

Empire versus God: Who Will You Serve?

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Matthew 22: 15-22

I was aware of hierarchy from a very early age – as the youngest member of my family, I had to be. I was the smallest and the weakest, the least developed intellectually and in size.

My brother, Randy, who had a slight disability, was six years older than I was, and during the difficult teenage years when having a disability is a really awful thing, I got teased a LOT by Randy. I was excluded from playing with his friends. It's wasn't a bad relationship, but it had those sibling dynamics that I'm sure many in the room can relate to. The truth is, my parents and my brother were in charge, and my ability to influence things was more due to my cuteness and ability to wheedle.

Another lens on my childhood was the notion of protesting – since I was in grade school during the 1960s, middle school at the beginning of the 1970s, and President Nixon resigned right as I was entering high school. It was a time when institutions began to lose authority, and a time when wearing a pin that said, "Question Authority" was a badge of honor. Since then, authority for some has gotten a bad rap. But I want to take a much longer view, back to the beginnings of human history.

Whether we like it or not, some people get authority over things, and this goes *way* back, even to the time of Hammurabi, whose code of law precedes the earliest Hebrew Scriptures by a good 800 hundred years. And those earliest codes rely on the good relationship of the leader to the God or Gods as the reason these authorities rule.

This doesn't change a lot over the millennia. The Hebrews rely on God's authority and providence for the structuring of their own society, and even their basic identity as the Hebrew people chosen by God. Authority and identity are bound together in our cultures and societies, just as authority and responsibilities are bound.

Authority can be used for ill or good, notes Jonathan Heidt in his book, *The Righteous Mind*, which examines six moral foundations found in cultures worldwide today. Dictators can abuse authority for their own prestige and gain, but authority used wisely creates trust and structure that increases the happiness and productivity of the community.

Lack of authority (see libertarian mindset here) can be just as problematic as the abuse of authority. Somalia is an African country in which the legitimate authority of the government failed, and now only thieves and gangs rule. It is chaos for all involved. Closer to home, the lack of authority by the Mexican government in dealing with its drug trafficking has resulted in mass murder and intimidation in a number of regions and cities, with the civic fabric fragmenting.

In Jesus' Time

During the time of Jesus, the authority of the day was the empire of Rome. This authority was the rule of law over all of Palestine, but it was also complicated by the relationship of the Jewish hierarchy to the Romans. The Romans, as gentiles and not believers in the one true God, found themselves designated as impure, and therefore good Jews would not eat with them or associate in business. One of the many reasons the tax collectors of the day were so unpopular and denigrated was that they were doing the bidding of the empire in their work.

The problems even filtered down to the coin of the Roman empire. The Roman coins carried the image of the Caesar or Emperor, and it usually said something like "so and so is the Son of God." The money that one had to pay taxes in showed Caesar Augustus.

For the Jews of this time, this is a big problem – they do not like images of people as gods (which they considered idols), so it was not considered proper to carry this money around. But you had to pay taxes, and you had to pay using this money, so Jews were in a pickle about what to do about this.

In a way, some of what Jesus had to deal with then, we have today as well. Several factions claimed to know how best to live according to God's rules. One group was a lay group, the Pharisees, that set themselves apart through their holy living – say, something akin to the Amish today, or Orthodox Jews, because they wanted nothing to do with the Romans who they considered unclean. Then there was a powerful group that had allied with the political forces – and made some compromises in their faith that they saw as acceptable, in return for other privileges. They are competing authorities.

So, these groups don't like each other at all, but they really want to trip up the up-and-coming Jesus, who's cutting into their profits and followings, and in their minds, subverting the authority that they had in mind. They devise a trick question to hopefully undercut Jesus and get him out of the way.

What is God's? What is Caesar's?

But Jesus sees them coming a mile away in this story, in which the problem of the coin that is a blasphemy and paying taxes come together.

The two groups come and ask Jesus this basic question that they hope is gonna bring him down: it is lawful to pay taxes to Caesar?

He doesn't want to answer directly – it would get him into trouble either with the Romans for telling people not to pay taxes (and subverting Roman authority), or with the Judeans who think the tax is blasphemy. So, what do you do when you don't want to answer a question? Ask a question instead!

Jesus asks to see a coin. As I mentioned before, any "good" Jew wouldn't be carrying one of these Roman coins around with the words that Caesar is a god on them, but they are! Point

one scored for the Jesus team.

Then he asks another question, whose image is on this? Now this carries more freight than it first appears, because every Judean knows that we as humans all carry the image of God, just like it says in the first chapter of Genesis, “male and female, we created them, in the image of God.” They know this, but they take the superficial road and say that it bears the image of Caesar, which it does. Point two scored!

Then, and only then does he respond at all to their original questions, distinguishing between what is Caesar’s and what is God’s.

Or does he really? What *is* God’s (our ultimate authority) if we want to get serious about this? If God created the whole world and everything belongs to God, then is anything really Caesar’s, even if it bears his likeness like the coin does?

And what about their question to him: What *are* the Judeans supposed to do about paying the taxes? Is it obvious to you, because it isn’t all that obvious to me. And the fact that the bunch of bible scholarship I looked at this week differs about the answer makes me think it is *not* all the obvious, which would have been a good thing for Jesus I think. Point three scored.

And the final point scored by Jesus is this: there is no mention that he gave the coin back to whomever provided it, and I can’t imagine anyone asking for it after that little discourse. Jesus got to make a profit along with his points.

With all the points getting racked up, and Jesus winning over the hypocrites, let’s stop for a minute and see what this all might imply for us as we deal with the issue of authority. If we want to think about moral authority as Jesus described it, it seems to me that these points are important.

1. Jesus does not want to end human authority – he wants to elevate God’s authority.
2. Other authorities are legitimate insofar as they build a world that allows for the expression and safety of the people, with mutual responsibilities and roles.
3. Subverting authority is ok – Jesus did it for good, and if it is like the American revolution, good things can come from it.

Conclusion

Friends, no authority on earth is final. There is a connection between authority and responsibilities. Our idea of representative democracy gives leaders certain rights, but also responsibilities. Our government’s systems of checks and balances helps to prevent abuse. Church orders (pastors, councils, trustees, etc.) give us in the church ways to organize ourselves on behalf of the whole without everyone having to do everything.

None of those authorities should pretend that they are God. Amen.