

Tale of the Tape

He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched . . .
(Mark 12:41a)

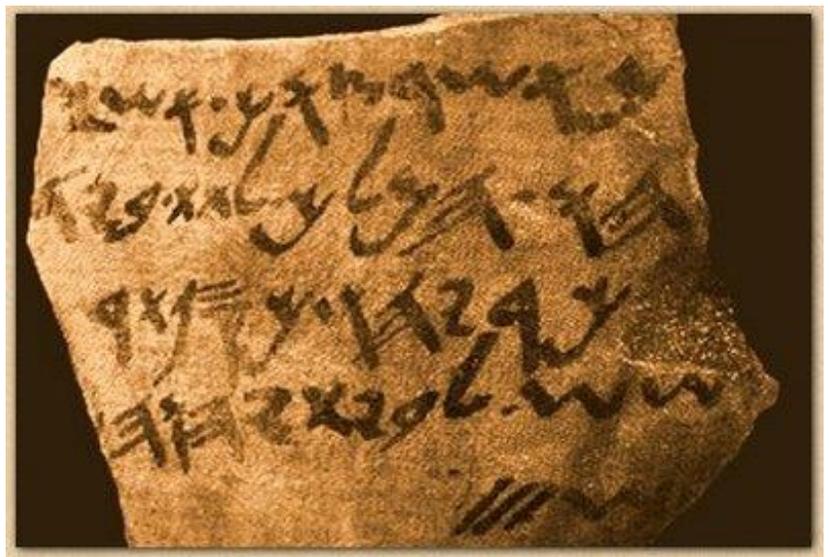
A sermon by Siegfried S. Johnson on the 21st Sunday after Pentecost, **October 14, 2018**
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Christ of the Hills UMC, 700 Balearic Drive, Hot Springs Village, Arkansas 71909

In October we are highlighting stewardship themes as we make preparations to aid our staff and lay servant leadership teams plan for our missional objectives in 2019. In addition to several laity offering their own “*Why Christ of the Hills?*” testimonies during worship, as you have heard Daryl and Shirley Taylor do this morning, we are printing your written lay testimonies in the *Weekly Ringer* each week. All this leads up to Commitment Sunday, October 28, when we celebrate our *Estimate of Giving Cards* for 2019. You’ll be receiving those cards along with a letter this week, thanking you for your support and outlining the unique challenges facing us in 2019 as we conclude our building project.

If dollars for mission take center stage in October, I thought I’d invite the Hebrew equivalent, shekels, to take center stage in today’s sermon. I’m doing this in two ways. First, the gospel story we have read this morning from Mark 12 and, secondly, a piece from the world of biblical archaeology. Both of these highlight the giving of shekels to sustain the temple.

In Mark 12, a temple-saturated passage, Jesus is sitting “*opposite the treasury,*” observing as people brought gifts for the upkeep of the temple and its faith-based activities. “*He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched.*” I wonder what would Jesus have seen in this first century Temple Stewardship Campaign?

One of the things he might have seen is an official of the treasury writing receipts for the donors, acknowledging their gifts. Here is just such a receipt for a gift to Solomon’s temple known as the *Three Shekel Ostrakon*. It turned up twenty-one years ago, in 1997. I say “*turned up*” rather than “*discovered*” because it wasn’t dug up in an archaeological dig, but rather surfaced in the antiquities market, the private collection of Shlomo Moussaieff in London. This opens the possibility, but not the certainty, that the piece is a forgery.



Pieces of broken pottery were abundant in ancient times and the larger pieces, such as this, were often used as a writing material. When an inscription is found on a piece of pottery, it's called an ostrakon. They couldn't jump on a camel and run down to Office Depot, so they used what was available, and broken pottery was abundantly available. Still today when in the Holy Land and I pick up a piece of pottery, I glance out of habit to see if there is any evidence of writing.

This fragment, measuring 4 inches wide and 3.5 inches tall, is a receipt for a donation of three shekels of silver to Solomon's temple, called the *Beit Yahweh*, the House of Yahweh. If you look carefully at the bottom line of writing you will see three diagonal slashes followed by what may look like a "W" to you. That is the Hebrew letter "*Shin*," pronounced "*Sh*," the initial sounding of the word, *Shekel*. It's an abbreviation for "*Shekel*." The full inscription reads, "*Pursuant to the order to you of Ashyahu the king to give by the hand of Zecharyahu silver of Tarshish to the House of Yahweh. Three shekels.*"

The possibility that it is an antiquities forgery is real, though some scholars are convinced through scientific and orthographical analysis that the piece is authentic, dating to the 9th century B. C., around 835 B.C. To set that date into your biblical history timeline, that would be the time of King Ahab, Queen Jezebel, and the prophet Elijah. At this time the first temple, Solomon's Temple, would have been relatively new, just over 100 years old.

