

“Living for God, Living for Others”

Matthew 17:24-27

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at JF Believers church
in Menomonie, Wisc
on October 16th, 2016



Matthew 17:24 - 27 *When they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, "Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?" 25 He said, "Yes." And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?" 26 Peter said to Him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. 27 "Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money; take that and give it to them for Me and you."*

In this series “The Life and Times of Jesus Christ,” we have often covered a scriptural account that appears in two, three or even all four of the gospel books. But for this account, Matthew is the only one who went to the effort to record it. A lot of folks suppose or extrapolate that perhaps this event caught Matthew's attention or was worthy of recording because Matthew knew a little something about tax collection. Having been called out of the tax-gathering business for the occupying Roman's, this issue would have likely been of keen interest to Matthew. Just how would *Jesus* deal with this issue?

Digging into this small seemingly inconsequential passage, we can quickly see that the subject matter would also reach deep into the Jewish culture. It spoke of not only obedience and behavior, but also of the philosophy and heart of Christ when it came to living out our faith on this earth and in this culture.

To begin with, we need to understand a little about what was going on here with this tax. This was not the kind of taxation that Matthew had been involved in, even though it indeed *was* a tax and had many of the same overtures. However the differences between this tax and the Roman tax is also just as critical to our understanding of what was playing out herein.

The Roman tax that Matthew had been employed to collect from his own people was for the benefit of the occupying government. However, this tax was actually collected *by* the Jewish people, *from* the Jewish people, *for the benefit of* the Jewish people's temple. While the nation hated the Romans and their taxes, they would have at least tacitly been on board with this “contribution.” After all, it was at least in theory, for the benefit of the maintenance of the temple, something that they would have gleaned benefit from and understood the need for.

This tax had its roots way back in the Old Testament. When God gave the law to the people, He spoke through the prophet Moses. In that law, there was a provision in which a particular tax was to be collected any time that they took a census of the people. Exodus 30:11-16 records this...

11 Then the LORD said to Moses, 12 “Whenever you take a census of the people of Israel, each man who is counted must pay a ransom for himself to the LORD. Then no plague will strike the people as you count them. 13 Each person who is counted must give a small piece of silver as a sacred offering to the LORD. (This payment is half a shekel, based on the sanctuary shekel, which equals twenty gerahs.) 14 All who have reached their twentieth birthday must give this sacred offering to the LORD. 15 When this offering is given to the LORD to purify your lives, making you right with him, the rich must not give more than the specified amount, and the poor must not give less. 16 Receive this ransom money from the Israelites, and use it for the care of the Tabernacle. It will bring the Israelites to the LORD’s attention, and it will purify your lives.’

But the problem with this tax, was that it had already strayed from God’s original edict as is often is the case with His directions. So even though it was in the Old Testament law, the people had morphed it into something they felt was more useful and expedient, if not more palatable. The way it was written, was that this tax was to be “contributed” by each adult male, each time a census was taken. But we have no record of a census being taken here, and thus a lot of folks believe that the paying of this tax and the collection of such had devolved into a religious custom rather than a legal requirement.

So what appears to be merely a governmental taxation issue...*and there is definitely realistic undertones as to such*, there is also a religious cultural aspect to it also, and even a spiritual response. Because even though there appears to be no actual **legal** requirement to pay this tax; there *was* a very strong social pressure to do so. But before you jump up to do the “free from taxes dance” remember that other passages take care of that subject on a much more clear and concise basis, such as Matthew 22:15-22 and Romans 13.

As always was and tends to be even today, there were people who were looking for holes in the theology and the living out of this thing called Christianity. Thus there was no doubt an implied meaning behind the question asked by those who were attempting to collect this tax: “*Does your Teacher not pay the temple tax?*” (v. 24). The question it seems was leading and had a hidden meaning behind it. We could read it rather as, “*Your Teacher **does** pay the temple tax* (or “the two-drachma tax” as it is called in some translations) . . . *doesn't He?*”

We gather much of our information on the scene before us by not *what* was asked, but rather *how* it was asked! Certainly the question itself wouldn’t have even needed to be asked had this tax been mandatory. Likely, the one’s gathering the tax were insinuating that Jesus perhaps believed Himself outside of such obligations. It was important to the Jewish world, but was it important to Jesus? After all, Jesus had already gained a reputation as one that was willing to buck the status quo and reject many of the customs and practices of the culture. Maybe this too would be rejected as the cultural practices of religion alone and would be rejected by Christ?

I have found that Christians run the gamut on this issue that we are taking on this morning. Some are innately caught up with pleasing man. They don’t want to offend anybody! Generally that’s not because they are so sensitive, but rather because they are people pleasers and want to be liked. Often these folks manifest this attitude on ‘both sides of the isle.’ Meaning at church they participate often out of obligation and appearance, and during the week in the workplace the “go along to get along.” They want their workmates and acquaintances to see them as ‘cool and hip’ so they try not to tell people they are Christians *and God forbid*, where they go to church! But Jesus said “*woe unto you when all men speak well of you.*” (Luke 6:26)

The other group doesn't seem to care a whole lot about anyone else nor do they spend a lot of time considering the witness of their lives or the rebellion they perpetuate. They are their 'own man' or 'own woman' and they are "free" and "under grace" so they are quick to state that they only have to please God not please man! They sight what Paul said in Galatians 1:10 "*Obviously, I'm not trying to win the approval of people, but of God. If pleasing people were my goal, I would not be Christ's servant.*"

Is there a righteous balance on this issue? If so, where is it? As always, Christ is our model, and the quintessential example of how to love others while loving God first and supremely. What did HIS walk look like?

