

Matthew 17:24-18:14: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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- [0 : 00] Matthew 17, 24-18, 14 When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two drachma tax went up to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the tax?
- He said, Yes. And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?
- From their sons, or from others? And when he said, From others, Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free. However, not to give offence to them.
- Go to the sea and cast a hook, and take the first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.
- At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven? And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them and said, Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.
- [1 : 10] Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me. But whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea.
- Woe to the world for temptations to sin! For it is necessary that temptations come, but woe to the one by whom the temptation comes.
- And if your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or two feet to be thrown into the eternal fire.
- And if your eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life with one eye than with two eyes to be thrown into the hell of fire.
- See that you do not despise one of these little ones. For I tell you that in heaven their angels always see the face of my Father who is in heaven.
- [2 : 19] What do you think? If a man has a hundred sheep and one of them has gone astray, does he not leave the ninety-nine on the mountains and go in search of the one that went astray?
- And if he finds it, truly I say to you, he rejoices over it more than over the ninety-nine that never went astray. So it is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish.
- The narrative concerning the temple tax at the end of Matthew chapter 17 is a peculiar one. The tax in question seems to be the temple tax because of the amount that was paid, also because the logic of Jesus' argument suggests that God is the one who is levying this tax in some way.

It is a tax that is rooted in the teaching of Moses. In Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16 there is a law concerning this tax that is given. The Lord said to Moses, When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the Lord when you number them, that there shall be no plague among them when you number them.

Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary. The shekel is twenty geras. Half a shekel is an offering to the Lord.

[3 : 39] Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering. The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than the half shekel.

When you give the Lord's offering to make atonement for your lives, you shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and you shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, so as to make atonement for your lives.

This is later used for the temple. For instance, in 2 Kings chapter 12 verse 4, or in 2 Chronicles chapter 24 verses 4 to 7.

After this, Joash decided to restore the house of the Lord, and he gathered the priests and the Levites and said to them, Go out to the cities of Judah, and gather from all Israel money to repair the house of your God from year to year, and see that you act quickly.

But the Levites did not act quickly. So the king summoned Jehoiada the chief and said to him, Why have you not required the Levites to bring in from Judah and Jerusalem the tax levied by Moses, the servant of the Lord, and the congregation of Israel for the tent of testimony?

[4 : 48] For the sons of Athaliah, that wicked woman, had broken into the house of God, and had also used all the dedicated things of the house of the Lord for the Baals. Jesus responds to the levying of the temple tax with a teaching about sons and strangers.

The sons are those who belong to the house, and what is within the house belongs to them. They will inherit. Jesus has also taught earlier about the way that the priests are exempt from the law of the Sabbath.

As they are engaged in divine service, the law concerning the Sabbath does not apply to them in the same way, and that his disciples were in a similar position. The sons have an access and a privilege that outsiders do not.

Jesus is the son, and the people who are his people share in that privilege of sonship. He could exploit his status, he could insist upon exemption, but he doesn't.

He submits to the tax, so as not to cause scandal. However, through the miracle of the fish with the coin, he does so in a way that demonstrates his freedom and his liberty.

[5 : 54] He is provided for by his father, through the creation itself, in a way that symbolises the Gentiles. He need not insist on his rights, as he serves a father who loves to provide, and will not abandon his children.

There are also far, far more important things than money, and picking a fight over money is not really fitting. Paying an unnecessary or even oppressive tax doesn't worry the free sons as much as slaves, and the strangers scrabbling for security.

Our urge often is to insist upon our rights, our privileges, our exemptions, our status. And Jesus challenges that. We can depend upon God. God will provide for us.

And even in certain circumstances, we can allow ourselves to be defrauded, to have someone take our tunic, or to make us walk the second mile. Because we know that God is the one that we depend upon.

God is the one who will reward us. God is the one who we look to for provision. Our urge to insist upon our rights, then, is placed into a distinctively unworthy category.

