



Mark 12:13-17

The Currency of God

¹³Later they sent some of the Pharisees and Herodians to Jesus to catch him in his words. ¹⁴They 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. Is it right to pay the imperial tax to Caesar or not? ¹⁵Should we pay or shouldn’t we?” But Jesus knew their hypocrisy. “*Why are you trying to trap me?*” he asked. “*Bring me a denarius and let me look at it.*” ¹⁶They brought the coin, and he asked them, “*Whose image is this? And whose inscription?*” “Caesar’s,” they replied. ¹⁷Then Jesus said to them, “*Give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s.*” And they were amazed at him. Mark 12:13-17

I. ABOUT CONTEXT

- A. Review.** We have seen the difficulty of the rich entering the Kingdom (10:17-31), we have seen Yeshua demonstrate the need for us believers to bear fruit for the Kingdom (11:12-14), we have seen His righteous anger at the contamination of His Father’s temple (11:15-18), we have seen Yeshua’s authority questioned (11:27-33), and we have seen criticism of the world system (12:1-12). All of these passages reflect an aspect of the conflict between the Kingdom of God and the world system, and this passage continues that exploration in a sort of under-the-radar way. Let’s look.
- B. Money.** We are going to be talking about money in this message. Actually, two kinds of money: the currency of Caesar, and the currency of God.

II. ABOUT PEOPLE

- A. Two groups.** In this passage, we see two groups of powerful people, at opposite ends of the social spectrum, uniting in a common goal: The destruction of Yeshua. These two groups are the epitome of the saying ‘the enemy of my enemy is my friend.’ They couldn’t have been more different. The Herodians, that is, the people who followed Herod, the tetrarch of Judea, could hardly have been more political. They were worldly, political, secular, pro-Herod, pro-tax, governmental, and eager to see Yeshua convicted of treason. The Pharisees were religious, spiritual, anti-Herod, anti-tax, pro-God, and eager to convict Yeshua of heresy.
- B. One goal.** Ironically, the Herodians actually looked at Herod Antipas as being the messiah, a ‘savior’ who would put the Jewish land in favor with Rome and bring blessings to them. This, of course, ran in conflict with Yeshua’s being the actual Messiah. The Pharisees, although bearing the brunt of Yeshua’s criticism, were actually the peace-keepers of the day. Remember that 200 years previously the Hasmoneans, called the Maccabees, had risen up in revolt to drive the Seleucid Empire out of Judea. In Yeshua’s day the Zealots were, in the same manner, striving to drive the Romans out also and this eventually resulted in the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD. It was the Pharisees who had their finger in this particular dike in their attempt to keep the peace between Rome and Palestine. But Yeshua’s popularity, His initiation of the Kingdom, threatened both groups for similar reasons. Both groups hated Yeshua because he threatened their prestige, power, and authority, and ultimately because both groups feared Rome’s recognition of Yeshua’s threat would get them all killed.

III. ABOUT TAXES

- A. How they were collected.** At the bottom, taxes in the Roman Empire were very prejudicial. Roman citizens and territory were considered to be exempt from taxation. If you were to superimpose the familiar concentric rings of a target over the Roman Empire, you would find that the outermost ring, that is, the most recently conquered and most heavily militarized area, would be the least tax-income producing of the areas because of the expense of the troops. The inner circles were heavily productive of the Roman income by imposing

heavy taxation on conquered, but stable regions. The very center of the target paid no taxes at all, because this is where the citizens lived.

