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Peters Fish, Children (Part 1)



The Life and Teachings of Christ - Steve Gregg

In this segment from Steve Gregg's teaching on Matthew 17, he discusses the story of Peter and the temple tax. While Jesus never explicitly confirms or denies paying the tax, Peter anticipates that Jesus does not pay it. Gregg emphasizes that while tithing is not obligatory for Christians, giving generously from the heart is still important. Additionally, Jesus avoids paying the temple tax to avoid offending others and because the temple was not serving their needs. Gregg also notes that Jesus' use of miraculous power is not inherently wrong and can be used for the glory of God.

Transcript

Let's turn to Matthew 17. My voice is not normal once again. It's been that way several times this year.

I think it's a strange phenomenon that has only occurred this winter. It hasn't occurred in previous years quite so much or so many times. Anyway, my voice is strong enough to make it through what we have to cover today.

We're turning to Matthew 17 and we're picking up now the next story that Matthew relates after the transfiguration story and of course the sequel to that one. Jesus and the disciples came down from the mountain and found a boy possessed by a demon brought to the disciples by the boy's father. And Jesus cast the demon out of the boy even though the disciples had been unable to do so.

Actually, in verse 22 it says, Now while they were staying in Galilee, Jesus said to them, The Son of Man is about to be betrayed into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and the third day he will be raised up. And they were exceedingly sorrowful. Now he had said those kinds of things before.

Initially Peter's reaction was one of violent disagreement. Now we see they're just exceedingly sorrowful. Once again, they must not be paying close attention to the fact that he's saying he's going to be raised up again.

They hear him talking about death and apparently they're sorrowful thinking that not so

much that he really is going to die because it came still as something of a surprise to them when he did, but probably thinking that oh Jesus is really getting down now. I mean the events of recent times have just depressed him. He's lost popularity.

He's getting despondent and melancholy and they didn't know what to say. Cheer him up. And of course, last time Peter tried to cheer him up, the first time he made a comment like this, Peter got soundly rebuked so the disciples just hear it, but they don't hear it.

They don't hear exactly what he's saying clearly. They don't necessarily take it to heart. When his death actually did come, it would appear that it took them by surprise and his resurrection certainly did so also.

Verse 24, And when they had come to Capernaum, those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the temple tax? He said, Yes. And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him saying, What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes? From their own sons or from strangers? Peter said to him, From strangers. Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free.

Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea and cast in a hook and take a fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of silver money and take that and give it to them for me and you. Now, the temple tax was something that was paid, I guess yearly.

I've read quite a bit about it and it's not all that clear. It goes back to numbers. In the book of Numbers, God said that a half shekel of silver should be exacted from every Jewish male toward the maintenance of the temple or of the tabernacle in the days of Moses.

It became the maintenance of the temple later on when the temple came into existence and replaced the tabernacle. By Jewish tradition, this was applied to all males over 19 years old and there were certain persons going about to collect this temple tax. Apparently, there were tax evaders or those who didn't want to pay it.

It may not have been strongly enforced in the days of Jesus. And so there was some question as to whether Jesus was one of those who paid it or not. Perhaps because he had just returned from being abroad for a while and he'd been away from home for a while, they thought that his travels had perhaps removed him for the purposes of evading the tax.

It's hard to know. But they came to Peter, Jesus being in the house and Peter being outside. They came up to him and asked Peter whether or not Jesus pays taxes.

No doubt they were hoping to entangle Jesus in some way or find some fault with him,

although we're not told that this was done by the leaders of the Jews, the scribes and Pharisees or any of those people who had tried to entangle him before. It may not be that these tax gatherers were specifically interested in participating in the plot against Jesus, but Jesus was a person whose values were surprising for one thing. He neglected many of the things of the law and yet he was very diligent about keeping those things that had to do with morality and so forth.

So they weren't sure what he would think about paying the temple tax. Now, Peter, defending Jesus against what he thought was maybe an implied accusation that perhaps Jesus was a tax evader, Peter denied this about Jesus and said, yes, Jesus does pay the temple tax, though probably he'd never seen Jesus do it. And so he was just saying what he thought was the right thing to say about Jesus.

Of course, Peter tends to do this. He speaks up without knowing what the right answer is in some cases. And when he had come into the house, Jesus anticipated him saying.

Now, what Jesus said, of course, addressed this very issue that Peter had answered already. Peter had never asked Jesus about this before and very possibly was going to on this occasion. We don't know whether Peter was just going to blow it off and say nothing or whether Peter, having given that answer, wanted to come and ask Jesus whether his answer had been correct or not.

