

Gospel inefficiency in the age of DOGE

God doesn't count the same things we do.

by [Brandon Ambrosino](#)

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Century illustration

It's only February and we might already have our Word of the Year: "efficiency." As in the Department of Government Efficiency, created by President Donald Trump and [led](#), according to Trump, by Elon Musk. Officially, [the White House has walked back](#) Trump's original claim, which he posted on Truth Social, about Musk's

leadership, and maintains that Musk is not even a DOGE employee but simply “a patriot.” Regardless of his official title, he seems to be intimately involved with DOGE’s work, [which has inspired speculation](#) that he stands to gain from this work personally.

An Executive Order from President Trump makes it clear that “efficiency,” though never quite defined, has to do with the elimination of “waste” and “bloat” by way of [“reforming the federal workforce to maximize efficiency and productivity.”](#) According to Trump, there’s a lot of bloat in “The Bureaucracy,” which Musk calls the fourth branch of US government. Appearing with Musk and his four-year-old child at an Oval Office press conference, Trump [said](#) Musk’s team has “already found billions of dollars. Not, like, a little bit: billions, many billions of dollars. And when you get down to it, it’s going to be probably close to a trillion dollars.”

Musk says that [DOGE will cut \\$55 billion](#) from the annual US budget. Reporters have questioned the accuracy of this claim. *Politico*, reviewing DOGE’s first comprehensive public listing, called it [“messy” and “inaccurate.”](#) And the *New York Times* pointed out that [an \\$8 billion contract DOGE bragged about canceling was in reality just \\$8 million](#). Elizabeth Linos, a public policy researcher at Harvard, wondered if [the endgame is really the destruction of any recognizable form of US government](#). Whether Musk’s DOGE will save any real taxpayer money by dismantling public goods in the name of “efficiency” remains to be seen.

What is absolutely clear, though, is that people have lost their jobs. A lot of people. The number is tough to nail down, but the terminations number so far into the thousands and span multiple agencies, including the Department of Veteran Affairs, Department of Health and Human Services, National Parks Service, and the Internal Revenue Service. The Associated Press notes that by the time the dust settles, [hundreds of thousands of people will have lost their jobs](#).

Trump ran as a candidate who cared about the working class, which is tough to square with DOGE’s actions. Perhaps layoffs are at times unavoidable. Fair enough. But the glee with which these terminations have been celebrated is horrifying. These are our fellow citizens who have worked hard contributing to the public good, and in reward they were fired unceremoniously ([some of them had to piece the news together via Reddit threads](#)) and dismissed by their president as “bloat” and “waste.”

What's being lost in all of this talk about efficiency is the humanity of the very real people who are receiving these phone calls. You don't get the sense when listening to Musk and President Trump brag about eliminating waste that they have any concern for the working class people whose lives are being upended for the sake of—what? Politics? Winning another election? Shoring up their base?

Like many Americans, I'm in favor of balancing our budgets and prioritizing our spending. Inefficiencies ought to be addressed and corrected justly. If people—not jobs but *people*—must be let go, then let those who send the emails or make the phone calls proceed with compassion, foregrounding the dignity and concerns of those who are now tasked with finding creative ways to pay next month's rent.

All this talk about efficiency is deeply concerning for several reasons. First, it carries forward the mass media project of stripping persons of their personhood and dignity. To DOGE, people are numbers. To President Trump and Musk, they are described as bureaucratic bloat. To the President's supporters, they are collateral damage in the zero-sum game of American politics. But people are bigger than their jobs, and a nation's greatness is measured in ways that can't be tallied on a ledger. How is the common good being pursued? Are its citizens inspired to create art? Do they consider themselves bound to one another in mutual obligation and responsibility? Do government programs designed to help people who are down on their luck truly reflect the good will of taxpayers? Caring for people who do not (and in some cases—as in many of the disabled who will suffer from slashed DEI initiatives—cannot) contribute to the country's coffers is not efficient; and yet how can a nation who neglects its vulnerable ever be judged as great?

Pharaoh is a master of efficiency; God wants his people to waste their time.

An obsession with efficiency is at odds with the kind of beings we are. Humans are terribly inefficient. That's what makes us *us*. We waste time by telling jokes and listening to records and setting off fireworks. We tap dance and drink Old Fashioneds and read comics for no reason other than we want to. Much of what we do has no direct survival value. Our five-course meals go beyond the needs of sustenance; our romantic practices are in excess of our Darwinian urge to procreate.

Christians of all people ought to delight in inefficiency. Ours is a God of reckless, embarrassing waste. "[God is the prodigal who squanders himself](#)," says Karl Rahner. If Pharaoh commands his people to work 24/7, God insists his people take an entire

day off. Rest and rest well and rest regularly, God says. Pharaoh is a master of efficiency; God wants his people to waste their time.

It's no surprise, then, that one of the central actions of Jesus' ministry is table fellowship. Come, Jesus calls to some of society's most inefficient members, and let's waste the next few hours drinking and gorging on food and getting to know one another. If, during one of these parties, someone wants to waste expensive perfume on Jesus' feet, so be it! In God's kingdom, the name of the game is extravagance. There's no need to worry there won't be enough. This king owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Psalm 50:10).

Of course, you probably can't run a country this way. Checkbooks have to be balanced. People like me, who swipe credit cards without much thought, need to be reined in by people like my husband, who know how to count. (We might start, for instance, with taking a look at the [lavish tax breaks](#) enjoyed by Musk's companies, and Trump's [taxpayer-funded trips](#) to Florida and all those golf clubs.)

The problem isn't primarily what "efficiency" rhetoric will do to the economy but what it's already doing to our moral imaginations. Some of my conservative friends who are cheering on Musk's team seem to believe that the morality of this administration, and the new direction in which it's taking this country, ought to be judged solely by how much money it's cutting from the budget. But there are more important ways of judging a nation: its character, the kindness of its leadership and citizens, its artistic and cultural achievements, its shared understanding of the common good. I don't know how efficient these things are, but history will certainly judge us by these categories.

So, it seems, will God. One of the lessons we've learned from our inherited biblical and moral traditions is that God isn't fooled by wealth so we shouldn't be either. God counts differently than we do. That's the lesson of Jesus' parables of the lost coin and the lost sheep and the lost son. If you lose something or someone, you should be sad about that loss, and you should work hard to restore it. So, inefficient as it is, forget about the 99 and waste your time looking for the insignificant one. Likewise, don't celebrate the nine coins you have; set them aside and go hunt for the inconsequential penny. You might be tempted to write off these losses as gains in efficiency, but God, it seems, isn't okay with our losing count of any of his gifts.

Like it or not, we are all—DOGE employees and protestors, red-hat-wearers and their opponents—each other's gifts. And God is taking note of how we decide to account

for one another.