

What Exactly Belongs to God?

Exodus 33:12-23; Matthew 22:15-22

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Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and Give to God what is God's.

This is what Jesus says to the Pharisees and the followers of Herod: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's.

This text is almost always used as a text to explain why Good Christians should be good citizens and pay their taxes, even if they find themselves (as Jesus did) under the heel of an unjust ruler.

But I do not for one moment think this text is about paying taxes. Even though most Bibles (including the Message by Eugene Peterson) label this section, "Paying Taxes to Caesar."

If this exchange were about paying taxes and Jesus told these guys who were trying to trip him up, "just follow the law, already!" they would not have been amazed. I mean, "Do what you're told" is not a radical teaching, those are not words to be amazed by.

So based on their reactions—they were stunned into silence by his words, they walked away shaking their heads in amazement at his teaching—I do not think Jesus told them do what you're told and pay your taxes like good Roman citizens.

So what exactly did he say? What did Jesus say that struck these guys dumb?

For me, this time, as I have encountered and wrestled with this text, the key comes when Jesus asks about the coin. First of all, there is a lot going on here. Jesus has turned their scheme on its head. They thought they were in control. They thought they were going to trap him into saying something that might get him in trouble—big trouble. But Jesus turns the tables on them, and suddenly he is the schoolmaster, quizzing a group of not too smart school boys.

Do you have a coin? (by the way—they are not even supposed to have money on them, as it breaks the rules and defiles the Temple)

Do you have a coin?

Yes

Whose likeness do you see there?

Caesar's

Okay, these are questions that could be answered by any six year-old in the crowd. Jesus has made them look pretty foolish, in public, which in that time and place was a really big deal. He has won

this encounter by the rules of his society. He looks smart and they look dumb. He could just have quit right there. But he doesn't.

He says, Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and give to God what is God's.

Now, and here, I think, is the key to Jesus' words: according to Jesus, the coin belongs to Caesar because it has Caesar's likeness on it, so what belongs to God would be whatever has God's likeness on it.

I think everyone in that encounter, every participant and every observer, was immediately reminded of a central text of the Hebrew Scriptures, right there in the beginning:

26 Then God said, "Let us make humankind in our image, in our likeness, and let them take care of the fish of the sea and the birds of the air, over the livestock, over all the earth, ^[b] and over all the creatures that move along the ground."

27 So God created the human being in God's own image,
in the image of God created them;
male and female God created them.

This basic tenet of our faith declares: Human beings bear the likeness of God, we are made in the image of God.

Give to Caesar what is Caesar's; Give to God what is God's.

Jesus was living this out, wasn't he? He was busy giving himself to God; loving God with all his heart with all his strength with all his mind. From that moment in the desert when the dove came down and broke the world open and the Holy One's voice rang out:

This is my beloved child!

Jesus has been giving himself wholeheartedly to God.

And now, he invites the Pharisees and Herod followers, and those listening in the crowd and YOU and ME—he invites us to do the same: Jesus says,

GIVE TO GOD WHAT IS GOD'S!

We ought to be amazed at this teaching. We ought to be stunned into silence. We ought to go forth from this moment pondering in our hearts how can I give to God what is God's—how can I give myself?

We should not think Jesus just told us to be good little boys and girls and pay our taxes.

So my dear ones, let us be stunned together in this place. Let us be amazed at what the Rabbi has told us. And let us ponder what in the world it might mean to give God what is God's—what it might mean to give ourselves, body and soul, mind heart and strength to the Holy One who created us in such exuberant love.

This is the question I have been pondering all month: What does it mean to give myself to God?

This is a very difficult question, I think. So I ask your indulgence as I start by answering what it is not.

Giving yourself to God is not joining a convent, taking a vow of celibacy, or giving all your money to the poor. At least, not necessarily. I have thought about this a lot, and I do not think that giving ourselves to God will necessarily make our lives look all that different from the outside.

Imagine two parents, two teachers, two ministers engaged in lives that look all but identical to an outside observer, but one person is living that life out of grudging duty or bitter self sacrifice while the other person is living that life out as a love song to God.

