

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, oh Lord, our redeemer. Amen. Do not be ashamed of your mistakes. There's some good advice. Why not? Well, because sometimes mistakes have glorious outcomes. A naval engineer named Richard Jones knows. He set out to invent a gadget that would measure the power being used by battleships. He failed, and instead ended up accidentally inventing the Slinky. And where would we be without the Slinky? Uh, generations of kids would be sitting on the landing, bored, longing to make a giant flexible spring walk down the stairs if only they had one. Then there's Patsy Sherman. She was a chemist for 3M. In her Minnesota lab, she had the g- high goal of creating a rubber material that would withstand exposure to jet fuel. Useful, I guess. But while busy inventing, she accidentally dropped the rubbery substance on her shoe. Then, over the next few weeks, she noticed that while the rest of her shoe became dirty and stained, that one spot where her invention had landed remained bright and clean. Patsy had accidentally invented Scotchgard In 1928, Sir Alexander Fleming went on vacation, forgetting to wash a dirty Petri dish, and came back two weeks later to find he'd discovered penicillin.

You see, you can even get a knighthood if your mistake is big enough And finally, there are the unknown workers at the Denver Mint, where they make coins. In 2004, they created the Wisconsin quarter. A batch of them, however, contained an error. If you've ever seen a Wisconsin quarter, or never seen it, let me tell you that it depicts a piece of cheese and a cow, like you didn't see that coming And also an ear of corn bursting from a husk. But on this particular batch of coins, there is a little mark on the side of the husk that appears to be an ex-relief. Hardly a mistake worthy of starting this sermon with, you might think, except that if you own one of these Wisconsin quarters, your fortune is more than twenty-five cents. I asked AI what these coins are worth to collectors, and it told me six thousand dollars. Now, I know you want to rummage through your pockets and your purses, uh, to see if you have a Wisconsin quarter with the error, but please control yourself until the offering Keep that Wisconsin quarter at the back of your mind as we enter the world of coins and the images they bear, and Jesus' audacious challenge to religious leaders in today's gospel lesson, "Give to the emperor what is the emperor's and give to God what is God's." Money, says Economics 101, isn't a real thing. It's just a symbol, a

neat way for someone to turn their hard work into the goods they need to sustain their life. It sure beats being paid in chickens and turnips. But for something that isn't really real, money is mighty powerful. Powerful and talkative. Money has the gift of the gab. It never shuts up. It's your own personal Hans Christian Andersen, telling grand stories, spinning wondrous narratives, and some of them are true. You did a hard day's work. You deserve a good meal in a warm home with a solid roof over your head. Yes. But sometimes those tales are lies. You are such an important person because of your salary, much better than people who earn less than you. Money proclaims your values. It howls your priorities. It exposes your soul. Money is the bullhorn that bellows your true ideals from the street corner of your life. Not bad for something that isn't really real.

"Money doesn't talk, it swears," said Bob Dylan, and it boasts, insults, accuses, oppresses, enslaves, and kills. For the Pharisees in today's gospel lesson, it was a weapon. A simple coin became the spokesperson for their jealousy, a mouthpiece for their malice. It was a rat trap. "Hey, Jesus, should we pay taxes to the Romans or not?" As a gotcha question, this was up there with asking an election candidate to name the Prime Minister of

Luxembourg. The candidate either looks ignorant and foolish or looks like an egghead who can't connect with normal people. There was nothing Jesus could say that would save him from humiliation at best or treason at worst. You see, this coin had blood on its hands and lies on its lips. This coin was despised. The tax it paid provided the salary for the Roman soldier who stood on the street sneering at citizens, reminding them of their national shame. Yes, money talks, and this tax coin cursed and mocked and ridiculed. What's more, it was an unjust tax. The sum levied was exactly the same for everyone, regardless of their wealth. Money talks, and this tax coin poked fun at the poor and flattered the rich. But as well as lying, cheating, and murdering, this coin blasphemed. It bore the image of the Roman Emperor Tiberius with the inscription, "Tiberius Caesar, son of the divine Augustus." If you are a devout person trying to honor the second commandment, the one forbidding graven images, then this coin is almost untouchable. Money talks, and this tax coin belittled God's people, insulted God's name. So back to that nasty little gotcha question. If Jesus answers, "Yes, people should pay the Roman tax," the crowd will be livid, maybe violently so. He may not even get out of here alive. The other

