

From Simon to Peter #17 - for Me and for Thee

by J. Glyn Owen

The sermon explores Jesus' humility and grace as he chooses to pay the temple tax, emphasizing the importance of selflessness in the life of a believer.

Duration: 23:41

Scripture: Matthew 17:24-27

Topics: "Simon to Peter"

Description

In this sermon, the speaker focuses on a seemingly insignificant incident in the life of Jesus and Peter. The incident involves a discussion about paying tribute money. Jesus, aware of his dignity and mission, chooses not to assert his rights and instead demonstrates humility and grace. The speaker emphasizes that this incident serves to remind Peter of the glory and uniqueness of Jesus' person and mission. The sermon highlights the importance of humility and grace in the life of a servant of God.

Transcript

Matthew chapter seventeen. Matthew chapter seventeen, and we read verses twenty-four to twenty-seven. This incident, perhaps, is not as familiar as other incidents that we have been considering, and therefore it is necessary that we should read it again.

And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money, came to Peter and said, Doth not your master pay tribute? He saith, Yes. And when he was come into the house, Jesus prevented, or got a step ahead of Peter. Before Peter had had the opportunity of saying anything, Jesus was a step ahead of him, and said to him, What are you thinking about, Simon? Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom and tribute? Of their own children, or of strangers? Peter said unto him, Of strangers.

Jesus saith unto him, Then are the children free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the first fish that cometh up. And when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money.

That take, and give unto them for me and thee. When we began this series, I remember saying that there are some apparently unimportant, or semi-important incidents in the life of our Lord, and in the experience of Simon, which appear to have played a major role in the formulating of Simon's faith, and life, and convictions. Now, I believe that the incident this morning is such in one.

I don't suppose you would classify this as on a par with Caesarea Philippi. One might not normally place this alongside the experience of seeing with your own eyes the transfigured Son of God in his glory. The kingdom of God come upon the mount.

And yet, here is a simple incident, destined to serve, in a most remarkable way, to mould the man before us. And to leave an indelible mark upon his way of thinking, and ultimately, his way of acting as a servant of God. Now, we're going to look at it, first of all, considering the circumstances that occasioned the incident.

We need to get the background. I think it is necessary for us to notice two things, by way of context, or of background here. First of all, the disciples' talk on the way towards the city, the town of Capernaum.

Mark tells us that as the little group made their way towards Capernaum, they were huddled together in excited conversation about something. Now, they didn't raise their voices, Jesus did not overhear them, though, of course, he knew what was going on. But there they were, huddled together, and in a semi-private sort of way, they were really engrossed, they were really lost in talk and conversation about something or other.

Knowing what was going on, Jesus wanted to refer to it, and purposed to refer to it later on. But something intervened in the meantime, as we shall see. So, Mark puts it this way.

They come to Capernaum. And when he was in the house, he asked them, What were you discussing on the way? But they were silent. For, this is the reason, on the way, they had discussed, one with another, Who was the greatest? Who was the greatest? Obviously, by this time, they have become convinced that our Lord Jesus is really going to be king.

They're now optimistic about the future. Perhaps, I don't know, I can't dogmatize, perhaps the three disciples that witnessed the transfiguration have told the others something of the glory of the mountaintop. I don't know.

In any case, they all saw something of his majesty and power right there at the foot of the mountain. When, after his disciples had been unable to heal the boy whom the father brought, demon-possessed as he was, Jesus came down and in the nick of time saved the reputation of the disciples and relieved the problem of the father and completely healed the lad. They'd all seen something of the kingdom and the kingship of the Savior in that very recent event.

And so, they were looking forward to a future over which he would reign, in which he would reign as king. And so, of course, the topic of conversation is this. Which of us is the greatest? Who will be the prime minister? Or who will be the chancellor of the exchequer? Or who will be the foreign minister? What place shall we occupy? That's the first.

The second strand in the context, and we need to see this also as background, is the demand for tax to be paid towards the Jerusalem temple. One would like to know a little more here. Why did they not, why did not this tax collector approach Jesus directly? He was very approachable.

However, he didn't do that. But recognizing Simon Peter as a disciple, he went to him and quietly said, Aha, doesn't your master or does your master pay tax? Now possibly he was suggesting that Jesus was a cheater, a tax evader. You do have this species, don't you, even in the world of today? Perhaps especially in the world of today.

And perhaps there is an insinuation here that the Lord Jesus was attempting to evade a responsibility for the upkeep of the temple. Peter jumps to his feet as usual and says, Yes, he certainly does pay tax. And now I guess that Peter was going to say a word to his master about the conversation as soon as he got back into the house, but the master preceded him.