[7 : 01] This is not what we are about. We are people who are willing to pay what is required from us. Indeed, we are happy to go over and above, to be those who are imposed upon.

If we can avoid causing scandal, if we can avoid placing obstacles before people, we will go ahead and do that. We'll be people who do not force our own rights, do not insist upon our privileges.

The money taken from the caught fish by Peter the fisherman pays for the tax. Peter has been commissioned as a fisher of men, and as I've observed in the story of the Gospels more generally, the fish are very much associated with the Gentiles.

This provision of our Father is one that can be provided through the creation itself, through fish. It can be provided through the Gentiles. It can be provided through all these different people that we would not expect, but God is the Lord of all, and we can depend upon Him.

He is a good Father that we look to, and we can trust, and as a result, we do not feel that we need to fight all these unnecessary and unseemly fights about money. God will provide all our needs according to His riches in Christ Jesus.

[8 : 12] And Jesus talks here, and in the passage that follows, about stumbling blocks. These are obstacles that we set up. These can be things like hypocrisy, or abuse, division, or hatred.

Those things which, attending our teaching that is good, can cause people to fall astray, to be those who reject the Word of God on account of something in us, or something that we have done, because we have not adorned the way of Christ.

Rather, we have been those that have been an obstacle within it, that have discouraged people from putting their trust and their lives in Jesus' hands. And as we do that, we are judged with the sharpest judgment that Jesus has in the Gospels.

There are many occasions where there is necessary offense and obstacles. Jesus often speaks about Himself and His mission as an obstacle. As a stone in the way, a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.

He is someone who presents all sorts of obstacles for the people who are unfaithful. Things that purposefully make the way of unrighteousness, or unfaithfulness, or disbelief, less pleasant or easy.

[9 : 19] He is someone who presents all these riddles, and difficulties, and problems, and frustrations. And yet, we are not to provide those sorts of things unnecessarily.

The temple tax isn't one of the ways that the Jewish leaders are undermining the law of God. There will come a time when the temple is overthrown. But for now, faithfulness requires honoring it.

You don't want to cause scandal in this thing. It's not the most important thing. Refusal to pay the temple tax would cause people to stumble. It would give the wrong message. It would be something that might cause people to turn astray from Christ, not to listen to him.

They would see him as someone who's opposed to what the temple represents in its fullest sense, rather than as the one who's fulfilling its true meaning. And so Christ is prepared to forgo his privileges as a son, to forgo his advantages, and his status, and his exemption, to be one who does not cause stumbling, who does not cause some weaker brother, some weaker person, to turn away from the path of righteousness, or to reject the message of the kingdom.

There are so much more important things than insisting upon our rights in such situations. This theme of scandal continues into the next chapter. And the question there is who is the greatest?

[10 : 38] The disciples are jockeying for position, and this is a typical human desire. We want to be exalted over others. And Jesus' response to them is to show a child. The kingdom of God does not work in the same way.

The kingdom of God is not about competitive jockeying for honour and privilege and status. The child challenges us to humble ourselves, not to be people who vaunt ourselves over others, who have a strong sense of our superiority.

We are not players of the competitive game of honour that utterly consumes other people's attention and concern. Rather, we recognise our dependence, our unworthiness, and to resist the pursuit to exalt ourselves over others, we must take that posture of the child.

Greatness comes through loving service of others, putting others ahead of ourselves. Greatness also requires a welcoming and a receiving of the weak, a valuing of the weak, and a concern not to be an obstacle or a stumbling block to them, even in those things where we do have rights that we could appeal to.

We are warned in the strongest of possible ways against putting an obstacle in the way of the weakest. Children are highlighted here. They are representative of the wider group of weak and dependent people, but they are important in their own right.

[12 : 00] They are not just symbols of something that they are not. Receiving children means paying attention to and honouring the people who cannot give us anything in return, who might threaten our status rather than raising it.

If you spend time paying attention to and valuing and considering the needs of and protecting children, it's not necessarily going to give you status. Often the people who are engaged in that sort of activity lose status.

