

Pledging allegiance: Matthew 22:15-22

Are service to God and to Caesar compatible?

by [Susan Pendleton Jones](#) in the [October 6, 1999](#) issue

As I was putting our nine-year-old son to bed, I bent down to kiss him goodnight. He reached up, pulled my face toward his, and gave me seven kisses—four down and three across—on my forehead. Then he looked me in the eye and said, "Mom, you are blessed."

"Did you realize you kissed me in the shape of a cross?" I asked him.

"Yep," he answered, "I planned it that way."

Over the years Ben had seen the sign of the cross made on other people's foreheads, with ashes during Lent and with water during services of baptismal renewal. But never had he seen the sign of the cross made on the forehead with kisses. From this little boy, often so full of mischief, I received an unexpected sign of grace from God, a reminder of the ways in which my life has been blessed, as well as the price that has been paid for those blessings.

Blessings are very much a part of our everyday life—we give them and receive them, from God and each other, almost on reflex. A word of grace offered, a sign of forgiveness shared. We extend a blessing and move on; we receive a blessing and feel good for the moment. Both as individuals and as a nation, we have gotten very used to being on the receiving end of blessings. We have holidays that commemorate them with flags flying, fireworks lighting up the sky, parades and family picnics—all celebrating our blessings of independence, of freedom, of peace and prosperity.

From whom do we receive the blessings of life and to whom, then, do we owe thanksgiving and allegiance? Is it God? Or is it America, our present-day Caesar? What do we owe to each? Are service to God and to Caesar compatible? Or are they competing loyalties that carry with them divergent senses of blessing?

To be sure, such questions always need the specification of the political contexts in which we find ourselves. Yet the question presses us at a fundamental level—for we Christians face a perpetual temptation to accept the promise of material blessings from political or economic systems in exchange for circumscribing our commitment to God.

Such was the trap laid for Jesus in the question, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" Some interpreters argue that Jesus's answer to the Pharisees and Herodians implies that we owe equal allegiance to the governing authorities and to God. The political realm and the religious realm place separate but equal demands upon us and we are obliged to obey both. The American flag standing in most of our churches reinforces this notion.

Yet it is hard to imagine that this answer would have caused the Pharisees and Herodians to leave this encounter with Jesus "amazed." The Pharisees and Herodians, as it turns out, were very strange bedfellows. The Herodians supported the continued rule of Palestine by those who descended from Herod, thus backing the Roman occupation. The Pharisees, on the other hand, as observant Jews, were offended at the thought of paying taxes to a foreign government.

Yet in this case they join forces in questioning Jesus and approach him with "malice," hoping to entrap him. The "enemy of my enemy is my friend" theory is at work here.

The flattering manner in which they frame their question makes their hypocrisy even more apparent. "You hypocrites," Jesus responds, "why are you putting me to the test?" He knows their motivation and frames his response accordingly. If he says yes, he will be in conflict with the religious authorities and the general population who oppose the foreign taxation; if he says no, he will be seen as a political revolutionary and a traitor to the regime. By asking the Pharisees and Herodians to provide the coin which is used to pay the taxes, he forces them to become personally involved in helping him circumvent the trap.

Jesus's question, "Whose image is this, and whose title?" echoes Genesis 1:27. The coin bears the image and title Tiberius Caesar, son of the Divine Augustus—idolatrous words and a painful reminder of oppression to a conquered people. Yet these are a people who know that they were created in the image of God, and though they live under subjugation, they continue to bear the image of God. The coin is a temporal thing that is given to Caesar in exchange for particular

"blessings," but the true blessing of life, of breath, of body, of soul, mind and spirit are from God and should be offered back to God. You, who bear the image of God, belong first and foremost to God. Allegiance to God and to Caesar do not occupy two separate realms; Caesar's realm is a limited one within the all-encompassing reign of God.

Yet Caesar is rarely content with limits. Jesus's claim carries a price. Within days of this exchange one of the charges brought against Jesus as he stands before Pilate is "forbidding us to pay taxes to the emperor" (Luke 23:2). Faithful service to God is always costly. Blessing and sacrifice are closely linked in Christian living, as even a nine-year-old boy was able to envision. When Ben kissed me on the forehead that night, he offered a challenging reminder of the price that was paid for the blessings we have received—kisses in the form of a cross.