Now, without saying any more about that, it is necessary for us to distinguish between tax and tax in the New Testament. The particular tax here in question needs to be distinguished from a civil tax that was levied by Rome. Every man had to pay that.

This was obligatory. Then there is another capitation tax levied by Herod the Tetrarch. Upon all Galileans, you had to pay that too.

But this is a different one. This is an ecclesiastical, this is a religious tax. This has not Roman or Herodian authority behind it, requiring it, but divine.

This was ordained of God. This was first ordained for the upkeep of the tabernacle, and now it is devoted to the upkeep of the temple in Jerusalem. Now, I asked Mr. Walker to read to us this morning from Deuteronomy chapter 30, verses 11 to 16, because there you have the institution of this tax.

Can I read just a few words from that excerpt? The Lord said to Moses, When you take a census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for himself to the Lord. Each 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. Everyone who is numbered in the census from twenty years old and upward shall give the Lord's offering to make atonement for yourself. Here then was a divinely instituted tax, modest in measure, not legally enforceable, but expected of every Jew of twenty years old and upward.

Every man has to pay this, so I gather that the Levites and the rabbis were generally exempt. Now, those are the circumstances. That is the background then, the talk and the way and the tax that was expected of the Savior.

Now, come next to see the condescension of Jesus as revealed by what took place here, standing out in stark contrast to the overbearing officiousness of the tax collector, who appears to have wondered whether he was a tax evader, and to the arrogant pride of the disciples, quibbling as they talk with one another, which of us will be the greatest or is the greatest. We see our Lord Jesus Christ so humble. Even though someone is charging him with something that is utterly false, he doesn't stand upon his own dignity and call the anathema of God upon him.

Even though there is no reason for him to pay the tax in question, or let me put it the other way, there is valid reason why he should not pay it, he nevertheless takes steps to do so. His humility, his condescension, his grace. Now, let's look at it like this.

I want to pose two questions and answer them as briefly as I can. The first question is this, what did Jesus do that revealed his unrivaled grace and humility? We can put it negatively and then positively. Negatively, let me repeat, he declined to press his own rights.

His was a privilege which enabled him, if he so desired, not to pay the required tax. He did not press his own rights. Neither did he leap in defense of himself, even though he was totally innocent of the

insinuation of the tax collector.

Now, we live in an age when people jump like the trigger of a gun going off in defense of their own rights. I don't want to create a false impression this morning. I think that we, as Christians, should be concerned that other people have their rights, but this is a different thing here.

It is a man standing up for his own rights. And there are times and situations in life when this ill befits a man or a woman of God. Oh, the world is so sensitive today.

Men will do anything to get their rights, their loaf of bread, their pound of human flesh if need be. Men will hold nations to ransom and much else. I have no time to enlarge upon it, simply because they will have their rights.

It doesn't matter how others fare. It doesn't matter how the nation fares. It doesn't matter what happens if I must get my rights.

And, you know, it is also unlike the Savior. Never did a man have such rights as the Son of God, the ruler of the universe, the judge of men, the one to whom all things belong. Never did any man have the rights that he had, and yet he did not press for them.

Though he never treated lightly any attempt by one man to disregard the rights of another man, he never stood for his own rights. Positively, Jesus set about doing what he could legitimately refuse to do. He made provision to pay the tax.

Now, you will notice that the tax in question was not only of an ecclesiastical order or nature, but it had a special significance. Two things were mentioned in the excerpt I quoted from Exodus 30. You must have noticed it.

One, in the words of the Lord to Moses, it was a matter of a person giving a ransom for himself to the Lord, Exodus 30, verse 12. Or, quote, making an atonement for sin, verses 15 and 16 in the same chapter. This was essentially, you see, a sinner's tax.

It was universal among the Jews because every Jew was a sinner. And therefore every Jew was expected to bring this tax for the support of the tabernacle first then of the temple because every Jew was a sinner like every Gentile is a sinner. But Jesus was not a sinner.

Jesus needed pay no ransom. Jesus need not make atonement for his sin, nor even give a token ransom, nor make a token atonement. Simon Peter had recognized him as Messiah, son of the living God, and he must be sinless who is Messiah.

But God the Father had twice already acknowledged him in these words, This is my beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased. And if the Father finds no fault in him, if the Father sees no sin in him, he need not pay the sinner's tax. He's exempt.

