

Balance sheet: Matthew 22:15-22

by [Judith Johnson-Siebold](#) in the [October 4, 2005](#) issue

*Then he said to them, "Whose head is this, and whose title?" They answered, "The emperor's." Then he said to them, "Give therefore to the emperor the things that are the emperor's, and to God the things that are God's." (Matt. 15:20-21)*

I was emphasizing to parents of confirmands that the young people should be with their families in worship as part of their preparation for membership. "I'm afraid we don't have time for worship," one mother told me after the meeting. Her words were soothing and gentle, yet they sounded condescending, as if she were explaining something to a not-very-bright child. "We've committed to soccer and cheerleading for my youngest on Sunday mornings. We have a full plate. Maybe in a few years."

This same woman had been adamant that her children be baptized and confirmed. Although she and her family could fit in brief forays into religious rites, other activities were more important than a steady commitment to the church.

Jesus' admonition to render unto Caesar what is Caesar's is a clever response, perhaps one that is appropriate for those of us who have trouble deciding what goes to Caesar and what to God. Rather than parceling out some money for Caesar and some for God, Jesus may have been making the point that nothing belongs to Caesar. Since everything ultimately belongs to God, he was saying that what we believe we own or is due us is actually only on loan to us. Caesar's wealth was not his to keep, and neither is ours. Christians believe that we are accountable to God for the gift of love and the way we use that gift. We are asked not to keep God in some sort of equal balance with all the other demands on our lives but to make sure that God takes second place to nothing and no one else. This principle was stated in the Ten Commandments: "You shall have no other gods before me."

Busy, well-meaning Christians often complain about how hard it is to balance church activities with everything else. We want to do it all rather than select certain activities as top priority and let other activities go. We do not want to sacrifice "alone time," family time, travel time or shopping time for corporate worship. So we forego worship. We give God the balance left over when everything else has been

accomplished.

God, however, does not belong on an equal par with work or recreation; God deserves to take first place in our lives. This may involve sacrifice, a seemingly harsh word that comfort-loving, convenience-seeking people do not like.

My nine-year-old daughter was invited to a Saturday afternoon birthday party which was to end at 4 p.m. Then plans changed, and the party was set to extend through Sunday morning.

“The girls won’t sleep all night, of course,” the mother told me. My husband and I were left with a dilemma. Should we let our daughter spend the night, knowing we would need to pick her up before worship and she would be in a foul mood from lack of sleep? Should we let her spend the night and skip worship just this once? Or should we risk her displeasure with us and interrupt the fun by picking her up just before bedtime? In the end we decided to pick her up before bedtime. Ours wasn’t a monumental decision, yet our lives consist of small choices like these, choices that add up over time.

Thomas R. Kelly was a Quaker missionary, educator, speaker, writer and scholar. In *A Testament of Devotion*, he wrote:

We are trying to be several selves at once, without all our selves being organized by a single, mastering Life within us. Each of us tends to be, not a single self, but a whole committee of selves. . . . And each of our selves is in turn a rank individualist, not cooperative but shouting out his vote loudly for himself when the voting time comes. . . . It is as if we have a chairman of our committee of many selves within us who does not integrate the many into one but who merely counts the votes at each decision, and leaves disgruntled minorities. . . . We are not integrated. We are distraught. We feel honestly the pull of many obligations and try to fulfill them all. . . . Life is meant to be lived from a Center, a divine Center. . . . Most of us, I fear, have not surrendered all else, in order to attend to the Holy Within.

These words aptly describe our dilemma, but the solution—surrendering all to God—does not sit well with busy families, who appear to fear being involved in fewer activities than their neighbors. Many young parents seem to feel that their children

must participate in many activities to be well-rounded. Such parents fail to understand that having a solid religious foundation is key to their child's maturation.

Writing in the January 2005 issue of Interpretation magazine, Robert Sherman states that we need to order our "lives in such a way that the Lord's time [becomes] sovereign," which could "become the means by which a gracious God liberates us from the tyranny of seemingly implacable and ultimately pointless time." Without allegiance to the Maker of time itself, we are at the mercy of every request. When we place our schedules in God's hands, however, we are given one day in seven to hold as holy. How liberating it is to be able to say, "No, we can't attend. We'll be at church."