

**Let us pray.**

**May the words from my mouth and the thoughts in our hearts  
be offered to you, oh Christ. Amen**

### **Gotta Serve Somebody**

Bob Dylan

You may be a preacher with your spiritual pride,  
You may be a councilman taking bribes on the side,  
You may be workin' in a barbershop, you know how to cut hair,  
You may be somebody's mistress, may be you're somebody's heir,

But you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes  
Indeed, you're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord,  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

You may be a construction worker working on a home,  
You may be living in a mansion, or you might live in a dome,  
You might own guns and you might even own tanks,  
You might be somebody's landlord, you might even own banks,

Still, you're gonna have to serve somebody, yes  
You're gonna have to serve somebody.  
Well, it may be the devil or it may be the Lord  
But you're gonna have to serve somebody.

In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus has several encounters with the Pharisees and Herodian's.

The text read this morning, is one of those Pharisee/educational moments for his disciples, and then for us, the Gospels readers.

We've all heard this story, for some, since as a child. Jesus was better at outwitting the Pharisees, so Jesus would get an, 'Atta boy,' from us kids in church school.

Initially, it sounds like Jesus was suggesting that his followers have a dual allegiance between God and Caesar, more or less serving two masters.

So, was he saying it was lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

As an adult, we read this through more mature eyes. So...

- Is this money issue essentially a question of conscience following our Christian values?
- When it conflicts with our allegiance to Christ, how do we answer the conflicts?

**The Question:** So, looking at the text, if Jesus answered, "Yes," to the question, he risked alienating the oppressed Jews of Palestine.

If he answered, "No," he can be accused of fostering sedition which is punishable by death under Roman law. The Pharisees think they've outwitted this young rabbi with this clever question.

But, Jesus turned the Pharisees' question around, and asked them, "Why are you putting me to the test?" knowing their intentions.

There are several key points in the story we need to focus on:

1. **The Coin:** First, the coin. A Pharisee had the Roman coin on his person. He presented it to Jesus in the Synagogue, which was a violation of the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> commandments (Making images of gods, and Worshiping false gods). The Jews had their

own coins for gift offerings in the temple. So, the Roman coin would never be accepted in the temple.

2. **Roman Image:** The Roman coin's image of Caesar on one side, with the other side stating he is a god, was troubling for the Jews. The Jews were dealt harshly by the Romans, as they tried to bring their images of Caesar into the temple area. This led to recent riots and mass killings in Jerusalem.
3. **Obligation:** Then there is the obligation. Jesus allows room for loyalty to Caesar, but subordinates it to the Loyalty to God.

Now, as an adult, Jesus gets the 'Atta boy, Carpenter son' from me.

FROM AN AMERICAN PERSPECTIVE...

The issue for most people in the 21st century is not really about paying taxes, as much as it is about paying attention to what our government is doing, and whether or not we can in good conscience support its actions.

- When our conscience is conflicted over government activity, this passage of rendering unto Caesar and rendering unto God, takes on a new and actionable meaning.

We live in a challenging and fast moving time. So, Answers to questions are not simple, but are complicated, from a Christian viewpoint.

In our history lessons in school, a significant reason for the decision to split from England was: "Taxation without representation is tyranny."

The same disputes could be heard among the Jewish people during their Roman occupation.

So, what has changed from the 18th Century Colonial years and today's issues in the 21<sup>st</sup> century? Partly, it's the complication and speed of change that we all experience daily.

- So, no one can really serve two masters. AND...

- We are never exempt from discernment, that is the necessary choosing in today's confusing world of how to serve.

Rendering to God can mean money, can mean gifts and time. God is blind to any of our labels. And God's grace for us is apolitical, it is focused on the future of our life in heaven, not on this earth.

The Jews have the Book of Life they talk about where all that you do on earth is recorded. You and God read this together, when you die. This concept is a somber approach, evaluating your life with everything you do.

## **MY STORY**

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When I was 22, I was attending Cal State U at Northridge, married with 2 kids, and working at the Hillcrest Country Club in Los Angeles. As you can imagine, money was tight with all my typical family needs. The next semester for classes and books weren't in my budget. I didn't want to drop out of school. And, I couldn't ask my parents for money, since there were still 9 siblings living at home.

