

Sermon Series: Shekels

December 8, 2013

## **Title: Whose Image?**

Text: Mark 12:13-17

Summary: Who do we really belong to? An earthly system that measures us by what we're worth in monetary terms? Or the God who created us? How you answer this question determines how you do everything else.

## **Census**

### **Setting a Trap:**

A group of men gathered around the rabbi from Galilee as he taught under one of the great public halls in the temple complex. They were a strange mix: some were religious patriots, others were pragmatic political types. Pharisees and Herodians. But they were on the same mission: to find a way to get Jesus to say something incriminating.

To put him off guard they began the discussion with some blatant flattery:

### **Mark 12:14a NIV**

**They came to him and said, "Teacher, we know that you are a man of integrity. You aren't swayed by others, because you pay no attention to who they are; but you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth."**

Then came the "gotcha" question:

### **Mark 12:14b-15a NIV**

**"Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? Should we pay or shouldn't we?"**

### **Census:**

Their question was a seemingly simple one: just answer "yes" or "no." But like all "gotcha" questions, neither answer was safe. To understand just how dangerous this question was all we need to do is look at one word -- the word "tax."

The original word for "tax" or "imperial tax" in the story is the little Greek word *kenson*. It was actually a word borrowed from the Latin word *census*. This tax was a tax imposed on all non-Romans, due each year. It was called "census" because the Romans had conducted a census to determine the tax roles.

The Jewish historian Josephus tells us that the Romans had conducted a census of Judea and Galilee some 25 years earlier under the Syrian governor Quirinius. And that census had caused quite a stir!

The census was conducted in the year A.D. 6. When Quirinius came and demanded that all of the Jewish people line up and be counted a Jewish rebel named Judas the Galilean took matters into his own hands. He gathered a band of insurgents, raided the armory in the city of Sepphoris (just 4 miles from the village of Nazareth where a young teen named Jesus lived), and attempted to make himself King of the Jews.

Judas and his little army were defeated by the Romans. Judas was killed, and 2000 of his soldiers were crucified. But before he died, Judas and a Pharisee named Zadok formed a resistance movement that would last until the destruction of Jerusalem 64 years later. Josephus called this movement the "fourth philosophy" of Judaism -- the Zealots.

### **A question of kingship:**

25 years is not a long time, especially for a people who have been longing for freedom from foreign domination. The very word *kenson*, "census" would have brought back a host of passions. Zealots still resolutely refused to pay the hated tax. Pharisees, patriots who were less inclined to violence, resented the humiliation of the tax, but went along with its payment. Herodians had no problem with the tax as it supported their ruler.

To pay or not to pay, that was the question.

Would this Jesus, who had just entered Jerusalem on a donkey, fulfilling an ancient prophecy of God's coming King, take a stand against the Roman tax and all it stood for? Or would he go along with the tax and squash the hopes of his enthusiastic followers?

At stake was the very question of who was truly King. Would it be the emperor Tiberius or the God in whose temple they were standing?

### **Caesar**

#### **A coin:**

Jesus immediately saw what they were up to and took the conversation in a direction they had not anticipated:

#### **Mark 12:15b-16 NIV**

**But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. "Why are you trying to trap me?" he asked.**

**"Bring me a denarius and let me look at it."**

**They brought the coin, and he asked them, “Whose image is this? And whose inscription?”**

**“Caesar’s,” they replied.**

The face on the coin and the inscription around it said it all.

The image was that of Tiberius, the current emperor of Rome.

The inscription read: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus."

They all knew that if the emperor's image and name were on the coin, then the coin actually belonged to him. He decreed the stamping of the coin. He decreed the image and the inscription. He decreed its actual value and a medium of exchange. He regulated its use throughout the empire.

But look more closely at the wording of the inscription: "Tiberius Caesar Augustus, Son of the Divine Augustus." The inscription described Tiberius in divine terms as the "son of the god Augustus", the founder of the Roman Empire. It is said that "Money makes the world go round." Tiberius was making that same point: the coinage that served as the medium of commerce throughout his realm announced that the entire monetary system came from him, was maintained by him, and proved in its own way that he was god.

