

Tough Words, Temple Taxes and Tilapia

Matt. 17:22-27

Intro. I want to admit right up front, the message this AM is a bit fishy...and I like it that way! But what are the chances of casting in a line at no particular location along the shore of the Sea of Galilee ...and finding a silver coin in the first fish caught...the coin being the exact amount needed to pay a tax for two men? I'm no mathematician, but this sounds off the charts improbable to me. I've caught fish with hooks, lures and other fish in their mouths, but never a fish with a coin in its mouth. Yet that's what happened. Peter hiked down to the shore, tossed out a line and reeled in a Temple-Tax-Toting-Tilapia. Here's a passage that begs for imaginative titles...like Fishing for Dollars / Casting for Coin /, or A Fisherman's ATM. The improbability disappears when we consider who told Peter to cast in the line. Jesus told Him to do it...Jesus the miracle working provider...Jesus, the God who knows every sparrow in the sky / lily in the field / hair on your head / and fish in the sea. As we've said many times, Matthew's Gospel is all about Jesus Christ who is King over the Universe He created. The Holy Spirit inspired this book so we might know Jesus better because to know Him better is to love and trust Him more. When the stage fades to black on every great human being or angel, the writer of Hebrews says...**But we see Jesus, who was made a little lower than the angels, now crowned with glory and honor because He suffered death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone. (Heb. 2:9)** So let's see 3 more vignettes of the Lord Jesus as they appear in **vs. 22-27**.

1. Tough Words...His unstoppable purpose to save – vs. 22, 23

When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.

The setting is Galilee where Jesus had spent the majority of His time. Jesus and disciples have returned from their up-north excursion to Caesarea Philippi. The crowds have dispersed. The disciples and Jesus have made the journey south and had plenty of time to think about the Transfiguration three of the disciples had witnessed. They had time to discuss the reason the remaining nine were unable to cast the demon out of the boy. They reminisced about the way Jesus was left standing alone on the mountain and how He alone was able to exorcise the demon. Now gathered privately at Matthew's home, Jesus repeated what He had told them twice before and would soon tell them again. **He said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life."** The detail Jesus added this time is the fact that He would be betrayed.

Have you ever been accused of 'sounding like a broken record'? And the young people say, "*what's a record?*" (Help them out Keegan. You're not sure either?) Sorry. Here's a 20th cent. I-pod. Because Jesus had something of great importance to tell His disciples, He repeated Himself. The truth is, He was telling them something they didn't want to hear. This happens all the time. For example, she says, "*Honey, I'm going shopping...would you help me clear the table and do the dishes?*" To which her husband who is deeply engrossed in a hockey game responds, "*I didn't hear you sweetie but the stores are closed and the dishes can wait.*" This phenomena is called selective hearing. For the third time Jesus repeated Himself because these words were tough and emotionally provocative to hear. We know this because when Jesus said it again, **the disciples were filled with grief.**

It's important for us to realize that Jesus was neither helpless nor passive in going to the cross. He knew what lay ahead for Him yet He was determined to do the will of His Father. He was eager to suffer and die for us. He was eager to return to His Father in Heaven. So Jesus went voluntarily without force even though He had the power to overcome His enemies and side step the pain.

Lk. 9:51 says, **As the time approached for him to be taken up to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem.** Then in **Jn. 10:17, 18** Jesus said, **The reason my Father loves me is that I lay down my life--only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.** What the disciples couldn't understand then, Peter and the others understood later. They came to understand that the cross was no accident or afterthought. In **Acts 2:22-24** Peter boldly said, **"Men of Israel, listen to this: Jesus of Nazareth was a man accredited by God to you by miracles, wonders and signs, which God did among you through him, as you yourselves know. This man was handed over to you by God's set purpose and foreknowledge; and you, with the help of wicked men, put him to death by nailing him to the cross. But God raised him from the dead, freeing him from the agony of death, because it was impossible for death to keep its hold on him.** But prior to the cross and resurrection, these words were almost impossible for the disciples to comprehend and embrace...especially the promise of resurrection.

