

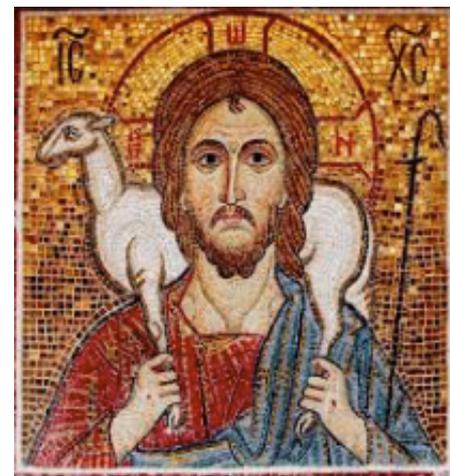
Gospel of Matthew

17:22-27

“But So That We May Not Offend...”



We cannot neglect a small but important slice of the text that does not seem to belong either to the story before it nor the one after. It stands on its own, yet the translators have attached it to the previous account of the epileptic boy who was made to suffer in this way by a demon. It stands on its own, interjected into the story line because of its importance to the timeline. I'm speaking of verses 22 and 23, where Jesus reminds His disciples once again that He/they will be entering into a very difficult time in the not-too-distant future – a time of three elements – betrayal, murder, and finally, of resurrection! He is trying to prepare His disciples for the fact that things in the near future are not going to go according to *their* expectations but according to *His* plans. **But**, the disciples cannot comprehend His words! It sounds to them that the plans of Jesus are soon going to go badly awry. They don't get that these unthinkable things are exactly how the plan is designed to go! It sounds like a terrible mishap to them - a very bad miscalculation on the part of Jesus that leads to a wildly out-of-control and undesirable end!



But with the benefit of hindsight, we know today that this was the plan all along – that Jesus has giving them, here, a simple and brief summary of the Gospel itself! This was why He was here on earth! This was why He had taken on human flesh! This is why He was referred to at His baptism by the prophet John as “...*the Lamb who takes away the sins of the world*”! In the Judaism of that day, lambs were brought to the temple by their owners and were slain on the alter by the priests, and their lifeblood was shed out for their owner's sins!

The writer of Matthew is making sure that we know that Jesus gave ample forewarning of what was coming. Yet, reading ahead in the story, we know that the disciples are going to be taken completely by surprise and will be totally in the dark when these events take place! But,.. it was not for lack of Jesus trying to break through to them with what the future *really* held for them all! They just wouldn't accept it! They were still set on their illusions of grandeur which had them soon residing in some great castle – maybe the soon-to-be-deposed King Herod's castle - and ruling the world with King Jesus!



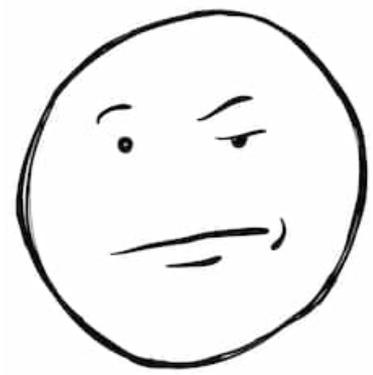
It is interesting how these guys totally focus on the bad news – the betrayal and murder, and **TOTALLY** disregard the good news of the resurrection! It was a spectacular end to His 3 predictions, but it carried no weight with the disciples. Despite all the stupefying, jaw-dropping miracles that Jesus has wrought, they saw this as impossible even for Jesus. So they fretted about the middle claim that he must die. How very human is that?! It is the core nature of most of us to focus on our hardships, hurts, failures, frustrations, and disappointments. *I know that Karen and I have a personal track record regarding our over-reaction to suffering a looming major financial setback; and even worse reaction to one that has already happened! Yet, throughout our lives God has always provided for our needs in the midst of such a crisis! We always have made it through and come out into the sunshine on the other side, and life gets good again! Why can't we remember the way that our God has helped us every time in the past. Could it be that we suspect that one day, one of these times, He will neglect to help us and our lives will spiral into disaster? I hear the words of Jesus ringing in my ears "*Oh you of little faith!*"



