

Matthew 17:24-27 The Sons are Free

Good morning it's great to be with you today, my name is Tom I look after youth and young adult ministry here at church at the peak and it is my pleasure to be speaking from Bible this morning. This is a really interesting passage in Matthew, its unique to his gospel but a really helpful inclusion that I have been wrestling with this week. Matthew has been really interested in explaining Jesus' identity in this section of the gospel and this is a key moment for us understanding where Jesus sits in the world.

Let me start by praying for us.

Wrapper tax...

A good tax?

Tax is a contentious issue in society. We kinda accept that it's a good and important thing, we like having roads, hospitals, schools. But we much prefer when someone else pays rather than us. Elections are often decided by tax policies. We love our tax returns when we reclaim what is rightfully ours.

Tax was a contentious issue in the time of Jesus as well. One major tax which was collected was the Roman tax. A tax the Jews had to pay to a power who was oppressing them and taking it by force to pay for their rule. There were tax collectors, Jews who were paid by the Romans to collect this tax and they were often corrupt and charged more than they should and kept the gap for themselves.

These may have been who you thought of when you heard the passage read before. The first thing to clarify is that these guys are not those guys, they are different.

²⁴After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?”

These are collectors of the temple tax. A tax that all Jews would pay for the maintenance of the temple and to support the priests. The priests were exempt but other than that people who didn’t even live in the region would send money in for the temple. This was less a tax they resented and more one they saw as their duty from Old Testament law. When these men come to Peter to ask if Jesus would pay the tax they are doing a couple of things. The first is that they are trying to do their job, they need to collect the tax or they will be in trouble and potentially fined. The second is they are seeing if Jesus holds the regard for the temple they would normally expect, they would know that Jesus has made a few comments that may seem to degrade the temple, Matt 12:6 “I tell you one who is greater than the temple is here”. In essence though I think this is a polite request that they are putting forward, a courteous reminder, but one that comes

with a bunch of tension. Would Jesus pay it, or was there going to be a fight, I'm sure they were nervous about approaching Jesus for this which might be why they go to Peter instead. The rejection of this tax would lead to a lengthy process involving more authorities from Jerusalem, a dispute which would derail Jesus' itinerant ministry for a while.

The nature of the tax as being a normal duty of a Jew in everyday life is exposed in Peter's response "Yes, he does". Peter doesn't think twice of course Jesus does it is the duty of all good Jews of course Jesus the Rabbi would do that. And so continues the theme that has consistently invaded the disciples' interactions, after all this time Peter still doesn't get who Jesus is.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?"

²⁶ "From others," Peter answered.

“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him.

Paying the tax to the temple was part of the old way in which God would relate to his people. But with Jesus that is changing.

Freedom of the Son/s

As with the rest of the Gospel of Matthew before this, this is all a question of the disciples understanding Jesus’ identity. The King in this situation is God the Father and it is his temple. Jesus is saying that the children of the King do not have to pay the temple tax because the King does not tax his own. By children he isn’t talking about members of his nation those are currently the Jews. Jesus is talking about the literal members of the royal family. What he is saying is that the Son would be personally exempt from paying the temple tax because of his status as the son of the King in close intimate family relationship with the one who owns the temple. This is the status the position Jesus is claiming he fills. That he is the son of the King and so therefore for Jesus to pay the tax he would be

undermining his status and affirming a practice that will become obsolete in his kingdom.

Jesus is claiming to be the Son of God.

And so he is facing a difficult situation, take the principled stand and enter a complex and long legal process or let this one go. The son is free from the tax, but really he is free to do what he thinks is the right thing to do.

²⁷ “But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours.”

This is a funny little miracle that Jesus performs and it is unique to Matthew. The source of the payment is miraculous and means not having to use the stores that they were using for their travels and

were likely donations. There are two things that happen here. Jesus pays for Peter and Jesus pays for himself. Lets look at that first point.

Borrowing money for the canteen...

At this point in time Peter is still under the law as a Jew and he should definitely be paying the temple tax. Jesus in the context of what he has just said subtly points to the nature of his mission. Jesus as the son of God is exempt from the tax but chooses to pay the tax on Peter's behalf thereby giving him the status of someone who hasn't and doesn't need to pay the tax, because it has been paid for him. In this we see a hint of what Jesus is moving towards in Jerusalem, that while he is innocent of sin he will choose to pay for sin on the behalf of everyone so that they may become children of God. They are free from paying what they owe. We are free from paying what we owe if we follow the son of God because he pays it for us.

