

# Not Causing Offence

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[ 0 : 00 ] Well, what did you make of that passage this evening? Only four verses, but a conversation about paying taxes that results in Peter being told to go and catch a fish, and the first one that he catches, he can take it out of the lake, open it up, find some money in its mouth, and it's going to be enough to pay the tax to the temple. It's an amazing story, an amazing miracle, but why?

Is it teaching us that when HMRC come knocking on the door and its self-assessment tax season coming round, we just all get a fishing line, head down to the harbour, go fishing, and the first fish that we catch might have enough money in there for us to pay our taxes? Well, no.

So what is going on in here? Well, as well as the question of what's going on in here, the kind of head-scratching of what's going on with this miracle in this little short story, there's the question of kind of why here in Matthew? Why now? Because where did we leave Jesus and his disciples last week? If you have your Bibles open, it's going to be helpful. We're going to look at some of the verses just before, but where did we leave them? Well, in verse 23, Jesus says he's going to die, and the final few words of the last verse, of the last section, the disciples are greatly distressed.

They are beside themselves at the thought of Jesus being killed, and Matthew says, I know, let's talk about taxes. Does Matthew put this here just to set up the old adage, oh, only two things in life are sure, death and taxes? You know, here they are side by side, look. Well, no, I don't think that's what Matthew's doing either. Last Sunday evening,

Joe Tuch was preaching, and he started his sermon on the verses, the passage before this, with a really, really helpful reminder. He reminded us that one of the main keys that we need to understand a passage is placing it in his context. Context is king, and last week, Joe just put that on display wonderfully helpfully for us. It was so clear, and every time we come to a passage of scripture for a sermon or our own Bible reading in life group, wherever, context really is king.

So I want to start this evening as we look at this short miracle, this little discussion about taxes, but by putting it in his context. So what have we seen recently in Matthew? Well, we've seen two really kind of huge things, haven't we? First, that Jesus is the Christ. He is the promised king, the promised Messiah of God's people. Matthew 16, 16, Peter confesses and says to the Lord Jesus, you are the Christ. Then on the Mount of Transfiguration, the Father speaks about Jesus, this is my son. Listen to him. So we've seen that huge thing being driven home. Jesus really is the Messiah. But we've seen something else, something perhaps more surprising going alongside that. The two are going hand in hand together. Jesus really is the Messiah, and he really is the Messiah that must die. He really is the king that must suffer. Matthew 16, 21, from that time, Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes and be killed. And since that time, all of Matthew's material, if you like, has

[ 3 : 44 ] Jesus on this journey south to Jerusalem facing the cross. And Matthew is now driving home, pressing home to his readers. Yes, Jesus really is the Messiah. We've got it right. But the reason we need that assurance is because the way of his kingdom is such a surprise, because his kingdom is totally reversed and upside down and inverted from what we thought it would be. He is God's king, but he turns what we think of glory and greatness upside down and inside out. What does our king look like? A king who is crucified. And what does it look like to belong to this king, to be a disciple of this king, to follow this king? Well, it's to take up your cross and follow Jesus. Last week, we saw that we need faith. But what kind of seed, sized faith is it? It's mustard seed faith, tiny faith, smaller than little faith. Next week, the disciples are going to ask, who is the greatest? And if you just cast your eyes down, you'll see what does Jesus do? He brings out a child. He brings out a child. This is King Jesus. And for those who are in his kingdom, it all looks inside out and upside down. The way up is the way down. The way to a crown and to glory is through a cross. The way to

glory is through humiliation first. The way to greatness is to become very, very small. So what is our passage doing this evening? Well, friends, I think we're going to see that it's actually showing us that again. That Matthew is going to press home that point again. That Jesus really is the Son of God. And that the pattern and the way of his kingdom is laying down our life. Of laying down our rights for the sake of the gospel. So we really only have that one point this evening, but we'll break it into three separate parts as we walk through this. So firstly, what does Matthew show us in this passage? He shows us that Jesus is God's Son. He really is

God's Son. And he does this in two ways. First, he does it through this example of kings and how they collect taxes. So verse 24. 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? And he says, yes. Okay, so that's our context for the passage. That's what's going on. The temple in Jesus' day had an annual, a yearly tax for its upkeep.

