

A friend of mine pointed out that often, the Gospels relate Jesus telling a parable, and then giving a summary or “explanation” that apparently has nothing to do with the parable, like how last week, Jesus told the perplexing parable of the wedding banquet, and wrapped it up by saying, “For many are called, but few are chosen.” And my friend quite fairly asked, “What does that mean?”

There’s certainly room for interpretation, and I suggested to him, and now to you, that our perplexity, and the ensuing reflection and conversation, could be a benefit, not a problem. One of the best and worst things about Scripture is that the stories are stories, and not systematic theology, and the stories are often provocative and open-ended. Today’s story is a perfect example.

Jesus’s answer, “Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor’s, and to God the things that are God’s,” is eminently quotable, deceptively simple, and endlessly debatable. Some have argued that it means Christians always have to obey civil authorities, and others, that it means Christians never have to obey civil authorities! Obviously, both positions can’t be correct, and both sound too simple to be right. Ultimately, we have to think carefully, honestly, and deeply, and make a choice for ourselves.

So Jesus’s answer remains vital because it’s really a question in disguise. What belongs to Caesar, and what belongs to God? On the one hand, the markings on the tribute penny were unambiguous, but on the other, Dale Glass-Hess, a Mennonite, wrote, “It is inconceivable to me that Jesus would teach that some spheres of human activity lie outside the authority of God.”*

And, just because a person says something is so, doesn’t make it so. Only God can make reality with a statement. The coin that Jesus’s adversaries held up was most likely a Roman denarius, which would have borne the inscription, “Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus.” If that wasn’t enough, the back would have said, “Highest priest.”

Some people might have found that impressive, but it sounds a bit needy to me, not to mention being false. A Jewish half-shekel coin was inscribed simply, “half shekel.” No insecurity, nothing to prove. It just seems silly to me to use a piece of mass-produced money to articulate a religious claim. I mean, I do trust in God, but not because the Department of the Treasury told me to.

So you could argue that there are things that God did not create, things like sin. One example of sin is in the hearts of the enemies of Jesus, their determination to get rid of him. Another example is in their hands, the claim that the Emperor is a god, a lie embossed in silver. So the more subversive understanding of Jesus’s answer is that some things do belong to the Emperor, things like lies, conspiracies, and graven images, and out of this treasury should we repay him. But if we did, we’d be no better than he and his allies are, so what would that accomplish?

I would suggest that the tension and complexity of Jesus’s answer is

appropriately evocative of, and analogous to, the tension and complexity that often exists between Christians and civil authorities. I would also argue that such tension and complexity should exist, even if the civil authority itself is Christian. Another take on Jesus's answer is that when you do business with Caesar, don't be surprised when Caesar expects you to do business Caesar's way.

I'm reminded of how, in the 18th and early 19th centuries, the Church of England had effectively made itself irrelevant by becoming, in practice, little more than a government department — I've heard the Church of that period called the state's lapdog — and the people, understandably, lost interest. Fortunately, the Oxford Movement came along and challenged the prevailing notions about the Church's nature and identity. The movement's assertion of a vigorous, independent, apostolic church was controversial at first, but not only did the people take a renewed interest in their church, but the movement's assertions became mainstream. Today you'd be hard-pressed to find any Anglican bishops who believe they are bureaucrats, rather than the successors of the apostles.

So for us today, I would suggest that if we are completely comfortable and supportive of everything our country is doing, that on some level, we have failed as Christians, because that would mean we have allowed human beings, and not God, to determine good and evil, right and wrong. There's nothing wrong with being patriotic, and taking pride in the many great things our country has done, and is doing. But true patriots always want their country to be better, and aren't afraid to point out things that need to change. Mass incarceration; denial of opportunity based on race, ethnicity, sex, sexuality, class, etc; casual disregard or outright contempt for our neighbors in need; completely unnecessary violence; and thoughtless degradation of the environment come immediately to mind. Wanting our country to hold closer to Christian values doesn't only make us better Christians; I would argue it also makes us better citizens.

To come at the matter another way, our souls are precious to God. If our souls were coins, what would be inscribed on them? Would they say we owe worship to our country, our party, our heritage, our profession, or even to our money? Even if they did, it wouldn't be true. We owe worship to God, and only to God. Because our souls belong to God. They bear God's image, and of course, no one else is making souls — at least, as far as I know. So I try to remember always to put God first, not only in my life in the Church, but also in my life as a citizen, including my financial life.

The great thing about a vigorous identity and a clear priority is that they need no interpretation. Rather, they help us interpret our lives. So I try to remember that God is preeminent, and to act accordingly. Giving proportionally to the church, that is, considering my gift as a percentage of my income, rather than a dollar amount or "what I can spare," is medicine for my soul, for it reminds me to be grateful for everything I receive. Thinking of that gift as my top financial priority, ahead of savings, consumption, and even taxes, helps me to remember who I am, and whose I am. So I urge you to join

me in these practices, if you are not already doing so, because they have made my life better.

Perplexity can encourage us to be thoughtful and creative, but the Gospel makes some things crystal clear. Ultimately, coins and countries will pass away; in heaven, they will not exist. Only our souls will endure, because God made them. When we give ourselves to God, we can finally abide in grace and peace, because in that way we become who God intended us to be.

*in Peachey, Titus Silence and Courage: Income Taxes, War and Mennonites 1940–1993 MCC Occasional Paper #18, August 1993, p. 29, according to https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Render_unto_Caesar