But Jesus didn't wait for Peter to ask anything. He anticipated that this was what was on Peter's mind. Now, Peter could have been musing about this, thinking, well, you know, come to think of it, what is the deal with the temple tax and Jesus? As I say, it's very possible Jesus hadn't paid it before in Peter's presence.

It was apparently time for the collection to take place and Jesus had made no moves toward paying it. And Jesus had, of course, not approved of all the things of the temple ritual that the Jews practiced and therefore he might. We don't know whether Jesus ever went and offered a sacrifice at the temple.

The Bible doesn't record that he ever did. It's kind of hard to imagine him doing so, to tell you the truth, knowing as we do his stature and the fate of his mission. I mean, he had never sinned, so why should he have to offer a sacrifice? And so it's questionable whether Jesus even attended temple ceremonies, with the exception of the times he went there to teach.

He sometimes taught in the temple, but we don't know that he ever offered a sacrifice there or whatever. And if he did not, then his disciples might have seen him as one who had come in opposition to the temple. After all, he had once said, though he meant something different, they didn't understand him correctly.

He had once said, destroy this temple. In three days I'll raise it up again. And this was

interpreted, at least by his enemies and possibly by his disciples, as a statement of contempt for the temple.

It was hurled back at him when he was on the cross and even when he was on trial later on. They said, you who said you're going to destroy the temple and raise it up in three days. Also, Stephen was accused in Acts chapter 6 of having said that Jesus was going to come and destroy the temple.

And replace it. Jesus may have said things like that. We don't have everything Jesus said recorded in the Gospels.

So the things that Stephen is said to have said about Jesus might have come from Jesus too, it's hard to say. In any case, the disciples probably did perceive a studied negligence on Jesus' part of the fine points of ritual of the Jewish religion. And Peter might have wondered, you know, now this temple maintenance thing, is Jesus going to go for this? I kind of defended him, I said he does pay it, but come to think of it, I wonder if he does.

Apparently those kinds of things were on Peter's mind when he came into the house because Jesus, knowing what was on his mind, anticipated what he was going to say and spoke what Jesus would have said if Peter had spoken. But he didn't wait for Peter to speak because he knew what Peter was thinking. What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth take customs or taxes? From their own sons or from strangers? Now, customs and taxes that he's referring to here are not the taxes that were paid to the Romans.

The issue of paying tribute to Caesar came up in another context, as you will know, you know, on a later occasion, in the final week of Jesus' life, he was approached by the scribes and Pharisees trying to find fault with him and asking whether it was lawful to pay tribute to Caesar. However, although this temple tax was not paid to Caesar, Jesus was talking about it as if it was a tribute to another king, to God. And a tribute money, this kind of tax that they were talking about, was one that was charged on conquered peoples.

When the Romans conquered a territory or before that, when the Greeks or the Persians or the Babylonians did, or even before that, when David did. When David conquered territories around him, he put them under tribute, which meant that part of being servile to him was that they had to pay a certain yearly amount for the upkeep of his kingdom. And that was one of the benefits of conquering people, you got some regular income out of them.

But it was not something you did to your own sons. David never charged tribute money of his own sons, nor did Nebuchadnezzar or Nero, and nor does God. And that's what Jesus is saying.

When tribute money is charged by a king, of whom is it charged? Is it charged to his sons or is it charged to those who he's conquered, who are strangers, foreigners. The word strangers means foreigners, people of other lands he's conquered. Well, the answer was not hard to give.

Peter said, from strangers, these kings exact tribute money from those foreigners that they've conquered. And Jesus' comment is, then the sons are free. And that means that the sons are not obliged to pay tribute to the king.

Now, this is interesting, not only in connection with the temple tax, but also within the question of tithing. There's a sense, of course, in which we are not free at all. There's a sense in which we're all slaves of God.

We've all been conquered by him. We were enemies of his, and through the gospel we've been won over. We've been conquered by the spirit of God, and he leads us forth in triumph in his triumphal procession, according to 2 Corinthians 2. And so there's, you know, depending on how you want to look at the issue of freedom and slavery, there's a sense in which we're all slaves of God, another sense in which we're all free.

Because slavery to God is freedom, because where the spirit of the Lord is, there's liberty. Now, when it comes to paying a religious tax of any kind, Jesus said that the king doesn't charge his sons religious taxes, doesn't charge his sons with tribute. Now, in the Old Testament, the Jews did pay temple tax, and they did pay tithe, and they paid a great number of fees of various kinds that the law prescribed.

