

1 Sermon, March 25, 2012 - revised

Texts: Mark 11:15-19, Mark 12:15-17

Title: "A Journey to Hope – Resources for the Journey"

1. The Pharisees were trying to trap Jesus with money.

The power people were lining up against Jesus. In this passage it tells us that some followers of Herod and some Pharisees got together to plot against Jesus.

This is an unlikely pairing. The Pharisees were concerned with the keeping of the ritual Law. Herod didn't pay much attention to the ritual law. Herod was pretty much interested in political power – in staying on top. The Pharisees political interests ran more to survival in a time when their country was occupied by foreign armies.

They were allies because of fear of Jesus. Together, they came to test Jesus. And they came up with a clever question: "Should a person pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

If Jesus said, "yes, pay taxes," Herod's followers would have won. Jesus was bowing to authority. And the Pharisees would have spread the word that Jesus was allying himself with the foreign oppressor.

If Jesus said, "don't pay taxes to Caesar," the Pharisees would have won, because Jesus was choosing a more ritually pure course. And the followers of Herod would have had him arrested for disloyalty to the state.

We know Jesus got out of this trap by telling them to pay to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's. Interestingly, he satisfied both Herod's followers and the Pharisees -- and the masses of people would have been impressed with his cleverness.

Jesus got out of this money trap.

And money can often be a trap.

People do dumb things with money. In fact, there is now an academic field called neuroeconomics, dedicated to studying how and why we behave certain ways with money.

Why do we sometimes spend beyond our means, why do we sometimes hoard it, why we think that saving \$50 on a \$100 purchase is more important than saving \$50 on a \$1,000 purchase.

2. What was so bad about the money changers and pigeon sellers?

Jesus thought that the whole system of selling sacrificial animals in the temple was a money trap. He objected to it for at least three reasons:

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a. They were doing it in a holy place: The temple was sacred, and it was to be dedicated to the worship of God, not to buying and selling.

b. They were cheating. It was a real racket. You pretty much had to buy your sacrificial animals in the temple, because the priests could reject a blemished animal, and priests were good at finding blemishes. Oops, here's a scar or a wart, or a mole! But if you bought your animal in the temple, it was guaranteed to be unblemished.

And in order to buy your animal in the temple, you couldn't use street money. No, Roman coinage was considered an abomination. After all, it had the image of Caesar on it. Caesar considered himself a God, but there was only one God, who couldn't be seen.

So you had to go and change your money for temple money, and the exchange rate always favored the money changers.

It was a monopoly with several layers to it, all designed to make money for the ones in charge of the temple.

c. The system burdened those who could least afford it. Imagine you have just had a child; you need to bring your child to the temple and offer a sacrifice. If you don't, your child may not be blessed. The same thing with many other events of life: the first harvest of the year, the Passover, the new year, when you have committed some sin, when you are praying for healing.

All of these things burdened the average Judean of the time. Most of them could not afford it all, so they made do with perhaps the "most important" of the occasions for sacrifice.

But if you skipped some of the rituals, you would be labeled as a sinner. And you didn't want that!

The system was unfair enough that when Jesus overturned the tables of the moneychangers, he had the tacit support of the crowds. The crowds were probably cheering him on.

3. It was a manipulative system:

The whole sacrificial system was a manipulative system. It first tried to convince you that you really need these two unblemished pigeons. So it created a market by which the priests could benefit.

The priests also created a sense of urgency about it: you need this lamb *now* – to atone for your sin.

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4. What else might have gone on?

But let's not blame it all on the priests and merchants. It's a mental game that we all participate in to some extent.

Suppose you were to come in to the temple and you see a number of stands offering sacrificial animals. The first merchant you come to has prices that are higher than anybody else's. You go on to the next merchant and feel much better about his lower price, even if it is higher than anywhere outside the temple. Even if the first merchant is getting kickbacks from the other merchants to keep his prices high in comparison.

e. Or suppose one of the merchants were to offer you a free dove with each lamb. Might that make you feel better about the lamb?

Even if you know in your heart of hearts that nothing is truly free except the grace of God, you can get taken in by the lure of something for nothing. It seems too good to be true, and it is.

f. What if there had been trinkets for sale in the temple? There probably were. Would you have bought some souvenir temple money or lucky lamb bones for your kids or grandkids?

g. What if there had been lenders just outside the temple who would loan you the money to buy sacrificial animals? What if they offered you a really good interest rate? Would you bite?

h. Or suppose a merchant offered to supersize your goat or pigeon? Would you have upgraded to the next level?

