

What Is Caesar's? What Is God's?
Matthew 22:15-22

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This is one of those stories where the religious establishment tries to set Jesus up to be trapped and humiliated. Generally, these officials ask Jesus to make a choice between God and Caesar—that is, between Jewish law and Roman law. Either way he chooses, he loses.

In this story, if Jesus says, yes, it's OK to pay taxes to Caesar, he's advocating for the oppression of his own people. Roman taxes on Israel could amount to fifty percent. Harvest 100 bushels of wheat, and 50 of them go to the tax collector. Press out 10 gallons of olive oil or wine, and five of them go to Rome. And on top of that, the tax collectors took a hefty fee for themselves; and that's why they were so universally hated in Israel. People starved to pay their taxes, or lost land that had been in their families for generations, or sold their children or themselves into slavery. So if Jesus says yes, he loses any credibility he has as a prophet of justice, and he will likely be attacked by his former devotees.

And if he says no? He's committing sedition—advocating for a tax strike, an insurrection against Rome. The penalty for that is a particularly ugly death: crucifixion.

But what Jesus does is to step completely out of the two alternatives, and he moves the problem *and* the bullies into a completely new dimension—a third place. His answer demands that the bullies stop and think—not just about trying to trap him, but about their own cozy friendships with the oppressors, their own power, and their own relationship with the God they claim to love.

The trap Jesus springs is partly in the “advice” he offers—give to Caesar what is Caesar's, he says; give to God what is God's. It sounds so simple and logical, doesn't it! But—what is God's? Psalm 24 says “The earth is the Lord's and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” And Psalm 95 says “In God's hand are the depths of the earth:

the heights of the mountains are God's also. The sea is God's, for God made it, and the dry land, which God's hands have formed." That pretty much covers everything, including the metal the Roman coin is made of and the bodies of the miners and smelters who made it. In reality, Caesar owns—nothing.

The other piece of the trap is the fact that these pious Temple officials, these definers of morality in the Jewish community, are carrying with them at least one graven image, forbidden by the second of the Ten Commandments. The coin has the face of Caesar stamped on it. And his image is that of a self-proclaimed god—a man who has blasphemously taken for himself the attributes of the savior of the world, the son of a god, the prince of peace. The worship of Caesar's money, and through it, the worship of Caesar himself, makes the Temple officials into idolaters.

This definitely gives them something to think about. Are they ready and willing to give Caesar back the coins they've earned by cooperating with Rome? This problem is suddenly a lot bigger than just paying the required taxes. It's about corruption in holy places, about officials who should be shepherds but who are acting like wolves, about men who have sold their souls for the privileges Rome is pleased to dole out to them. Does any of this sound familiar, or current?

The coin the officials have accepted is made of metal mined by slaves in a colony far from Rome. There is blood in that coin. And it isn't just the blood of the miners and smelters; it is the blood of oppressed Jews as well. The very presence of that coin actually defiles the Temple.

So, we can say now what Caesar actually owns. He owns corruption and lies and greed. He owns slavery and exploitation of the poor. He owns destruction of the environment. He owns blasphemy and narcissism. And in this story, he owns the Temple officials.

The Roman empire is long gone, but the spirit of Caesar is alive and thriving. On Friday, we experienced the inauguration of a man who gained his popularity by exploiting the worst qualities of his fans: greed,

bigotry, hate, resentment, and fear—particularly fear. Those are the attributes that belong to Caesar.

The man who is now president promised renewed prosperity for his admirers. But his coinage carries the blood of low-paid workers and slaves in corporate colonies a long way from Michigan or Pennsylvania or Wisconsin. Some of those colonies, like the Indian reservations in North Dakota or the coal towns in West Virginia, are in America. The corporations that will supposedly be bringing jobs back to their rightful workers are strip-mining raw materials, clean air, drinkable water, and the lives and health of the people.

So exploitation and misery for poor working people belong to Caesar.

A televangelist who offered a prayer at the inauguration preaches that God loves the rich, and wealth is a measure of God's regard. She rakes her wealth in from her faithful followers by assuring them that that the "seed" money they send her will attract God's attention to them as a sign of their faith, and their lives will miraculously improve. But the money she demands is Caesar's tax, not God's; it's a tax paid to greed and false hope.

So greed and blasphemy belong to Caesar.

What belongs to God, though? The answers are clear. The prophet Micah has told us what to give back to God. "Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with your God."

Love belongs to God. Our sense of justice belongs to God. Our sense of connectedness with all living beings, including all humans, belongs to God. Hope belongs to God, hope that motivates our activism on God's behalf. Honor belongs to God. We can't achieve what we want by lying, by cheating, by stepping on the heads of other people, by exploiting them. We must offer our God, the God of love and justice, our best selves. These are the things we give to God.

We are facing a disaster. It has announced itself as clearly as a hurricane or tsunami warning. Throughout his campaign, the new president told us clearly what he planned for America. And as far as we can hear, he fully intends to carry out *those* promises. He has the support of his new cabinet, the Congress, and the governments of many states.

