

What Do We Owe the Emperor?

Sunday School Lesson

Matthew 22:15-22

March 19, 2023

The Pledge of Allegiance was written in August 1892 by the socialist minister Francis Bellamy (1855-1931). It was originally published in *The Youth's Companion* on September 8, 1892. Bellamy had hoped that the pledge would be used by citizens in any country. In its original form it read: *I pledge allegiance to my Flag and the Republic for which it stands, one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

In 1923, the words, "the Flag of the United States of America" were added. In 1954, in response to the Communist threat of the times, President Eisenhower encouraged Congress to add the words "under God," creating the 31-word pledge we say today. Bellamy's daughter objected to this alteration. Today it reads: *I Pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the republic for which it stands, one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.*

Why did Bellamy's daughter object? Bellamy believed in the strict separation of church and state. Many times our nation does not act like a nation that is under God even though we make that claim in the pledge. I think about it every time I say it. There were people in my classroom growing up whose religion preventing them from pledging any loyalty except to God. I was taught to respect that difference although today, it would be met with ridicule.

Let us pray

O Holy God,

That you for leading us through another week. Open our hearts to hear your word so we may be faithful disciples who are known by our love for one another and our neighbors. Amen.

Our Purpose Statement:

To consider whether we give to God our complete allegiance.

Read Matthew 22:15-22

You have to feel sorry for those poor Pharisees who kept thinking they could trick Jesus. This lesson is about allegiances and that is a tricky topic, especially for us who dearly love our country. When I was a child, we often said the Pledge of Allegiance in church, especially during Vacation Bible School. This often leads us to tying our faith to both God and our country. As an adult, I have learned it is important to keep those two things separate. Why? Because our country can let us down. Our country can make bad decisions and those decisions should not be tied to our faith. A disappointment in our government can lead to a disappointment in our faith. Our government is led by people and those people are often making political or economic decisions that have nothing to do with faith in God.

For the Pharisees, government referred to an occupying force – the Romans. You had a Jewish nation, a theocracy, being occupied by a heathen country. Jesus refused to tie the two together. You pay what is owed to Caesar; you pay what you owe to God. Caesar will come after you. God relies on your integrity.

We have many allegiances as humans. Where is our relationship to God on the hierarchy of allegiances? We have a very deep allegiance to our country. I have a deep allegiance to the United Methodist Church through the vows I took at ordination. Most of us have a deep loyalty to our families and our closest circle of friends. We have allegiances to sports teams and to our communities and states. We often have an allegiance to our place of work or our neighborhood. Some people have a deep loyalty to certain broadcasts or news sources, and some to political parties or civic clubs.

It is easy to say God is first but do we put our relationship with God first? For the Pharisees, it is easy to see that they put the law before God or maybe you could say that God was the law for them. The Law was actually a gift to God's people and Jesus summed up all 618 laws into two that are easily remembered:

Jesus replied: 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind.' This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' All the Law and the Prophets hang on these two commandments. Matthew 22:37-40 NIV

These laws were created to help us live in right priorities with God and also our neighbor. The Ten Commandments are about living in relationship with God and neighbor. It is so easy to allow other priorities to step in and interfere. We are a divided nation along political lines but perhaps we have gotten into this mess by prioritizing ideologies or politics or candidates or talking heads over God and neighbor. As Christians, serving God is our first priority. Practicing our faith is not just about the outward public things we do like worship and prayer. It is also the inward way we treat one another.

The author of our lesson calls for us to live a life of love and peace. The Beatitudes celebrate peacemaking, humility, working for justice, and being merciful. During this season of Lent, he is challenging us to look at our habits, our loyalties, and even our opinions to see if we are allowing anything to interfere in our relationship to God through Jesus Christ. Are we allowing anything to taint our love for our neighbor.

At the end of the lesson, the author said this would take more than 40 days. For most of us, it takes a lifetime.

Closing prayer: O Gracious God, thank you for your redeeming love. Help me to see my own story with you and be able to share it with others. If there is a stumbling block between me and You, please help me to be aware. Then help me change it. Amen.