**Caesar:**

So what about paying the tax? Well, Jesus connects the dots in a way that his questioners had not anticipated:

**Mark 12:17 NIV**

**Then Jesus said to them, “Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s....”**

His point? The coin that you used to pay the tax already belonged to Caesar and his realm. All the money in the entire empire was ultimately his. He merely allowed people to use it in order to pay and receive salaries, make purchases and investments, or save up for a rainy day. But in the end the money -- and any value it actually had -- was the creation of the emperor.

He could let it circulate. He could demand some of it back. If you agreed to use the money at all, then there was no argument about taxation. You were already up to your ears in the system.

The real danger wasn't about a single silver coin that you gave back to Caesar once a year. The real danger was that of coming to depend on Caesar and his money as your ultimate Source!

### **Not of this world:**

There is one other thing that Jesus was saying in his statement, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's...." He was making it perfectly clear that he was not calling for the creation of a different earthly kingdom.

The Zealots, who refused on principle to pay Caesar his tax, had every intention of creating the Kingdom of God right here on earth in the land of Israel. Some 36 years later, when they did finally instigate a full revolt against the Romans, one of the first things they did was make their own money and demand that it be used instead of the Roman currency.

But Jesus' answer makes it clear that he was not interested in swapping one defective earthly empire for another. His goal was to look beyond the world's coins to the Creator.

### **Whose Image?**

#### **The Image of God:**

Jesus' answer to his questioners had two parts. The first part directed them to give back to Caesar that which belonged to Caesar. So what about the second part?

#### **Mark 12:17 NIV**

**Then Jesus said to them, "Give back to Caesar what is Caesar's *and to God what is God's.*"**

This is where Jesus sprang the trap on the very people who thought they were going to trap him!

Follow the logic: If you could tell who really owned a coin by looking at the image, then what about that which bears the *Image of God*? Who would be the rightful owner of something or someone made in His Image?

What did the Creation Story say?

#### **Genesis 1:27 NIV**

**So God created mankind in his own image,  
in the image of God he created them;**

**male and female he created them.**

### **The Name of God:**

And hadn't God inscribed His Name upon His People? Isaiah describes the day when God would redeem His People from slavery to the nations around them:

#### **Isaiah 43:4-7 NIV**

**Since you are precious and honored in my sight,  
and because I love you,  
I will give people in exchange for you,  
nations in exchange for your life.**

**Do not be afraid, for I am with you;  
I will bring your children from the east  
and gather you from the west.**

**I will say to the north, 'Give them up!'  
and to the south, 'Do not hold them back.'**

**Bring my sons from afar  
and my daughters from the ends of the earth —  
*everyone who is called by my name,*  
whom I created for my glory,  
whom I formed and made."**

Here we have the language of commercial exchange: "I will give people in exchange for you, nations in exchange for your life." But now we're not talking about silver coinage. We're talking about the Creator of humanity calling back what belongs to Him alone -- His sons and daughters from the ends of the earth.

He alone is the rightful Owner and Ruler of humankind, created for His glory. And that means that when we look at the image stamped upon us and the inscription of God's Name in our hearts, we see the reflection of the world's true Lord.

**"Give to God what is God's."**

Jesus did not say that it was wrong to use the currency of this world. Instead, He challenged his questioners to think in terms of the greater Image and the greater Name that they bore. It was all about priorities.

God gave His People explicit instructions about how to keep the proper perspective when it came to their earnings and personal wealth:

**Leviticus 27:30 NIV**

**“A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord.”**

He knew how tempting it would be for people to forget whose Image they bore and whose Name was inscribed upon them. So He gave them a way to assert His Rule over the realm of Money. He called them to return 10% of whatever He gave them.

In the highly commercialized world we live in there will always be the temptation to think of money as "ours." We "made" it and own it. And what we do with it is nobody else's business. Jesus reminds us that *we ourselves* belong to God alone. All that He allows us to have is really His as well. And when we give Him back a portion of what He has entrusted to us we remind ourselves and our world that we all have only one true Lord.

Would we want to have it any other way?