Vs. 24 – So the tax men ran into Peter and plied him with their most obvious question. “*Doesn’t your master pay the temple tax?*” They ask it in a negative way. They could have asked it in a positive sense “*Does your master pay the temple tax?*”. Can you sense the difference. One is an actual question, the other carries a bit of an accusation, as if they expected that Peter would say “no”, because Jesus was already getting a reputation for being a radical/rebel, a contrarian who opposed the religious establishment. So that may provide insight into the way this question is being asked. But Peter pipes up right away – “*Yes, He does*”. Perhaps he had seen Jesus pay the tax before, but maybe he was just sticking up for his Master, given the negative nature of the question, and didn’t really know.

So Peter goes to the house where they are staying, walks in the door and doesn’t even get the chance to tell the story of his encounter with the tax men. Jesus begins to speak, and He obviously knows all about Peter’s encounter! He begins talking about taxes. He poses a hypothetical situation. “*You know that kings collect taxes. Does any king that you know of collect taxes from his own family, or do all of them collect taxes from everyone else?*” Peter replies, “*From everyone else*” Jesus comes right back at him with “*Then the sons are exempt.*” He was telling Peter that **He** was the King and they were like His sons! The temple was all about God, and He was God, so the temple actually belonged to Him since He was God, and therefore even by human standards they actually owed the temple nothing!

I can just see the blank look on Peter's face. I'm quite sure He did not draw the connection between Jesus' question about the Kings taxes and themselves and the temple tax. He would store this thing that Jesus said in his memory, and figure it out later.



Jesus is saying here that they did not owe the temple anything! Was he against taxes? No. In another place, He said to “*Give unto Caesar what is Caesars*” (22:21) – referring to the taxes owed to Caesar. What is striking in that passage is what He did not say! He did not say that no one owed Caesar anything – that no one had invited Caesar to come to Palestine and take their money, so they should all resist!

But He did not say that! He was not a political revolutionary as many have claimed. He believed in government! He knew that people need leadership. Even the leaders need leaders! We have so many layers of authority in human society that it is almost ridiculous! Family government – the kids/the kids over the dog; Mom and Dad over the kids. But Mom and Dad have supervisors and managers over them at work, who, in turn, have supervisors and managers over *THEM*. Then there is city government, which is superseded by state government, which is superseded by the central federal government. Which is superseded by the Supreme Court, which also has to obey law written for it by the legislature - congress and Senate. Likewise, ancient societies also had many layers of authority. Jesus believed in government, even that which was often fundamentally flawed. Even bad government is usually better than no government! Christ's disciples later became apostles who taught respect for governmental authorities! One day, the Bible promises that the followers of Christ will “rule and reign” with Jesus. We will work at all levels of government. But God will rule over us all! If He was allowed to rule over us now we would have peace all over this planet, in families, between tribes (even Packers and Vikings fans), between nations – Israel and all it's Arab neighbors! Or the USA and Russia, or China and Japan! Can you even imagine? But He is NOT allowed to rule, therefore we have hatred and war!

[Rom. 13:1]

Vs. 27 – Then Jesus said these important words – “*We actually don’t owe these guys anything. But, so that we may not offend them...*” This is a concession to unbelief. Jesus was willing to go along with the foolishness and ignorance of others to avoid open conflict with them. It would do them no good to add fuel a fight that could easily be avoided. There is a time to stand your ground. There are hills that it would be wise to be willing to die upon. But there are far fewer of them than one might expect. It takes discernment/wisdom to know the difference. This happens all the time in our interactions with the people we associate or cross paths with. Why would we pick or continue a fight rather than seek peace; press an issue rather than let it go? Why would we “feed the beast”? From watching and listening to Jesus, Christ-followers are supposed to have grown a relational IQ! It takes a high relational IQ for a person to know what is important and what is not! I’m telling you, this is where humans are generally at their worst! I have seen family implode – the life sucked out of them because a family member thought a non-essential issue was more important than preserving relationship with another family member. It is jaw-droppingly low IQ. Husbands and wives saying things to each other that if they had just thought about it for 3 seconds before uttering it they would have known that it was an unforgivable thing to say – and even if they could forgive, they would never be able to forget, and such a thing would destroy trust, probably forever! When you don’t trust someone, it is hard to have close relationship with them.