One of the waiters said to me, "Go ask one of the country club members for a loan. I've done that with the man that owns Standard Brand Paints. He gave me \$500 worth of paint." George the waiter showed me the man's business card. I didn't need paint, but money.

You may have heard of Hillcrest Country Club, the largest Jewish club in Los Angeles, with many of its members in the Film Industry. Mr. Alfred Cohen, president and owner of the Beverly Hills Bank, was a regular at the club. I waited on him almost daily. I got the nerve and explained to him why I needed a school loan. Mr. Cohen looked at me, then at my maître de across the room.

I became nervous, thinking he'd call over the maître de and say he's offended that one of his waiters would ask for money. Instead, he took out his business card, wrote 500 on it, and told me to visit him at his bank.

A couple of days later, I dressed up, went to the bank, in the heart of Beverly Hills, took the elevator up to the 8<sup>th</sup> floor. When the doors opened, I saw the beautiful pictures, the dark furniture, and everyone dressed like they were in movies. I debated whether to take

the elevator down immediately, but finally walked over to the desk that had a plaque on it, “Mrs. Abigail Smith, Personal Assistant to Mr. Cohen.” The woman looked at me and expressed her surprise. “May I help you?”

“Mr. Cohen said I should come to his office. My name is John Abeln.”

She looked at her day planner. “Well... just a minute,” she said. Then she walked into his office, which was the size of my whole apartment.

She came out and said, “Mr. Abeln, Mr. Cohen can see you now.” She smiled, and showed me into his office. Now, I was really afraid.

Why would a man I hardly know, except he loved his pastrami sandwich and iced tea at lunch, loan me \$500? This just didn’t make sense. Mr. Cohen was busy writing at his desk, so I stood there waiting. He walked over and presented his check to me.

I tried to shake his hand, but that held the check, it made for an embarrassing moment as I reached for his hand, then the check, then held the check and tried to shake his hand. “Hello, Mr. Cohen,” I stuttered.

“Please,” he said, pointing to the chair, “Sit down. What classes are you taking this semester?”

I stared at the \$500 check. “Classes. Uh. Accounting, Business Contracts, Statistics, and...” I couldn’t remember the rest of my classes. “I don’t know when I’ll be able to pay you back,” I said.

“You won’t,” he replied. “When you land a good job, then you will help someone in need, like I’m helping you.”

“I don’t know how to thank you,” I squeaked.

“I hope you do well in school. We won’t talk about this at the club.” He started to walk back to his desk. “Mrs. Smith has a document for you to sign. Gotta make it legal,” he said, as he sat down.

I stood up, thanked him again, then walked out of his office. It felt like it took 5 minutes to get to Mrs. Smith’s desk, I felt like I was walking in mud.

“Sign here,” she said, professionally.

It was a one-page document, saying the \$500 was for my college education. I signed it and handed it back to her. "Thank you," I said.

She said, "It is Mr. Cohen's pleasure. Good luck, young man."

God's grace was bountiful that day for me. I didn't deserve it.

Once I had a good job, I've 'invested' in high school and college kids over the years, remembering the time I was in need and someone supported me. It was God's grace, crossing religious lines, and economic lines, since God has no boundaries.

Prudence and I have made it a point to regularly help people and we also give generously to the church. We feel God has blessed us, and we have a role to remember our past, and support the community's future by giving.

When you look at our money, there is an icon and inscription on it. A dollar bill has George Washington, and the inscription, "In God We Trust." When we think of God and our faith, we have an image of the Lord, and The First Presbyterian's motto which is: "We Best Serve Christ by Loving All!"

What we render to God is whatever bears that divine image. Every life is marked with that image, an icon of the One who is our source and destination. The first book of the Bible tells us we are made in his image, AND, Our soul's connection to loving God is eternal.

Remember Bob Dylan's line:  
YOU MAY SERVE THE DEVIL,  
OR YOU MAY SERVE THE LORD,  
BUT YOU GOTTA SERVE SOMEBODY.

AMEN