And so this isn't a Roman tax that the kind of, that Matthew would have collected previously before Jesus called him to follow him. But it's a Jewish tax for the temple. I don't know, some of you maybe live in places where there's a kind of factoring charge. It's something like that, right? It's upkeep. It's how we're going to keep this going. And the collector of that tax basically comes to Peter and says, look, does your teacher pay it? And Peter says, yes. Okay, Jesus pays it. But verse 25, do you see what happens? And when Peter comes into the house, Jesus spoke to him first saying, what do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take toll and tax? From their sons or from others? And when he said from others, that's the right answer. Okay, correct answer. Because Jesus says, okay, well, the sons are free, but so that we don't cause offense, go fishing and go and collect the money. Do you see what Jesus is doing here? He's comparing himself with the son of the king. Sons of kings don't pay tax and I don't need to pay tax. But where is this tax due? Not to some civil magistrate.

No, it's due to the temple. And whose house is the temple? God's house. God's house. Jesus is saying, I don't have to pay this because I am God's son. I am the son of God. That's how Jesus sets this up in this story to drive that home. But there's a second way that we see it. And actually, that is why the miracles are here. The miracles are here to underline this and show, yes, this really is the son of God, the Messiah, Emmanuel. God has come amongst us in Jesus. We see that in a couple of ways. First, we see it in his supernatural knowledge. The whole conversation in verse 24 between Peter and the collectors of the tax has been happening kind of outside or away somewhere. Because in verse 25, do you see that? Peter comes into the house and Jesus spoke to him, verse 25, first. Do you see that? Matthew records that for us, that little word, first. Peter's not told any of this to Jesus, but Jesus knows exactly what's been said and exactly what's going on. And not only does he know of this conversation, he knows, Jesus knows that if Peter leaves now, and no, we're not told that this happens, but it presumably does, that if [ 9 : 00 ] Peter leaves now and goes fishing, the first fish he's going to catch in the lake, he's going to bring it up and it'll have enough money to pay for the tax for Peter and for Jesus. Amazing, right? Amazing.

Who knows that kind of thing? It's amazing. And of course, it's not just his knowledge, is it? It's not just his knowledge. Surely it's also Jesus' power. It's his power, his power over nature to arrange all of these things for a fish somehow in the lake to have swallowed a coin and to be ready at that very time to be hooked up by Peter. And there it is, all ready to go. That shows, doesn't it, the power of God over nature. So what's the point? What's the point in all this? Matthew is pressing home, this really is the Messiah we've been looking for. This really is Emmanuel, God with us, the Son of God. So dear friends, this may seem like a simple point, but we need to hear it again and again and again. Jesus really is the Christ, the Son of God. And the implications of this are huge, right? That they're massive, that they're seismic. Why? Well, for a number of reasons, but one of them here is because Jesus is beginning to imply, beginning to show that the temple tax doesn't really need to be paid anymore, right? He's saying that soon, that this kind of tax doesn't really need paid. Why?

Because the Son of the King is here. Because Jesus is here amongst God's people. And it'll no longer be to the temple that we go to worship God. But no, we come to Christ himself, one greater than the temple has come amongst them. And so for any of us here this evening who are doubting or struggling, or maybe we are in workplaces or families where it just is very hard to follow Jesus. People are saying to us, why are you giving your time to that? Pressure from friends, from

colleagues. Do you really need that kind of religion stuff going on with Jesus? Maybe you're here this evening and sometimes we just look at the mess of the world and think, really has God come amongst us in Christ? Well, friends, Matthew is reminding us this evening, yes, yes, that the King really has come. Jesus is the

Christ. So take that assurance. Take that reassurance this evening. If you're on the edge of giving up, if you're doubting, again, come to Jesus. Draw near to him. If your faith is hanging by a thread, remember what we learned last week? It's not the size of your faith. No, it's the object of it.

[11:58] Remember the one who holds you. God really has come amongst us and that changes everything. So keep listening to Jesus. Keep following him. Yes, he is the Christ. We're to look for no other.

And dear friends, this evening, if you're here and you don't know the Lord Jesus, you don't follow him. You maybe are only starting to get to know a little about Christianity and who Jesus is. It's wonderful if you're here, if that's you. But no, yes, Jesus is the Savior. He's the one you need to come to, to meet God, to have your sins forgiven, and to have eternal life. The King has come and the Lord Jesus calls you once again to bow your knee to him, or maybe for the first time to bow your knee to him and to come and worship him. So Jesus really is God's son. And that then brings us to our first implication. Jesus is God's son. So as adopted sons, we are free. So as adopted sons, we are free.