Jesus seemed to be saying that now that we are sons of God, we do not have the status of those that are simply, that we've been dominated by God, but we are now treated as sons. Therefore, this obligatory squeezing out of us of money, which God did to the Jews in the Old Testament, is not really part of the relationship now. Now, I say there's two sides to this, because on one hand, everything we own belongs to God.

He requires it all. Jesus said, elsewhere, except a man forsake all that he has. He cannot be my disciple, in Luke 14.

And so, on the one hand, we do give everything. We are obliged to do so. That's part of becoming a Christian.

We surrender all to Jesus. We come under his ownership and lordship. But seen another way, we're freemen.

We're sons, not slaves. And as sons, we are not obliged to legalistically pay some kind of a tax or tribute money to God. Tithing is just such a one.

Now, that's not the one that's in view in this passage. But Jesus never did talk about tithing directly to the disciples, as an obligation or not. He did mention to the Pharisees,

in Matthew 23, that they had been faithful in tithing and said they had been right to do so.

Because, of course, they were under obligation under the law to do so. But he never said that the disciples should necessarily pay tithes. And this, perhaps, is the closest thing we have to an actual teaching of Jesus that would affect the question of tithing.

Because, although it's not talking about tithing, it is talking about something that was like tithing, a tax for the maintenance of the temple, or previously of the tabernacle. If you sit back in Numbers and those books where this temple tribute first was initiated, there were several fees that were to be exacted from people. And one was, of course, this regular half-shekel for the maintenance of the tabernacle or the temple.

Another was 10% of all income to maintain the Levites. Well, the Levites and the tabernacle were all part of the same operation. Some of the money went to support them as individuals, the workers.

Others went to support the building. And so the tithe and the temple tax were pretty much, in principle, the same thing. They were both fees, a set amount of fees, that were charged to the citizenry in order to maintain the religious system.

The temple and the Levites who served there. Now, therefore, it would seem like the tithe continues to have validity only as long as the temple tax does. As long as there is a Levitical priesthood to support, as long as there is a temple to maintain, then these things would be legit.

This is implying, as he said earlier, that the temple is kind of passé. He said to the woman at the well, the hour is coming, and now is, when those who worship God won't worship in Jerusalem at the temple anymore. And they won't worship it here at Mount Gerizim in Samaria, but they'll just worship in spirit and in truth.

It's going to be a relational thing with people in God, not a ritual thing. It's going to be a genuine life and exchange of life between father and child, between man and God. That's going to be the true worship.

It's not going to be the offering of sacrifices in some particular altar in some location. And so Jesus had already announced that the altar and the temple in Jerusalem were more or less a thing of the past. He said the time is coming and now is, when they won't do this anymore.

So he was living during that transitional time where the temple was ceasing to have any relevance because of the new covenant that was breaking in. And that shift in the relevance of the temple was brought about by a shift in man's relationship to God. We don't need a temple anymore because we have our relationship with God intact.

The temple was therefore the offering of sacrifices to take away sin, but we are justified from all our sins when we receive Christ. And therefore we don't need that temple anymore, and the temple tax is no longer needed. I dare say that the tithe is no longer necessary either because we don't need Levites.

For the same reason we don't need the temple, we don't need Levites. And therefore that fee that was exacted of the Jews to support the Levites, which we call the tithe, is no longer valid anymore than the temple tax is. Our relationship with God under the new covenant according to Jeremiah means that we don't need an intermediary set of people like the Levites and the priests.

It's said in Jeremiah 31, man shall not say to his neighbor, know the Lord, they'll all know me, from the least even to the greatest. So that the new covenant according to Jeremiah did away with the situation where men had to go to the priests to mediate between them and God. The new covenant brings us into an immediate relationship with God ourselves.

No priesthood, no temple, no sacrifices beyond that of Christ are valid anymore. Therefore the fees that were charged to the Jews to maintain this temporary system were temporary fees and no longer valid to us today. And God doesn't charge us fees for our relationship with him any more than a king charges his sons fees for the protection and so forth that he gives them.

That's what Jesus is saying. The king doesn't charge his sons tribute. The sons are free.

The sons are free of that. And in that statement it occurs to me that in principle he did away with tithing as well. However, as I said, this does not mean that he does away with giving.

Because what has replaced ritual religion in the new covenant is spiritual religion. A life in the spirit and the principle dominating factor in the life of a spiritual person is love. The fruit of the spirit is love.