What we see in this first vignette is the unstoppable purpose of Jesus to save us. In **Lk. 19:10** Jesus declared why He had come. He said, **"For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."** For three years Jesus had been seeking the lost sheep of Israel and any who would listen and respond to His call. But now the time was fast approaching for Him to accomplish the second part of His mission...the work that would save us and release us from sin. And nothing could dissuade Jesus from His mission. Neither Satanic temptation / fear / nor persuasion from His own followers could deter Him. Concerning Jesus, **Heb. 10:7** says, **"Then I said, 'Here I am--it is written about me in the scroll-- I have come to do your will, O God.'"** Concerning God's redemption plan, Jesus is **the Lamb that was slain from the creation of the world. – Rev. 13:8** Nothing has or ever will stop God's plan from reaching it's predetermined glorious end.

Friends, let this sink in. The cross was planned before the time of creation. The purpose of God and the forward progress of Jesus Christ is unstoppable. He said, **I will build my Church** and He has. Yet Jesus willingly went to the cross for you and me. He was eager to suffer knowing His sacrifice would purchase our release from sin and death. For that reason, **Heb. 12:2** says, **Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.** To be like Jesus in this world is to be unstoppable in terms of our determination to live for Him and do His will.

2. Temple Taxes---He is unashamed to call us "brothers" – vs. 24-26

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" "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 sons or from others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him.

In this second vignette, we see that Jesus is unashamed to call us brothers. But you're thinking, *"Pastor, you must see something I don't see. Where do these verses say that?"* I was certain you'd ask, so give me a minute and I'll explain.

Ever since the time of Moses, every Jewish male 20 years or older, was required to pay the two-drachma Temple Tax. Now this tax was levied to defray the costs of Temple services and maintenance. It was collected by Jewish agents who were authorized by Rome. Even though this tax was strictly Jewish, Rome supervised it...as they did with everything. The tax was collected about a month before Passover in the month of Adar which translates to March. The Jews were much more willing to pay this tax than to pay the corrupt publicans who collected taxes for Rome's coffers.

This tax was legitimate and apolitical. Since Jesus and His disciples were away from Galilee for some time, they hadn't yet paid the tax. So the Jewish agents came asking a question. Though the text doesn't say this, these agents probably hoped to catch Jesus in another perceived violation of Jewish Law. To catch Him in violation was just the sort of thing their leaders were hoping to expose as a reason to condemn Jesus. Exposing Him would put these agents in good favor with these malicious higher-ups.

Since Peter was the recognized leader, they came to him and asked, **"Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"** Their question was locked and loaded. Their assumption was, *"Jesus doesn't pay it, does He!"* By the way, that's a lousy way to begin a conversation or solicit information. It denies the presumption of innocence and follows the rule, "guilty until proven innocent." It's like saying, *"You don't brush your teeth or use deodorant, do you!" / or "You never had driving lessons, did you!" / or "When did you stop beating your wife?"*

So right away, Peter is put on the defensive and forced to say, **"Yes, he does!"** Peter was afraid Jesus and His disciples would not have been looked on as good Jews...but as irreligious tax dodgers. He didn't want to dishonor Jesus or bring Him trouble, so Peter assured them Jesus pays the tax.

Now bear in mind, this conversation between Peter and the collectors happened outside the house. But now inside and before Peter ever had a chance to tell Jesus about it, **v.25** says, **Jesus was the first to speak.** Here's another example of our Lord's omniscience. Jesus knew all about the conversation that took place outside. This all-hearing, all-knowing attribute of Christ is something David praised God for. In **Psa. 139:4** He said, **Before a word is on my tongue you know it completely, O LORD.** So Jesus spoke first and said, **"What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes--from their own sons or from others?"** *"Let's discuss your answer to those guys collecting the Temple Tax. What do you think?"* Now Peter is thinking...*"Well shazaam, it's like Jesus hears everything I say!"* And yes disciples, He does!