They are not seen as powerful power brokers in society. They are not seen as the sort of people with influence and weight. The way that we treat children and the weak is absolutely key.

It's a critical indicator of the life of the kingdom. We are being called to follow Jesus' example here. Jesus surrenders his rights for the sake of people who have nothing to offer, nothing to commend themselves to his attention, no status that he can benefit from.

And Jesus teaches this again and again in his teaching, that we are to be people who give attention to those who can give us nothing in return, to invite the people who are the outcasts to our feasts, to invite those who have no honour to return to us, to pay attention to the child, to the outcast, to the stranger, to the widow, to the orphan, to the people on the margins of society.

[13 : 18] And Jesus stresses the importance of dealing most radically with the obstacles to the weak and to the children. This is a connection to Jesus' earlier teaching on adultery in the Sermon on the Mount.

The importance of dealing radically with sin in order to protect not just ourselves but others from stumbling. If there is something that is causing us to sin, we must pluck it out even if it is our eye or our hand.

The fact that there are angels in God's very presence who are interceding for the weak is something that reminds us that they may appear weak but God, who has more power than any other, pays attention to them.

He has charged some of his angels to take special concern for them to ensure that they are never overlooked or forgotten. This is a recurring theme in the wisdom literature and in the law.

God sees the orphan and the widow. The weak are noticed by God himself. The one who gives to the poor and cares for the poor lends to the Lord.

[14 : 20] And there is a danger that we have of a Christianity that is unmindful of the weak that allows the weak to be collateral damage for the achievements of the strong. In Revelation chapter 18 verse 21 there is the recurrence of this image of a millstone and something being cast into the sea.

In that passage it is the fate of Babylon the Great. Then a mighty angel took up a stone like a great millstone and threw it into the sea saying So will Babylon the great city be thrown down with violence and will be found no more.

Why does this city receive such a terrible fate? Because they have abused the weak. Because they have preyed upon the children of God. Because the people that God attends to those marginalized people those people who are dependent upon his care those people who have no power or honor or glory of their own to offer they have been abused and mistreated and God will judge all who act in such a manner.

Jesus here gives the lost sheep parable that is more familiar to us from Luke chapter 15. Christ isn't a saviour who tolerates collateral damage. A few weak people sacrificed for the sake of the strong.

No one in the kingdom of God doesn't matter. The good shepherd will leave ninety-nine strong sheep for the one that is lost. The weak ill-favored blemished sheep whatever sheep it is even if it has nothing to commend it is of concern to the good shepherd.

[15 : 57] This challenging passage has a peculiar and powerful relevance to many situations in our own time where we are prepared perhaps to sacrifice for the sake of the benefit of the powerful people who are made in the image of God.

People who are these lost sheep that God cares for. Children who have angels in God's very presence who are interceding for them. God cares about the weak but so often our concern for the strength of our communities for the power of particularly gifted preachers or teachers or authorities we are willing to sacrifice a few weak people for that and Christ teaches that this is utterly opposed to the principle of the kingdom.

The principle of the kingdom is that the child is in the centre the weak the dependent the one without honour the one without status and if we are those who will sacrifice them for our gain our gain as the strong or the powerful or the influential we have utterly rejected his kingdom.

Rather we are to aspire to be like them to be those who give up the games of status that others play to give up that concern with honour and supremacy and to be those who put others before ourselves.

A question to consider the sort of unnecessary obstacles that we set up for other people walking the way of the kingdom is a chief concern of Christ in this passage and maybe we should think about the inverse of these obstacles the ways in which we can make the way of the kingdom a lot easier to walk for people we don't want to make the way of the kingdom easier than God has made it but we do not dare to make it harder what are some very practical ways in our various situations that we can make the path of the kingdom easier for others to walk.

[17 : 52] also how can this teaching of Christ in this chapter be related to Paul's teaching concerning the strong and the weak in places such as his letters to the Corinthians and the book of Romans.