Galatians 5.22 says, and in Romans 5 Paul says that the love of God is shed abroad in our hearts by the Holy Spirit. Now love is something that among other things is inclined to give when there is a need. Therefore the Christian life, though it does not tax us a certain fee to participate in it, it taxes us greatly really in another sense.

In that love compels us. Paul said the love of Christ constrains us. We have love operating through the Holy Spirit in us which makes us giving people.

But that giving is not measured in exact percentages of income. It's not supposed to be. It ceases to be a relational thing anymore.

It becomes a tax again. It becomes a fee charged again if we have to give a certain set amount. But rather when we see needs and we have that which we can use to fulfill

those needs, the loving thing to do is to help fill those needs and that's what we do.

That's what we do instead of tithing a certain set amount. Tithe means 10%. And so when I say we're not obliged to tithe anymore or obligated to tithe anymore, I don't mean that we are not supposed to give.

Giving is part of love and love is the essential part of the Christian life. But to give 10% is not required. By the way, the teaching today that's so common in the churches that Christians are supposed to tithe 10% of their income to the local church, I think fails to take into consideration really what the tithe was for in the first place or the temple tax.

Because the church today, the average church that takes tithes from people uses them for a variety of things. For supporting missionaries, for supporting the pastor and the staff, for maintaining the building, for putting carpet in the building or whatever. All the needs, the physical needs of the plant and of the personnel of the church usually come out of the tithes.

However, in the Old Testament, the tithe was simply to go into the pocket of the Levites. It was their income. They were full-time in ministry and 10% of the income of the persons that they ministered to was to go into their pockets so that they'd have some elective money too.

The facilities of the temple were not maintained with the tithes. They were maintained with a separate tax. And that's what we're talking about here, which was about 50 cents really in value from each person.

But in addition to the various other things that made it possible to keep the temple running, special gifts and so forth that people would make, this 50 cent head tax would provide a lot of money. If every Jew paid it, there were about 3 million Jews in the world, although I think only the male Jews over 19 were required to pay it. So I'm not sure what percentage of them that was.

Perhaps say a quarter of that would have been. Then there would have been the equivalent of over half a million dollars come in a year for things like temple repairs and stuff. And that along with special gifts that people would make would no doubt be enough to keep a building functioning.

They didn't have electrical problems or plumbing problems in those days. Marble doesn't wear out that fast. And so there just wouldn't be that many repairs to be done.

So this is what that was for. If we're going to say that tithing is required today, then we should say, well, the tithes then should go to the support of full-time ministers. And there should be another tax on the people of God, 50 cents per head per year to maintain the church building.

I mean, if we want to make the modern clergy the equivalent of the Levites and the church building the equivalent of the temple, which I think would be a mistake to do. Since the modern equivalent of the Levites and priests is the whole church. We're a kingdom of priests.

Everyone's a priest. And likewise, the modern equivalent of the temple is the church. We're living stones built up into a spiritual house.

So the church building, the clergy are not the modern counterparts of the Jewish Levites and priests. But those Levites and priests and temple have a spiritual counterpart, and that is the whole church, the whole body of Christ is that. Okay, now having said that, Jesus points out that disciples, because they're sons of God and in a new relationship with God, are not like servile peoples who've been under the heel of a conqueror.

But they are like sons of God, and therefore they're not obliged to pay for their relationship with him. Or work for it, or anything. The sons are free.

But, he says, nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that first comes up. And when you've opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money, actually in the Greek, the word piece of money is a stator, which was a drachma, which was half, a drachma was how much the temple tax was, we call it a half shekel. A stator was a shekel.

So it would be enough to pay the temple tax for two people, Peter and Jesus. He says, you'll find a piece of money, take it, and give it to them for me and you. Now, it's clear that Jesus didn't consider that paying the temple tax was an obligation by what he said in verse 26.

Furthermore, he made no provision to pay the temple tax for every one of the disciples. Only for Peter and Jesus. Now why was that? To avoid offending them.

The tax collectors had come to Peter, who apparently had not paid his temple tax recently, and had asked about Jesus, who apparently hadn't paid his temple tax either up to this point. And so these two persons were put under scrutiny by the tax collectors. The other disciples, for some reason, were not there, or for some reason were not being examined.

So, Peter and Jesus being the ones that were being scrutinized, he provides enough money just for their two things, just to avoid offending the people who've made an issue of it. Now, avoiding offending people is a thing that comes up elsewhere in the scripture a great deal. In fact, in the very next chapter, Jesus said in verse 7 of chapter 18 of Matthew, Woe to the world because of offenses, for offenses must come.

