

A taxing question – Matthew 17:24-27 (+ Romans 13:1-7)

29th May 2011 at 10am

Introduction

Good morning everyone

Today we've reached chapter 17 verses 24 to 27 in our Sunday morning journey through Matthew's Gospel. So, it'd be really helpful if you'd grab a pew Bible and open it on page 985

This is an important little passage, which provides some vital principles for 21st century Christian living – principles that give us much-needed guidance on how to engage properly with this complex world we live in

You see the problem is that the New Testament makes it clear that a Christian's primary citizenship is not of this world but of heaven and that we must wary of getting contaminated by the world's standards. (Philippians 3:17-21, Ephesians 2:19, Hebrews 12:22-23)

This forces us to ask what our relationship should be to human society in general, and to governmental authority in particular. How, in practice, can Christians be both in the world but not of the world?

It's this general area, and specifically the issue of paying taxes, which Jesus deals with, as he gives Peter a personal lesson in three key principles of Christian living

To help us get to grips with this passage I'm going to divide it into three parts:

Firstly, the taxmen pay a visit
Secondly, the principle is discussed
And thirdly, Jesus provides

Got that? The taxmen visit, the principle's discussed; and Jesus provides

The payment demanded (vv24-25a)

Okay, firstly, the taxmen pay a visit:

²⁴ *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?"*

²⁵ *"Yes, he does," he replied.*

There's only one thing worse than getting a letter with a tax demand. And that's getting a personal visit with a tax demand!

A mother had taken her young toddler to the beach. They were having great fun when the toddler saw a £2 coin. And as toddlers do, he picked it up and put it in his mouth.

The toddler began choke and his mother started to panic. "Help me! Please somebody! Help my little boy," she cried.

Just then, a man came over. He grabbed the little boy by the chest, wrapped his arms around him, and gave a quick thrust inwards. Out popped the coin. The mother thanked the man profusely, and then said, "It's a miracle! God be praised! He provided a doctor so my little boy would be saved."

"Oh, I'm not a doctor," the man said. "I'm from the Inland Revenue. Getting people to cough up money is what I do for a living!"

I'm sure that when Peter saw those tax collectors coming towards him his heart sank. But what was this tax that he was being asked about?

The two-drachma Temple tax was the equivalent to about two days' wages. It had originally been introduced as a one-off tax while the Israelites were in the desert with Moses. It was intended to pay for the maintenance and operation of the Tabernacle – that very special tent where God lived among his people during the Exodus. (Exodus 30:11-16)

Of course, the problem is that once taxes have been introduced, they have a habit of increasing rather than going away. And this one was no different! Over the centuries this one-off tent tax had morphed into a government-approved annual tax, which the Romans allowed the Jewish religious leaders to collect for the operation of the Jerusalem Temple.

Because the Temple tax was to be paid by the time of the Passover, collectors were sent throughout Palestine a month or so beforehand.

It's a bit like Janette Watkins, our treasurer, sending round her heavies to your houses once a year in Lent, to collect a special Southover Tax – now there's an idea for the PCC to consider, Steve.....

The way the tax collectors ask Peter their question is interesting. It suggests that they might have been under instruction from the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem to challenge Jesus on the issue of paying the tax.

Their thinking might have been something like this:

Because Jesus claimed to be the Messiah, he might consider himself exempt. And if he did, that would be yet another charge they could make against him.

So, it was perhaps to their surprise that Peter said "*yes, he does*".

Peter didn't have to ask Jesus for the answer, because he knew Jesus always paid his taxes, whether they were demanded by Rome or by the Jewish leaders. You only have to go a few chapters forward in Mathew to remind yourself of Jesus' principle on taxes: "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's*". (Matthew 22)

The principle discussed (vv25b-27a)

So, the taxmen have paid their visit. Now, secondly, the principle is discussed:

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?"

²⁶ "From others", Peter answered. "Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him.

When Peter gets back from his meeting with the taxmen, Jesus gets in first with a question that widens the debate from purely being an issue about the Temple tax

I'm sure you understand what Jesus is saying here. He's saying that as God's fully-divine Son, he doesn't have to submit to a Temple tax.