- B. How they offended.** As a result, the people of Israel were heavily burdened and resentful of the taxation system. To put things in perspective, the people in Galilee would pay local taxes, Temple taxes, and taxes to Herod as well. One of the reasons the tax collectors such as Matthew were so hated is that they had the right under the Roman system to collect as much as they could get away with as long as they paid the correct amount to the government. As a result, the people were gouged for as much as the tax collector could collect. Here is another example: When the census was counted, the Jews were required to pay a poll tax of 1 denarius which was equivalent to one day's wage of a Roman soldier. In today's money that would be \$150 just to be counted.
- C. Graven image.** But the worst offence to the Jews was what the tax represented. Remember this was an agrarian economy and the Roman government had no desire to have warehouses filled with foodstuffs. The taxation system was not a barter system, so every tax had to be paid in coin. But also every coin was an affront to the Jew because every coin carried a graven image of the Emperor *du jour*. In the case of the imperial denarius, the image was of Tiberius Caesar and surrounding his image was 'Augustus Tiberius, son of the divine Augustus'. On the other side, it says: 'High Priest'. Both phrases were anathema to the devoted Jew. In effect, the denarius, to the devoted Jew, broke the 1st and 2nd commandments.
- D. How they oppressed.** In addition, the coins reminded every user of them that they were under subjugation to Rome. Two hundred years prior to this, the Maccabean Revolt had risen up to throw off the pagan desecration of Antiochus Epiphanes with the cry 'pay back the Gentiles what they deserve and obey the commands of the Law'. 100 years after that revolt they fell back into subjugation, this time under the rule of Rome.

IV. ABOUT PERSPECTIVE

- A. An opportunity.** The result of all of this was that taxes were such a hot button issue that they were seen as the perfect way to trap Yeshua. If he had sided with the Herodians and been pro-tax he would have lost the support of the people and the Pharisees would have gone after him with a vengeance. If he had sided with the Pharisees, Rome would have seen it as the beginning of a rebellion and suppressed it immediately. But as usual, Yeshua cuts to the chase. Where the power brokers saw an all-or-nothing conundrum, Yeshua saw an opportunity.
- B. Pay unto Caesar...** But as usual Yeshua was about to turn the tables on his opponents. When he asked his accusers to bring him a denarius he was underscoring their hypocrisy. Yeshua's reply was a sort of sarcastic barb. He was saying, 'Go ahead and pay Caesar, it's his money anyway!' But the take-away here is not so much the comment as the action which provoked it. Yeshua had just asked, 'Bring me a denarius.' Do you think they went to an ATM to get the coin? No! They pulled it from their pocket. We have a bunch of hypocrites complaining about taxes, trying to trap Yeshua about taxes, and here they were carrying that offensive graven image in their own pocket. Yeshua is echoing the Maccabean rallying cry and saying 'send this filthy stuff back where it came from!'

V. ABOUT OWNERSHIP

1Cor. 6:19-20 *Do you not know that your bodies are temples of the Holy Spirit, who is in you, whom you have received from God? You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your bodies.*

1Cor. 7:23 *You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of human beings.*

Gal. 3:13a *Christ bought us with His blood and made us free from the Law.*

Psalms 139:14 *I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well.*

1Peter1:18-19 *For you know that it was not with perishable things such as silver or gold that you were redeemed from the empty way of life handed down to you from your ancestors, but with the precious blood of Christ, a lamb without blemish or defect.*

- A. One thing.** These verses all have one thing in common: they teach that we are all created by God and, further, that He, through His Son, has bought us and purchased us back from the powers of darkness and from the evil of our own sin. But what does ‘created by’ and ‘bought by’ mean except that we are owned by God. We are His; we owe him everything.
- B. Pay unto God...** So when Yeshua says ‘give unto God what is God’ he means exactly that. He means give Him everything, our lives, our hopes, and our fears. He also meant that, because humans bear God’s image, all humans owe themselves, their very lives, to God, and should give those lives back, as one might give a coin back to Caesar. He also meant standing there in the Temple courtyards, that the sacrificial system which was supposed to be the way of giving God his due, needed to be superseded by a more complete worship. It is not enough to bring something to the Temple to have someone else lift that something up to God. We are the temple of the Holy Spirit. We worship God by raising our own sacrifice of love, commitment, and devotion to Him.
1. Something more. There is something more here though; the structure of Yeshua’s question implies there is more information here. If we are to give back to Caesar what is Caesar’s, it is because Caesar’s image is on the coin, so Caesar owns the coin. The word used for images is the same word used in the Greek Septuagint when translating the Hebrew of Geneses 1:26: *Then God said, “Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness,....*
 2. About owning. So, if we are created in God’s image, then God’s image is in us, and God owns us just like He owns all of creation, including Caesar. Then, if we are giving to God what he already owns, we are not paying a tax. It’s not an obligatory payment; it’s not a tax. We are willingly giving back to God’s what is God’s because of the great and wonderful things he has done. Here’s the way to look at it: The thing that carries the image is owned by the one whose image is on it. Caesar’s image was on the coin, God’s image is in us. Caesar owned the coin, **but that is all he owned.** Similarly, Yahweh owns us, but because He created everything, he owns everything in the earth, in the air, universe, and sea. He owns everything about us.
 3. Godly image. I sort of imagine Yeshua standing there in front of the crowd which had surely gathered, and, holding the offensive denarius up for full view, saying give **this** back to Caesar. He is saying, “This is the only thing that belongs to Caesar, everything else belongs to God.” The silver and gold of the Roman Empire bore the image of Caesar and so as we have seen belong to him. Also, if Caesar demands the payment of taxes and submission to civil authority then that is OK, because Caesar is also part of God’s creation and he has been set in place by God for the purpose of governance. So governance is a good thing, even if abused, because it is set in place by God. But believers are to be preoccupied by matters of faith, hope, and love, and furtherance of the Kingdom. The currency of this Kingdom flows through the heart not in fine metals or outward appearance.

