

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 17:24 - 17:27



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this passage of Matthew 17, Steve Gregg discusses the voluntary tribute tax paid by Jews to the Roman Empire. While Jesus did not necessarily support the ongoing validity of the temple tax, he paid it to avoid potentially offending people's image and testimony. Gregg suggests that denying oneself something legitimately can be a way of showing love to others. Peter assumed that Jesus would pay the tax, and it is possible that this assumption was based on a prediction from Jesus.

### Transcript

Today we'll be taking a further look at the same passage in Matthew 17 that we were discussing when we ran out of time last time. This is a paragraph found at the end of the 17th chapter of Matthew. It's verses 24 through 27.

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? And Peter said to him, From strangers. Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free.

Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money. Take that, and give it to them for me and you.

Now if you happened to be listening in yesterday, you'll remember that this temple tax was a tax that was for the maintenance of the temple. And it was a small amount of money that was requested. It was about 50 cents.

It was a half shekel, half stater, from each citizen. And it was really not a very burdensome tax, but it was nonetheless voluntary. And because it was voluntary, it was not known by those who were collecting it whether Jesus was one of those who would pay it, or one of those who would forego.

And so they came to Peter, and they seemed to actually anticipate Jesus not being one who would pay the tax. Because they say, Does your teacher not pay the temple tax? Peter, wishing to cast Jesus in the best possible light, but apparently not knowing for sure whether Jesus did this or not, he simply answered as he thought best, that Jesus does pay the temple tax. But he went into the house, no doubt to ask Jesus about this very thing.

And Jesus anticipated the question, anticipated him, and said, Simon, tell me this. The kings of the earth, they do charge tribute, but from whom do they exact it? Do they make their sons pay tribute, or the conquered foreigners that have been brought into their empire? And the answer was, of course, the foreigners. The kings impose these tributes on foreigners, not on their own sons.

And Jesus' statement was, well then the sons are free, aren't they? In other words, the sons of the king are not obligated to pay such a tribute as this. Now, Jesus is not here talking about the tribute that the Jews paid to Rome. Although the situation of the Jews paying tribute to Rome was no doubt an example of the illustration he gave.

Because the Jewish people had been conquered by Rome back in the 60s BC, and this was now about 30 years or so AD that Jesus was speaking. So about 100 years, the Jewish people had been under tribute to Rome. And they had been paying a yearly amount to the Romans, which by the way, many of the Jews resented doing.

But they had no choice, they were a conquered people, they were a vassal nation. And they had to pay up each year. That's how emperors gained their wealth, by conquering foreigners and then plundering their wealth in this manner.

Now the kings of the emperors, as the Jews probably knew well enough, I say the kings, the sons of the emperors, did not have to pay this tax, of course. They didn't need it. They charged the foreigners.

And that took care of all the political works and so forth. And then the sons of the emperor were free from this taxation. Now Jesus is saying that this temple tax is like that.

Now the Jews had to pay several taxes in Jesus' day. There was of course the tithe, which was a tenth of all their income, and this had to be brought to the temple, but that was not the temple tax. That was more for the sustenance of the workers in the temple, the Levites and the priests.

These men had to have an income for their full-time service, and the tithes, which was one-tenth of the national produce, was brought to them for their food, so that they could survive and continue to work full-time in the ministry without a salary. They lived off the free will tithes of these people. Now there was that tax, and then of course they had the

tribute that they had to pay to Caesar, because of the special circumstances of them being under a suzerainty relationship with Rome.

But then there was this temple tax, and that was voluntary. Now Jesus was only talking about the temple tax here. He was not saying that the Jews were free from paying taxes to Rome, because that simply wouldn't fit his illustration.

The fact is, he is agreeing with Peter that it is foreigners, the ones that the emperor has conquered, that they are the ones who must pay the tribute. And in the situation of the Roman tax, the Jews were the conquered ones, and Jesus would be in a sense saying they should pay it. They are the foreigners who got conquered by Rome, and they are under tribute to Rome.

They better pay it. On another occasion, Jesus was asked on that very point, when someone brought him the question, is it lawful for us to pay tribute to Caesar or not? And the reason this question came up is there were many Jews, especially the zealots, who believed that it was actually irreverent or sacrilegious for the Jews to pay tribute to Caesar, because they said God is our king, and if we pay tribute to some other king, then we are acknowledging that man as our king and denying that God is our king. Therefore, we cannot pay tribute to Caesar because it is a denial that God is our king.