Because Jesus is God's son, not only him, but those who belong to him are free. Look down at verse 26. And when he said from others, Jesus said to him, to Peter, then the sons are free. However, not to give offense 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.

Do you see that the sons are free not to pay? But then Jesus sends off Peter to catch enough money for them both. A shekel is four denarii and each person's to pay two denarii, right?

It covers them both. But by implication, Jesus is saying, Peter, you too are a son of the king. You too belong to my family. You're exempt from paying. But I'll pay for you. Jesus pays for Peter.

[14:02] Now we'll get on to a minute about why they do pay and why they go on and pay when they don't need to. But first, we just want to pause there to understand it and just to take that point. Jesus pays for Peter. He shows that by belonging to him, that being with him, he too is a son of the king.

So what's happening here? Well, really, Jesus is saying to Peter, look, a time is coming when this tax will be no more because I've paid it all. I've paid it all. Now, where am I getting that from? Where am I getting that from? That Jesus here is saying a time is coming that this tax will be no more. Well, this tax was taken or kind of based on an instruction in the law that God gave to Moses in Exodus 30. And it was given as a tax for the upkeep of the tabernacle about 1,500 years before this. And so 1,500 years later in Jesus' day here, some of what they've instituted in Jesus' day is a little bit different from then. But just hear about some of the instructions that were given for this tax. One of the main things that changed is in the book of Exodus, the tax was given for a time of census. And that isn't now what's happening in Jesus' day. But hear about this tax.

What's this money called? Atonement money. Verse 16 of Exodus 30, you shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel, Israel, and give it for the service of the tent of meeting, the tabernacle, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the Lord, as so to make atonement for your lives.

Dear friends, this tax and what Jesus is paying here is atonement money. And here Jesus is saying, look, that tax one day will be null and void. The tax we're paying today will be null and void. But it won't be paid with money from fish, will it? We know it's going to need to be paid with his blood. Paid with his blood.

[16:29] You see, this money here that Jesus is paying goes towards the upkeep of a temple where priests offered lambs for sins. And to stop that, there must be a lamb who takes away the sin of the world, takes away the sin of those who trust him. And Jesus is here.

You see, maybe Ben Franklin, when he put death and taxes together, spoke more than what he kind of knew. Because friends, this evening, we no longer pay this tax. Why? Because Jesus paid it all.

Not this tax, if you like, but the debt of our sin we could never afford. Do you see it? We no longer need to go to the temple to pay these things because Christ has died for our sin. And so if you

belong to Jesus, you really are free from the claim of death.

You really are free from the power of sin. You really are no longer bound to sin. You are forgiven and bought and ransomed, just like Peter. And so this passage, this evening, really is a reminder to us, if we're in Christ, our sin really is dealt with. It's paid. It's done. We no longer go to the temple because Christ paid it all. If you are in Christ, we need no more fear, no more doubt, no more dread that our sin will come back and haunt us. No, it's forgiven. Jesus paid it all, all to him I owe. Sin left a crimson stain. He washed it white as snow. Jesus is God's son, the king who came to die, that we therefore as adopted sons are free. We have this new life, which means we no longer belong to this world, but belong to our king and the kingdom which is coming and are free now to serve and live for him. So Jesus is God's son. So we, we as adopted sons, adopted children of God, we too are free.

The debt of our sin is canceled and we have new life in him to serve him. But lastly then, our third point, that we are called like Jesus, like Jesus, to use our freedoms and sometimes to limit our freedoms.

[18:59] For the sake of the gospel. You see, the question that kind of hangs over all this then is if Jesus didn't need to pay this tax and Peter didn't need to pay this tax, then why pay it? Why pay it at all?

Why pay the tax when Jesus is drawing this old covenant way of life to an end? Well, Jesus tells us in verse 27 why they pay. They pay not to give offense. They pay not to give offense. Jesus says to Simon Peter, pay the tax so offense isn't given. In other words, we don't want to be a stumbling block to these tax collectors. Now, why would they be a stumbling block? Why would they be a stumbling block? Well, for Jesus not to pay these, these men who were tasked with coming around to collect the tax. They might think Jesus is kind of very anti-temple or anti-Torah. And Jesus not paying would become a wall between them. It would put distance between them and the gospel. But Jesus isn't anti these things. No, he came to fulfill them. So he forgoes his rights as the son and pays the tax. And so keeps a listening ear for the gospel to be kept. In other words, he limits his freedom. He says, cross before crown. Martin Luther, the reformer, wrote a treatise on the freedom of the Christian. And he talked about a Christian's freedom this way.

