



My Dear Brothers and Sisters,

In the Gospel today, the Pharisees plot against Jesus with the Herodians. While this may not seem like much of a big deal, but these were two opposing groups. The Pharisees were a sect of Judaism that promoted a strict adherence to the Law of Moses, as well as protecting the Law with many other practices. They were very faithful to Israel and did not want the Romans ruling them. The Herodians were people who worked for Herod, a ruler established by the Roman Government. Because of their contact with the *goim* – the Gentiles (aka—anyone not Jewish) – the Pharisees would have seen the Herodians as unclean. Because the Herodians wanted a ruler other than a Davidic king (the descendants of Herod), the Pharisees saw them as traitors.

Yet these two groups join together to come against Jesus. Enemies united by a common enemy.

The Pharisees send their disciples to Jesus to place before Him a question that will get Him in trouble: to pay the census tax to Caesar or not. If Jesus says to pay the census tax, they would see Him as betraying the people of Israel and as rejecting the claim as Messiah (since the common belief was that the Messiah would rid the people of Israel of the bondage of other nations). If Jesus says not to pay the tax, then the Herodians will report Him to the Romans as instigating dissidence.

Jesus, as always, answers the unanswerable with ease. First, He recognizes that the flattery they use is merely a guise, and that they are not truly seeking an answer to the question, but testing Him. How often in our world do we come against malice and spite instead of honesty and integrity? There are people (we probably all know them personally) who delight in being able to trick people, dupe them, and take advantage of them. Jesus sees through this and calls them out.

Then He answers the question with a question: "Whose image is this and whose inscription?" (Matthew 22:20). They tell Jesus that it is Caesar's image, and so Jesus points out that the money, then, belongs to him. "Repay to Caesar what belongs to Caesar" (Mt. 22:21). He says that it is Caesar's, so why, if you're worried about being made ritually unclean, do you have Gentile money on you?

The key point Jesus makes is then to repay "to God what belongs to God" (*ibid.*). What belongs to God? Everything. He made everything that is. What bears the image and inscription of God? We do.

There's a story that anti-theist scientists tell God that they don't need Him, since they can do everything He does. They challenge God to a contest, and God says, "We'll make a human being... but doing it the old fashioned way: out of dirt." The scientists say, "No, problem. We'll just take this dirt..." God interrupts, "Get your own dirt!" Implying that, of course, He made everything out of nothing, something we cannot do.

Everything we have comes from God. Even our ability to earn money, our intelligence, our talents, all come from God (though we may have cultivated them). Everything we have belongs to God. We are but stewards. Even our very selves are gift... since none of us wills ourselves into being.

As I said a couple weeks ago, God made us in His image and likeness, and so we must respect the sacred dignity of each person. In how we treat even ourselves, we must remember that we are not our own, but we belong to Him (in love). May we always remember this stewardship and care for ourselves – not as our own masters that can do anything we want – but as stewards of a gift that will return to God for an accounting.