

They really thought they had Jesus trapped. Their question—and His answer—would give them a way to destroy Jesus, either in the court of public opinion, or the actual civil court. It's a strange alliance that approached Jesus that day, bringing to life the old saying, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." More about that in a minute. But knowing Jesus' reputation as a thinker and teacher, they lead with words meant to flatter: "Rabbi, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances."

These are words meant to inflate Jesus' ego, to soften him up a bit, get him to relax, so that he will speak loosely enough to say too much. Can you imagine, coming to God with such bad motives?

Well, about that strange alliance, here's what we know. Pharisees and Herodians did not like each other very much. They were political and theological opposites. If only we had something to compare that to...but anyway, The Pharisees were nationalists, one hundred percent against the rule of Rome, while the Herodians, as their name suggests, supported the Roman partnership with the Herods. Irreconcilable positions, to be sure, but united in their distaste for the itinerant teacher Jesus of Nazareth. And what do you know, a hot-button issue of the day seemed custom made to damage Jesus' reputation, if not ruin his public life altogether, and it had to do with taxes.

The Roman poll tax was the flashpoint. The Pharisees, as you might imagine, were against it, not wanting to submit to Roman rule or give any support to Caesar. The Herodians were for it, wanting to keep Herod in power. Somehow these political foes figured out that their disagreement held the key to damaging Jesus.

Here's what they thought: if they could get Jesus to say, 'Yes, pay the tax,' he would appear disloyal to Israel and sympathetic to the Roman occupation. If they could get Jesus to say, "No, don't pay it," he could be arrested for treason. They thought they had him. So the day comes, the plan is set in motion, and some spokesman for the alliance asks Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?"

Now, to be clear, it's not that this question by itself was bad. It's actually an extremely relevant question to deal with, right down to this present moment. The problem was not the question—the problem was the motive for asking. Like many so-called hypothetical questions, there was a reason for asking, and this particular reason was to bring harm to Jesus, one way or the other.

So, Jesus does two things. First, he lets the Pharisees and Herodians know that he knows. "Why put me to the test, you hypocrites?" He calls them out. He lets them know, he knows this is not some innocent theological debate. That's the first thing, and it's a bold move. The second thing is even bolder. He gives an answer.

“Show me the coin for the tax,” Jesus says. Someone produces the appropriate coin. “Whose likeness and inscription is this?” Jesus asks. “Caesar’s,” comes the response. Of course, that’s the right answer. And so Jesus says, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

His opponents, we are told, marveled, and left the scene. They really thought they had Jesus trapped. It didn’t work out as they planned. Jesus exposed their motives, telling the truth about them, about Caesar, and about God’s claim on his creation.

Jesus’ answer is brilliant and truthful and somewhat bewildering. He does not call for a revolution against Rome, as corrupt and unwelcome as it may have been. Paying taxes, honoring authorities, fulfilling civic responsibilities, these are all things Jesus endorses when he says “render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s.” But that’s not all he said. He continued, “render to God the things that are God’s.” It’s an amazing comeback, but what could Jesus have meant? What are the “things that are God’s” that we are to render to Him?

Perhaps the answer lies in Jesus’ object lesson. He took the coin and asked, “whose likeness and inscription is this?” Everyone knew that Caesar’s likeness and inscription was on the coin, meaning that ultimately, the coin “belonged to” Caesar. Well, let me ask this: In whose likeness are you made? Whose name is inscribed on you? Do you see? You, who are made in the image of God; you, on whom Father, Son, and Holy Spirit wrote his name at your Baptism, are God’s property. You, who bear the image and name of God, belong to Him. The things that are God’s, the things he wants given to Him, are our selves.

And in saying that, there is much that is implied. Let me describe a little bit of it. If I am rendering my self to God, one of the things that means is that I am giving God my ultimate allegiance. He is the Authority above all other authorities. This is mapped out for me in the first commandment: “You shall have no other gods.” I should fear, love and trust in God above all things. Now here’s the tension—I often fail at that. What can change my heart—and yours—so that we gladly render *ourselves* to God?

One more time, we go back to the coin. We all know what a coin is for—it’s currency. It is the power to purchase. If you ever struggle with the question, “Does God deserve my allegiance,” let me remind you that Jesus himself became currency for you. God’s own beloved Son became the priceless coin that was paid to ransom your soul. As Martin Luther wrote in the Small Catechism, “I believe that Jesus...has redeemed me, a lost and condemned person, purchased and won me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil; not with gold or silver, *but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death*, that I may be His own...”

There was no way we could make restitution for our sin, so Jesus paid it all. Jesus’ suffering and death on the cross settled the debt. And though it cost him ultimate rejection, Jesus purchased you so that you can be His own. How could you not want to give your ultimate allegiance to Him, knowing he went to the depths for you? His sacrificial love is the power that changes hearts and minds and priorities. Jesus is the currency by which you are transferred to God, and like a coin, you bear His image. His name is inscribed on you. You belong to Him. To

render yourself to Him is to say ‘yes’ to the claim he has placed on your life, and to be astonished at the price He paid to do so. The words of the Lutheran Women’s Missionary League Pledge say it well: *In fervent gratitude for the Savior's dying love and His blood-bought gift of redemption we dedicate ourselves to Him with all that we are and have.*

Let this **fervent gratitude** be the driving force of your life.