

The Caesar Question

MATTHEW 22:15-22 (NRSV) *Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said.* ¹⁶*So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are sincere, and teach the way of God in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality.* ¹⁷*Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”* ¹⁸*But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” ²¹They answered, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Give therefore to Caesar the things that are the Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.” ²²When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.*

This teaching of Jesus undergirds the idea of separation of church and state. In reading it, some questions came to mind: What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? How do we discern the difference? Does allegiance, loyalty, or obedience to God ever demand disobedience to government?¹

39th US President, Jimmy Carter is known for his faith, but he also deeply backs the separation of church and state, which is why he wouldn't have prayer breakfasts in the White House or to let his own religious views shape public policy. The religious right criticized him for that.

In 2000, Mr. Carter left the S.B.C. because of what he called its “inexorable merger with the conservative wing of the Republican Party.” In his book *Our Endangered Values: America’s Moral Crisis* he sharply attacks right-wing evangelicals, and he often speaks of “narrow, self-serving...authoritarian males” who are so convinced of their own morality “that they cast the opposition not just as wrong, but as evil.”

In a later book, *Faith: A Journey for All*, he asks, “What is the proper response from people of faith when there is obvious disparity between our government’s policies and our religious beliefs?” Several sentences later, he answers: “Look to the example of Jesus and his disciples, who demonstrated that civil disobedience is in order when human laws are contrary to God’s demand.”

Looking to Jesus is the core of this series of sermons. The Scripture Daily read follows an act of civil disobedience: after Jesus’ Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem, he went directly to the temple and confronted the authorities who, like many others throughout history, drew validation from a vile concoction of political, economic, and religious elements.

Even Jesus’ entry into was seen as more political than religious. He rode a donkey to symbolize the humility, simplicity, and nonviolence of the kingdom of God. He entered by the east gate; while the horses and chariots of Rome that symbolized the arrogance, dominance, and violence of the empire always entered by the west gate.

Two very different kingdoms, representing different—even

¹ Paraphrased from Wallis, Jim. *Christ in Crisis* (p. 159). HarperOne. Kindle Edition.

contradictory—sets of order and values. Some believe, mistakenly, the new kingdom has nothing to do with politics. It's personal—spiritual—private—me and Jesus, all alone; so, their appeal is for Christians to submit to the power of the state; and there are some Gospel texts and part of Romans 13 that, when taken out of context, can appear to support such an idea.

But that's not what Jesus said, and that's not what he lived. His life defines the alternatives in this text: what belongs to Caesar and what belongs to God—and when the two are in conflict, there was no doubt that his ultimate allegiance and loyalty lay with God and not with Caesar.

"Jesus makes clear who he is, and what it means to come 'in the name of the Lord.'"² He disrupts the corrupt temple operation, overturning tables and driving out the animals religious hucksters used to controlled a sacrificial system that made them rich and oppressed the poor—particularly poor women. Jesus simply would not tolerate unjust economic power in the place of worship. ...

(Paraphrasing Wes Granberg-Michaelson in *Sojourner Magazine*), in cleansing the Temple, Jesus exposed and condemned exclusionary temple rules and practices. He not only said those in control were running a 'den of thieves,' he also declared the temple to be a 'place of prayer for all nations!' All nations; not just males in positions of wealth and power within an exclusive cultural and religious group.

And there was more. The Sadducees and the High Priest—essentially an oligarchy—controlled the temple and held tight to whatever political and religious power Rome allowed. They betrayed the heart of Jewish tradition in their unholy alliance with Roman power. But that was the trade-off that kept them in control.³

Which brings us to today's text in Mathew. It's interesting that the gospel writers describe this situation as an effort to "trap" Jesus. Many of Jesus's followers today face similar traps in relation to the state. The way Jesus avoids the trap and clarifies the choices can guide us today.

The beauty of Jesus's answer to the trick question is that while it looks like an endorsement of the census tax, it actually subverts the emperor's power. Jesus puts the Empire's power in perspective: Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's but remember who owns the world. "[God is] the Lord and there is no other," says the prophet Isaiah (Isaiah 45:6).⁴

From the opening of his ministry, Jesus systematically attacks the injustice of the social order and lifts up a countercultural alternative. In Luke, he begins his ministry in his home town, where he sets the standards for all he is about: *...to proclaim good news to the poor... release to the captives... (and) recovery of sight to the blind... to let the oppressed go free, and to announce the year of the Lord's favor.* (LUKE 4:18-19)

The year of the Lord's favor probably is a reference to the year of Jubilee—what might be called the 11th Commandment (Leviticus 25:8ff). Israel never

² Ibid. (pp. 159-160).

