

You Are Worth More Than A Penny
Matthew 10:24—39

Does anyone happen to know how much two sparrows are going for these days? With inflation, I'm thinking, it's more than a penny. And speaking of the penny, since this officially defunct coin now costs more to make than it's worth, I propose that we round things off with the following statement: You and I live and breathe and will take our last breath, in a world where nearly everything has been monetized, where we're being charged as we speak, where we can place a bet on whether Kim Kardashian will sneeze or whether the Strait of Hormuz will be open or close... and **WHERE PEOPLE ARE VALUED BASED UPON THE FORCES OF THE MARKET.** People will pay. The ticket-holders for the Oklahoma Thunder will pay, as Chet Holmgren (who left Gonzaga after his freshman year) is valued at \$45 million per year; and maybe next year they'll have to renegotiate his contract. You see what I'm saying? I'm trying to say something that Jesus was saying as he prepared his followers for their mission—which is—the sacrifices made in the marketplace are not the same as those you and I are called to make:

“Are not two sparrows sold for a penny? Yet not one of them will fall to the ground apart from your Father. And even the hairs on your head are all counted. So do not be afraid; you are of more value than many sparrows.”

You see, the reason for the sparrow-reference is fascinating. Consider the background of Leviticus 14 and the practice of sacrificing small, clean birds for the purpose of praying to God and asking God for healing. Over the centuries the Hebrew people did this by simply snagging a bird or two from the hedgerows in the wilderness. But, at the time of Jesus' ministry, the Roman Empire had intruded on the economic situation, and for a poor Jewish peasant to acquire the sparrows necessary for the ritual, it was going to cost an *assarian*.

Like our contemporary penny, the *assarian* was the lowest form of currency in circulation among the occupied villages and cities of first century Judea; and what's important for us to understand is that, embossed on the coin, would have been the image of the emperor—almost as if to say, *if you want to make a purchase of two sparrows to worship Yahweh, the God of Israel, you're going to have to go through Caesar.* And, of course, that's a little disheartening. It's sort of like how I was feeling the other day listening to a good ol' Neil Diamond song, Just listen: "*Money talks/ But it don't sing and dance and it don't walk/ Long as I can have you here with me/ I'd much rather be forever in blue jeans.*" And that would have been great in 1979, when that song came out, but given that today people spend between \$85 to a hundred dollars on a pair of designer blue jeans—and for a designer rip in the fabric of those jeans, 'FOREVER' seems pretty costly. Can I afford to be that hip? Maybe that's the wrong question.

Maybe the question is—CAN I AFFORD to calculate my self-worth or that of anyone else based upon how fashionable, how athletic, how physically-fit, how clever, how affluent or how pious? Can we afford that? The allusion Jesus makes in Matthew 10:29 is to the sacrifices poor peasants will make, and how they'll have to compromise with the Roman Empire's economy to make them. And yet, can God's attention to his people be bought and sold like that? Is divine healing something we need to bid on? The disciples here can take a little comfort in that they're no longer required to sacrifice sparrows anymore; but they *are* being asked to sacrifice their lives. (Are we?) They are being asked to sacrifice their ego-enhancement strategies for fitting in or getting ahead. (Are we?)—"**Those who find their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake will find it.**"

And *why* are we sacrificing? We're sacrificing because we're beginning to trust in God as a Loving Father who sees what no else can see. And we're sacrificing for everyone who is sadly trying to prove their value (before God, before parents, before peers or in the marketplace)—because we know they're going to be let down. Jesus claims a Loving Father sees even those sparrows that fall to the ground and are not therefore officially sacrificed for the religious authorities to officially see. GOD SEES—and that's enough. And if a Loving Father is so present with those birds, how much more will he be present with us! Do we have any idea? It's beyond calculation. A Loving Father takes careful inventory of the number of hairs on our heads; and so if we happen to lose a follicle or two because of the stress and the strain of serving and sacrificing, there is *Someone* who is counting.

And yet, it won't be easy. The vast majority of people within the institution of church are still prone to prone to get sucked back into the marketplace; and that majority who are buying and selling their religious goods and services aren't going to appreciate the ways Jesus is calling them to sacrifice. Jesus is trash-talked. Would you like to be trash-talked too? He's called **'Beelzebul.'** According to anybody who is *anybody*, he's dangerously evil. And why? Is it because he challenges the way we value things and people—ourselves. A university professor in Ohio wanted to teach Vacation Bible School, but when the children weren't showing him respect like he was used to, he pulled out some crisp dollar bills and tried to entice the kids to memorize Bible verse in exchange for cash. When Sheryl and I were helping to start our new church in Philadelphia, someone got the idea of giving away a really expensive set of pots and pans *'That'll be a surefire way to bring them in...'*

