REFLECTION · IN THE REGISTER OF G. K. CHESTERTON

Here, You Have What Is Yours

A layman's musing on a coin, a buried talent and a broken jar. Food for thought, not teaching.

Richard Verver · October 2026

There is a joke in the Gospel that nobody laughs at, because we have heard it too often to notice that it is a joke. Men come to Our Lord in the Temple courts with a trap, and a very good one. Is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar, or not? If he says yes, he is a collaborator; if he says no, he is a rebel, and there are Herodians standing by to take a note. And he does a thing so simple that it is easy to miss. He does not reach into his own purse. He says: show me the coin. And they show him one.

Look at what they produced. The silver denarius of Tiberius carried the emperor's head, and round it the words *TI CAESAR DIVI AVG F AVGVSTVS*: Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus. On the other side it said *PONTIF MAXIM*: high priest. So here, in the house of the one God, men who would not have tolerated a graven image on the Temple wall produce from their own belts a graven image of a man who calls himself the son of a god and the high priest, and they hand it to the Son of God, who is the High Priest. And he asks them, whose image is this, and whose inscription? I have always suspected that he asked it with a perfectly straight face. He has not answered their question yet, and they have already lost.

Then comes the answer. Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's. It is tempting to make it cleverer than it is, and to say that nothing belongs to Caesar at all, since the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. That is true, and it proves too much. Our Lord does not deny Caesar the coin. He puts Caesar in his place, which is a lower place than Caesar supposed, and a real one. To Caesar's own man in Jerusalem he will say, a few days later, that he would have no power at all unless it had been given him from above. Caesar's "mine" is a steward's "mine." The coin is his in the way the cellar keys are the butler's. The house belongs to somebody else, and the somebody else is coming back.

The old writers saw where the second half of the sentence goes. Tertullian put it with his usual economy: give the image of Caesar, which is on the coin, to Caesar, and the image of God, which is on man, to God. The coin bears Caesar's face; you bear God's, and you have borne it since Genesis. So the trap, which was a question about what we owe the emperor, turns in Our Lord's hand into a far more dangerous question about what we owe God, when the thing stamped with his image is ourselves. It is the kind of answer that makes a man check his pockets and find himself in them.

The Church, in the year of the Sunday lectionary that gives us this Gospel in October, gives us a month later a story that answers that question, the wrong way. A man going on a journey entrusts his property to his servants. Two of them trade with it and double it. The third digs a hole in the ground and hides his master's money. And when the master comes back to settle accounts, this servant makes a little speech. Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter; so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.

I want to defend this man for a moment, because he deserves a better hearing than he usually gets. He did not steal. He did not waste. He did not lose a penny. He did exactly what every sensible institution in the world does with something precious: he kept it safe. He handed it back in the condition in which he received it, and he said, with perfect accuracy, here, you have what is yours. And he is the one who is thrown into the outer darkness. I can only conclude that of all the ways of refusing a gift, the most polite is to give it back unopened, and the most final.

Look again at his accusation, because it gives him away. Gathering where you did not scatter. A friend who knows Greek better than I do points out that the verb is *diaskorpizō*, and that it is the wrong verb to deny of this particular master. If there is one thing the God of the Gospels does, it is scatter. The sower in the parable flings his seed on the path and the rock and the thorns as if seed cost nothing, which, to him, it does not. The servant believed in a God who gathers and does not scatter, and a man who believes in that God will bury everything he is given, because the only safe thing to do with a gatherer's money is to keep it in one piece. He was not lazy. He was orthodox about the wrong God.

The same mistake turns up in a better man, and in a form we hear every week. When Our Lord first tells the disciples that he must go up to Jerusalem and suffer and be killed, Peter takes him aside and rebukes him. Our Bibles say "God forbid, Lord!" or "Far be it from you!" but the Greek is *Hileōs soi, Kyrie*, which means something nearer to "Mercy on you, Lord," or "God be gracious to you." Peter invokes the mercy of God to keep the Son of God off the cross. It is the most natural sentence in the world. I have heard it all my life from good people, in the form that it is by God's mercy we are spared. And the answer Peter received was "Get behind me, Satan," followed at once by the sentence about the talents in another key: whoever would save his life will lose it. Peter wanted the talent buried. The cross was not an interruption of God's mercy. It was the shape of it.

