



Matthew 17:24–27

24 After 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?”

25 “Yes, he does,” he replied. 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. 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.”

Reflection

In yesterday’s passage the disciples were filled with grief. Jesus had told them directly – no allusions or parables or Old Testament quotations this time – that he was going to die. In fact this was the second time he’d told them, only this time he’d added another element, that he was

going to be ‘delivered into the hands’ of the men who are going to kill him. In other words not only was Jesus going to be killed but he was going to be betrayed. Finally, it seems the gravity of the situation is beginning to sink in, and his disciples are filled with grief.

Off the back of such an ominous episode it comes as no surprise to find Jesus and his disciples accosted in today’s passage by the religious tax collectors when they arrive back in Capernaum. As is often the case, they sidestep Jesus, instead taking aim at his disciples, in this case Peter. Verse 24 says that:

... the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, “Doesn’t your teacher pay

the temple tax?”

Now to set the scene, the Old Testament stipulates in Exodus 30:11–16 that every Jewish male over twenty has to give an offering to the Lord to support the tabernacle. Jewish tradition had later began to apply this to the temple in Jerusalem as an annual tax. The tax was about the equivalent of two days’ wages. The collectors of the temple tax weren’t typical tax collectors collecting taxes for the Romans. The tax collectors in our passage today work for the Jewish religious leaders in Jerusalem who oversee the temple. In other words, they’d been sent to do their dirty work, to try and discredit Jesus or to catch him in another trap. Perhaps they were testing Jesus to see if he’d obey the Old Testament Law. Or maybe, given that

ordained Rabbi's were exempt from the tax, it's possible that they were trying to see if Jesus who had no formal qualifications would claim this tax-exempt status for himself. Either way, something was up, when they came to Peter and asked,

“Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?”

In the Greek, the question is more of a leading question, like: ‘Your teacher pay's the temple tax doesn't he?’ Peter quickly answers in the affirmative only to have Jesus take the matter up with him when he arrives home. As soon as he enters the house, Jesus ask him this question:

“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?”

The conversation continues,

26 “From others,” Peter answered.
“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him. 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 encounter only occurs in the gospel of Matthew, who as we know was a tax collector before he gave his life to Jesus (Matt 9:9–13). Some think that’s why he’s

included it, and I think those people might also be a little shy of this quaint little story about a fish with a coin in its mouth. But there's at least four very profound things going on in this story that should make us sit up and take notice. So let's do so now. We're about to learn about Jesus, giving, loving others, and humility.

Firstly, this story teaches us about Jesus; who he is, and who we are because of him. 'No-one taxes their own children', Jesus says to Peter. 'Kings levy duties and taxes in their citizens, but Fathers don't tax their children. The temple is my Father's house, so the temple tax doesn't apply to me. I might not be an ordained Rabbi, but I am the son of God and through me you too have become a child of God.'

Which leads us to our second point about giving. The New Testament consistently emphasizes that all giving to the Lord's work is voluntary (e.g. 2 Cor 8–9). God doesn't impose taxes on his children, as if he needs anything (Acts 17:25). All that God desires is a joyful and cheerful heart out of which giving rightfully flows. The bible encourages us to give cheerfully (2 Cor 9:7), sacrificially (2 Cor 8:2–3) and regularly (1 Cor 16:2) to the work of the kingdom but never, ever in any kind of forced way (2 Cor 9:7).

But did you notice that in the end Jesus still tells Peter to pay the tax 'so that we may not cause offense.' Or a little bit closer to the Greek might be 'so that we might not cause anyone to stumble in their faith.' And this is our third point. So often in Christian com-

munities people do things or say things or require things of you that are simply not necessary or required by Scripture, but to them, these patterns of behaviour are extremely important. It might be a question of the music in church, or the way they believe it's appropriate to dress, or any number of things that they believe are appropriate or inappropriate for a Christian to do. Today Jesus is teaching us to love the weaker brother or sister (Rom 14; 1 Cor 8), even if you're in right. Jesus is teaching us that in minor matters like this, if speaking up will cause a member of your church difficulty in their faith, then let it slide out of love, even if it means some small (or even not so small) inconvenience to yourself.

Finally, and most powerfully, do you see Jesus' humility in the passage? 'You're not

an ordained Rabbi so you need to pay the tax.' But he's the son of God! The one who so controls nature and its powers that he stills storms and multiplies food. In fact Jesus holds all creation into being by his powerful word. And he's all knowing , all seeing and powerful. So he knows the path of every single fish swimming in the sea of Galilee, and he foreordained that one of these fish would one day eat that shiny object sitting there on the bottom. He knew that it's path would intersect with Peter's one day, in a few hours from this moment in fact, and that that particular fish would be hungry enough to eat the bait off a hook dangling from a single line amidst the vast sea of Galilee. And that Peter would find in its mouth a coin to pay this tax. Consider the humility of a man with power like this, and yet who is so careful not to offend in

case it might cause a brother or sister to stumble in their journey of faith. Consider the humility of Jesus.

Think & Pray

And then consider yourself. How about you? Are you humble like Jesus? We're so quick to claim our rights, to prove that we're right at the expense of someone else. But look at Jesus. 'You're not a real Rabbi so you need to pay the tax'. He's the son of God but he's happy to pay. Because he's humble, and so careful not to cause offense, in case a brother or sister might stumble in their faith. How are you going at loving the weaker brother or sister in your church? How can you go out of your way this week to be like Jesus and build up their faith in love, instead of talking

about them behind their back? How can you love and build them up – even if it costs you something?

In response to our passage you also might find yourself thinking about your giving. Do you give cheerfully, sacrificially and regularly to your church and to good causes in our world? Not because you have to, but because you want to? Please use what time remains to think over the implications of this passage for your life and then close by spending some time with our Lord in prayer.