A Christian is perfectly free, Lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all. In another place, Martin Luther writes this, who then can comprehend the riches and the glory of the Christian life? It can do all things and has all things and lacks nothing. It is Lord over sin and death and hell, yet at the same time serves, ministers to, and benefits all people.

Jesus here pays the tax for him and Peter to say, we'll limit our freedom to take up our cross in this life, to limit our rights that a gospel hearing could be kept. Now let's just try and illustrate this in a number of ways then for ourselves.

One example, next to the Lord Jesus who does this is the Apostle Paul. Think about the Apostle Paul's ministry and what we had read to us earlier. What did the Apostle Paul write in 1 Corinthians 9?

Though I am free from all, because I belong to Christ, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win them. To the Jews, I became a Jew in order to win Jews. To those under the law, I became as one under the law. Though not being myself under the law, right, he's free that I might win those under the law. To those outside of the law, to the Gentiles, I became as one outside of the law, that I too might win those outside of the law. I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. So here's the question. Where are you? Or where do you or I need to lay down our rights, limit our Christian freedoms for the sake of others, that we might win them to Christ? Or put it the other way, are there places we know we're being deliberately stubborn in how we hold our new Christian freedoms, and so causing unnecessary offence to others, so that they won't listen to the gospel? Now of course, none of this compromises the gospel. Jesus nor Paul are sort of taking any edges off the gospel or concealing any part of it. No, they're saying how can we love people and serve people so that the gospel is heard. Perhaps another famous example of this kind of contextualizing of the gospel is Hudson Taylor in China. Hudson Taylor traveled to China. He, if you like, had every right to keep wearing Western clothing, Western hairstyle, but he wore clothing that the local people were, grew his hair and his beard the way that local people did in order to gain a hearing from local people. I heard a really wonderfully encouraging story recently of a Protestant minister going to a very Republican and Catholic part of Belfast, and the way he's taking the gospel in there is what by, is by using the Irish language. It is by finding ways to

contextualize, to reach out with the gospel in such a way as not to cause unnecessary offence as he reaches out there, identifying himself with the kind of local Irish roots of the area to gain a hearing. So dear friends, where in your life does it look like not, as we said here, not compromising the gospel, but finding ways to gain a hearing?

[ 24 : 23 ] Maybe it's in our Christian union. We're free to sing a certain way, to pray a certain way, to gather with things like that as we meet and worship, but we'll say we'll lay down our rights to keep a gospel hearing for our witness, for the sake of our witness on campus. Maybe it's in our places of work. We have people who have different worldviews to us, whether Muslims or atheists or whatever it might be. Are there ways we can speak in such a way as not to hide the truth of the gospel, not at all, but to try and love them well enough, to serve them well enough that they would come and hear? In sum, the calling that Jesus puts before us is saying to us, how can we love and how can we understand our neighbors and the way that they think to help serve them, that they might clearly see that Jesus is the only savior? That's the question before us. And so dear friends, for all of us here, may we ask the Lord to help us see, are there things in our life that are keeping people from hearing the gospel, things that we're doing or things that we're not doing, for building up the body amongst other Christians or with non-Christians?

Dear friends, may you see the Lord Jesus' example here of limiting our freedoms, of laying down our rights, that others may come and hear who he is, so we may win them for the sake of Christ. So dear friends, may we remember this week that the way up in the kingdom really is the way down. The way to glory really is the way of humiliation and the way of our freedom really is being a servant to all. Why? Because that was Jesus' way. He is the son of God who came not to be served, but to serve.

And so may we too be glad to go and do likewise. Amen. Let's pray. Lord Jesus, we do indeed thank you that you are the son of God, that you have come amongst us, that you did not count equality with God, something to be grasped, but you humiliated yourself. You came in condescension into this world and humbled yourself by taking on human flesh and going to the cross for us. We thank you so much that you laid down your life to be our savior. And so we rejoice in who you are and in all that you've done to redeem us. And we pray that you would help us as your people bought by your blood, worshiping you and following you to live the way that you have taught us to live, to take up our crosses and to follow you, to see greatness as living out a way that's that of a child and to limit our rights and to not hold too hard to our freedoms that we may gain others as we seek to take out the gospel. Lord, may we preach boldly, may we share the gospel boldly, but doing so in love that we would seek to win those around us. Lord Jesus, we love you. We thank you that you've made yourself known to us. Help us in all that we do to make you known to those around us. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.