Imagine two doctors, two lawyers, or two engineers engaged in lives that look all but identical to an outside observer, but one person is living that life to gain money or status, glory or fame while the other person is living out that life as the best, most genuine, most lovingly wholehearted way to give to God what is God's.

You do not have to be anyone but yourself. Liz Gilbert puts it this way in her book *Eat Pray Love*, quoting her spiritual teacher's central teaching:

God dwells within you, as you.

As you.

If there is one holy truth of this [teaching], that line encapsulates it. God dwells within you as you yourself, exactly the way you are. God isn't interested in watching you enact some performance of personality in order to comply with some crackpot notion you have about how a spiritual person looks or behaves. We all seem to get this idea that in order to be sacred, we have to make some massive dramatic change of character, that we have to renounce our individuality....

But no, to serve God, to know God, to love God, to give ourselves back to God—we should not become someone else. Instead we should become more and more fully ourselves, growing bit by bit and day by day into the people God dreams us to be.

Maybe that is the answer to my question. We give ourselves to God by becoming fully truly joyfully ourselves, the people God dreams and calls us to be.

I thought about using some famous examples here, telling stories of people who have lived lives of almost heroic faith, giving their lives to God. But the thing is, stories of people like Martin Luther King, Gandhi or Mother Theresa can make us want to throw in the towel before we even begin.

And in any case, their stories are kinda beside the point. Their stories can inspire us, give us courage and hope and tenacity. Their stories can touch us in the place of holy tears. But their stories cannot help us answer the question for ourselves. Because whatever it might look like for me or for you to give ourselves fully to God, it will not look like another King, another Gandhi, another Theresa.

There is a story of the Jewish Rabbi Souza who loved his teacher Yeshua. He tried to be like his teacher in every way. Of course, he never lived up to his aspirations. This depressed him greatly. So he went out alone and fasted and prayed, asking God to help him become better.

He returned from his days of prayer and fasting a changed man. He was calm and centered and almost shining. His students questioned him, wanting to know what had happened; how God had answered his prayers.

The Rabbi looked at all his students with great compassion and said I know only this. When I die, God will not ask me why I was not a better Yeshua, will not ask me why I was not a better Moses or Jacob. The only question the Holy One will ask is, my son, why were you not a better Souza?

God will not ask us why we were not like Martin Luther King, Ghandi, or Mother Theresa, not ask us why we were not more like Paul or Mary or Martha.

All God asks of us is to become more fully our own unique selves, our own true selves, our own best selves.

That is how we give ourselves to God. Not in one bold move. At least, not necessarily. Often we give ourselves to God slowly, over time, as we figure out who we really are. Overtime, as we learn to pray, to sit in Holy Stillness and listen for the One who calls us to ourselves. We give ourselves to God, taking baby steps, faithfully taken every day, toward our own wholeness. That is what the word Holy means, after all, wholeness.

So I cannot tell you how to give yourself to God. And you cannot tell me how to give myself to God. That is something each of us will have to work out for ourselves. However, we are community, and that means we do not seek alone. Indeed church can be a place—SHOULD be a place—where we nurture and support one another as we grow into our lives of faith, so that day by day and month by month and year by year we bear God more fully and freely everywhere we go.

Hear the good news, people of God. God made us, and made us to bear the image, the likeness of God. It is in our very DNA. If this is true, the more fully we shine, the more fully the divine shines through us.

Jesus is telling us to let ourselves shine.

The stories of our tradition tell us that God shined so brightly, so fully through Jesus of Nazareth, that we come to know God more fully through Jesus. And Jesus tells us again and again that we can do everything that he can. Again and again he invites us to follow him. He invites us to love God with all our hearts and all our minds and all our souls. And in today's reading, Jesus tells us to remember whose likeness we bear, and to whom we truly belong. He invites us to respond to the Holy One, creator of heaven and earth, great and small, with everything we have, or rather with everything we are.

May we find the strength, the courage, and the joy to give to God what is God's, today, tomorrow, and forever.

Amen