³ Adapted and paraphrased from Wes Granberg-Michaelson, "Asking 'Which Jesus?' in 2018," Sojo.net, March 26, 2018, <https://sojo.net/articles/asking-which-jesus-2018>.

⁴ Min-Ah Cho, "What Is Empire?," Sojo.net, accessed September 14, 2018, <https://sojo.net/preaching-the-word/what-empire>.

observed Jubilee; and the biblical account of Jubilee is not included in the Christian Lectionary. Isn't that interesting?

Jubilee was meant to occur every fifty years. All debts were to be forgiven, all slaves released, and all property returned to the families of the original owners. You can see why it was never observed. Let's just ignore it; maybe it'll go away.

Jubilee was an expression of God's sense of justice; leveling the playing field. Jesus embraced it; It undergirded his attacks on the unjust systems built upon property, wealth and power: "God has sent me to proclaim Jubilee."

Jesus followed the precedent set by the prophets, speaking truth to power, calling people to "seek justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God" (Micah 6:8). In that precedent, he consistently challenged unjust laws and social structures wherever he found them—in rigidly exclusionary Temple policies or in Roman law.

He challenged the rigid social caste system of clean and unclean by calling a tax collector as his disciple and by sharing table-fellowship with outcasts. By touching a leper, he already was considered impure; by eating with "sinners," he defied Pharisaical codes of ritual purity. He assaults the symbolic center of Judaism by ignoring sabbath laws and boldly claiming, "The sabbath was made for man, not man for the sabbath." He even healed a man's hand on the Sabbath.⁵

Now, when we seek to be faithful to Jesus' principle, "give to Caesar what is due Caesar, and the God what is due God," we need to be careful that we don't hide behind it and let Caesar do anything Caesar wants to do.

When the last Administration initiated inhumane policies at our southern border, including separation of children from their parents, faith communities across the country rose to speak against this utter lack of compassion. But the administration cited Romans 13 and claimed, "The Bible says you have to allow the government to do whatever it wants to do."

That's not even close to what Paul intended, and it's a gross distortion of Jesus dictum, "Give to Caesar what is due Caesar..." I concur with Jim Wallis' response, "This is a line of demarcation that political power must not be allowed to cross. If Jesus is Lord, we are called to love our neighbors in every circumstance, and to even love our enemies. In Matthew 22, Jesus puts loving God and loving your neighbor at the heart of everything. 'On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.' In Matthew 25, Jesus commands us to welcome the stranger."⁶

Again, Jesus is consistent with the Hebrew prophets. 119 times in the NRSV we are reminded of two things: (1) that our ancestors in the faith dwelt as aliens in the land of Canaan, and (2) from the time the Israelites entered the Promised land God was consistent: "You shall not wrong or oppress a resident alien, for you were aliens in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 22:21).

Here's the thing: since very early in Judeo/Christian history, God's people have been inconsistent in their application of Jesus' principle, "Give to Caesar what

⁵ Wallis, Op. Cit. p. 165.

⁶ Ibid., p. 168.

is due Caesar, and to God what is due God." That principle has been adapted to fit and rationalize the policies of whatever person or group has been in power.

So, here's my question: Is it possible for us today to set aside our own political agendas, our biases, anger, and fears, to reclaim Jesus as our standard for all of the above? "Give Caesar what's due Caesar, a to God what's due God?"

Some have made an effort to do so. We need not point only to leaders like Martin Luther King, Jr., or Congressman John Lewis or Disciple minister William Barber: airline attendants refused to work flights that were transporting immigrant children separated from their parents, and several airlines temporarily stopped booking flights with immigration authorities. A man working for the Montana Department of Labor quit his job after he was asked to process subpoena requests for Immigrations and Customs Enforcement. An employee at one processing center quit after receiving instructions to not allow siblings to hug one another.⁷

The answer to the Caesar question isn't difficult. Long before the Pharisees asked the question, Jesus had established the standard: "*You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*" (MATTHEW 5:43-48).

So, what part of "love" do some people have difficulty understanding?

⁷ Ibid., p. 170.