These officials have take Caesar's coin in the form of contributions and outright bribes. You already know what they have planned for the poor, people of color, women, Muslims, gay, lesbian, and trans people, and pretty much anyone who doesn't look like them. I don't need to depress you with the list.

And you know that there has been a dramatic increase in hate crimes and bullying since the election, and bullies cite the president's words and behavior as a justification for their abuse. This is the state of the nation right now. The hurricane is upon us.

But something else is happening, too. God, who is the ever-present energy of love, of creativity, of compassion and justice, is moving in and through the nation. People are taking action in large and small ways. Rather than simply observing, we are actively deflecting bullying, and teaching others how. In the first week after the election, fabric stores sold out of safety pins, because people wanted to find a way to show their solidarity and compassion for those who were being attacked. Social media is full of stories about individuals standing up for their own rights and the rights of others. We are calling our representatives; a huge flood of phone calls to congressional offices stopped the plan by the House of Representatives to destroy the Government Ethics Office.

I've quoted before now from Rebecca Solnit's amazing book, *A Paradise Built in Hell*, where she describes the communities of love and sharing and mutual help that appear spontaneously in catastrophes. She talks, for example, about the great San Francisco earthquake and fire in 1906. Even as the dust and smoke were still settling, shopkeepers opened their storerooms to the public, and those whose homes survived invited in those who were now homeless. Sidewalk cafes sprang up, where food and drink were given away. People who would never have spoken to each other because of differences in social status or race or gender were smiling and conversing, sharing meals and living space, watching out for each other's children. This way that we respond to disaster gives us "a glimpse of who else we ourselves may be and what else our society could become."

Solnit, for me, is a prophet of hope. Recently, she wrote this¹:

There is another America rising and taking action, and it is beautiful. I'm thinking of the many stories of people standing up for the vulnerable, directly when they intervene in confrontations with haters. Or indirectly, as with the young woman I know who co-organised the creation of Neveragain.tech, a public oath people working in tech can take to refuse to create Muslim registries, turn over people's private data, or otherwise cooperate with state persecution.

Of the California state senate, which immediately after the election issued a manifesto of defiance: "California will defend its people and our progress. We are not going to allow one election to reverse generations of progress at the height of our historic diversity, scientific advancement, economic output, and sense of global responsibility. We will lead the resistance to any effort that would shred our social fabric or our constitution."

I'm thinking of the many action groups and coalitions that came together in the wake of the election determined to stop Trump, defend civil liberties and address the illegitimacy of the election, and of the candidate. ..

Many people are still trying to figure out what to do; others are doing it. They give me hope, in some portion of humanity, the portion that will resist Trump and defend our ideals. It will be hard. It will be ugly. Our job will be to be to embody and protect all of those things most antithetical to authoritarianism, racism, misogyny, kleptocracy, an atmosphere of lies and indifference to science, fact, and truth.

In easy times, we grow slack; this will require us each to find our capacity for heroism. Some will, and my hope lies with them. Or us.

¹ Solnit, Rebecca. "Another, more beautiful America is rising. Trump will be resisted. *The Guardian*, US Edition: <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/dec/29/america-trump-californian-senate>. Accessed 12/29/16

That is, in the face of this national disaster, God—the spirit of love and justice—is creating new communities of caring and action, and challenging us to demonstrate our faith in the infinite creativity of the Holy Spirit.

Let us give back to Caesar what is Caesar's. Let us refuse to accept Caesar's lies, greed, or scapegoating. Refuse to accept the fear, the bullying, the manipulation. And refuse to use those ugly tools, even in the name of justice. Return them all to Caesar and those who love Caesar. They have no place with the people of God. They do not belong to God.

And as tempting as it is—as cathartic and even fun as it feels to jeer at the ridiculous Tweets or react to the latest outrage—we can give even that kind of behavior back to Caesar. Our energy and creativity needs to go elsewhere.

What *we* can give God is our time, our talent, and our treasure, as much as is possible to do so. Many of us marched yesterday for the dignity of all women and all persons—but that's just the beginning. We can call our Congresspeople every time we see a need, be that a confirmation hearing or another piece of unjust legislation; it takes about two minutes per Congressperson. We can help our Muslim neighbors in Bellevue as they rebuild their place of worship. Solnit has reminded us of tech companies that are refusing to build the software needed to register Muslims; and many Christians and Jews have pledged that *if* such a registry happens anyway, they will make sure their names are on the lists. We can openly and colorfully display our ONA status. We can write to our school districts to ask what plan they have in place to prevent bullying.

Individually, as a family, as a church, as a denomination, as a neighborhood, we can find creative ways to protect, to cherish, to resist evil, to build community.

Solnit says this task will be hard and ugly. But I promise you it will also be exciting, life-affirming, and loving, and even joyful. If you were in the streets yesterday, you know this is true. Prospect has a history of seeing injustice and responding in unexpected and creative ways. This is the time to step up. This is the time to focus on how we are already

coming together, and to figure out new ways to bring about justice, even in the face of this disaster—*especially* in the face of this disaster. This is the time to open our eyes and ears and hearts and brains to the moving of the Holy Spirit, as it guides us toward life, light, love, justice, and what belongs to God.