VI. ABOUT GIVING TO GOD

- A. Faith.** If God owns us, if we were bought with a great price, then how do we show it? If God created everything, then he owns everything. What can we give Him that He doesn’t own already? Just what is the currency of God? Is it the denarius? Is it the quarter? Is it money at all? The currency of God isn’t love. It isn’t hope. It isn’t forgiveness. **It’s faith.** Without faith, nothing happens. Faith is useless without action. In fact, faith is an **action verb.**

Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see (Heb. 11:1).

The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective (James 5:16b).

I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I now live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me (Gal. 2:20).

- B. The fruit of faith.** Also, faith isn't something you have, it's something you use. Did you know that God shows up when faith is being used? Our faith is something he first gave us, and when we use it, He's here. And in case you doubt it, there are people in this room who can prove it. This community has seen cancer healed because of faith. Even two bouts of cancer in the same person. It has seen a leg lengthened because of faith. It has seen a person's foot grown to the same size as the other because of faith. It has seen marriages healed because of faith.
- C. Faith's summation.** We have faith because of what God has done for us:
Col. 1:13-24 For he has rescued us from the kingdom of darkness and transferred us into the Kingdom of his dear Son, who purchased our freedom and forgave our sins. Christ is supreme over everything. Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation, for through him God created everything in the heavenly realms and on earth. He made the things we can see and the things we can't see—such as thrones, kingdoms, rulers, and authorities in the unseen world. Everything was created through him and for him. He existed before anything else, and he holds all creation together. Christ is also the head of the church, which is his body. He is the beginning, supreme over all who rise from the dead. So he is first in everything. For God in all his fullness was pleased to live in Christ, and through him God reconciled everything to himself. He made peace with everything in heaven and on earth by means of Christ's blood on the cross. This includes you who were once far away from God. You were his enemies, separated from him by your evil thoughts and actions. Yet now he has reconciled you to himself through the death of Christ in his physical body. As a result, he has brought you into his own presence, and you are holy and blameless as you stand before him without a single fault.
- D. The crux of the gospel.** This passage is the entire Gospel in 11 verses. It says God has freed us from sin. He has welcomed us into His Kingdom. He's the creator of everything, even Caesar, and especially even me and even you. All of us. Did you know that when God looks at each of us, every believer in this room, He sees the image of His Son? Considering this, how can we **not** offer ourselves to God? How can we not have faith that He will help us through our struggle?

