

We are in a series of messages that began just last week where we are fact-checking what we think we know about Jesus with what Jesus says and demonstrates in his life. Because, whatever conclusions we draw about Jesus, we want to make sure our conclusions are based on what he actually says, and does, and who he is, as opposed to who we *think* he is – which could very well be wrong.

And one of the preconceived notions that a lot of people have about Jesus is that he’s greedy for our money. 11 of his 39 parables in the Gospels deal with the topic of money and stuff. And he taught on it in other ways besides parables. So, is he greedy, and is there a place for greed in our own faith? With that, let’s turn to Matthew 22 beginning in verse 15. This is God’s word to you and me this morning, and we’ll start with the first three verses (**Mt. 22:15-17**), and then continue on in a few minutes.

So, let’s pause here, because there’s stuff here that is fascinating once we understand what’s going on, and it impacts the conversation that takes place. **The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders of the day.** They frequently butted heads with Jesus. Usually we see them going to Jesus themselves, but this time some of their understudies (“disciples”) went to Jesus on their behalf. We aren’t told why they did it this way in this instance, but one answer certainly could be that the Pharisees didn’t want to be directly associated with the Herodians.

The Herodians were not religious leaders, but Israelites (as are the Pharisees, just to be clear) **who supported the work of the occupying Roman government, particularly the Herodian local rulers.** Herod the Great was the first. (Heard of the “Herodian Dynasty”? It started with him.), When he died, his region of rule was divided among his four sons. One of them was Herod Antipas, and at the time he was *sort of* like the governor over the region that included Galilee, where Jesus is from. So, these people called “the Herodians” probably benefited from Herod’s rule, and worked to maintain that rule under the broader umbrella of the Roman Empire because

of the benefits they received – perhaps things like favorable treatment in legal or political issues, or financial gain through participating in building projects that the different Herods oversaw, maybe they got tax breaks, or perhaps even had governmental positions. So, you’ve got these two groups joining together: The Pharisees (who opposed Roman rule of Israel) and the Herodians – who are also Israelites but have cozied up with the occupying ruling authorities.

And yet, they both perceive Jesus to be a threat to their position and power in society, so they join together. The Pharisees see Jesus as a religious threat because Jesus’ teaching is distinctly Jewish, rooted in the Jewish Bible – what you and I call the Old Testament – and he’s generating quite a following. If this were 21st Century, he would definitely be trending on Instagram, he’d be on YouTube, the radio, and so forth. And a lot of his teaching cuts against the rules and regulations that the Pharisees had developed over the centuries that helped keep them in positions of power. Essentially, Jesus’ teaching undermines the Pharisees authority. The Herodians perceive him as a political threat, especially as Jesus taught frequently about a coming Kingdom – the Kingdom of God as he called it – and as whispers circulated around that Jesus just might be the Jewish Messiah, which by this time was thought to be a political revolutionary who would free them from foreign rule.

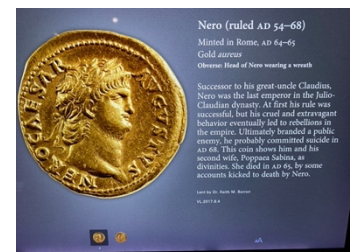
You put it all together and we get the religious folks linking up with the political folks to question Jesus and even try to trap him with this line of questioning: Should taxes be paid to Caesar or not? Of course, they butter him up first, with their compliments about his teaching, and so forth...it is easy to read a bit of sarcasm into that, but they probably tried to keep their poker face on and act like it’s a sincere question.

And so, the trap laid is this: If Jesus openly supported paying taxes to Caesar, the Pharisees could paint Him as disloyal to Jewish national interests, which would turn the crowds against Him. If Jesus opposed paying taxes to Caesar, the Herodians could accuse Him of sedition and subversion of the Roman Empire, which would provide a legal basis to have Him arrested. Either a “yes” or a “no” puts an end to Jesus’ ministry and movement. Either he loses

the people, or he loses the public platform. So, let's keep reading (**Mt. 22:18-19**).

