. The first step to being a steward of God’s is to buy into this understanding – to get our minds around what it means for the choices we make – every choice we make. And once we do, it changes every decision we make.

Susie Scott was a *Playboy* centerfold back in the early ‘80s. After her experience in the magazine she spent the next ten years modeling, acting, and doing promotional work for the magazine.

She made a good living and enjoyed the life that often accompanies the lifestyle of celebrities. After a failed marriage, she married an Aspen, Colorado attorney and settled down with him to enjoy the comfortable lifestyle that their wealth offered them. She was a partner in an antique store and a sushi bar for a time.

Her life changed though the day she watched a documentary on Mongolian orphans. She just felt that she had to do something. A friend suggested that she take a look at the situation in Haiti because of how poor it was and how close it was to the United States. So she did, and as a result she sold her businesses and travelled to Haiti.

When she arrived she told the taxi driver to take her to where “the poor people are.” He dropped her off in a shantytown and quickly sped away. A family of 17 took her in for the night. With their help she learned how really bad it was in Haiti.

She later shared with a reporter, “I knew I had been born that day.” She also said in the article that she completely committed herself to Christ once she began to work in Haiti. With her husband as a partner, Susie launched the Foundation for Worldwide Mercy and Sharing, an organization dedicated to serving the children of Haiti. It now operates six schools, five orphanages and a hospital ward for abandoned children. Susie’s group feeds, clothes, educates and nurses close to 2,000 children.

She isn’t a hands-off administrator either. She spends a great deal of time there nursing sick children and helping any way she can. It’s not been easy. She contracted lice, scabies, mange, and was treated for encephalitis. She has also had some run-ins with gangs and bureaucrats. But, sticking with it has won for her the respect of the people of Haiti and the Haitian government.

Susie’s story is a story about stewardship. Susie and Joe fund the foundation’s expenses – administration, publicity and travel expenses – with their own money. They believe in what they are doing. It shows in where they put their time and money. It shows on their calendar and in their checkbook. Donations, including some which come because of Susie’s unique personal story and the *Playboy* background – which shows that in God’s economy, nothing is wasted – donations cover the operating budget of the foundation.

“But, it’s also a story about stewardship because Susie was able to see that not only her money, but her position of privilege, her celebrity status, and her life experience itself were treasures on loan from God, and she put them to use in a way that honors Christ.”³

There’s no question that none of us in this room this morning probably have at our disposal the resources Susie Scott does. But all of us do have our own unique set of gifts that God has given us. “The worst error we can make is to think (that those gifts) are only for our personal use. But it is a correctable situation, and one we can start in motion by acknowledging that everything we have comes from God’s hand.”⁴

Now, today’s emphasis is upon the importance of our financial gifts – our vow to support the ministries of the church with our money. The rest of our resources will be emphasized next week when we talk about our vow to service.

There’s no question that we are living in a dangerously materialistic society and that there is something intrinsically seductive about money. When Jesus said, “You cannot worship God and Mammon...” he was not saying that we shouldn’t own things. What he was saying to us is that we should be careful with what we own or what we own might own us.

John Wesley wrote one time about the tension he had become aware of between being properly industrious and becoming rich. He was committed to a life of relative austerity. He constantly was warning others about how material possessions could be an encumbrance to ministry. And yet, his writings made him quite prosperous.

And so, on one occasion he wrote: “I do not see how it is possible...for any revival to continue long. Religion must necessarily produce industry and these cannot but produce riches. As riches increase so will pride, anger and the love of the world.”⁵

John D. Rockefeller, Sr. struggled with such a reality in his life. He drove himself to succeed. He was a millionaire by the time he was twenty-three. He was the richest man in the world by the time he was fifty. But, at fifty-three years of age he developed a serious illness which caused him to lose all his facial hair – including his eyebrows and that on the top of his head. “Even though he was the world’s only billionaire (at that time) and could have almost anything on earth he desired, he could only digest milk and crackers. Someone noted, ‘He could not sleep, would not smile, and nothing in life meant much to him at all.’ Doctors predicted that within a year he would be dead.

“One night, however, as he struggled to fall asleep he came to grips with his life. He realized that he could take nothing with him into the next world. The next day he embarked on a new way of living. Rather than hoarding his money and possessions, he began to give them away to persons in need. Establishing the Rockefeller Foundation, he channeled his fortune into hospitals, research, and mission work.

“At age 53 Rockefeller was given a year to live. By learning to live by the principle of giving rather than getting he altered his life so dramatically that he eventually lived to the ripe old age of ninety-eight!”⁶

What indeed were they thinking when they asked Jesus that question in the temple? What were they thinking after he responded? More importantly, what are we thinking about how we should use the resources God has made us stewards of? The worship of money is a deadly spiritual problem. Why is it the more we have the less we seem able to give? Why is it that the more things we own, the greater is the temptation for our things to own us? What indeed are we thinking?

Let us pray.

1. Johnny Dean, “Another Tricky Question,” www.esermons.com, 1999.
2. Paul J. Nechterlien, “A win-win-answer to a lose-lose question,” October 20, 2002, *Girardian Reflections Web Site*, girardian-lectionary.net.
3. *Homiletics*, “Mint Errors,” September – October 2005, p. 54.
4. King Duncan, “God and the IRS,” *Collected Sermons*, Dynamic Preaching, 2005, 0-000-0000-20.
5. *Ibid.* quoting from C. William Fisher, *It’s Revival We Need* (Kansas City: Nazarene Publishing House, 1966).