So Peter, **"From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes--from their own sons or from others?"** Here Jesus appealed to a well known principle that exempts the family of royalty from paying taxes. Because he was aware of this, Peter answered correctly. **"From others," Peter answered.** Everybody knows this...the king's sons are not required to pay the taxes the rest of us have to pay. **"Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him.**

Now this was the tax rule for civil matters...for kings and their sons. But here we're talking about a religious tax. Does the same rule apply? Jesus wanted Peter and the other disciples to process this...to think it through. Who is the Lord or King of the Temple? Though the Jews sometimes called it "their Temple", the Temple in Jerusalem has always belonged to God. It is His Temple. **Mal. 3:1 - "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.** This was fulfilled in part when John the Baptist came and Jesus twice cleansed the Temple. So if Christ is King and Lord of His Temple, who are His sons and daughters? The answer is...all who trust Jesus and belong to Him by way of the new birth. I'm sure Peter didn't grasp all of this yet, but **Gal. 3:26** says, **You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus.** Say this with me... *"I'm a child of the king. / "I'm a child of God." Because God is our father, like Peter, we are exempt from this tax.* Isn't that good news...we found a legitimate 100% tax exemption! This tax represented the Law and the entire OT system that was just about to end. The Temple curtain was just about to be torn from top to bottom and the sacrifices discontinued. Jesus was just about to fulfill the Law and replace the whole system of Law with a new system based on grace, not performance. Peter, you and the other apostles have so much to learn before Pentecost! But here's the point I want you to see....

Jesus didn't say, "*I alone am exempt because I am God's one and only son.*" He said, **Then the sons (plural) are exempt.** Twice in these verses the word **sons** is plural. Looking ahead to **v. 27** Jesus said, **But so that we (plural) may not offend them...** Then after the Temple-Tax-Toting-Tilapia was caught and the coin retrieved, Jesus said, **"Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."** These plural nouns and pronouns are highly significant. Implied in this whole section is the fact that Jesus relates to Peter as family. He is a son of God and a brother of Jesus. Peter, listen to this and grasp it if you can...You have been made a son of God by faith in Christ.

The Apostle John wrote, **He (Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, He gave the right to become children of God—(Jn. 1:11, 12)** Later in His first letter John wrote, **How great is the love the Father has lavished on us, that we should be called children of God! And that is what we are! - I Jn. 3:1**

And listen to what **Rom. 8:17** adds...**Now if we are children, then we are heirs--heirs of God and co-heirs with Christ, if indeed we share in his sufferings in order that we may also share in his glory.** Now get this...to be a **coheir with Christ** means the full inheritance that belongs to Jesus Christ belongs to all who believe and are born into God's family! No joke...you're rich! It may not seem like that right now in the realm of time and taxes, but you are rich for eternity! For this reason, the next verse says, **I consider that our present sufferings are not worth comparing with the glory that will be revealed in us. (Rom. 8:18)**

Before we leave this section, let me validate the title I chose. I called it, **Temple Taxes---He is unashamed to call us "brothers."** I borrowed that phrase from **Heb. 2:11 - Both the One who makes men holy (Jesus) and those who are made holy (all who trust Him for salvation) are of the same family. So Jesus is not ashamed to call them brothers.** Here in **Matt. 17** Jesus is saying, *"Peter, by believing in Me you've been made a son of God. You're my brother, Peter. Despite your impetuosity / despite the aroma of *aud du fishey*' that hangs on your clothing / despite your incurable hoof in mouth disease / and despite the fact that I know you will deny me three times...we are family! **We** don't have to pay this tax because God is **our Father**...and Peter, very soon, you will be released from this tax and from all of the Law's obligations!"*

3. Tilapia...He is unwilling to offend anyone – v. 27

"But so that we may not offend them, 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."

