

## **What Belongs to God?**

Matthew 22:15-22 (“Render to Caesar”)

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“Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s  
and to God the things that are God’s.”

It’s a line we quote often, and it seems quite clear.

It seems to mean:

give the government its due.

It seems to mean:

separate church and state.

However, because Jesus says this,

we can be fairly sure this line is loaded.

It’s just that we miss its radical nature

because we hear it with 21<sup>st</sup> century ears.

So, this morning, I’m going to invite you

back into the world of the 1<sup>st</sup> century, C.E.

When we imagine Rome,

we imagine its glory:

the Coliseum,

statues of gods and goddesses.

We imagine great feats of engineering:

aqueducts,

great baths (some even as far away as what is now England),

and the Roman roads that linked the Roman world/empire.

And we remember the Roman Legions

Yet there’s more to this picture.

Imagine Israel in the 1<sup>st</sup> century:

Rome is the occupying power;

Israel is part of the Roman Empire.

Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians

and then by the Persians

and then by the Greeks, the Egyptians, and the Syrians.

In 63 B.C.E. Rome conquered Jerusalem.

The first place the Roman general Pompey marched with his troops  
was into the Temple.

Pompey walked straight through the second court --

a place that was forbidden to non-Jews --

and right into the Holy of Holies

where the Ark of the Covenant was,  
a place only the High Priest was allowed to enter  
on Yom Kippur.

Pompey stood there and laughed at Israel's God.

And this was just the beginning of a brutal occupation . . .

Rome raised taxes throughout its empire in 6 C.E. because the Roman soldiers –  
an essential part of maintaining the Roman Empire –  
refused to re-enlist without a pay raise.

At the same time a huge fire swept through Rome and the city had to be rebuilt.

In addition, much of the empire was facing famine.

Then, three years later, in the year 9 C.E.,

the German barbarians massacred 1/10<sup>th</sup> of the Roman army.

The result: the Romans charged heavy customs taxes on merchants  
and heavy taxes on the land (which impacted the farmers).

Due to these taxes, and Roman ownership of the farmland,

2/3rds of everything – 67% -- that was produced by the local population  
went to the Romans.

Of course, the occupying Roman army enforced this local taxation.

On top of that, those who worked as tax collectors for Rome were not salaried –  
their only income was an extra amount they added to each tax.

So, we can understand why Matthew, a tax collector,  
might be despised as an outcast and feared as a traitor.

And, if this wasn't enough,

in addition to these amounts Jews were forced to pay  
to the Romans and their collaborators,

they also had a commitment to support the Temple

(~21%/year of personal, pre-tax, gross income).

You do the math . . .

(67% + 21% = 88% tax rate + what tax collectors added)

Many people could not pay their taxes.

They had to give up their family's land and become indentured servants.

Eventually most of the land was owned by a handful of rich men,

and a large percentage of the people lived in poverty

There is one account of more than 60 poor families

sharing one half-acre parcel in Jerusalem.

It was not unusual for 16 people to live in one small room.

Families were feeding their children grass and roots to stay alive.

Anyone who disagreed with Roman policies paid the price.

The Romans kept a tight reign over Israel for 100 years.

They would destroy a village

and then take the villagers as slaves or kill them

if they failed to pay taxes.  
There are accounts of tax collectors  
torturing the head of the household for non-payment.  
If the man still would not pay,  
The tax collectors would torture the man's family  
and make him watch.  
It's no wonder tax collectors were hated.  
And it gets even worse,  
because during that time,  
the Romans publicly crucified an average of 3 Jews a day  
during each day of their 100 years of terror in the Holy Land  
(That number is low, as it doesn't include non-Jews,  
and estimates are as high as 6 people/day or over 200,000 people)  
It would often take five days or more for a crucified person to die.  
That's gruesome enough . . .  
And to make their point even more starkly,  
the Romans lined the roads into the occupied cities  
with crosses bearing those who dared to oppose Caesar.

The question of accommodating Rome is a very real question in Jesus' time,  
as it still is in ours:

Where does our ultimate allegiance lie?  
And Jesus seems to have some very creative answers!

Let's look at some of the ones that Matthew –  
the disciple who had been a Roman tax collector –  
has recorded for us:

“IF ANYONE STRIKES YOU ON THE RIGHT CHEEK, TURN THE OTHER ALSO”  
(Mt. 5:39)

Jesus is very specific – he says that the strike is to the right cheek.  
There's reason for this.

Then, as now, in the Middle East,  
a person's left hand was only used for “unclean” tasks,  
such as wiping oneself after going to the bathroom.  
The right hand is used for “clean” tasks, such as eating.  
And, the only way to hit someone on their right cheek  
using your right hand  
is to hit him or her back-handed. (Demonstrate this.)