VII. APPLICATION

- A. The main point.** The main take-away of this passage is not the payment of taxes. It's the offering of ourselves. It is not the use of the currency of Caesar, it's the use of the currency of God. How do we offer ourselves? If we only do it on April 15th, then we have some work to do. I have asked several of the people in the community what they would offer God if any option was available. One person said he would offer God more time in his life. Another said he would offer a bigger place in his heart. Another said he would pray more. Still another said he would dig deeper into Torah. These are wonderful ideas, but they're too big. It's too hard to wrap your head around them.
- B. Not so easy.** This is easier said than done. I was 38 when I came to the Lord, which means I had 38 years of practice in 'giving unto Caesar.' For the life of me (literally) I couldn't figure out how to 'give unto God.' I remember one message I heard in which the speaker spoke about giving God the 'keys to your heart'. I didn't know what this meant, but I tried it. Only trouble was, the keys were attached to a retractable key chain and as soon as I released them they zipped back to me. I didn't give anything to God. Today, I still struggle with the conflict between the 'big ideas' and the real world. For instance, at the beginning, I struggled with tithing. This should be a no-brainer shouldn't it, since God has promised to bless us and fill our storehouses if we simply return our tithe unto him? But I always seemed to find someplace else to put the money.
- C. Rich towards God?** Are we? It seems to me that if we spent as much effort in giving to God as we do in giving to Caesar the world would be a whole different place. Since giving unto God what is God's means to give him our whole being, it also means the world ought to be able to tell the difference. A very good friend and I were having a conversation yesterday about this. We came to the understanding that while our friends and family might say we are different because they want to affirm us, the world would not. I remember a

time when my car got booted for parking in a handicapped spot because I had forgotten to put up the placard. I was screaming and yelling at the world when my unsaved neighbor came out to see what was wrong. To him, I was acting just like every other person he knew and not at all like a believer. I was not at all reflecting Yeshua. How do we get beyond our flesh? See, we tend to think that since God doesn't 'need' anything, he also doesn't need our worship.

- D. Partnership.** God has chosen to partner with us to further his kingdom. He could choose to 'snap his fingers' but then what would happen to free will? God wants us to 'step up to the plate' and offer him our time, our money, and our energy to further the Kingdom. Financially, one of the beginning stages of this is the area of tithing. Consistently giving 10% of our income to God can be challenging to walk out, but this is a place where God asks us to test Him and promises blessing as we consistently walk in this (Mal 3:10). Can we take small, active steps towards God's will in our lives? Are we really committed to growing? If we're stuck, how do we change?
- E. One small step.** In 1969 Neil Armstrong in stepping on the moon said, 'That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind'. But that was wrong. The small step was Kennedy's announcement of the moon program in 1960. My small step in tithing was the day I lost my job. The temptation was to not do it, but I did anyway and God did what he promised in Malachi 3. In two days I had a new, better job. We think of all these ways to honor God: we are told we should be helping to expand the Kingdom, or that our faith should be growing, or that our lives should reflect Yeshua, or that we should be cleaning out our temple. These are the 'shoulda, coulda, wouldas'. What are the 'cans'? Each of us should ask ourselves where the point of our personal connection to God is. Is any of us inclined to speak to others about God? Take that person to coffee. Is anyone inclined to love on a neighbor in need? Send over a pizza. Is there a struggling person you feel inclined to help? Buy some groceries. In each case think of the small first step that can be made.
- F. Giant leap.** The giant leap is the result of the small step; it's the use of the currency of God. It's the faith that God will actually use the small step and further His Kingdom in some way through it. See, that's the human tendency isn't it? It's to just go with the flow, to 'get along to move along', and not to muddy the waters. But that's just what Yeshua is arguing against; he's saying, 'get up, get moving, give to God, you know what to do'. In 1734 a young woman, known as a carouser, gave her life to the Lord through the ministry of a young Jonathan Edwards. Within 6 months 300 of the townspeople gave their lives to the Lord in a town of only 1100 people, and from that came the Great Awakening. The 2nd Great Awakening which followed on the heels of the 1st saw 500,000 people come to Yeshua. Giant Leaps come from small steps.

VIII. REFERENCES

- Bill, Brian (2017). *We owe the one who owns us, Mark 12:13-17*. Retrieved from <https://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/transferring-ownership-brian-bill-sermon-on-government>
- Brad, (2012). Who's image is this? Retrieved from <https://www.atone.me/who's-image-is-this/Mark12:13-17Commentary>
- Kuecker, A. (2011). Taxing Issues, Luke 19:1-10, 20:20-26. Retrieved from <https://www.theologyofwork.org/new-testament/luke/taxingissues>
- Stein, R.H. (2008). Mark. In R. W. Yarborough & R. H. Stein (Eds.), *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic
- Wright, N.T. (2004). *Mark For Everyone*. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press