What, then, does it look like not to bury it? Not, I think, a very tidy life. The answer the Gospels give is embarrassing to people like me, who make a living out of the careful application of rules. It looks less like the scribes and more like the tax collectors and the prostitutes, who, Our Lord told the chief priests to their faces, were going into the kingdom ahead of them. I do not commend the far country. But I notice that St Luke uses the servant's verb for the prodigal son, who "squandered" his inheritance there, *diaskorpizō* again, and for the unjust steward accused of "wasting" his master's goods. The prodigal scattered with both hands. He was doing the divine thing on nothing, which is a forgery of the Sower; but a forgery

is at least a copy of something real. The prodigal was a bad imitation of God. The servant with the spade was a very good imitation of a hole.

Then St Matthew, just before the Passion, gives us the right picture, and gives it to us at a dinner party. A woman comes to Our Lord at table in Bethany with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment, and pours it over his head. The disciples are indignant. "Why this waste?" The word is *apōleia*, which means waste, and loss, and ruin, and in other places perdition. St Mark and St John put a price on it: three hundred denarii, a year's wages; three hundred of Caesar's little silver faces, poured out over God's anointed. In St John it is Judas who objects, and it is Judas whom Our Lord will call, a few chapters later, the son of *apōleia*: the son of the waste. In St Matthew the very next thing Judas does is go to the chief priests and sell his master for thirty pieces of silver. There you have the two economies side by side on a single page. One person spends three hundred on him; another sells him for thirty. Our Lord calls the waste a beautiful thing, and says that she has anointed his body for burial. She is the only person at that table who has understood about the cross, and she understood it by spending.

This is why I do not think the line between the saint and the sinner runs between spending and keeping. The prodigal spends and the woman spends; the scribe keeps and the servant keeps. The line runs through the spending, and it is a line of direction. That is exactly what the New Testament's word for conversion says, if you let it. *Metanoia* is a change of mind, a thinking-again. The prophets' word for it, *shuv*, is a turning round, which the Greek Bible renders *epistrephō*; and St Peter, preaching in Solomon's Portico, puts them side by side: repent, and turn. The prodigal does both, in that order. He came to himself, which is the *metanoia*; and he said, I will arise and go to my father, which is the turning. His feet had been moving the whole time. That is what scattering is. Conversion did not have to set him walking. It only had to turn him round. The scribe's difficulty is that there is nothing to turn. You cannot turn round a man who is standing perfectly still beside a hole.

So we come back to the coin. If we bear God's image, then we are the coin, and the question of what we render to God has only one answer. There are two ways of giving it. One can bury oneself: keep safe, guard against loss, risk nothing, and at the end hand oneself back intact with a little speech about how hard a master he was. Or one can be broken and poured out like nard, which the sensible people at the table will call waste and Our Lord will call beautiful. I will not pretend the second way is safe. It is not. Nor do I think we are asked to do it alone. Even the one man who carried the cross perfectly did not carry it the whole way alone. On the road out of the city they found Simon of Cyrene coming in from the country and laid it on him too, and I take that as permission for the rest of us to be helped.

I should say what this is not. It is not a doctrine; I have no authority to make doctrines, and would think less of anyone who took this for one. It is not a licence for the far country, which is a real country with real famines in it. And it is not a sneer at prudence, which is a cardinal virtue and keeps a great many talents from being thrown in the river. It is only a layman's observation that the servant who did nothing wrong was the one sent out, and the woman who did something extravagant was the one remembered wherever

the Gospel is preached. There are two ways of saying “here, you have what is yours.” One is said over a hole in the ground. The other is not said at all. The woman at Bethany said nothing. She broke the jar.

TEXTS Mt 22:15–22; Gn 1:27; Ps 24:1; Jn 19:11; Mt 25:14–30; Mt 13:3–9; Mt 16:21–25; Mt 21:28–32; Lk 15:11–24; Lk 16:1; Mt 26:6–16; Mk 14:3–9; Jn 12:1–8; Jn 17:12; Mt 4:17; Acts 3:19; Mt 27:32; Mk 15:21; Tertullian, *De idololatria* 15. A personal reflection, offered as food for thought; not teaching.

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