Whether this piece is authentic or not, we do know that everyday communications, including receipts, were recorded in precisely this way. Ostraca shed much light on our knowledge of everyday life, so it's not surprising that one would offer such an interesting fleshing out of the gospel story we've read this morning.

Imagine Jesus watching wealthy philanthropists offering significant sums of silver, pocketing their *ostrakon* receipts, while the widow bringing tiny pieces of copper, called mites, is rather ignored. It gave Jesus an opportunity to speak of, well, of receipts. Which is why I'm calling this sermon, the *Tale of the Tape*.

The *Tale of the Tape* is a necessity for human civilization. Since Adam and Eve were invited to give names to every creature in the garden, humans have been record-keepers. It's who we are.

In a very real sense, church Finance Committees during an annual Stewardship Campaign are following Jesus' example, sitting "*opposite the treasury*" to watch. Sometimes the watching is a bit nervous because, ultimately, they recognize that the *Tale of the Tape* will be a measure of the possibilities of our congregation in its staffing, its day-to-day programming, and its missional outreach.

Are you ready for some trivia? The first automatically printed register receipt is now 134 years old. It was printed in 1884, when National Cash Register (NCR) began selling registers that actually spit out paper records. Over the next 100 years, most receipts remained very short, not unlike this ostrakon, a few inches.

But in our lifetimes, the early part of the 21st century, something happened. Stores began using sophisticated software to track consumer purchases and manage inventory. It began to be clear that receipts could do more than record a purchase. They could be a forum for communication, and certainly for advertisement.

Companies like our own Arkansas-based Acxiom is a leader in the industry, collecting, analyzing and selling customer information for targeted advertising. In my previous congregation in Little Rock I had several leaders of Acxiom, and some great discussions about the *Tale of the Tape*.

I may go to the store to pick up milk and bread, but the cash register receipt miraculously includes a coupon for precisely the brand of Shredded Wheat I like and the brand of toothpaste I use. How could they have known? Says Dan Bogan, NCR's senior Vice President overseeing receipt printing, "*Retailers find it's one of the most effective places to communicate with their customers.*"

Store receipts are getting longer and longer as retailers tack coupons, return policies, loyalty points, application for credit cards, and other sundry bits of information onto those narrow strips of paper recording what you bought and how much you paid. *The Wall Street Journal* article I read on this phenomenon showed a foot-long receipt generated at a Duane Reade store in New York for the purchase of a single pack of Trident, and another receipt, two and a half feet long, generated by the purchase of a Hula Hoop at a Chicago K-Mart.

If shopping sprees once emptied wallets, now they leave wallets bulging! Not with money, but with paper. Said Jack Britton, a 24-year-old Dallas accountant tired of wads of folded-up paper in his wallet, "*You feel like you have a very special document in your pocket, when in reality you bought a Sprite at Best Buy.*" CVS cashiers have joked with their customers as receipts for approached three feet long that they may need another shopping bag to tote their receipts!

If that's a modern version of how the *Tale of the Tape* can skew reality, let's remember that these ostracoon receipts didn't tell the whole story in Jesus' day, either. Jesus saw the rich giving respectable sums to the temple treasury, noting how with their long, flowing robes, they loved to attract attention and respect.

I can imagine they would love also a long, flowing, three-foot long receipt for their gifts, glad for others to witness their struggle to fold and put it away in their pouch. Jesus' attention is turned instead to a poor widow bringing two copper coins, the widow's mite. Surely such a gift wouldn't generate much paper as a receipt. Jesus, though, saw beyond the *Tale of the Tape*, saying, "*This woman has given more than all of the wealthy leaders and decision-makers.*"

Jesus saw more than the *Tale of the Tape* and called attention, not to a receipt, but to a motive, to faith, to vision, to commitment, and to shared sacrifice. Few things give us a clearer window into our hearts than our money, what we do with it. "*Where your treasure is, there shall your heart be also,*" are words of Jesus that are hardly profound. These words expound the obvious. We are economic creatures, and in the *Tale of the Tape* we read the economics of our living. How much we earned, how much we spent, how much we saved, how much we give.

The *Tale of the Tape* tracks all of that, but can never tell the whole story. The whole story can't be written on a receipt, but can only be written on the heart, which is why I am so thankful for the testimonies, oral and written, that we're hearing in this *Why Christ of the Hills?* emphasis.

You are the whole story, and how much we can do as a congregation depends on YOU.