So, right away Jesus sees through them: **“You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?” (verse 18)**. He sees *exactly* what's going on, and calls them out on it. I would have loved to be standing next to Jesus to see the looks on the faces of the guys who were questioning him. I have think that right then and there, they knew they were cooked. Unlike them buttering up Jesus, he comes back much more directly. He could have said, “That’s a really brilliant and tough question. I’ll have to give this some thought and prayer before I answer.” He could have done that, right? But no. It’s just, “You hypocrites, why are you trying to trap me?”

Then Jesus asks for a coin. Look: Right there is a clue about whether or not Jesus is greedy: He literally did not have a dollar on him. Kind of hard to accuse him of being greedy, it would seem. But we’ll get back to that in a minute. So, someone else has to bring him a denarius, which at this time was equivalent to a day’s wages. This last summer when we took our daughter, Brooke, down to Pepperdine, I was able to visit the Getty Villa in Malibu. It is the former residence of J. Paul Getty, where he collected all kinds of ancient artifacts, statues, and so forth, mostly from ancient Greece and Rome, and is sort of an extension to the Getty Museum in Los Angeles. And one of their displays is a collection of ancient coins, including this one right here that I took (**Photo**).



Now, this is not quite the same coin Jesus would have been handed. First, this one is from 54-68 A.D., and Jesus’ public ministry was in the early 30’s A.D. So, this has Emperor Nero’s head on it. Second, this is a *gold* coin and a denarius would have been silver. But the coin Jesus was handed would have looked a bit like this, nonetheless – shape, craftsmanship, etc. So, he’s handed this coin, and then he gives his answer. Who is Jesus going to please, and who is he going to upset? This is like “Tom Cruise/Mission Impossible” tension, you know? Let’s read **Matthew 22:20-22**.

Boom. **Jesus gives an answer that evades the trap, doesn't get him in trouble with either the Herodians *or* the Pharisees, and left them "amazed:" "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."** It's a drop the mic and exit stage left moment (the questioners do, in fact, leave!). The word there for "amazed" is "etha-u-masan" and it means "to marvel, be astonished, or in wonder." It implies more than just a mild surprise, but a deep reaction. In other words: they're dumfounded; they are speechless – like Mariners' fans reaction to missing the playoffs by a hair the last two seasons and then no significant changes to the team for this year. It's confounding...leaves you speechless.

So, in regards to this question of "Is Jesus greedy?" we get the tip of the iceberg to the answer right here: Not only did Jesus not have a single coin on him to illustrate his answer, but he tells them to pay their tax. He's not greedy at all. "Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

What to give to Caesar was defined by the Roman government. But how much belongs to God? Well, to be honest: **All of it.** All of your wealth, all of your possessions, all your stuff, belongs to God. Some of *you* are now perhaps speechless. Others of you are like, "So, Jesus *is* greedy!" Well, no. It's about honoring God with your finances. It's about not making an idol of our finances and our stuff. In fact, it's not just your money and stuff that belongs to God, but so does your time, your talents and abilities, your heart, mind, soul...everything you do and are belongs to God. The question really is: do you believe that and allow it to shape and guide you?

Discipleship to Jesus doesn't mean worship on Sunday for an hour or so and a dinnertime prayer a few nights a week. **Discipleship to Jesus is all of who we are submitted to Jesus – from the bank account to the calendar to our hearts and minds – because Jesus is Lord of our lives.** So, in a sense all our finances belong to God: but he lets us keep a lot of it for ourselves to be stewards of – 90%, in fact. The Biblical mandate for financial giving to the Lord is 10%. As for the other 90% (minus the taxes to Caesar): although it really also belongs to God, you have freedom in how it's used. You're the steward of it, and you can use it as the Spirit leads you...but ultimately it is all for God's glory. It is all under the Lordship of Jesus.