Let's face it, if there's any tax that Jesus shouldn't be required to pay it's the Temple tax! Jesus is Lord of all the earth but supremely Lord of the Temple. Jesus called the Temple his "Father's house" (Luke 2:49; John 2:16) and declared himself to be greater than the Temple (Matt. 12:6).

Jesus had every right to refuse to pay the Temple tax, just as he had every right to refuse being humiliated and persecuted by the Jewish authorities
But he didn't refuse that either

Instead it says in Philippians 2 that Jesus willingly emptied himself of his divine glory, "*taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness*" (Philippians 2:7).

No! Instead of demanding his divine rights, Jesus accepted his obligations as a human being
Instead of taking up his rights, Jesus laid them down for the sake of serving others
And if this is what Jesus did, then we as his disciples mustn't do anything less

So here's **the first principle** from our passage..... and I'm afraid it's not a popular one!
The first principle is this: We must fulfil our duties as a citizen of this world and that includes paying our taxes

You see if you were hoping that Jesus didn't really intend this incident to be applied as a general principle, then you need to look again at that Romans 13 passage we had as our first Reading.

In it Paul repeats and in fact strengthens the idea of Christians needing to submit to the authorities.

And the excuse that our authorities are failing to govern properly won't wash either. Let's face it, the governing authorities Paul and his fellow believers were under, were far more corrupt and oppressive than our democratically elected governments.....whatever you may think of the current Conservative – LibDem Alliance and its cost-cutting policies!

I'm afraid that there's no getting around it. Christians are required to submit to governmental authorities and we're to pay our taxes promptly and completely [*Pause*]

Okay, so doing your duty and paying your taxes is something we have to do. Much more important is when we don't have to do something. But we do it anyway out of love.

And this is the point of the **second principle** from our passage: **our rights are less important than our relationships.**

Jesus willingly submits himself to the Temple tax, even though he didn't have to, because he doesn't want anything to compromise the gospel

Jesus doesn't want anything to divert attention away from his primary God-given task

And what's that? What was his primary God-given task? Well it's this: it's to mend our relationship with God through his work on the cross

That's the whole reason Jesus came to this earth – he came to restore the broken relationship between God and his people, us.

Jesus doesn't want anything to get in the way of that.

²⁷ *"But so that we may not offend them",* is Jesus' rationale for paying the tax in verse 27.

By agreeing to submit to this tax, he's avoiding giving the taxmen any grief

It'd help us represent our Lord Jesus better if we acted like he did in this interaction with the taxmen.

Do you see how he handles it?

He avoids offending them. Because he knows they're just trying to do their job

Next time you have a problem with the Inland Revenue, the Local Authority, or indeed any other governmental organisation, before you act, just think about how Jesus handled his taxing question

Have you ever heard complaints from non-Christians about the behaviour of some Christians? I have.

Sometimes their complaints are unfair and unjustified. But sometimes they're not.

Perhaps it's because they've seen one of us unnecessarily arguing about a minor point of principle

Perhaps it's because we been seen to be less than gracious to that poor messenger who's just delivered some unwelcome news – perhaps about a tax bill or a loss of benefits

Perhaps it's because we've been unfairly haranguing a dustman about the declining quality of the local authority refuse service

It doesn't really matter what it is. The point is that it's not OK to force our rights when it damages our Lord's reputation in someone else's eyes.

Even if we're absolutely in the right

Save your confrontations with authority for the big important issues rather than get diverted by the little things that in truth are largely inconsequential

Avoid your frustrations becoming an excuse for others to reject, or not even hear, the gospel because of your behaviour.

It's better to waive your rights and submit to wrong than to prejudice the gospel in any way whatever

Look, I'm not saying that there are no circumstances in which a Christian should challenge authority. There are. After all Jesus overturned the tables of the temple money-changers.

But I am saying we need to remember the example of our saviour who submitted himself to suffering he didn't deserve, from those who had no right to judge him in the first place.

Jesus committed no sin, outwardly or inwardly, yet he submitted to corrupt and sinful authorities, both religious and political.

Jesus took unjust abuse in order that he might better win people to himself, and he's the example for all of us who call him Lord.

Being a citizen of God's heavenly kingdom doesn't exempt a Christian from responsibility to our human kingdoms.

In fact just the opposite: being a citizen of God's heavenly kingdom gives us a special obligation to human kingdoms, because those, too, belong to God and are ordained by him.