So it takes a discerning person to look ahead and know “Oops,.. I want to say that so bad, but then, if I do, I will probably never be seen the same way by them. It will alter our ability to be friends” but then there are also times when to not say something would be wrong!



The difference is whether you are concerned for them or for yourself – whether you are loving them or besting them! It is Jesus that is the difference maker in this area. He teaches us a better way – the way of love.

When we surrender ourselves to Jesus, the Holy Spirit becomes our tutor, telling/reminding us through an awakened conscience when we have done wrong and when we have displeased God. He not only brings to life that part of our nature that responds to Him in love but that which is able to respond to others in love and caring. He enters into the conversation in our head and speaks as God. If we are truly a follower of Jesus, there is no way that we do not hear that voice. The only question is whether we listen! If we listen, we become relationally skillful. If we don't listen we are as relationally inept as the people who do not have the tutorial advantage of the Holy Spirit. Sometimes it is very hard to listen to the Spirit of God. We want to do and say what we want to do and say. And often times we are impulsive – we don't think before speaking or acting. Yet, if we subvert the voice of the Holy Spirit, especially on a consistent basis, and do our own thing instead, we have no claim to being a follower of Jesus. True followers of Jesus are not inept at being able to be kind, or patient, or gentle, gracious, or forgiving. If we have the Holy Spirit instructing us, we are not allowed to stray from the path of peacemaking, of humility and submission, of a loving-kindness!



I mean, poor us, right?! That God would make us be good and wise in how we relate to other people – especially those that are closest to us. Poor us – that He will not allow us to be as mean as we want to be! But it is true! He will not let us! When we are a true follower of Jesus and we are unkind to someone unnecessarily, selfishly, the Spirit intrudes on our peace and continues to plague us until we confess that it has been more about us rather than them, and ask for their forgiveness. That’s relational maturity! We all make mistakes, but only those who are relationally mature can take responsibility and apologize for their mistakes! And only those that are relationally mature have the wisdom to accept an apology when it is given, and offer forgiveness.

But, bottom line is that Jesus teaches us to avoid giving offense. Only in the most important issues do we invite conflict - and even then we can learn to disagree in the most agreeable way possible!

But we do it for Jesus. He is our focus. He is our authority! He is who we model ourselves after because He asks us to, and He is our Lord and Leader. We are totally committed to this! We are “all in” to do as He says – to BE that kind of person – with His heart transplanted in our heart to change our heart, our ear tuned to the Spirit’s voice, and His power, the power of the resurrection deployed to make it so!

[Pet. 1:13-2:17]



After all that – Jesus doesn't have the money. Imagine that! He is certainly not in this for the money, like virtually all the would-be messiahs have been throughout the ages. I mean, He and the disciples sleep outside or stay at other people's houses. I don't know how they fed themselves, except that I think people who believed brought them food to eat. Clothes were expensive but somehow they had decent

clothes to wear. We know they pooled their money because they had a treasurer who took care of the money – Judas. But Jesus only “raised” money in this way, once.

But lacking money, Jesus just sent Peter to “the lake” to catch a fish, open its mouth and extract a four drachma coin. The coin would take care of what both Jesus and Peter owed in temple taxes! A drachma was about what a workman, or field hand would earn in a day. So this would have been about two days labor for the average man – enough to hurt the average budget of a poor man a bit. But Jesus tells Peter to catch a fish and it would be quite miraculous that He had known that the fish would have had a four drachma coin in its mouth. Peter would be floored once again! It tells us that Jesus foresaw things that He wanted or needed to foresee. He is God! God does what He wants to do. He foresaw the money fish, and He foresaw His betrayal, death, and resurrection. He makes His mission happen. No wonder He knows what comes next. He knows He is going to do it!

The detractors of Jesus then had nothing on Jesus. He paid His taxes! They could not legitimately add that to their grievances against Him. Even though He was in the right, He had avoided an unnecessary mess – avoided outraging the temple leaders!