

Rigged outcomes are nothing new under the sun. Slot machines, Ponzi schemes and chain letters all operate on the basis of stacked odds. Or consider the medieval test for determining if someone was a witch. Water was held to be a pure substance that would reject impurity. So, bind the accused with rope and toss them in deep water. If they float, the water proves their impurity. Execution follows. If they sink, they are innocent. The drawback is that they will drown – but, the rationalization went, they will die vindicated. For all so accused: heads I win, tails you lose.

Today's story in Matthew tells of a trap meant to ensnare Jesus. To lull Jesus into a false sense of security, his opponents begin with an effusive gush of praise in the Rabbi's direction. Jesus is told in short order: *we know you are sincere, a truth-telling teacher of God, impartial*. And then, just when Jesus might be thinking these have to be his best friends in the whole world – BAM! The trap slams shut. *Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor or not?*

To say the question is loaded – the outcome rigged – is a gross understatement. To answer yes to handing over hard-earned money to Caesar's agents would risk the crowd's wrath. It might even land Jesus on some Zealot's hitlist. But to answer no, that Caesar is owed nothing: Jesus risks offending the Roman provincial government, whose fortress known as the Antonia loomed ominously right next to the Temple. Make your choice, Jesus. Heads we win, tails you lose!

Jesus had overturned tables when he entered the city a few days prior. Now, Jesus' answer turns the tables on interrogators. Caesar's head on a coin flips the outcome of who wins and who loses. *Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, give God what belongs to God*. Matthew, Mark and Luke all report the reaction of Jesus' opponents: *amazement*. Amazed to be ensnared in their own trap. The Gospels use that same verb to describe disciples when Jesus stilled a stormy sea. *Amazed!*

Jesus' answer did not expire when Caesar Augustus drew his last breath, nor when the empire he ruled collapsed. The matter still resonates today: Where *do* you draw the line between what belongs to God and what belongs to any human authority, governmental or otherwise? Truth be told, that is *always* the call that disciples must make with the Spirit's guidance. For when contemporary counterparts of Caesar infringe on what belongs to God: what is our answer?

For Reflection and Action:

How might one of the questioners describe this encounter: at home; at synagogue?
How has "Give Caesar and God what belongs to them" played out in the church's history?
What guideposts might serve the church's faithful discernment in such issues today?