Marine biologists say there are 6 species of mouth breeding fish in the Sea of Galilee but many believe the fish of **Matt. 17** was a Tilapia. The particular species is known as the Musht. Today this fish is still harvested and served in local restaurants. The locals call it St. Peter's fish. The six of us who went to Israel a few years ago ate these fish for dinner. Restaurants serve the whole fish baked or deep fried. The Tilapia tasted pretty good if you don't mind eating a fish that's looking at you. But as a mouth breeder, the Musht carries its young in its mouth until they're big enough to evade predators. In the process of scooping up eggs from the sea floor, the Musht sometimes picks up small pebbles and other objects. There actually is a published story of a Tilapia found with a bottle cap in its mouth. So there's no inherent problem fitting or finding a coin in the mouth of this species.

The miracle consists first in the omniscience of Jesus...the fact that Jesus knew that one particular fish out of the many schools of fish in Galilee, had the necessary coin in its mouth. Not only did Jesus know there was a fish swimming near shore with a coin in its mouth, but He directed that fish to Peter.

With human beings the lone exception, the entire creation obeys its Creator's voice. So Jesus directed that fish to Peter and instructed it to bite...and it did. There are days when I wish...

The miracle also consists in the fact the first fish to take Peter's hook was the one having the precise four drachma coin that was needed to pay the tax for two men. According to **v. 24**, the tax owed by each man was two-drachma. The silver coin found in the fish's mouth was most likely the four drachma coin known as the tetradrachma. Since Jewish taxes could not be paid with coins bearing the image of a foreign emperor, the coin had to be exchanged for a Jewish shekel. Here's a photo of a tetradrachma compared to a US quarter.

This miracle reminds disciples then and now that Jesus is the omnipotent / all-knowing / sovereign Son of God who controls all of creation. He cares about the taxes we owe and He is well able to meet our needs! The options open to Him are unlimited! Even the sea can be an ATM for God's children.

But let's return to the first part of **v.27**. There Jesus told Peter...**But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line.** The first principle taught here is doctrinal ...Jesus is the omnipotent Son of God and Israel's rightful King. He is Jehovah Jireh, our provider! Amen? Yet the second principle is moral. Here Jesus leads His disciples to understand that the greatness of His Kingdom consists of service and humility. Though Jesus and His disciples were exempt from the Temple Tax, Jesus refused to unnecessarily offend His fellow Israelites. So Jesus set aside a right that was legitimately His to claim for a greater purpose...the purpose of putting no stumbling block in the way of His countrymen, but instead, doing what He could to encourage them to believe and come to Him so they might be saved. And remember, these people Jesus refused to offend, hated Him and were conspiring to kill Him. In the final days leading up to the cross, Jesus was teaching His disciples a lesson that applies to us as much as to them. He showed us what it means to love enemies.

We find this principle stated throughout the NT and we'll talk more about it tonight. A classic example is the instruction given by the Apostle Paul. To the Corinthians who were self-centered / loveless / and rights oriented, Paul wrote...**Do not cause anyone to stumble, whether Jews, Greeks or the church of God--even as I try to please everybody in every way. For I am not seeking my own good but the good of many, so that they may be saved. (1 Cor. 10:32, 33)**

Well, I told you this would be fishy message. But even fishier than this message is Christians who live for themselves and have little concern for the lost around them. The unsaved world will always be offended by Christ and the Gospel. We can't do anything about that. What we need to avoid is the sort of offensiveness that is unnecessary and caused when we are disrespectful and hostile toward those who don't know Jesus or when we make a big deal about things that don't matter. Though Jesus never condoned sin, sinners were drawn to Him. There was something winsome and attractive about His meekness and lowliness. Our calling is to follow Him as we put the welfare of others ahead of our own. Say, how is that principle working in your life? Do you love others enough to hold your tongue about things that don't matter as much as a friend's need of Jesus?

So our passage this AM has three vignettes of Jesus. First we see His determination and unstoppable purpose to save us. Then we find that He is unashamed to call us His brothers and sisters. Finally, this Jesus who appeared in all His glory just days earlier, is unwilling to offend anyone in the interest of encouraging as many as will to embrace Him and be saved. These vignettes are given so we might know Him better and love Him more. But they are also given so that we might follow Him.