There is no way to do it open-handed.  
Now in that time, just as today,  
a back-handed hit is done to humiliate someone  
and to demonstrate that the person doing the hitting  
has power over the person who is being hit.  
So husbands back-handed their wives,  
parents back-handed their children,

masters back-handed their slaves,  
and Romans back-handed Jews and others in occupied Israel.  
However, if a person does as the passage says  
and turns her other cheek (her left cheek), again,  
the master is stuck.  
He can't backhand her on her left cheek with his right hand;  
he can only use his right hand to hit her.  
If he hits her now, he has to use the palm of his hand.  
That's important because  
a person could only hit an equal this way.  
So, by turning her cheek,  
the hurt person forces the master to pause  
if he doesn't, and he continues swinging,  
she becomes his equal  
She claims equality with the one who is doing the hitting.  
She reminds him that she is a human being.  
And, she keeps her dignity and allows the hitter to keep his dignity,  
while challenging him at the same time  
in a creative and non-violent manner.

“IF ANYONE WANTS TO SUE YOU AND TAKE YOUR COAT,  
GIVE YOUR CLOAK AS WELL.”

(Mt. 5:40)

This was a common situation.

The wealthy Roman landowners would charge high interest rates on loans  
as a way to force the resident landowners into losing their land.

When a person had lost everything,  
the only thing that he could use for collateral  
was his “coat,” or outer garment (note: “himation” in Greek).

However, there was a catch:  
according to Jewish law,  
that outer garment had to be returned to its owner  
every evening at sunset.

When the Romans took the shirt off a person's back,  
leaving the person standing  
only in his inner garment, or “cloak” (note: “chiton” in Greek).  
that was bad enough,  
but then Jesus suggests  
that the person give the Roman creditor his inner garment as well.

Now, at that time,  
wearing one's inner garment in public was not unusual or embarrassing.  
However, since nothing was worn under the inner garment,  
when the debtor gave his inner garment to the Roman,  
he would be naked.

Being naked was not a problem.

However, looking at another person who was naked was forbidden.

The person in debt is now standing naked,  
invoking the Curse of Cannan (Gn. 9) on the Roman landowner  
and making the same naked protest against an unjust system  
as the prophet Isaiah had done  
Here, again, it is the Roman who is suddenly put on the spot  
in a creative and non-violent manner.

“IF ANYONE FORCES YOU TO GO ONE MILE, GO ALSO THE SECOND MILE.”  
(Mt. 5:41)

Jesus is not encouraging Jews to walk a second mile  
in order to build up merit in heaven,  
or to practice piety,  
or to be kind to the enemy.  
Not at all!

The soldiers of the Roman army  
were allowed to force the local residents to carry their heavy packs.  
Because Roman subjects resented this practice so much,  
soldiers were only allowed to force civilians  
to carry their packs for one mile.  
And everyone knew exactly how long that mile was,  
because the Roman roads were marked  
with mileposts at every mile.  
If a soldier attempted to force someone to carry a pack further than a mile,  
he could be court-martialed.

So imagine what happens  
when a civilian reaches the end of the first mile  
and then continues on, carrying the pack:  
The Roman soldier is suddenly face to face with the possibility of court-martial  
and must beg the civilian to give him back his pack!  
Again, it is the Roman who is suddenly put on the spot  
in a creative and non-violent manner.

So, you see, Jesus' statements are anything but simple!  
And, shockingly, it's Matthew, the former Roman collaborator,  
who has written them down for us!

Today we hear:  
“GIVE BACK THEREFORE TO CAESAR THAT THINGS THAT ARE CAESAR'S,  
AND TO GOD THE THINGS THAT ARE GOD'S”  
(Mt. 22:21)

Like the other Jesus statements that Matthew has recorded,  
this one contains a challenge that is deeper than what is immediately apparent.

Let's go to the text.

First, we hear that the “Pharisees” send some of their followers to Jesus.  
Now, remember, there were 50+ types of Pharisees at the time,  
just as we have many Christian denominations now.

And, when we say “Christian,” do we mean  
Jerry Falwell, Marcus Borg, evangelicals, liberals,  
charismatics, holy rollers, Catholics, or Methodists?  
The same holds for any time we read “Pharisee” – it needs clarification.  
because most of the Pharisees believed  
in a personal relationship with God (not in Temple worship)  
and in following the spirit of the law  
not the letter of the law.

So, don’t get stuck here, assuming that Pharisees are the “bad guys.”

On the other hand, whichever group this is,  
they only send their disciples.

They do not come themselves.

These disciples come with some Herodians.

Herodians were Jews who supported the bloody reign of Herod –

When he came to power,

he killed off 45 of the 71 members of the Sanhedrin (the supreme court)

and he killed his own wife,

three of his sons,

his mother-in-law,

his brother-in-law,

and the high priest.

He burned 42 people to death at one point

because a rumor had surfaced that he’d died and people had rejoiced.

And, because the Herodians supported Rome,

they were opposed to most groups of Pharisees.