But woe to that man by whom offenses, the offense comes. Now, it's possible, however, that the word offense means something a little different here, but we'll talk about that in

a moment. But Paul talks about this in a couple of important places.

One is in Romans 14 and 15, where he talks about not doing things deliberately that offend people. Just because you have the right to do them doesn't mean you should do them, if it offends people. Paul's talking about those who are somewhat more liberated in their conscience about what they eat.

And he says, some people eat everything, some people just don't have a conscience for that, they can't eat anything but vegetables. And he says, don't you who have freedom, use that freedom to offend your brother. Galatians says something like that too in Galatians chapter 5. He says, you've been called for freedom, but don't use your freedom as an occasion for the flesh, I believe is how Galatians says it.

And then we have it in Peter also. Let me turn to these other passages just to get it. I sometimes get the content of the various passages mixed up, they're very similar.

Galatians 5.13, but for you brethren have been called to liberty, only do not use your liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another. Do not use your liberty as an occasion for the flesh, but through love serve one another. So use your freedom to serve others' interests and not to get in their face about how free you are and in a way that could offend them.

Over in 1 Peter chapter 2 and verse 16, 1 Peter 2.16, Peter says essentially the same thing. He says, as free, that's what we are, yet not using your liberty as a cloak for vice, but as servants of God. So there are certain ways you're not supposed to use your liberty.

Jesus said the sons of God are free, but freedom doesn't mean we're free to stumble people, free to offend people. Now there are times where even if you do the thing that you must do, people will be offended. There are times where if you didn't do the offensive thing to someone, you would be violating your own conscience, because some people are offended by doing good.

Some people are offended if you talk to them about Christ. The Sanhedrin was offended that the apostles were blaming them for crucifying Christ and that the apostles didn't stop preaching that way, but the apostles were not at liberty to do anything else. They were told by Christ to preach this.

So sometimes when you obey God, and you can do no other than that, you'll end up offending people. I'm sure Martin Luther offended the Roman Catholics of his day, and probably all generations of them since. But he said, it's neither safe nor right for a man to do anything other than what his conscience dictates.

And he says, here I stand, I can do no other. So help me God, he said. And that's the position you have to take sometimes.

No matter who's being offended, you just have to do what you know is right. However, there are many issues which it would be very selfish for us to insist upon doing, knowing that we don't have to do them, we're not required to do them by God, and the doing of them would bother Christians and non-Christians unnecessarily, it might put a stumbling block in their path. We've talked about those issues before, we won't go into it in detail now.

Things like smoking, drinking, listening to certain kinds of music and things, dressing a certain way, wearing your hair a certain way. Doing a lot of different things. Have been known to offend certain people.

And if you know that something you're doing is offending someone, and it's not something you're required by your conscience to do, then out of love, Paul says, serve one another. Don't use your liberty as a cloak for the flesh, but serve one another with it. And that means sometimes giving up what you would prefer, knowing that if you insist on what you prefer, it could cause a stumbling block to someone else.

Paul talks the same way in three chapters. In 1 Corinthians, chapters 8 through 10, and particularly in 10, he talks about the need to be careful what we eat and drink. If something we eat would destroy our brother, something we eat would stumble him, then we should just not eat, even though we have the right to.

You're not required to eat certain things. You have the right to, but you're not required to, and therefore you can sacrifice your right in such a case to avoid offending your brother. Now, it's often very hard to know exactly where to draw the line on things that you can and cannot, or should and should not compromise.

If, for instance, you know that the way you look, the way you dress, would offend some Christians in some churches, should you then dress differently and go to those churches? Change your looks, maybe. If you're called to go to such a church, it would make sense. On the other hand, if you're not required to go to that church, you can probably find a church that doesn't make an issue of the way you look or dress, and maybe that would be just as well.

You can't please everybody. There's so many different preferences that people have. Jesus is not saying that we have to make everybody happy.

But here is a case where for Jesus to say, no, I'm taking a stand against the temple, would convey the wrong message. For one thing, the temple services were not finally abolished yet. He brought an end to their legitimacy at the cross, but even the Christians continued in the temple for a long time until the temple was destroyed.

And so, he had never really declared the temple cult as to be illegitimate. He had said that they had turned it into a den of thieves, but that didn't mean that it wasn't still

God's house. And therefore, just to avoid offending people and to avoid making a statement he didn't wish to make, namely, to take a strong stand against the temple at this point in time, which wasn't his message or it wasn't the right time to do such a thing.

