

St Pius-St Anthony 29th Sunday Ordinary Time Year A

Flip a coin! How about 'Flip a Con'! This is a trap where both sides of the coin stack against Jesus. Yet, I love that Jesus, the very wisdom of God knows and sees all of this before it plays out, and he brilliantly sidesteps the 'trap' set by the Pharisees and **Herodians**. But they (*the Herodians*) are the new guy on the block here, which I think needs a mention right up front—explain this 'ganging up' of both Pharisees and **Herodians**. This is serious. Jesus has been debating theological points back and forth with the Pharisees all through the gospel of Matthew so far, (and it will go on). But when the Pharisees show up with the Herodian heavyweights, the tension between them rises to another level all together. The muscle is showing up now; the Herodians don't mind anyone arguing theology, just don't cut into our collections. So when the Herodians appear, they are the 'enforcers'. Think of it this way talking about taxes: I may have meetings with an IRS worker: fine that doesn't cause me too much sweat, but when the IRS shows up with the Federal Marshals, okay, now I have trouble! That's the Herodians. So regarding these roman taxes, think of the Pharisees as the marketing department, while the Herodians are the collection department. This is not only a theological debate anymore. In the past the Pharisees had attacked Jesus over 'the fact that he talked to and ate with tax collectors and sinners' (Matt 9:11), they had jealously accused him publicly of being 'possessed by Devil' because he cast out demons (Matt 9:34). They had claimed him a 'lawbreaker' over violated Sabbath work restrictions (Matt 12:2) and minimizing handwashing rituals (Matt 15:2) to just mention a few controversies. But now, the Herodians raise the stakes tremendously. Jesus will get through this encounter fine, but I think its gravity is why Jesus comes back at the Pharisees in the next chapter 23, with his strongest condemnations of them ever: He will proclaim seven woes upon them (curses-saying, "Woe to you Pharisees"). These are seven charges identifying specific abuses of religion that they commit. Of course, we are nearing the end of the gospel and soon He will be arrested, dragged through a sham trial and be executed. Interestingly, the gospel of Luke 23:2 says "They brought charges against him, saying, "We found this man misleading our people; **he opposes the payment of taxes to Caesar...**". We don't see that in today's bible reading, but the word on the street was that 'Jesus said not to pay Caesar's'. It is a false charge or false news report. It's not the first nor last time that this will happen. So how does Jesus get through this showdown? Again, the trap-setup is that regardless of what Jesus answers 'Yes or No' to the question 'Is it lawful to pay Caesar's tax?', He is set to lose. Either way, One or the Other side (the Pharisees or the Herodians) will have ammunition against Him. If He says 'Yes' He comes across as Roman Patriot collaborator (big tax big government guy), and then He loses all religious credibility. If He says 'No' then He comes across as zealous & separatist rebel (resist government on all fronts), and loses all public security-could be seized by

the guards on the spot. Either way he loses. Or does He? No. They lose. Because Jesus exposes to the Jewish crowds, how the Pharisees are already in the pocket of the Romans. What I mean is, who has the roman coin that pays the tax? Jesus has to ask to see one. He doesn't carry such tokens of Roman allegiance. The Pharisees are the ones holding the Roman money. So Pharisees lose face because the crowd can ask now, "What are you Pharisees doing with that, you 'holiers than thou'?" But also, the Romans lose because Jesus says 'Give back to Caesar what is his-That is nothing to me. Give it to Caesar.'" Now the Herodians can ask themselves, "Why were we dragged out here? You Pharisees are wasting our time. There's nothing here for us?" Or is there? Remember they are the muscle, and now that money is on the table, who gets it? Jesus just cost those Pharisees their coins. The enforcers can say, "Like your teacher said, we'll just take these coins with us-not worry you about them anymore (take them off your hands)" The Pharisees just paid for their foolish game of trying to entrap Jesus. Will they ever learn their lesson?

But what might be is the lesson of Jesus' wisdom here for us? I love how Jesus reminds us of Who makes What and Who makes Whom? We humans make big deals out of what we make, trade, buy and sell. Our stuff, our coins. But Jesus reminds us that God alone our Creator, ***He made us.*** Our lives, our bodies, our souls belong to God. Some things can be sold and some cannot. Stuff we hold in this world, because we humans made these perishable products, we can sell and trade them all day long. But what we humans don't/can't make, we also have no authority to exchange, buy or sell. What God has made is our lives. What is eternal is our souls. Our souls and lives cannot be traded, bought or sold. I hear Jesus saying that the coin and tax bear the name and image of Caesar-he came up with them, so give it back to him. ***But*** the soul and life of each precious human being bears the name and image of God Himself who created each of us. So we owe them and give them rightly back to only God. ***And this is shown by how we live.*** Jesus says it this way, "Give to Caesar what belongs to Caesar and give to God what belongs to God" (Matt 22:21). Give your money-coin to Caesar. Fine! But give your heart-your life to God. And live the same dignity recognizing this treasure in others. So Caesar's coin is no true treasure, it is nothing of lasting value. Rather, only what God creates has eternal currency-each human heart. God alone, and our lives given to Him. Serving His good will and glorifying His redemptive purpose for all, that is what lasts forever.