According to the accounts we have,

they seem to be the ones who plotted to kill Jesus.

Needless to say, the air is charged!

They approach Jesus, saying:

“Teacher, we know that you are sincere,

and teach the way of God (“Way of God” = Torah)

in accordance with truth, and show deference to no one;

for you do not regard people with partiality.”

Ah, they acknowledge Jesus as someone who teaches Torah,

and who treats everyone as equals.

Then, the question:

“Tell, us then, what do you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor/Caesar or not?”

But Jesus is aware of their malice and says:

“Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites?”

“Hypocrite” means someone who underjudges or undervalues,

so Matthew is giving us a clue that something is being undervalued here.

And we’re about to find out what that is!

Jesus continues: “Show me the coin used for the tax.”

Matthew wants to be sure we know about this coin, so he tells us:

“they brought him a denarius.”

A denarius was a silver coin worth one day's wages.

(Bring replica coin & show it.)

And then Jesus asks: "Whose head is this, and whose title?"

This seems innocuous to our 21<sup>st</sup> century ears, right?

However, in the 1st century,

faithful Jews in the Galilee

(Nazareth, Capernaum, Tiberias –

all along the Sea of Galilee in the north),

who did not believe in idols,

had refused to use the Roman coins –

including the denarius –

because each coin bore the image Caesar

and stated that Caesar was "the son of God"

and, therefore, a god as well.

The Romans had been forced by this resistance to re-mint the coins,

striking each coin with a new image – palm branches –

over the face of Caesar to obscure his likeness.

Faithful Jews would only use these re-minted coins,

and palm branches became a sign of resistance to Roman rule

throughout Israel.

The men answer Jesus, saying: "The emperor's/Caesar's."

Ah! Immediately we know that this coin

has an unobscured image of Caesar on its face.

And, of course, it carries the usual inscription:

"Son of the Divine Augustus" ("son of god").

What does the answer to Jesus' question tell you about the one who has this coin?

This is someone who uses the idolatrous Roman coins;

this is someone who has been co-opted by Rome!

Jesus says, "Give back to Caesar the things that are Caesar's,  
and give back to God that things that are God's."

Again, this seems straightforward,

but the listener would know something that is not obvious in the English:

Often Jesus uses a grammatical construct

in which the second part of the sentence is prior to the first part,

e.g. "love your neighbor as yourself"

("as yourself" is prior to "love your neighbor").

In this way, by saying "give back to God the things that are God's" first,

Jesus puts his listeners back into the scripture

and the commitment that faithful Jews recite every day:

love God with ALL your heart, soul, mind and strength

(Dt. 6:4-5; the S'hma & V'Ahavta).

So, in this case, give back (and it is "give back") to God the things that are God's  
and, only then, to Caesar . . .

I don't know about you,

but I haven't been able to figure out yet what doesn't belong to God . . .

so if we give everything to God  
there's nothing left over for Caesar!  
If I love God with all my heart, soul, mind and strength, (Dt. 6:5)  
there just isn't anything left over for any other power.

Then Matthew reports: "When they heard this, they were amazed . . ."  
Of course they were amazed!  
Jesus has done it again –  
He challenges them (and us) to re-orient themselves  
in a non-violent and creative way!  
This re-orientation has everything to do with how we choose to live.

The early church knew that the choice was "Caesar is Lord" or "Jesus is Lord."  
One or the other.  
Just as a person cannot serve two masters,  
a person cannot serve two Gods or two powers.  
S/he can only have one ultimate allegiance.  
There are no "trade-offs," no possible compromises.  
And when the early Christians made the choice of "Jesus,"  
they were often killed because they were traitors to the established regime.  
And yet, by most of the accounts that we have, they died celebrating.  
They celebrated their choice of "Jesus"  
because it had everything to do with keeping their integrity.  
It had everything to do with what this life is about.

According to Christian scriptures, the goal isn't success on earth.  
Scripture and tradition insist that the goal is a much wider, much longer view of life.  
As I learned as a child:  
"Why did God make me? God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him  
in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next."  
Or as the Hebrew scriptures remind us:  
"You shall love the Lord, your God, with all your heart, and all your soul,  
with all your mind and with all your strength."  
We are asked to give back to God all that is God's.  
Everything.  
We are asked not to compromise our souls for any other power here and now.

If we seek God's kingdom first, we are assured that all things will be in order.  
As T.S. Eliot wrote, quoting the 14<sup>th</sup> century saint, Julian of Norwich:  
Quick now, here, now, always --  
A condition of complete simplicity  
(Costing not less than everything)  
And all shall be well and  
All manner of thing shall be well

Amen.

**Sources:**

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**Text:**

Matthew 22:15-22

Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. 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. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. Then he said to them, “Whose head is this, and whose title?” They answered, “The emperor’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.” When they heard this, they were amazed; and they left him and went away.