

*In the name of God, who makes us, loves us, and keeps us. AMEN*

Matthew describes a strange coalition there in the Jerusalem Temple that day, Pharisees and Herodians. He describes an unusual teamwork between these two groups who would normally be suspicious of each other, who would usually avoid being on the same page, let alone the same stage. But they have combined strategies to confront a common threat, namely Jesus the unauthorized rabbi who claims to be the Son of God, the long-expected Messiah. It is Tuesday, Tuesday in what we call Holy Week. After teaching and healing in the outskirts, in provincial towns and rural backwaters, Jesus has come to the city, to the metropolis of Jerusalem, to the national Temple itself. Riding a wave of public popularity, he has even brought his message inside the Temple walls, and there stands his ground that day, teaching in parables and confounding those who would normally control that very space. And they aren't happy about it.

Now, the Pharisees, you may remember, are the self-appointed select of the Jewish faith community. They present themselves as pious defenders of the historical commandments, tirelessly policing Jewish thought and behavior. They believe they are the keepers of great spiritual secrets, the defenders of the faith, the champions of the order of things the way God Almighty has appointed through history and judgment, the elect and elite when it comes to religion. They, in their hearts, defy the Roman oppression. They stand firmly, though generally silently, against the foreign rule by the Roman legions and bureaucrats who have conquered their city. Their insincere silence and compliance have prevented the sack of the Temple, so far. The Herodians are also Jewish, but only nominally so, and they are, in fact, active supporters of the Roman suppression, for they have carved out their own comfortable life within it. True, they don't always have the same agenda as their Roman overlords, but the Herod family does quite well during these times, thank you, and have been permitted a certain level of power and independence.

I suppose one might say that it is a credit to Jesus' popular influence among the crowds that two such different groups have joined forces to confront him that day, but this isn't just some trivial squabble over who has the better claim to be teaching in the Temple; it is rather a deep controversy about faith and the intentions of God. Is allegiance to the occupying Romans permissible? Is it best to go along to get along? Is God offended that the message of the Jewish prophets has been confined and diluted? Does this itinerant, self-proclaimed Messiah have anything to say about it? Is he trying to start a revolution? Will he have enough influence to upset the apple-cart and put everyone in jeopardy? How can we get him to just shut up, to go back to Galilee and leave us alone? But despite all efforts to silence and discredit him, Jesus is intent on his mission of salvation, on his ministry of forgiveness and spiritual renewal. He is driven by his calling and just won't let go. And his sincere enthusiasm is contagious among the people whose lives have been dominated by the pretensions of the religious and civic elite, represented by Matthew as the Pharisees and the Herodians.

They combine forces to entrap Jesus with his own teaching. They cast a net to ensnare him, first by phony flattery and then by impossible interrogative. "Oh, Teacher," they say, "we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." We think you're the best thing since sliced bread, and we hang on your every word! So, please share your wisdom with us and help us figure out whether or not it is

lawful and appropriate to pay taxes to the emperor. For, after all, the taxes seem oppressive and unfair, and don't seem to be in line with our historical religious teachings. Oh, tell us, wise one, what are we to do? Not one to be so easily fooled, Jesus sees through their attempt to ensnare and triangulate him, and comes up with an ingenious response, doesn't he?! It has become a legendary response, really, one which has provoked interest and curiosity and thought down through the ages since. His offhand teaching technique here has caused millions to think more about God's kingdom and how it might interface with their earthly societies.

Jesus asks to be shown a coin with which the tax is paid. Interesting, isn't it, that Jesus himself doesn't have any pocket change of his own. Instead, someone hands him a denarius. If it were a current coin from those days, it would have included a bust of Tiberius, the Roman emperor, and an inscription that he was the son of the divine Augustus. After the death of Augustus, Roman belief had elevated him to the position of a god; so Tiberius named himself the son of a god. This coin, then, or one like it, would have been blasphemous to a devout Jew. It would have been idolatry to actually carry one around in your pocket. And if the Pharisee, or even one of the nominally Jewish Herodians had produced such a coin from their own pockets, a coin meant for tribute to a false god, then Jesus was correct to call them hypocrites. Worse yet, such a coin would be evidence of collusion with the irreverent Roman occupation. And that such a coin was even in the Holy Temple in the first place would have been, according to the laws of Moses, utterly sinful.

Nevertheless, such a coin is handed to Jesus, and as he studies it, looking it over front and back, he ponders how to answer their clever question. Should we pay tribute to the Romans by paying this tax? And then he asks, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" When they tell him that it is the image of the emperor who call himself the son of a god, he famously and flippantly says, 'Yeah, go ahead and give this back to the emperor, for it was made in his image. He had it minted with his image so everyone would know it belonged to him.' Now, where have you heard the word image in our Biblical texts? The scriptural assertion is that we have been made in God's image, and by extrapolation, that God continues to create us in that same image. So, when Jesus teaches that we should give the things which are God's back to God, he is including us, for having been made in God's image is both a joy and a responsibility. God makes us, loves us, and keeps us, and we bear witness to that gift in every economy of our lives. All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee.

True, our modern coins, if you check your pocket change, mostly have the heads of dead presidents engraved on them. But like our statuary of famous historical people, we are not called to worship them the way the Romans worshiped their emperors. In fact, there is always the probability that we can find something about those characters which was humanly imperfect. Thankfully we are not expected to revere them nor consider them graven images which rival our fidelity to our creator, in whose image we are made and in whom we trust. But Jesus' teaching, as it should, provokes us to keep these questions in mind. Like the Pharisees and the Herodians and all those who have ears to hear Jesus, we are amazed, and called to live out our faithfulness in the context of such questions. Meanwhile, though, we are called to give to God those things which belong to God, and one of them is us. As if it were a coin of tribute, taken from my pocket and handed to thee, O Lord, take my life and hold it in your own hand. I believe it has both value and usefulness, since it has been imprinted with your own image, and its denomination is measured in love. Amen