Now that comes from the book of Exodus. But now Jesus puts it in a different way according to Matthew. He puts another face, another picture before us.

He puts it like this. He turned to Peter and he put this question to him. Peter, he says, what do you think? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll or tribute? From their sons or from others? And when he said from others, Jesus said to him, then the sons are free.

I'm aware that you can expound this in two or three different ways at least. I'm taking the simplest. I believe humbly that the simplest is really the key to this situation and the key to the passage and to the usage referred.

It's very simple. Kings of the earth don't tax their own children. Now we're thinking of a totalitarian ruler more or less, the man who has the power to call for taxes.

He doesn't tax his own family. He doesn't tax his own children. Who does he tax? Well, he taxes the nation at large in order fundamentally to support his own family and, of course, to look after the realm.

But kings of the earth don't normally tax their own children. Very well, says the Son of God. I am the Son of the King.

As the Son of the King, the Lord of all creation. My Father doesn't tax me. Therefore I'm exempt.

I have no need to pay this tax. I am the Son of the King of all creation, the Lord of all being and of all life. I have no reason to pay this tax.

Then notice this. Nevertheless. Oh, this condescending nevertheless.

No man has the right to force me to do this or even to expect me to do this. Nevertheless, says the condescending Son of God, though there is no enforcement from above, no moral obligation, I'll do it and he does it. What he did, therefore, was to refuse to stand upon his own dignity and plead legitimate exemption despite the fact that he could appeal first to Scripture and then to tradition.

Some people put a tremendous emphasis upon tradition. We put emphasis upon Scripture. Here you have both of them.

Jesus appealed to Scripture and tradition and he says, there's no reason why I should do it. Very well. Nevertheless.

My friends, let's get this before we pass on. Tell me, are you a man or a woman who is always known as standing for your own rights? There are times when this can be most nauseating because it is evident oftentimes of an arrogance and a selfishness and a carnality that is all out of consonance with the spirit of the gospel and with the person of the Son of God. He to whom all things belong said, all right, I'll pay the tax and not begrudgingly.

When did Jesus thus show such self-effacing condescension? That's the second question I want to answer because this puts it in a different focus again and lets us see something of the wonder and the grandeur of this episode. Now the fact of his willingness to pay the temple half shekel would have been significant, I think, at any time, particularly, sir, when you remember that the temple at this time is the headquarters of the religion of the Jews. And already the leaders, the very people who are in charge of the temple are machinating to slay him and to get rid of him.

Already they've got their plans afoot. Already they will not recede his word. Already they are setting the machinery in motion whereby they will ultimately crucify him.

They are the leaders of the temple. Why should Jesus pay tax to a temple that's doing that? Why should he support a regime that's involved in this kind of thing? If ever there was a time when Jesus could legitimately say, not a penny, this was the time. But I want to add to that.

In the first place, he does it in the wake of his recent experience of transfiguration. Before the eyes of his onlooking three disciples. Now, if we rightly understand that passage, there may have been times when Jesus was often transfigured privately in fellowship with God, but on that occasion he was transfigured before them.

They saw it. They'd never seen it before. He was but like an ordinary man in one sense before, just like an ordinary bush that Moses saw in the backwoods, but this time, this day, the glory of the Shekinah was upon him and within him.

Oh, what it meant to him, none of us can ever tell. The glory that surrounded him, the Shekinah, the voice that came to him, the people that spoke to him, Moses and Elias, speaking of the exodus that he was to accomplish in Jerusalem, what it meant to him, who can tell? I shall not attempt to do so this morning, but the one thing I must say is this. It reminded him of the dignity and the glory of his person and of the uniqueness of his mission, who he was and what he'd come for, and that he was the son of God to whom all men should listen, and yet he refuses to stand upon his dignity, and yet he refuses to make a battle with somebody that thinks he's a tax evader.

Oh, the humble son of God, in the awareness of his dignity and of his destiny and of his glory, he refuses, I say, to press for his rights. This is grace, you know. Ye behold the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, who though he was rich, yet for our sakes he became poor, that we out of his poverty or through his poverty might be made rich.

Over and over again he did the same kind of thing. John chapter 13, for example. I won't go after it this morning.

The same self-consciousness could not other than be enhanced by the spectacle of the healed, demon-possessed boy to whom we've already referred, and in this respect. Already Jesus knew of a fish in Galilee's lake that had a whole shekel in its mouth, and he had the power to cause that little fish to come to the very spot where Simon was going and to respond to Simon's hook, and yet in the awareness of the power and the might and the glory that was his, he did not press for his rights.

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