And therefore, they thought that it was not lawful for the Jews to pay tribute to Caesar. Now Jesus didn't agree about that. They came and asked Jesus, is it lawful to pay tribute to Caesar? And Jesus said, well, show me the coin that you used to pay the tribute.

And they showed him a coin, and it had a picture of Caesar engraved on it. And Jesus said, whose picture is that? Whose face is that? They said, that's Caesar's. And Jesus said, well, then this must belong to Caesar.

It's got his face on it. Give it back to him. That's what the word render means.

Render doesn't mean give. It means give back. Return it to him.

This coin has Caesar's face. It must have come from him. Give it back to him if he wants it back.

Render to Caesar whatever is his. But render to God what is his. You see, your life bears the image of God as that coin bore the image of Caesar.

Now, if the coin has Caesar's image on it, it must belong to him. Give it back to him. But you bear the image of God.

Therefore, you must belong to him. Give your life back to God. So Jesus basically did not dispute that the Jews ought to pay tribute to Caesar.

He took it for granted that that was an all right thing to do. But it was more important, he

said, that you make sure that God gets his due from you and not just Caesar getting his. Now, therefore, Jesus in this place, when he said the sons are free, he was not talking about taxes that were imposed politically.

This was a situation of a temple tax. This was imposed within the nation of Israel, within the religious structure of Israel. And he was saying that the temple, of course, is God's house.

Now, Jesus, on occasion, referred to the temple as my father's house. Now, if the temple was his father's house, then he's the son, then it must be his house, too. In fact, he also referred to it as my house on occasion.

So it's important to note that Jesus saw the temple not as something foreign to him, but something that was his own house, as it were, the house of his father. Now, he was one of the sons then, and so were his disciples who were with him. And he's saying, well, we don't seem to have any obligation to pay taxes to God since we're his sons.

Now, that doesn't mean that he was saying that the tithe should not be paid. Instead, he was simply saying the father of the household doesn't impose a tax on his children to maintain the family home. And a king, in particular, doesn't impose a tax on his children to maintain his empire.

This is done on foreigners. Therefore, the sons of the king are free. And what Jesus is saying is our relationship to God in this matter frees us from the obligation to pay for the maintenance of the temple.

Now, this would not really be a very good teaching if Jesus supported the ongoing validity of the temple. Because it seems clear to me, at least, maybe not to all, but it seems clear to me that if Jesus believed that the temple ought to continue operating indefinitely, as it had for the previous 1400 years, that it would, of course, need maintenance. And it would, therefore, be necessary for someone to contribute to its maintenance.

Although he might be saying it should always be the voluntary thing, and therefore the children are free, but someone should pay for this, but it should be those who voluntarily do it, not those who it's imposed upon. And really, that would make sense, too. Because the father, Paul said in 2 Corinthians, the children do not lay up for their parents, but the parents lay up for the children.

It is not the place of my children to have to pay the mortgage on my home, or the taxes on my home, or the maintenance costs on my home. I'm the father, I'm in charge, I'm supposed to provide for them. I don't require them to pay the bills on the maintenance of my home.

However, if they wish to contribute, if they see a need and they have something they

want to help, that's fine. I can receive that, perhaps, depending on the circumstances. Likewise, Jesus seems to be saying that it's not the children of God's obligation to pay for the maintenance of this temple thing.

Although, obligation aside, voluntary contributions would not be a bad thing. But it seems to me that what Jesus is getting at here is that the temple really is not going to be around that much longer anyway. And the payment of the temple tax is really something that the disciples don't need to feel an obligation about.

The temple is essentially defunct because Jesus was come to bring an end to that whole temple system. However, he was concerned about the image and the testimony to these other people. There were many times that Jesus conformed to the sacrificial systems requirements in some respects, even though he didn't feel an obligation to do so, but he did so for a testimony.

For example, when Jesus healed a leper, he told that leper, go and show yourself to the priest and offer the gifts and the sacrifices that Moses required as a testimony to them. Now, Jesus, of course, was not real big on animal sacrifices, I would imagine. But even David wasn't back a thousand years earlier.

But Jesus did want that leper to, as a testimony to the Jews and to the priests, go and do what the law said to do, so as not to offend them in all likelihood. And so also here, Jesus is concerned not to offend the pious Jewish people. He says, nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first.