He said, well, let's just go along with him here. Now, this is probably what Paul meant to do also when he went and paid the fees for the four Nazarites in the book of Acts, in Acts 21. But whether he did the right thing or not is questionable, that he did that largely to avoid offending people.

He seemed to lend a certain amount of validity to the temple cult just by doing this, and that might have actually been the wrong thing for him to do. But at this point in time, Jesus was still a man living under the law, speaking to people who lived under the law, and therefore, he did not wish to press his liberty, and he said, let's go ahead and pay this thing. And it's no big deal anyway.

But he did it in such a strange way. He didn't say, well, Peter, go tell Judas we need a stater to give to these people for us, you know, I mean, out of the bag. Judas was the treasurer.

He didn't have him go get it out of the bag. He wouldn't take any of the apostolic community funds for something as unnecessary in his mind as paying the temple tax. The temple was no longer the way in which his disciples were learning to relate to God.

They were relating to God through Jesus in a spiritual relationship. The temple was not serving their needs, and therefore, he wasn't going to take out of their pockets, and out of their mouths, their food money, to pay some unnecessary fees. However, since he did not want to offend those who were collecting the tax, and so he needed something to pay, he provided with something else.

And this is the only time in the whole, all the Gospels that Jesus does anything like this. He tells Peter to go fish with a hook, not with a net. Peter used to fish with a net, but probably he'd put his nets in mothballs by this time and stuff.

So he'd just go throw a line out in the sea, and when you pull up a fish, there'd be a coin in his mouth, and it'd be sufficient to pay the temple tax for both of us. Now, one thing I point out to you, it doesn't record that Peter went out and did this. We, of course, assume that Peter did this.

But we don't read of it going on. We just read of the statement of Jesus, and there the narrative ends. Because we don't read of the event actually taking place, there have been some who've given a variety of explanations for it.

One explanation has been that Jesus was just being sarcastic. Like saying, well, sure, we'll pay this tax, just go fishing, and if you find a coin in the mouth, if it's enough to pay the tax, use it. But not really intending Peter to do it, but even if Peter did do it, he

wouldn't find a coin, and Jesus basically said, well, we've done what we could.

We'll go see if we find any coins in fish's mouths. We don't have any extra money around here, and if you find some money, give it to him. However, I don't think that that is a good explanation.

That is, I think he really did expect Peter to pay the tax, because he stated his reasons were to avoid offending them. And if Jesus was just being sarcastic, and saying, sure, we'll pay the tax if you find a coin in a fish's mouth, or something unlikely like that, if we come out ahead by a whole shekel somewhere, through some unexpected providential means, then by all means, we'll pay it. Barclay, who is himself quite shy about admitting to any miracles, I don't know if you've read Barclay's commentaries at all.

They're quite interesting, and he's quite scholarly, and very interesting. But he is very poor. He takes a very weak view of miracles, and he tends to explain almost all of them away.

This is one of them. He suggests that this didn't actually happen. I mean, that Jesus did say this, but Peter didn't go out and find a coin in a fish's mouth.

It doesn't record that he did. It just says that Jesus said this. And Barclay understands Jesus to be saying, go out and fish.

You know how to fish? It's a profitable living. Catch a fish, sell it for a stater, and we'll pay for the temple tax. You'll find, figuratively speaking, you'll find the money in the fish's mouth.

Because the fish's mouth is where the hook would enter. It would be the fish's mouth that would deliver the fish into Peter's hands, and therefore, in a manner of speaking, the fish's mouth would provide the coin. And this is another way that this fellow, one person has tried to argue it.

One of the reasons that people have argued this way is because they feel that it would be below the dignity of Jesus and a compromise of his principles to use miraculous power to meet his own needs. I've read this many times, and not only from liberals, but even from evangelicals. I've sometimes read, for instance, when they are writing about the temptation of Jesus in the wilderness.

When the devil said, why don't you turn these rocks into bread? You're so hungry, why don't you just turn the rocks into bread? And Jesus refused to do it. Evangelicals, as well as liberals, seem to have missed the point as near as I can tell. To me, the point seems obvious, but most commentators seem to take it another way.

They feel that the reason Jesus refused to turn rocks into bread, and the reason that it would have been wrong for him to turn the rocks into bread, was because he was being

tempted to use his miraculous power to meet his own needs, and that, in fact, his miraculous power was there only to serve the needs of others and not himself, and that it would have been a selfish use of his power, and so forth and so on. Well, if people take an approach like that and say, well, it would have been wrong for Jesus to use miraculous power to meet his own needs, then they have to do something with this present passage, which seems to imply that Jesus did provide a miracle to meet his and Peter's needs to pay the temple tax, the debt they owed. Now, there are several ways to come back at this.