Firstly, we need to see that Jesus was fully involved in loving people. Sometimes that "pleased" them, and sometimes it made them want to stone him to death, but it was still all a manifest of His love for them . Sometimes one can definitely get the feeling that in certain situations, He could have easily said more, but He didn't. And then sometimes it was like "*ouch...that was harsh...*" Sometimes He kind of left the discussion hanging and we want to ask "*...and?*" Like the discussion with the rich, young ruler in Matthew 19:16-22, where the guy just apparently stood there for a bit and then walked away.

Yet in Matthew 15, Jesus 'went to town' on the religious leaders and seem to just keep coming at them...calling them hypocrites and scolding them publically. Even the apostles came to Him afterwards saying "*do you know those guys were offended by what you said?*" and Jesus made no apology. Now I don't want to paint an easy-peeezy picture here and over-simplify the subject, but Jesus had a critical thing going for Him: *He was Spirit led.* You see, without Holy Spirit indwelling we are 'flying blind.' "*Shooting from the hip,*" so to speak, and no one is very accurate with that kind panache.

In this situation Jesus clearly says He had the freedom to stand down from participation, but He chose not to in order to "*not offend them.*" So we cannot ignore the model herein that there needs to be a conscious consideration of others and a love lived out for others at the expense of ourselves! Under the careful guidance of the Spirit's leading, we need to ask "what is it that the person needs right now in this situation? What is best for *them?*" We could ask at this juncture "Ok...but where is the priority of pleasing God first?" But would not such a heart as this ultimately *please God?* A heart that seeks for what is best for an individual? Perhaps this all speaks into the word's of Jesus to the apostles when He told them that "*what they bind on earth will be bound in heaven and what they loose on earth will be loosed in heaven.*"

I wish that this was an exact science, but it never has been for me. But it **is** a priority and one that motivates me greatly! In every such case I want to be led by the Holy Spirit in whether I should *shut up* or whether I should *step up*. But that requires thought and prayer (albeit often a quick one!) as to how to handle a situation and how to live out our faith in way that both blesses and loves the man, but ultimately glorifies God. And that is just factually a lot of work! It requires that I 'stay in tune' with the Master all day long. We much rather prefer an emphatic and absolute position because *it's just easier!* Thus we tend to adhere to either the position of "all I have to do is please God" or the opposite extreme of "I must just always *love* people and not offend them."

No one can argue that we answer ultimately to our Creator Lord. But what is less clear so often is how to live and act in individual situations to really please Him and magnify His name. Do we stop and ask ourselves "can I go along with this and not dis' my Lord?" And then ask the next question "What would Jesus do?" Now I know that such a phrase is usually found to be overtly cliché but its truth still hangs out there like a comma.

If Jesus “always did what was pleasing to the Father,” (John 8:29), then we must admit that the answer is not always one-sided nor easy for us as men and women to live out without thought and guidance. But we have the advantage of knowing the nature and way of Christ in His living by seeing Him on the pages of scripture and history.

Jesus asked the question of Peter. Notice that Jesus used His old name “Simon” here, leading us to think maybe Jesus was implying that Peter’s questioning of this situation was still in line with the thinking of the ‘old’ Peter...one that should be passing away by now. “*What do you think, Simon?*”, Jesus asked. “*From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes, from their sons or from strangers?*”

I can’t help but wonder if the boys by this time were a little jumpy about such leading questions from Christ. That maybe there would naturally be a quick dance to come up with the correct answer, even if the answer was only correct to Jesus! I wonder if Peter didn't answer the question with a little apprehension in his voice: “Ugh...*from strangers—?*”

Apparently, there was a “ding, ding, ding” for the right answer because Jesus replied, “*Then the sons are free.*” The implication of Jesus' answer was that He was the Son of God and therefore was under no obligation at all to pay a tax collected among men for the upkeep of the temple, or to participate in any such effectively worldly interaction such as this. Many folks just plant their feet right there, and they feel no obligation to tithe or to serve claiming “I’m a son of God and have no obligation to do anything but please God.” Of course, the presumption is that they effectively and totally know what pleases God always, and that of course by inference would say that serving or tithing would not please God.

Even though He is supreme, even though He is exempt from the temple tax as “the Son of the King”—and even though He declares that Peter is exempt with Him—Jesus says “*Nevertheless, lest we offend them, let’s pay the tax.*” Perhaps we would do better by grasping the fuller meaning of the word “offend.” The word that is here translated “offend” means “to cause someone to stumble.” This harkens back to the question “is it good for the person or bad?” Does our action or reaction draw others *to* God or does it push them away? Is the truth herein so mandated that even if they are offended, it must be said or must be done or must *not* be done? Robert Murray McCheyne was once quoted saying “*The Christian is a person who makes it easy for others to believe in God.*”

When we are in India, we are often approached to contribute to some cause which, if enquiry is made, is usually for the support of some Hindu temple or the care of an idol somewhere. Certainly we would glean favor from the locals by chipping in, but such an end does not justify the means, and we cannot give to support false gods. So we tell them we are Christians and unable to give to them. It is not the easiest or most expedient response, but it is the right thing to do. On the other hand, it is the religious custom there for the women to sit on one side of the church and the men on the other, and that is a custom we generally follow as respect in those instances goes a long way to build trust. We also dress appropriately for the culture in which we visit, and especially the women who go out of their way to dress modestly and often in local attire.

All of this is not an easy way to live. It requires near constant evaluation of the world and the specific situation. It requires knowing the nature of our God and His Son, so one is required to be diligently in the Word. And most of all, it demands a Spirit filled and Spirit led lifestyle! It is literally a moment by moment “in-tune” with God. That’s the real “living out of our faith.” John Piper said it all when he said “*Christian living moves from what God has freely done for us in Christ to what we should freely do for others.*”