By being a good citizen we show love for our fellow humans, even those who are lost and unjust.

By being a good citizen we show respect for God-ordained human government, even when its leaders are ungodly, corrupt, and oppressive.

By being a good citizen we show that we love both God, and our country and fellow citizens.

Being a good citizen matters, because such counter-cultural behaviour forces the watching world to think about the power that makes such love possible

The provision delivered (v27b)

So, the taxmen have been and the principle has been discussed. Now, thirdly, Jesus provides

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."

Our third and last principle is this: Jesus takes care of his followers

At Jesus' request Peter had left everything: he'd left his nets, his boat, and the fish market where he worked to follow Jesus. In fact he left behind all the resources that he needed in order to provide for himself and his family.

When we give up everything to follow Jesus Christ, we can expect him to meet all our needs— whether it's 50p or something much larger. God is no one's debtor as countless Christians through the ages have discovered to their delight and joy.

And, of course, it's not just our financial needs either. Jesus takes care of all of our needs whatever they are.

"Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest," Jesus says in those wonderful words in Matthew 11:28.

Joe used to worry all of the time about everything. He was a non-stop worrier. One day his friend Bill was walking down the street when he saw Joe bouncing along as happy as a man could be. Joe looked as if he didn't have a care in the world

Bill could hardly believe his eyes; it was obvious that something extraordinary had happened, and he wanted to know what. So he stopped Joe and asked, "Joe, what's happened to you? You don't seem worried anymore; I never saw a happier man." Joe replied, "It's wonderful Bill, I haven't worried for several weeks now."

Bill continued, "That's great; but what brought about the change?" Joe explained, "You see, I hired a man to do all of my worrying for me." "You hired a man to do all of your worrying for you?" "Right," Joe said.

"Well," Bill mused, "I must say that's incredible. Tell me, how much does he charge you?" "A thousand dollars a week."

"A thousand dollars a week? How could you possibly raise a thousand dollars a week to pay him?"

Joe answered, "That's his worry."

Jesus said *"But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things shall be given to you as well"* (Matthew 6:33).

So next time you feel the world falling in on you because of your troubles – hold onto the thought that Jesus takes care of his followers

Next time someone mocks you at work because you follow Jesus, remember that Jesus takes care of his followers

Next time you're hurting because you've been standing up for him in a conversation, remember that Jesus takes care of his followers

Next time you need courage to do his will, remember that Jesus takes care of his followers

Next time your burdens are too much for you, bring them to the cross and leave them there with Jesus.

Conclusion

This passage teaches us three important principles for Christian living – two challenges and one tremendous encouragement

Firstly, a believer must fulfil their duties as a citizen of this world in every way

Secondly, rights are less important than relationships

And thirdly, Jesus takes care of his followers

This passage is a wonderful example of Jesus giving up his rights in order to reach people.

After all that's what living the Christian life is all about for us too – it's about reaching the people of the world to share the love of Jesus with them.

How have you been sharing your love of Jesus?

John and Fritha Washington have just come back from two months in Egypt as missionaries. They have plans to go to the Ukraine later on this year. But they're not doing this because they have to. They're doing this because they want to. It's their way of sharing the love of Jesus

Jonathan Hunter spent 6 weeks in Rwanda earlier on this year. He decided to use some special holiday entitlement he was owed, to apply his specialist environmental expertise to help the people of Rwanda. But he didn't do this because he had to. He did it because he wanted to. It was his way of sharing the love of Jesus

Someone I know buys a copy of the Big Issue magazine outside Waitrose every week, for two and half times its cover price. And as she does it, she gives the seller a big hug. But she doesn't do this because she has to. She's doing this because she wants to. It's her way of sharing the love of Jesus

If you're a disciple of Jesus, how have you been sharing your love of him recently?
And how will you do it in this coming week?

If you're not a disciple of Jesus', wouldn't you like to be in his loving care? Wouldn't you like to feel his loving arms around you in the storms of life? Protecting you and guiding you? Sharing your burdens? Wouldn't you like that?

If it is, please speak to me, or Steve, or David after the service and we'll tell you how you can. Or sign up for that Alpha course starting this week

Just remember: Jesus takes care of his followers

Prayer