Ironically, the greedy ones in this passage are the Pharisees and the Herodians. Both groups want to maintain their power positions in society. They're greedy for their status, influence, titles, perks, and all the rest. And yet Jesus is the one often thought of as greedy. **This reputation of a “greedy Jesus,” unfortunately, mostly (entirely?) comes from Christians.** Pastors especially, have often appeared greedy. I don't know the hearts of any pastor other than my own, which is why I say they “appear” greedy. And it can be greed for money, or fame, or status, power, and so forth. So, there are pastors asking anyone who is listening to them to give more money, when these pastors have private jets, \$12-million dollar homes, drive Ferraris, dressed head to toe in Gucci, Prada, Rolex...It just all *looks* greedy, as they ask for more money from people. But as Christians, we're called to be Christ-like, and he didn't have a home, a horse (the Ferrari of the day!) or a donkey (more like a Ford, Chevy, Dodge, etc.), or even a denarius on him as we see today. Jesus is our model – not the Pharisees and Herodians who were greedy for all the perks of position and power. We are *Jesus*' disciples. Greed should have no place in our lives. But unfortunately, it happens sometimes, and when it does, it makes Jesus look greedy.

Now: **There is a basic principal of financially supporting those who lead God's people. But it's is not rooted in greed; it's rooted in Scripture.** It's for the purpose of freeing up faith leaders from doing other work to provide for their worldly needs, so they can prepare, and study, and dedicate themselves to preparing for worship, shepherding the flock, and pastoring the church. This predates Jesus by 1500 years or so, starting in Leviticus and Numbers and elsewhere in the OT, where various passage tell us that some of the offerings that people give is explicitly for the priests and their families¹. So, the roots are there, that the people of God financially support their leaders.

Jesus then upholds the tithe, affirming it in Matthew 23:23 when he says, **“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. *You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former*”** (Matthew

23:23). In other words: give your tithe, but that's not sufficient you need these other things: justice, mercy and faithfulness.

So, Jesus upholds financial giving, but actually at the same time kind of diminishes its importance compared to these other things like justice, mercy, and faithfulness which he says are “the more important matters.” Jesus most certainly is *not* greedy for your money. If he's greedy for something, it's the other stuff he lists here. He's not in this for his own personal gain or benefit. He *does* want us completely dedicated to him; But it's not because he's greedy for money. Rather, his desire for us to be 100% committed as his disciples financially and in every other aspect of life is for *our* benefit and for the benefit of *other people*...for the kingdom of God to grow and spread, and include more and more people.

So, greed has no place in Jesus' life, and nor should it in his disciples, either. He teaches this: “Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed” (Luke 12:15). Greed is a dividing wall between us and God, and between us and other people, and it comes in different forms: greed for money, stuff, power, position, status, and so forth. The antidote to greed is generosity. Generous people look out for the welfare of others, rather than themselves. And Jesus was generous – leaving the heavenly realms (“emptying himself” as Philippians 2 says), becoming human and giving his life in crucifixion. That's generous. And he calls us to take up our cross daily, and follow him: which means living as he lived. Being generous as he is generous. Crucifying our greed. As Paul writes, **“I have been crucified with Christ and it is no longer I who live but Christ who lives in me” (Galatians 2:20).** Any greed in us needs to be crucified, so more of Jesus can be living in us.

Let's not have lives marked by greed or even with the appearance of greed – we don't want to be hypocrites like the guys who came to Jesus. Instead, let's be generous as Jesus was generous. Let's give of ourselves, demonstrating the love, forgiveness, and generosity of Jesus to a world that is desperately in need of them, and desperately in need of Jesus. Let's pray...Amen.

¹ Leviticus 6:14-18, 26; 10:12-15; 27:30 speaks to the “tithe” [10%]; Numbers 18:20-21 is particularly clear, perhaps, about the priests and families being supported by tithes, plus there are others.