



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

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## **"Give to Caesar What is Caesar's"**

*A Sermon delivered by Rev. Dr. Benjamin Boswell at Myers Park Baptist Church  
on October 15<sup>th</sup>, 2023, from Matthew 22:15-22*

I'm not sure if you've noticed but it seems like every other ad on television these days is about sports betting. Recently, one of our members shared an ad with me from Caesars sportsbook. In it, black comedian J.B. Smoove is dressed as Caesar with his arms open, screaming in victory and the quote above his head states, "WE ARE ALL CAESARS!" (repeat) Before I deconstruct the theology of this ad, you should know the same church member insightfully told me you can read the phrase in two different ways. On the one hand, "WE ARE ALL CAESARS!" can mean "We are all kings and queens, emperors and royalty, the Lords and Ladies of our own castle." On the other hand, "WE ARE ALL CAESARS!" can mean "We are Caesar's children, offspring, custody. We belong to Caesar, we're owned by Caesar, we're Caesar's possession." All it takes is an apostrophe for the ad to say, "We are all Caesar's property."

The question is "Are we all little Caesars (I'm not talking about the pizza)? Are we all Caesar's or are we all Caesar's with an apostrophe? Are we royalty or property? Owners or the owned? Possessors or the possession? Custodians or the custody?" This is not a simple question with a simple answer because as people living in the American Empire, there are many ways in which we find ourselves possessed by Caesar without even realizing it. American culture seeks to convince us that instead of one person being Caesar we all get to be Caesars, but this is nothing more than a mask for the tyranny of individualism, which obscures the fact there are true Caesars who have us under their thumbs and seek to have dominion over our hearts, minds, and bodies. Convincing us that we are all Caesars is the perfect trick to blind us from the fact that in reality we're all Caesar's, with an apostrophe "s."

Things were much clearer in first century Judea. The Roman empire was not trying to trick anyone into believing they were Caesar. Instead, they made it abundantly clear to the entire world there was only one Caesar, and it was Augustus, the emperor of Rome. When the Roman Army conquered a region, they would subjugate the people by requiring them to render what was called a "tribute" or a special imperial tax. Levying tribute was one of the primary reasons for imperial conquest and the principal way Rome became wealthy. When the coffers were running dry, they would conquer another region and require the people to pay a tribute. In Judea, people were already paying taxes to fund Herod's building projects as well as tithes and offerings to the Temple. Now, on top of all that, all the residents of Judea were required to pay a tribute of 25% of all they produced to their Roman imperial rulers once a year. And you thought our taxes were high!



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Adding insult to injury, the Roman tribute could not be paid in ordinary currency such as a Jewish *shekel* or a Greek *drachma*. It had to be paid with a Roman *denarius*, which required an exchange fee on top of the tax itself. As you can imagine, for the average Jewish person who was heavily taxed, deeply indebted, and living hand to mouth by subsistence farming the Roman tribute was extremely controversial and widely despised. Yet, to make matters worse, the tribute was an affront to their faith as well. Every *denarius* had the image of Caesar and the inscription, "Caesar Augustus Tiberius, son of the Divine Augustus." So, the coin contained both a "graven image" and a declaration that Caesar was God. Therefore, most Jews living at the time of Jesus believed to hold a *denarius* in one's possession, let alone to pay the tribute, was a direct violation of the first two of the ten commandments "you shall have no other gods before me" and "you shall not make for yourself an idol from anything in heaven, or on the earth, you shall not bow down or worship them." The problem was that the Romans viewed any refusal to pay the tribute as tantamount to an insurrection and crucified anyone who resisted the taxation, so most people in occupied Judea held their noses and paid the tax.

Around the time Jesus was born, a Galilean named Judas and a Pharisee named Zadok started a Jewish movement called "the Fourth Philosophy" that went beyond the three primary Jewish sects of the time—the Sadducees, Pharisees, and Essenes. According to historian Josephus, the fourth philosophy agreed with the views of the Pharisees in everything except they had an "unconquerable passion for freedom since they take God as their only leader and master." Judas the Galilean and Zadok the Pharisee protested the census of Quirinius that is the backdrop of the Christmas story because they knew the Roman tribute would be imposed and they believed the tribute amounted to slavery. They opposed direct Roman rule over Judea and reproached their fellow Jews not to pay taxes to the Romans. We don't know what eventually happened to Judas or Zadok, but we know their teaching led to a widespread belief in liberation among young people in Judea and evolved into a group called "the Zealots." Josephus blamed the fourth philosophy for poisoning the minds of the youth, leading to all-out war with Rome, and causing the destruction of the Temple.

Like Judas, Jesus was from Galilee, which means he grew up with the fourth philosophy and authorities would have assumed he was part of the movement. In the beginning, the Pharisees attempted to question Jesus, but all their efforts to undermine his teachings failed. So, when Jesus arrived in Jerusalem for Passover, they knew the stakes were high. Freedom and liberation would be on the hearts and minds of every Jewish person in the city. So, in an act of desperation, the Pharisees changed their tactic and moved from questioning Jesus to trying to trap him.



# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Our story today is the first of three traps they laid for Jesus and for this particular trap they conspired with some Herodians or court officials to amplify the potential consequences if Jesus stumbled. Jesus had just turned over the tables of the money changers and condemned the Temple and the high priests. They knew his direct condemnation of them was also an indirect attack on the Roman imperial order in Palestine, so they came up with a way to get Jesus to express his resistance to the empire publicly and explicitly by teaching people not to pay the controversial tribute to Rome.

The Pharisee's trap was diabolical. They called Jesus, "Rabbi" or "Teacher" even though they didn't believe his teachings. Then they tried to disarm him with vain flattery saying, "we know you are sincere and teach the way of God in accordance with truth and show deference to no one; for you do not regard people with partiality." You can almost hear Jesus think to himself, "Boy is it getting deep in here." But then they suddenly brought down the hammer, "Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not?" If Jesus said "No," they would have him arrested on the spot for treason against the empire, he'd be branded a rebel, tried as an insurrectionist, and crucified by the end of the day. If Jesus said "Yes," he'd lose his followers who were serious about the law and the prophets and hoping for freedom from imperial subjugation. Not to mention, it's obvious Jesus did not believe in the tribute, so if he said "yes" he'd also be lying and would have betrayed his own integrity. It was the perfect trap—one of the greatest "Catch 22s" of all time—a no win situation.

This week as we witnessed the horrific violence in the Middle East many of us found ourselves in a similar situation. The brutal surprise attack by Hamas that murdered 1,300 Israeli civilians, injured thousands more, and the kidnapping of 150 hostages left us shocked, shaken, and enraged. It was especially traumatic for our Jewish neighbors in Israel, America, and all over the world—as a people who have been the victims of oppression, violence, and genocide for thousands of years. Many of us quickly condemned the atrocities of Hamas and sent out our heartfelt support for the Israelis. But then Israel's swift and brutal response of cutting off power and water and engaging in a full on bombardment of Gaza killing 2,000 people, threatening a ground siege and forcing a mass evacuation of 1.1 million Palestinians also left many of us shocked, shaken, and enraged—a stark demonstration of the massive power differential between the occupier and the occupied, as well as a reminder of the painful history of 100 year old conflict that we, as Americans, share the burden of responsibility for creating.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

Like so many of my friends and colleagues, I found myself feeling conflicted and trapped unable to speak—not knowing what to say. I believe the Jewish people have a right to a homeland of safety and security, but I do not consider myself a Zionist. I believe the Palestinian people have a right to self-determination and a homeland of safety and security as well, but I do not support Hamas or any other violent military groups. However, we all discovered that if you condemn Hamas and support Israel you will quickly be labeled “Islamophobic” and accused of not understanding the Palestinian people’s 100-year fight for liberation. On the other hand, if you condemn Israel and support Palestine you will quickly be labeled “Anti-Semitic” and accused of not understanding the Jewish people’s 100-year fight for safety. It felt like a Catch 22 situation. Look how many different activist groups condemned Israel’s violence but not Hamas or condemned Hamas’s violence but not Israel. We were all left asking, “How do we stand with Israeli’s without being Zionist or Islamophobic? And how do we stand with Palestinian’s without being Anti-Jewish or Anti-Semitic?”

I was asked by an organization to help them draft a statement and I feared I was at a loss about what to say. After praying for discernment what came to me was, “This is the time to rehearse the history of this conflict, to nurse old wounds, to share perspectives about the State of Israel, to argue about who has a right to the land, to pontificate about the ethics of the American government’s unwavering support for occupation, apartheid, open-air prisons, or to theoretically discuss the possibilities of a two-state solution. The time for those things will come later.” Instead, I wrote, “The first and foremost thing for us to do in the wake of this extreme violence is to grieve and mourn the tragic loss of life—both Israeli and Palestinian lives, Jewish and Muslim lives.”

Grief must always come first and if there appear to be limits on our grief, we must honestly interrogate why we can only grieve for the loss of some lives. “Second,” I wrote, “If we must condemn something then we must condemn all violence against innocent civilians no matter who has committed that war crime, regardless of whether it is provocative or reactionary.” “Then and only then” I stated, “Can we offer our prayers for the people of Israel and Palestine, show our solidarity with Jews and Muslims around the world, and begin to engage in the work of peace.” As people of faith, we can always express grief over the loss of life, we can always condemn violence against innocent civilians, we can always offer prayers, show solidarity, and work together for peace.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

An elder of mine reminded me this week of the Buddhist text, the Vimalakirti Sutra, where Buddha says, "In times of war one should give rise in yourself to the mind of compassion, and help living beings abandon the will to fight." (repeat) Horrific violence and war does not simply threaten the lives and souls of the people on the ground in the Middle East; it threatens the lives and the souls of every human being on the face of the earth. During times of war the forces of violence and death have the power to take up residence inside every one of us and harden our hearts toward our neighbors. The forces of violence and death can wreak havoc on all of us by making us feel like we're in Catch 22 situations, that we must choose sides in a conflict, that we must judge who's right and who's wrong, or sanctify one group's violence while condemning the other, or dehumanize and demonize our enemies and to glorify our allies. Or worse, to decide that some must die so others can live. War anywhere in the world is a war for our hearts and souls. So, we must be on guard lest the forces of violence and death overtake us, and we lose our own humanity. In times of war, we should give rise in ourselves the mind of compassion, and help living beings abandon the will to fight. That is what it means to be people of peace and love in a time of violence and death.