One is that, philosophically, I don't see any reason why it would be wrong for Jesus or any other miracle worker in the Bible to use his miracle working power to help himself. Elijah, when he was being threatened by troops, called fire out of heaven. That was working a miracle.

At least the Jews understood Elijah to be the one who called fire out of heaven. James and John said to Jesus of Samaria, shall we call fire out of heaven to consume them like Elijah did? Well, why did Elijah do it? It was just his own self-protection. Was that an abuse of power? When Moses brought water from the rock, did he not drink any of it himself? Did he live without water, whereas everyone else was able to drink? Obviously, the miracles that were worked by men in the Old Testament didn't always mean that they couldn't participate in the benefits.

And so, even if Jesus did work a miracle to provide this coin to pay this tax, it helped Peter and himself, and there's no reason why he shouldn't do it. Furthermore, I don't think that the reason that it would have been wrong for Jesus to turn rocks into bread in the wilderness when he was tempted, I don't think the reason for that has anything to do with using his miraculous power to benefit himself. In a sense, he raised himself from the dead, the Bible says.

Jesus said, destroy this temple in three days, I will raise it up. So the resurrection of Christ himself was an act of his own miraculous power. Yet, that benefited him, did it not? To me, I would just challenge the whole philosophical assumption that it's wrong to use miraculous power to meet your own needs, or for Jesus to do so.

The reason Jesus shouldn't turn rocks into bread is because he wasn't getting such instructions from his father. And he was obliged to do only what his father told him to do. And it was the devil, not his father, who told him to do that thing, so it wasn't the right thing to do.

He didn't have to give a miracle. If God didn't approve of that kind of use of miraculous power, God could have withheld the miracle, because Jesus himself said, it's the father who dwells in me who does the works. So it's not even that Jesus possessed miracle-working power more than, say, the apostles did later on.

Or Elijah and Elisha did earlier on. It's God, the father, who did the works through Jesus, and no doubt it was also God who did the works through the apostles and through Elijah. So Jesus' miracle-working power was not necessarily governed by different principles, or different ethics, than the miracle-working power of the apostles at a later date, or of prophets in the Old Testament, like Moses and Elijah.

Now, I want to say this too. I mean, to say that it would be selfish for Jesus to turn rocks into bread to feed himself, or to do a miracle to produce a coin to, you know, pay this temple tribute, is to misunderstand what selfishness is. Because it sounds an awful lot to me like people who say, I would never pray for anything for myself.

I just pray for other people and other people's needs. Well, why wouldn't you pray for yourself? When Jesus said to pray, didn't he say, give us this day our daily bread? Isn't that something we're supposed to pray for? Isn't that praying for something for ourselves? Now, of course, we intend to go out and work for that money most of the time, and when we pray for money, it doesn't mean we expect it to fall from the sky. We expect to go out and earn it.

But still, when we earn it, we see it as a gift from God, a gift he has provided through giving us the ability to work. If we can't work, he'd still provide it some other way. In any case, whether it comes through work, or through some other means, we still receive it as from God.

It is still, as it were, an answer to prayer. If I say, God, I need to pay some bills, and he gives me a job, and I make enough money to pay the bills, or if he doesn't give me a job, and I have no opportunity to make it, but the money comes some other way, it's all the same. It's all answers to prayer, and in that sense, it's all a miracle.

What is a miracle but when God intervenes? When God does what he wouldn't otherwise do, what would not have naturally happened by itself? And, you know, some miracles are stupendous, and remarkable, and astonishing. Others are everyday kind of miracles. Answers to prayer that happen all the time, and wouldn't have happened if you hadn't prayed for them.

So, to say that it's wrong to use miraculous power on that which benefits you, it'd be the same as saying it's wrong to pray for God's intervention to benefit something that has to do with your benefit. To me, it's ridiculous. To me, our whole lives are for the glory of God.

The food I eat, the car I drive, the clothing I wear, the house I live in, all of those are parts of the way God provides for me to stay alive, to function, to get the job done that he wants me to do, and to pray for such, if my car broke down, to pray that I could get it running or get a new car, I wouldn't see that as a selfish thing. I'd just say, well, I mean, the car I have is in the service of God. My future will be in the service of God.

So, what's so selfish about praying for a car, or clothing, or food, or a house? You know, those are things that we're supposed to pray for. We're supposed to cast all our cares on him, for he cares for us. And if God provides like as not, he'll provide in a remarkable way.