But you see? It doesn't take long before valuing the gospel with that kind of gimmick gets old. And we'll pay for it. We'll pay for it with our souls, if not our bodies. I remember, back in a philosophy class I was teaching, the students read a chapter on the ethics of self-driving cars. Apparently, one of the snags in the technology at the time was the ability of the Artificial Intelligence to tell the difference between a squirrel, a deer, a sparrow, someone's pet cat or a stray dog... *and* the honest-to-goodness human pedestrian crossing the street. You see, if the car (without a driver) had to determine whether or not to swerve and miss one of the animals (or that unfortunate human being) it would have to make a judgment as to the relative worth of each individual creature. Are you with me? The A.I. car might not change course if a sparrow were to be pecking at some seed in the road; and yet a person would be a different story. Right? But now, let's put this in the context of our lives in Christ. Every once in a while, as we "**acknowledge**" [verse 32] that God came in the form of a Savior who was *run over* by the Roman Empire, it's not A.I. that sees that sacrifice. It's a Loving Father!

Now, I'm not suggesting that we can or should avoid money or the traffic surrounding money altogether. There's a great story in Matthew 22, of course, in which the Pharisees press Jesus with a question of paying taxes to Rome. He then asks them to provide him with a denarius, which is worth a lot more than a penny. He says, "**Whose head is this and whose title?**" And when the Pharisees reply that it's the emperor's, Jesus delivers the classic line: "**Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's.**" You see, the point is very nuanced: in following Jesus we're being challenged to walk a fine line, to offer an alternative to the rat race while standing very close to the rats.

Of course, everyone here—everyone committed to the life and ministry of this congregation—needs to acknowledge that we are paying people’s salaries. I am compensated monetarily; and your future pastor will be compensated. We don’t need to be shy about that. But take a look at how the first missionaries in Christ handled the situation. Jesus and his disciples had benefactors who sacrificed—and here’s *Mary Magdalene, Johanna, the wife of the manager of Herod’s household and Suzanna*—all of whom devoted their financial resources. And likewise the Apostle Paul finds support from Lydia, who made her money selling purple cloth. And then there’s Phoebe who sacrifices for the sake of the church in Rome... The mission of the church includes money; but it never is intended to be held captive to the values of the marketplace or to make the marketability of a product the main thing. The mystery of God is not our product. As good as we are at praying and singing—and as good as your future pastor will be at preaching and teaching—Northwood Presbyterian Church is not in the business of producing the *God-Experience*.

In fact, those who are in the business of producing ‘*God*’ are always in for a big surprise. A shock. Check out what happened in Ephesus, when the Apostle Paul is milling about the city, in conversation with the affluent citizens who make a living there:

“About that time no little disturbance broke out concerning the Way. A man named Demetrius, a silversmith who made silver shrines to Artemis, brought no little business to the artisans. These he gathered together with the workers of the same trade and said, ‘Men, you know that we get our wealth from this business. You also see and hear that not only in Ephesus, but almost the whole of Asia this Paul has persuaded and drawn away a considerable number of people by saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is a danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute but also that the temple of the great goddess Artemis will be scorned, and she will be deprived of her majesty that brought all Asia and the world to worship her...’

Again, this passage isn't meant to illustrate the evil of money per se, but rather the sacrifices we're being invited to make on behalf of a Living and Loving Father—the God we do not produce, manufacture or market. And if we take that seriously like the Apostle Paul took it seriously there's going to be trouble, which is part of the sacrifice. ***“Do not think that I have come to bring peace to the earth; I have not come to bring peace but a sword”***—and that sword in verse 34 constitutes this amazing metaphor. It's not a literal sword taken up against the Roman Empire or its complicit religious powerbrokers. The *sword* is a *sword* that cuts us free from the rat race, that slices open the consumer-mentality by saying we don't have to buy our way into success and love. The *sword* says, *'I am enough! I have worth despite what others may say about me—even my own family. Even my own father. Even my own mother. Even a mother-in-law.'* Imagine, for example, the sadness of Zebedee in Mark 1:20. Jesus calls and immediately his sons leave their father with the hired men in the boat. The boat is his business and now that family business is in jeopardy.

William Willimon, when he was the chaplain at Duke University, had a parent come into his office with an angry expression on his face. He was extremely upset because he had spent a lot of money on tuition and getting his daughter through the four years of college at a prestigious school; and yet, instead of going to Wall Street to work in a *Fortune 500* company, this daughter chose to become a teacher in one of the poorest towns in West Virginia. And when Willimon asked what any of that had to do with him, the father shouted in his face: *'it's because of the crap you were preaching in chapel about following Jesus and sacrificing your life!'*