And when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money. Take that and give it to them for me and you. In other words, go ahead and pay it.

We are free from this obligation, and we will not pay it because of some sense of principle that we must, but we will do it in order to avoid offending those who think that this is an important thing. And obviously, Jesus was not really opposed in principle to the payment of the temple tax, or else he wouldn't have made this compromise. He wouldn't have paid it.

He didn't think it was bad to pay it. He just felt like God's children are not obligated to do so. And because of that, he was free either to pay it or not.

And therefore, the decision to pay the tax or not to pay it would rest upon other considerations than that of obligation. It would rest upon the consideration of how the action would fly as a testimony, really, to other people, and whether it would cause a negative reaction, whether it would offend some people. I need to make something very clear.

Jesus was not afraid to offend people on a matter of principle. He offended the Pharisees on many, many occasions by healing on the Sabbath and doing things that they didn't

like him to do. He was not afraid to offend them.

In fact, in Matthew chapter 15, when the disciples were accused of breaking the Sabbath and eating, or excuse me, on that occasion it was accused of eating with their hands unwashed, Jesus offended the Pharisees on purpose and said it's not what goes into your mouth that defiles you as the Pharisees thought it was, but what comes out of your mouth. And the disciples came to Jesus later in that chapter and said, Lord, do you know you offended the Pharisees? They were offended when you said that. And Jesus said, well, every tree that my father has not planted will be plucked up by the roots.

In other words, I don't care. They're not God's people. Leave them alone.

He said they are the blind leaders of the blind. Jesus didn't mind offending people when it was a matter of standing on principle, something he needed to do. He didn't care if it bothered people that he did it.

And he would not compromise in order to avoid criticism to himself. However, on a matter like the temple tax, we have a very good example of what we might call disputed matters or gray areas. Here was a matter where Jesus clearly did not think it was an obligation of his or his disciples to pay a temple tax, and yet he didn't think it was a bad thing to do either.

To make a contribution to support the temple would not hurt anything. It was not a violation of any principle he stood for, and therefore they could pay it or not. It was simply a toss-up.

But the thing that tipped the scales in favor of doing the thing was the consideration of whether people would be offended or not. Now, as Christians, we have to be wise about such things. There are times when we have to be prepared for people to be offended because we stand on principle, and they simply are offended by the principle.

There are times when people are offended because you live a holy life or because you stand against the ungodly things they're doing. You have to not be afraid to offend people in cases like this where the offense comes because you cannot compromise and will not compromise. But there are situations where you have liberty.

You can, let us say, drink alcohol, or you can not drink alcohol. You have liberty one way or the other. Well, if somebody might possibly be offended by your doing so, then that tips the scales in favor of not drinking alcohol.

Now, I realize some of our listeners probably think that drinking alcohol is itself a sin. They'd be very hard-pressed, I think, to find a scripture that says so. And it's very clear that alcohol was served at the communion table in Corinth where some were going away drunk having taken too much of it.

And, you know, Jesus ate and drank with people who had wine at the table and himself seemed to participate in it. He never got drunk because drunkenness is a sin. But alcohol, drinking a bit of alcohol, is never actually forbidden.

Now, there might be very good reasons, though, not to do it. It might be partly because drinking alcohol can be bad for you or maybe because you don't have self-control or there may be a lot of reasons not to drink it. The point is there are some who could indeed have the liberty under God to have a bit of alcohol.

Let's say they've never been the type to be overcome by it. They've never been the type to get drunk. And yet, even if you have that liberty, there's not really, in most cases, any reason that you should have it.

Now, I can see that there could be, in some cases, a reason for drinking alcohol, let us say, because it does have medicinal value. Even the Bible acknowledges this. Paul told Timothy, drink no longer only water but take a little wine for your stomach's sake and your oft infirmities.

No one can deny that alcohol has some medicinal value. And even people who will not touch a glass of wine or other alcoholic beverage sometimes will take medicines right off the drugstore shelf that have alcohol in them. And for some reason, they don't see that as a compromise.

But the fact of the matter is the Bible does not deny. In fact, it actually affirms that alcohol may have medicinal value. But if persons are using it simply for recreational value, even if they don't get drunk and don't violate any specific biblical command, it is obviously something that can be offensive.

And you can give it up. The point here is that when giving in to the more sensitive conscience of another person and restraining your behavior in a way that you would not normally have to, but you do so to avoid offending someone else, when you have a matter of liberty where you can go one way or the other, deferring to the tender conscience of another person is an act of love. Paul has several chapters on this very subject.