answer is even worse. To say, "No, people should not pay the tax," was treason, insurrection, and a brutal execution Good luck tossing that coin, Jesus. Heads you lose, tails you lose. By the way, AI tells me that the Prime Minister of Luxembourg is Luc Frieden, but then you all knew that anyway Caesar, for the Pharisees, was a real man. Tiberius, a fool, a blasphemer, a human soul disfigured by self-worship. But for Jesus, Caesar was bigger than one man at the head of a brutal regime. Caesar was a symbol for all human authority, an alias for the systems, the structures, the matrix of human power. You know Caesar. You rub shoulders with Caesar. You look Caesar in the face every day. His coin is domination. His currency is control. Whenever a person is used up and spat out for profit, you see Caesar's handiwork. Whenever human dignity is crushed by slavery, trafficking, or exploitation, you hear Caesar's goose step. Whenever a child is abused, a woman overpowered, a man disposed of, a family starved, an innocent imprisoned, a community destroyed, a village flattened, Caesar's image is emblazoned across the carnage Caesar is not just the Roman emperor, but every system, industry, or project that dehumanizes, destroys, or devastates God's pinnacle of creation, the apex of his imagination, the

peak of his grand and glorious design, human beings. You, me, and every man, woman, and child, however touched by disability, however disfigured by sin, however much their own actions or the actions of agents outside their control have tried to eradicate their dignity. The Bible translation we use, uh, has Jesus asking, "Whose head is on this coin?" Uh, but that isn't the best translation. Uh, the Greek word we read as head is *icon*, which means, you know, *icon*, an image. The coin bore the image of Caesar. Now we're getting somewhere, so work with me here. Where else do you see the image of a governor, the image of a high authority, the image of a god? In the mirror, that's where. You are made in the image of God, says Genesis. God's likeness is stamped on you in the same way a cow's is stamped on the Wisconsin quarter. Everywhere you go, and in every interaction you have, you are bearing the image of God. So let's live like it. Do you see what Jesus is doing? He's taking that gotcha question that was suicidal to answer because of the politics of taxation, and he turns it into a bigger, more important question. In effect, he says, "It's not about coins of metal, but coins of flesh. Not the tokens in your pocket, but the life that you live. Your life bears God's hallmark, his stamp of approval, his badge of

ownership. So how are you using it? Who are you giving it to? All metaphors are imperfect, and, uh, this coin bearing the image of God lets us down because the image on a coin is merely stamped on the surface, and we human beings are not just stamped with God's image on the surface. So let me tell you about British seaside rock. It's not actually rock, but candy. It's hard, stick-shaped, and made of boiled sugar, and it's been a staple of UK seaside holidays since Queen Victoria. A stick of rock is about an inch in diameter and ten inches long. It's usually pink, and it comes wrapped in cellophane, and it has a mint flavor. But here's why humans are like a stick of rock. The name of the seaside resort, you know, Brighton, Blackpool, is printed in the middle of the, the rock, and it runs right the way through the entire stick. So no matter where you break it or bite it, it still says Blackpool or Brighton in the center. We bear the image of God right through to our core. It doesn't matter where you snap a human, God's image is present and visible, not just on the surface. I wish I had a stick of rock I could actually show you, but I haven't, so you'll have to find one online. This lesson from Jesus is a challenge to give ourselves to God, and when we do, God will put us into circulation. We are his currency. Let the world see his

image on you. This is the glory of being human, being made in the image of our creator, and it swells our hearts. It compels us to worship and inspires us to live as God's currency. But coins that sit in the darkness of a pocket are useless. It's only when they escape the gloomy prison of frugality that they are useful. Unless we, God's coins, are in circulation, then we deprive our city and neighborhoods of a vision of God. We are the bearers of his image. Dare we put ourselves in circulation? People will always follow the money. When they see us being God's coins, bearing his likeness, sharing his kindness, they will follow the one whose image we bear. They will follow you to the Father. They will follow you to the throne of grace. They will even follow you into this building. We give him all we are and all we have, and when we give ourselves, we give the only legal currency in the Kingdom of Heaven. Amen.