



Things to Ponder

Heads and Tails

- [About the Author](#)
- [Order](#)
- [About the Book](#)
- [Reviews](#)
- [Readers' Comments](#)
- [News & Events](#)
- [A Prayer for the Day](#)
- [Things To Shout Out!](#)
- [Things to Ponder](#)
- [My Favorite Quotes](#)
- [FAQ](#)
- [Contact](#)
- [Home](#)

By Rev. Msgr. Kevin T. Hart

Nothing makes for becoming friends as much as sharing a common enemy. In today's Gospel (Matthew 22:15-21) two enemies, the Herodians and the Pharisees, become allies as they confront their common enemy, Jesus. The Herodians, as their name implies, were those Jews who were supporters of King Herod, put on the throne by the Romans as a result of their conquest of Israel. They were collaborators with a foreign occupying army, and thus supporters of Caesar. They were fully in favor of supporting the taxation of Israel by the Romans, the proceeds from which went to Caesar and to supporting the occupying army. Their allegiance to Rome enabled them to win administrative and other governmental positions in Israel.

The Pharisees, on the other hand, were adherents to the theocracy of Israel: God was their only King. Caesar, and therefore Herod, had no legitimate authority over them. They saw the Herodians as heretics because their support of Caesar was contrary to the Jewish religion and to the Law. They were opposed to Roman taxation because the money went to support an Emperor who was considered to be divine. Taxation for the Pharisees amounted to nothing less than worship of a false idol.

Their question to Jesus, "Is it lawful to pay the census tax to Caesar or not?" was an accurate reflection of these deep political and religious differences between them. They pose the question to Jesus, not looking for an answer, but as a way of trapping Jesus into taking a position that would discredit Him no matter how He answered the question. If He were to say, "It is lawful," the Pharisees could charge Jesus as a heretic and blasphemer (and eventually did on Holy Thursday at His trial before the Sanhedrin).

Those who considered Jesus a prophet would lose their faith in Him. If He were to answer, "It is not lawful," the Herodians could charge Him as a traitor and have Him imprisoned or executed, (which they did on Good Friday afternoon in the presence of Pilate and the crowds who screamed for His death). For the Pharisees and Herodians, it was a win-win situation; for Jesus it was a lose-lose situation.

So how does Jesus answer? He doesn't, at least not to the satisfaction of the Pharisees and the Herodians. Asking for a coin that depicted on one side the image of Caesar, Jesus gives His famous reply, "Render to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's." He states that there is a balance between our responsibilities to the government, as well as responsibilities to God.

As American citizens we necessarily deal in the things of this world: paying taxes, obeying laws, voting and taking part in the political process so as to allow our ideas and ideals to penetrate the heart of society. However, the things of this world are transitory and while they are hardly unimportant, they cannot compare to the reign of God which begins in the hearts of those who welcome it and perdures forever. All loyalties and priorities should be adjusted accordingly.

The coin handed to Jesus is an image of ourselves, and like every coin, we have two sides. St. Paul reminds the Thessalonians today that they are imprinted with God's image, and that they are chosen and loved by Him. And so, indeed, are we. But we also bear the image of citizens of this world. It is not easy to bear two images in one world. It is hard to put God first in a political system that feeds on dividing rather than uniting.

The question put to Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians is put to us in the form of our stance on many moral problems which disguise themselves as political issues: abortion, capital punishment, euthanasia, immigration, the death penalty and international aid. These issues put us on the horns of a dilemma by making us choose one side or the other, choosing "heads" or "tails." Rather, our faith challenges us to be both "heads" and "tails." Our response to God must be total and not in any way divided. In submitting totally to the sovereignty of God and His will, the concerns of lesser authorities will be put into their proper perspective.

We think of April 15th as our tax time. But if we give to God what is God's, every day is tax time, and what a huge return we can expect!

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St. Andrew Apostle Catholic Church, Silver Spring, MD