And so the question for all of us is do you recognise who Jesus is? Do you recognise the son of God who is exempt from the guilt that we are guilty of? As Christians Jesus pays the debt on our behalf even though he doesn't have to and that gives us the status of Children of God alongside him. For the Jews this would mean freedom from the temple and the ability to follow God in an intimate relationship. For the gentiles for us it means we are included into Jesus' kingdom and given the same status as one of his people. But not in the way the Jews were in the Old Testament but in a much closer more intimate position as children of God children who pray 'our father'. Have you managed what the disciples have continued to fail at this point in the story, have you recognised Jesus' identity as the son of God? Jesus is saying that you can't treat him just as a wise man or impressive healer, he is claiming to be much more than that. He is claiming a status that we need to engage with that Christians have accepted. If you are here today and you don't think of Jesus as Lord but that he is a good teacher I'm telling you that Jesus doesn't give you that option. He is either God, or hes a liar, but only God would have

known about the coin which had dropped into the water, been swallowed by a fish, and exact time you would need to throw a line in to catch that fish.

By paying the tax on behalf of Peter he is foreshadowing his mission to save the world. Foreshadowing the opportunity he will give us all to be children alongside him to be children of God.

Humility of the righteous (willing to die on)

Jesus decision to pay the tax for himself may seem like a contradiction of what he has just proclaimed. There are two reasons that I can see for what happens here. Jesus protects the integrity of the tax collectors who are themselves simply pious Jews, and Jesus chooses not to get involved in the fuss that would be caused. The money which is paid does not come from the financial supplies of the group of disciples and so they are not affirming the tax whilst still allowing the collectors to fulfil their duty. You could fairly observe

that this is still an affirming of the temple and so what seems to be at the centre here is Jesus deciding not to cause the tax collectors problems, and not to start of a complex judicial process simply so that he can take a principled stand. If he didn't pay the tax then it would make a huge fuss people would be asking why and that's what the situation would become all about. Jesus doesn't want the secondary issue of the tax to distract from the main issue of his identity.

Martin Luther King's response to his family being attacked...

Being right, is often not the most important thing. Jesus would have been completely justified in refusing to pay the tax, but what victory would have been won? These tax collectors would have been the ones who paid for it, maybe people would have talked about it but not in a helpful way for Jesus, no victory would have been won.

There was no need. Jesus didn't deny any truth in this situation but he definitely picked his battles. He chose to let this one slide so as

not to distract people from his primary message. He chose humility over victory. His victory over death would take the same form, humility is his glory.

Christians are an important voice in the public sphere. But we are not always a positive one. Sometimes I think we let the fact that we are right, because the Bible says so, cloud our decision making with what fights to have and what things to let go. Jesus chose not to humiliate these men who were trying to do their job, he chose not to make a public statement that would have resulted in stress for his disciples, he was doing that often enough anyway. What is important in this situation isn't whether or not they pay the temple tax, what matters is whether the disciples understand who Jesus is.

Don't get me wrong some issues are worth fighting for. Euthanasia is going to be a big one this year. Freedom of speech is an important concept in our society. But I urge caution and consideration in our approach. Remember the real battle that is going on, is that battle

for people's souls to be saved and they is not through them being convinced of our perspective on social issues.

When you have debates with people about Christianity there are two issues at play. There is the point you are arguing about, and there is the relationship that they have or don't have with Jesus. The point you are arguing about is the secondary issue, the primary issue is whether that person knows Jesus is Lord, whether they get his identity. The thing is we can get so caught up on making sure they understand our point of view about marriage, or euthanasia, or abortion, issues that we should be engaged with, but cause anger and upset between you and that person when really what that person needs, is to know Jesus. When someone chooses to follow Jesus then they begin the journey of understanding what Jesus says about these issues. They don't need to convert to your perspective on issues before they come to know Jesus. Most of the time that comes later. Jesus shows us that we don't always need to fight for the secondary issue, but bring it back to who he is. That people who

turn to him and become children of God. We don't have to die on these hills, Jesus already did that.