In Romans chapters 14 and 15, he discusses it. And also in 1 Corinthians chapters 8 through 10, he discusses the issues of, for example, eating meat that is sacrificed to idols. Paul said there's nothing intrinsically wrong with doing so, and Christians do have that liberty.

But there are very good reasons to abstain from it, not the least of which is that some people would be offended, and some might even be stumbled into sin because of it. Now, if that is true, he says you are not loving your brother if you exercise this liberty without reference to his sensitivities about it. And remember, the Christian life is not the

life that is... the choice is not to live with as much liberty as I can and to just indulge my liberty for my own happiness as much as I can.

The purpose of the Christian life is to be as loving as I can be toward others. And there are times when I can deny myself something that I might legitimately allow myself on other occasions, but to deny myself out of love for someone else who would be bothered severely by it. Well, this is what Jesus seems to exhibit here.

There was nothing wrong with paying the temple tax, and there was really nothing wrong with not doing so, but here were some people to whom it seemed to matter. And therefore, let's not offend them, let's go ahead and pay it. Now, I find it interesting Jesus didn't say to Peter, now Peter, just go over to Judas there, he's got the money bag there, and get a stater out and give it to them to pay for yours and mine.

Now, it's interesting, Jesus didn't have him pay for all the disciples because he apparently did not care whether it was paid for all of them. The question was posed to Peter about Jesus, and those were the only two who were being examined at this point by these collectors. And Jesus said, well, let's do the minimum thing they require, you pay for mine and yours.

But Jesus didn't say go get some money from Judas because it would appear they didn't have a lot of money. And Jesus did not wish to take money out of the bag, out of the necessary things for buying food and so forth, in order to pay this tax. So he told Peter how to get some extra money, enough extra to pay this tax.

Now, what was it he was to do? He was to go with a fishing line. Now, usually Peter fished with nets, you know. When Jesus met him, Peter and the other disciples were fishing with nets and bringing in great numbers of fish.

But this was going to require only catching one fish. So he said, put a hook on the line and throw it in the sea, this would be the Sea of Galilee. And the first fish that comes up, look in its mouth, you'll find a coin there, take it, and pay our taxes with it.

Now, did Jesus do a miracle here? He might have. It is entirely possible that he is saying, you will find a coin, literally, in this fish's mouth. But, you know, the Bible doesn't tell us of Peter going and doing this.

We assume Peter did what he was told. But we only read of what Jesus told Peter. We do not read of what actually went on after this.

Let me say there are some, at least, who have believed that what Jesus was saying was, go and catch a fish. And when you've removed the hook from its mouth, when you've opened its mouth, and you've sold it in the marketplace, you'll get a stater for it, you'll get the money for it, and then you can pay this tax. If this is so, then Jesus is not predicting that there will be a miracle.



In saying that you'll find a coin in its mouth, he could be speaking figuratively that by the hook in its mouth, catching the fish and bringing it in where you can sell it, you have found yourself the coin you need. Namely, you go and sell it and get the coin. Now, I myself do not necessarily think that's how we're to interpret Jesus' words.

But some have thought it is. And if it is, then what we have here is Jesus telling Peter, you know, we've got to make an honest living, go and fish. That's what you do best.

You need a coin, go out and catch a fish. You can sell it and you'll have enough money to pay our taxes. Or it is possible that he literally meant there would be a coin in the mouth of the fish.

There are some say that in the Sea of Galilee there is a type of fish that is attracted to eating shiny objects, and sometimes they will eat coins that fall into the sea. And if this was indeed the case, that he picked up one of these fish, then Jesus was not, by a miracle, counterfeiting money in the mouth of a fish, but simply someone had dropped a coin into the sea, a fish had eaten it, and still had it in its mouth at the time that it also took Peter's hook. This is a possibility.

But as I say, we are only told of the prediction. We're not told of what actually happened or exactly how it materialized. Some would say that Jesus miraculously knew, and maybe ordained and orchestrated, that the first fish to catch his hook would have a coin in its mouth, or he may have been simply telling Peter, catch a fish, the hook that you get in its mouth will be the same hook and the same place you'll get your coin.

In any case, the lesson was we don't want to offend them. We have liberty, but we don't want to use our liberty to stumble others. And it is indeed an interesting story.