

The Pharisees despised the Herodians, and with good reason too. The Herodians, named after the King Herod of baby-massacring infamy, were a political movement collaborating with the Roman occupation and supporting the dynasty chosen as the rulers of Judea by Rome.

On the other hand, the Pharisees were a revolutionary populist social movement of devout Jews, scrupulous in their observance of God's law and highly respected by the people. There were Pharisees among the disciples of Jesus, like Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea; Pharisees within the early Church, as is mentioned in Acts 15; the apostle Paul was a Pharisee and, according to Acts 23, called himself one even after his conversion to Christianity. In fact, some scholars speculate that, despite his arguments with them, Jesus himself may have been a Pharisee, even if a rather eccentric one.

The Pharisees and the Herodians were enemies. As such, it may have come as quite a surprise to Jesus to see both Pharisees and Herodians coming to him as a group and saying, "Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one, for you do not regard people with partiality."

It's rarely a good sign when your opponents begin to flatter you. They then ask him, "Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar or not?"

By "lawful" here they of course meant "according to the Torah." If Jesus said that Jews should support the Roman state, then he would have allied himself with a power that was occupying and killing them. But to say that Jews should not pay taxes to Rome would have been treason, a crime punishable by crucifixion. Ay, ay, ay, what to do?

It was a good question too, and still a difficult one to answer. Throughout history, Christians have continued to wrestle with this dilemma. During the Protestant Reformation, German and French peasants stopped paying taxes to the church and the state. In the 16th century, Hutterites refused to pay taxes for war or capital punishment, with one writing, “When the government requires of us what is contrary to our faith and conscience—as swearing oaths and paying hangman's dues or taxes for war—then we do not obey its command.” In the 18th century, the American preacher and abolitionist John Woolman supported tax resistance to protest the war against the French and Native Americans. In the 20th century, Catholic activist Ammon Hennacy practised tax resistance against the Vietnam War. And in 1982, the Catholic Archbishop of Seattle, Raymond Hunthausen, noted advocate for the rights of gays and lesbians, announced that he would refuse to pay half of his income tax in protest against the stockpiling and development of nuclear weapons. Nonetheless, I imagine nobody in this room has ever declared a personal holy war against the Canada Revenue Agency. And fair enough.

So, is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

Well, Jesus never really answers their question.

“Show me the coin used for the tax,” he says, and they hand him a coin. He then asks, “Whose icon is this and whose title?” The coin would have borne the image of the emperor with a Latin inscription reading: “Tiberius Caesar, Son of the Divine Augustus”. Finally, Jesus says, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s and to God the things that are God’s.”

This morning, we sang Psalm 99 as appointed for what the lectionary calls its “Semi-continuous Series”. The Psalm selected for its “Complementary Series”, though, is Psalm 96, which reads

“For great is the Lord and most worthy of praise; he is to be feared above all gods. For all the gods of the nations are idols”. Idols. Idols are what the Pharisees and Herodians were carrying in their pockets — gold and silver icons of an allegedly divine monarch. The Bible talks a lot about this issue of idols. Do you place your faith and love in the God of the Resurrection, the Prince of Peace, the Lord of Liberation, or in the gods of property, money, accumulation, consumption, the nation, power, capitalism, and the state?

In Matthew, Jesus tells us, “No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and wealth.”

God does not want your idols.

What is it that belongs to God then?

Well, the coins bear the image of Caesar. What is it that bears the image of God?

You may be reminded here of Genesis 1:27: “So God created humans in his image, in the image of God he created them”.

We belong to God.

The Bible says in Deuteronomy, “The Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might.”

We must give ourselves not to Caesar, not to idols, not to money and wealth. We must give ourselves to God. Every day, we should have the aim, in everything we do, however we can, to give ourselves to God. Because God’s image is upon us, and thus every part of us, every particle of our being, every atom of our existence, is his.

We can give ourselves to God through worship, through prayer and praise, meditation, contemplation, and also through loving one another, through taking care of the needy and the marginalized, attending to the poor and the oppressed, tending to God's creation, extending to others the grace which God has given us, and manifesting his Kingdom of peace and freedom on Earth as it is in Heaven. Which, if you were to ask Woolman and Hennacy and the Hutterites, might include not paying your taxes. This is not legal advice, though, and I am not a lawyer.

So, I ask you: how will you give yourself to God?

Consider the places in your life where maybe you haven't given yourself over completely to God. What can you do differently? What needs to change? What are the idols, the Caesars in your life? How can you stop giving to them what is meant for God?

I pray that God may show us the way to give ourselves to him more fully, that he would help us to honour him in every aspect of our lives, today, tomorrow, and forever. I pray this in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen.