

GoatCoins and BarleyCoins October 22, 2023

Imagine you are a farmer living almost 3000 years ago. You live 100 miles away from Jerusalem. Once a year, for Passover, you make a trip to Jerusalem to the Temple. You are, of course, obligated to make a sacrifice at the Temple.

So every year, you choose a goat from one of your herds. You pack food and clothing for yourself for the journey, and you bring a big bag of feed for the goat. You then walk for 7 days, schlepping all these belongings and the goat itself, until you get to Jerusalem. You make the sacrifice, and you make the long walk home.

One year, as you're getting ready, you think, "Surely, there must be a better way to do this. Surely, I don't have to take this particular goat and its food with me all the way to Jerusalem."

And here is where money enters the scene. The first money was invented as a proxy, a stand-in, for sacrifices. So instead of taking your goat all the way up to the temple, you sell your goat in your hometown, and you receive 1 goat-coin. Good for 1 goat.

You carry the coin to the temple (which is much easier than dragging a goat and its food). When you arrive at the temple, you hand your goat-coin to a goat vendor, and you receive a local Jerusalem goat to take to the altar. Easy peasy.

That is the first written record of money that we have. Five thousand years ago, money was measured in livestock and in crops. There was the practice of bartering for goods, but no money at that point. Around 3000 BC, the Mesopotamians started to use stand-ins for animals and crops, and one of those stand-ins was the metal coin. The earliest coin we know of was called a shekel (which is mentioned in the Bible); one shekel was equal to a specific weight of barley. One barley-coin, similar to a goat-coin. (Those sound like new cryptocurrencies, don't they?)

So a coin (and money itself) is a substitute, a physical proxy, for real goods. You start with a goat; you end with a goat. Money is the medium.

We have a similar system today, just with fewer goats and sacks of barley. Now instead of trading your goat for a goat-coin, you give a day of your life, you work 8 hours at your job. And in return, you get a stack of dollar bills (or some numbers in your bank account) to use as you will. You might take 4 of those hours and buy groceries with them, and the other 4 you pay your electric bill with. Your time and your mental and physical effort are turned into food and electricity, with money being the medium.

Note that the dollar bills, the coins themselves aren't worth anything; they are valuable because of what they represent – a sack of barley, a meal, a set of clothes, an hour of light and heat. A \$100-bill isn't worth that much because the paper it's printed on is super fancy. It's worth that because we as a country have agreed that it's worth that much.

It's also worth remembering that if you look at any paper money printed in the US, you will see that it says at the top "Federal Reserve Note." That piece of paper belongs to the government (which is why there are laws that you can't deface or destroy it). Years ago (before 1971), you could take that Federal Reserve Note to a bank, turn in that note, and get gold for it. That paper was a slip issued by the government and belonged to the government, a voucher that sound that had credit of \$1.

I share all this because (1) I do think it's interesting, but more importantly, because (2) this is helpful background for Jesus' latest verbal antics. Again we have religious authorities trying to trap Jesus. They flatter him and then ask him a question: "Should we pay taxes?"

The statement behind that question? "We don't like you, and we want to give a wrong answer." And there is no right answer. If Jesus says, "Yes, you should pay taxes," then the whole Jewish crowd (led by the Pharisees) will boo him and write him off as a puppet of Rome. If Jesus says, "No, you shouldn't pay taxes to the oppressive Roman occupiers," then the Herodians would run to the Roman soldiers, who would arrest Jesus for sedition or treason.

Instead, Jesus gives a very tactful answer. He asks for a coin, and someone pulls out a Roman-issued coin (which is work 1 days' work, as it happens). Jesus gives this great line, "Give to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and give to God the things that are God's."

In saying this, Jesus not only sidesteps their trap, but he gives a profound lesson. That coin has the face of Caesar on it. It belongs to Caesar. What has the face of God on it? Everything. All creation. You and me. The Pharisees, the Herodians, the disciples, the tax collectors, the lepers. The Temple, the trees, the grass, the clouds. All these things were created by God and belong to God.

If the Roman emperor wants to claim this coin, that's fine. That coin does belong to the Roman empire. Just like our dollar bill belongs to the US government. That coin, that bill, are nothing more than social contracts. In and of themselves, they are worthless. But what is behind those coins - the goats, the barley, the hours of our lives, the food we share, the homes we live in... God has created it all. It all belongs to God.

So in these couple sentences that Jesus gives,

- he avoids getting trapped
- he gives a little jibe at the Romans for owning nothing but some worthless coins
- and he reminds us that God created and owns everything.

Money is just shorthand. Money is a medium, the avenue, a translation from one creation of God to another.

Now this week begins the Stewardship Campaign here at St. Gabriel's. It's a time when we talk a lot about money. You'll receive a letter this week, inviting you to support St. Gabriel's in 2024 by giving financially and by sharing your talents with the church, which many of you already do.

One way of thinking about giving to the church is using goat-coin or barley-coin. Would you consider giving a couple hours of your work-life to support the ministry of St. Gabe's? Let's say 4 hours out of the 40 that you (hopefully) work. An even 10%.

You can give that in monetary form to the church, which goes toward ministry or to the staff who helps lead that ministry. Or you give a few hours of your life to make soup or distribute dinners or sing to praise God or plant flowers out front or set up the altar for this miracle we call the Eucharist. There are lots of options.

As Jesus reminds us, all of that belongs to God. The hour of work, and the ministry done with the money earned. The flowers. The singing. All of that is of God. Money is the pipeline, the road through which work is done.

Finally, let me remind you of something that I believe strongly. You have the Holy Spirit within you. That is entirely separate from the question of money. Maybe you can give money, and maybe you can't.

- If you contribute thousands of dollars to church, to your community, to causes, you are welcome here. This is your home. You belong.
- If you who don't have a dollar to spare, live paycheck to paycheck: you are welcome here. This is your home. You belong.

You are a creation of God. You belong to God. And as Jesus reminds us today, you bear the image of God yourself.

Amen.

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