Possibly even through what we'd have to call a miracle. So, let me just, I'm making a big deal of this, because if you happen to hear preachers talk about the temptation of Jesus, for example, and, excuse me, the particular temptation to turn rocks into bread, or if you read commentators on it, you'll often hear them say, well, the reason this would have been wrong for Jesus is because Jesus shouldn't use miraculous power for himself. Why not? Were not his needs the concerns of his father, just like the needs of others were? So, I disagree with that.

And assuming that Peter did go out and find a coin in a fish's mouth, we'd have to suggest, here we have at least a case where Jesus did use his miraculous power to fill a need. Unless, of course, we say, well, it wasn't a need, because paying the temple tax, he already said, was something they didn't have to do. It was sort of a, something extra they were doing.

It was not something required for their well-being, it wasn't an actual debt that he felt that he had to pay. He did it to glorify God, to avoid offending people. He just did it to please God, and, therefore, it was a completely unselfish act.

But then everything Jesus did, he did to please his father, whether he ate or drank or whatever. Likewise with us, Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10, 30 or 31, he says, whatever you do, whether you eat or drink, do all to the glory of God. So, every concern of ours is a concern of God's, and it is much a legitimate cause for prayer, and even to expect a miracle, if that's the way that God chooses to answer prayer, as something that seems less selfish.

As long as we are God's servants, and all that we have is dedicated to him, and then to pray for our maintenance, and for the maintenance of things that concern us, is not selfish, it's just asking God to maintain what is his. Okay, now, did Jesus become a counterfeiter here? Did he produce a coin, and put it in a fish's mouth? Well, we're not told so, in fact, we're not even told what followed his statement here. I'm assuming, and I think this is a good question, I think the text would lead us to assume that Peter went out and followed the instructions, and found that even as Jesus said, that there was a coin in the fish's mouth.

However, that does not necessitate that Jesus manufacture a coin, which would make him, put him in the business of counterfeiting money. There is a fish, that I have, from what I've heard from several sources, in the Sea of Galilee, that they call Peter's fish, based on this story, because the fish has often been found, when caught, to have shiny objects in its mouth, including such things as coins, that have fallen into the water.

These fish are attracted to shiny objects, and to eat them, or bring them into their mouth.

And therefore, it's not unknown, even in modern times, for this particular type of fish to be caught in the Sea of Galilee, and to have some bright object, even a coin, in its mouth. That means that for this miracle to happen, it would not be so much that it's a miracle of creating a coin, or creating a fish, but just bringing a fish that had taken in a coin, which there may have been many in the sea at that time, depending on how many coins had fallen into the Sea of Galilee, there might be many fish swimming around, that had coins in their mouth, at least there was one. The miracle was bringing that fish together with Peter's hook, providentially, in answer to the promise that Jesus made to him.

And that's not hard for God to do. Scriptures say that the ox knows its owner, and the ass knows its master's crib. Even though Israel didn't know where they were supposed to go, God said the ox and the ass knows its master.

And in Jeremiah it says that the swallows and the cranes, they know their appointed times, and they obey the course God has given to them. We know that ravens brought food to Elijah. We don't think the ravens baked it themselves, nor that the angels baked it and gave it to the ravens.

Probably the ravens found it in somebody else's window or something, and brought it to them. In any case, the animals obey God. And this fish, it was his time to go.

He happened to have taken a coin into his mouth, and God brought him to Peter's hook, and the fish obeyed. And that's, I think, the best way to understand this. There's, in one sense, nothing miraculous about it, except for the providence of the situation.

The fact that God providentially allowed that no other fish than the one that had a coin in its mouth would take Peter's hook. The first fish you pull up will have it, he said. And God providentially made sure that that happened, I'm sure.

Okay, enough on that story. Now chapter 18. In chapter 18, we come to the fourth of the five collected saints' discourses of Jesus that Matthew gives us.

Remember, Matthew does this. The other Gospels do not. But Matthew has gathered the saints of Jesus largely in five places, as if they were five discourses.

But as we've seen in the Sermon on the Mount, as we've seen in the missionary discourse, as we've seen even in the Olivet Discourse, though we haven't covered it in this Life of Christ, we've covered it in another series. What Matthew has done is take things Jesus said on similar subjects and put them all together in one place. Some feel that he does this because he's writing to a Jewish audience, and he's wishing to present Jesus as sort of the new Moses.

As Moses gave the Old Testament, Jesus gives the New Covenant. And that Moses gave five books of the law, and so that Matthew has arranged his book as if to give five books.