5. What kind of snares are there on the journey?

Today, we don't have a religious establishment that makes money with that brazenness, with that kind of monopoly. But we have many of the same psychological pressures to spend money.

Often we respond to the reward of instant gratification. That's why car dealerships handle loans at good rates. That's why credit card can get us into so much trouble.

We also can get stuck by thinking that we've already put so much into this project, or fund or stock or whatever, that we want to get *something* out of it. But often pulling out is just what we need to do.

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One of the most difficult traps is the "just this once" trap. We'll just do it this once. But once we've done it, twice is easier.

6. What are the resources that help us avoid the snares?

Jesus talked a lot about money because it is easy to make mistakes with money.

On our journey of faith, how do we respond to the money traps?

Well, clearly the most significant tool to help us is prayer, because prayer has the power to change our hearts. But what to pray for?

Well, we can ask God to show us what is Caesar's, and what is God's! Jesus said to give to the government what is the government's, and give to God what is God's. Think about it. What really is God's? The quick answer is that everything is God's – but just saying that everything is God's doesn't help us make good decisions.

Jesus knew that there are some things that are Caesar's. There are some things that we have to spend money on that don't advance God's cause. Gasoline for the car is necessary to get us places, but it's hard to say that I'm glorifying God at the pump. We need to spend money on clothing if we are to live in a civilized society, but the Kingdom of God doesn't depend upon what kind of clothing we wear.

Jesus also knew that there are some things that are *especially* God's. These are things that help us honor God or God's creation.

I want to challenge you to pray about what you buy, and what you do. Ask God if this or that is really important to God. Does it really matter to God's kingdom?

Ten years from now, will I have been better for it? Will the world have been better for it? Will it have glorified God?

Will this thing promote love and peace and hope?

Jesus gave us the challenge to figure out which things are Caesar's, and which are God's. Let's take up the challenge in our living. Amen.

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Mark 11:15-19

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

15 After Jesus and his disciples reached Jerusalem, he went into the temple and began chasing out everyone who was selling and buying. He turned over the tables of the moneychangers and the benches of those who were selling doves. 16 Jesus would not let anyone carry things through the temple. 17 Then he taught the people and said, "The Scriptures say, 'My house should be called a place of worship for all nations.' But you have made it a place where robbers hide!"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the Law of Moses heard what Jesus said, and they started looking for a way to kill him. They were afraid of him, because the crowds were completely amazed at his teaching.

19 That evening, Jesus and the disciples went outside the city.

Mark 11:15-19

New International Version (NIV)

15 On reaching Jerusalem, Jesus entered the temple courts and began driving out those who were buying and selling there. He overturned the tables of the money changers and the benches of those selling doves, 16 and would not allow anyone to carry merchandise through the temple courts. 17 And as he taught them, he said, "Is it not written: 'My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations'[a]? But you have made it 'a den of robbers.'[b]"

18 The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.

19 When evening came, Jesus and his disciples[c] went out of the city.

Mark 12:13-17

New International Version (NIV)

13 Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. **14** They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. Is it right to pay the imperial tax[a] to Caesar or not? **15** Should we pay or shouldn't we?"

But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked. "Bring me a denarius and let me look at it." **16** They brought the coin, and he asked them, "Whose image is this? And whose inscription?"

"Caesar's," they replied.

17 Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's."

And they were amazed at him.

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Mark 12:13-17

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

13The Pharisees got together with Herod's followers. [**a**] Then they sent some men to trick Jesus into saying something wrong. **14**They went to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are honest. You treat everyone with the same respect, no matter who they are. And you teach the truth about what God wants people to do. Tell us, should we pay taxes to the Emperor or not?"

15Jesus knew what they were up to, and he said, "Why are you trying to test me? Show me a coin!"

16They brought him a silver coin, and he asked, "Whose picture and name are on it?"

"The Emperor's," they answered.

17Then Jesus told them, "Give the Emperor what belongs to him and give God what belongs to God." The men were amazed at Jesus.

. Maybe one of the sellers had false set of weights. This is something spoken of in Proverbs 11:1 – "A false balance is an abomination to the LORD, but an accurate weight is his delight."