The Pharisees tried to get Jesus to choose between endorsing Roman violence against his own people or endorsing a violent uprising against the Roman empire, but Jesus chose peace instead. Many would-be revolutionaries had come before Jesus from the same backwater region of Galilee and not only to refused to pay the tribute but summoned their followers to take up arms against their Roman oppressors. The Pharisees and Herodians hoped Jesus would follow that path and fall in the same trap. But Jesus cunningly maneuvered around the trap they set for him and laid one of his own. Aware of their malice, he said, 'Why are you putting me to the test, you hypocrites? Show me the coin used for the tax.' He tricked them into "showing their hand." The very fact the Pharisees were able to produce a coin with Caesar's image meant they were carrying one around, which betrayed their loyalties. Then he said to them, 'Whose head is this, and whose title?' When they answered, 'Caesars.' Then he said, 'Give therefore to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.'"

Every Jew in the first century would have understood that everything belongs to God and nothing to Caesar. Therefore, while Jesus did not explicitly refuse the payment of the tribute, in this cagy reply he made it clear the Israelites did not owe anything to Caesar. One of the reasons so many of us struggled to know how to feel, what to think, or what to say in the wake of the violence in Israel and Gaza is because we think we owe something to Caesar. The war in the Middle East has nothing to do with the true faith at the heart of Islam, Judaism, or Christianity.



## MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

But it has everything to do with the religion of empire. Every religious tradition has peace and love for all of humanity at its core, yet any religious tradition that intertwines itself with the project of empire becomes toxic, violent, and deadly. As Christians in America, we do not get to stand back and say, "Oh those poor Israelis and those poor Palestinians." We must take responsibility for the fact that our own version of empire religion--imperial Christianity—is what created this mess.

Jews found safe harbor in Muslim nations until we marched in and killed them both during the Crusades. It was the Anti-Semitism from our religion that made the world a violence place for Jews and required the need for a homeland. It was Western imperialism that made a mess of the Middle East, and America is the nation that has stamped out every movement for democracy in the Arab speaking world to protect our access to oil, money, and power. Before we cast aspersions on the Israeli government or Hamas, we must look closely at ourselves and take responsibility for what we have done and who we've become. We are the new Roman Empire; therefore, Jesus looks at the American church and says, "You hypocrites. Stop giving Caesar your hearts, minds, bodies, and souls. Give America what is America's and give to God what is God's.

How do we know if we belong to Caesar, if we are owned by Caesar, if we are possessed by Caesar. How do we know if we are Caesar's with an apostrophe "s"? If we side only with Israel and not with Palestinians, then we are Caesar's. If we side only with the Palestinians and not with Israel, then we are still Caesar's. If we side only with Jews and not with Muslims, then we are still Caesar's. If we side only with Muslims and not with Jews, then we are still Caesar's. If we side with America and its interests in the world and not with all the other nations and people's longing to be free, then we are still Caesar's. If we are not condemning all forms of violence and working for peace, then we are still Caesar's. If we are not rejecting every attempt to make us choose sides with violence, then we are still Caesar's. If we can't keep from conflating religions with empires, we are still Caesar's. If we can't distinguish Judaism from Israel, Islam from Hamas, and Christianity from America then we're still trapped in the religion of empire, and we are still Caesar's.

I don't know about you, but I don't want to be Caesar's anymore! I don't want to belong to Caesar, to be owned by Caesar, to be possessed by Caesar anymore. I've given enough of my life to Caesar. We belong to God. And if we belong to God then when give to God what is God's, then we will give all of ourselves—heart, mind, body, and soul, and that means there will be nothing left for Caesar.





# MYERS PARK BAPTIST CHURCH

Inclusivity | Spirituality | Community | Justice

The forces of violence and death--Caesar and all his friends are trying everything they can to gain power over us. But we do not have to let him in. We do not have to succumb to the false choices and zero-sum games of our culture. We can be people who follow the prince of peace, the one who came preaching peace, and the who wept over Jerusalem saying, "O Jerusalem, O Jerusalem, if only you knew the things that make for peace."

Who will we be in this time of war? Will we practice the religion of empire or the religion of Jesus? Will we be Caesar's or will we be God's? Will we be overcome by the forces of violence and death that wage war on our hearts, minds, souls, and bodies, or will we be people of love, justice, and peace. Let us all make a solemn vow, that in this time of war, we will not lose our ourselves, we will not lose our humanity, we will not succumb to the forces of violence and death. we will give rise in ourselves the mind of compassion, and we will do whatever in our power to help all living beings abandon the will to fight. Let us pledge that in this time of war we will not be Caesar's, we will be people who belong to the God of peace. Amen.