

# OpenTheo

## Matthew 17:22 - 17:23



### Gospel of Matthew - Steve Gregg

In this talk, Steve Gregg discusses Matthew 17:22-23 and the prediction of Jesus' death, as well as the temple tax issue. He emphasizes the importance of studying the Bible closely and being able to address apparent contradictions in religious beliefs. Gregg also highlights the need for Christians to become better acquainted with sacred writings from other religions in order to defend their own beliefs. Overall, the talk encourages listeners to deepen their understanding of scripture and engage in evangelism with a knowledgeable and open-minded approach.

### Transcript

Today we'll begin our study in Matthew with Matthew 17, beginning at verse 22. Those who received the temple tax came to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the temple tax? Peter 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, 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 and give it to them for me and for you. The first part of this passage records Jesus once again foretelling to the disciples that he will be delivered into the hands of the chief priests in Jerusalem and that he will be put to death. But he also predicts that he'll rise from the dead the third day.

Now their reaction to this news was that they were very sorrowful. Now if they were very sorrowful, it seems as if they were hearing only part of what he said. Because the last thing he said was that he would rise again the third day.

Now even if that registered with them and they believed it, it still might make them sorrowful to think that he must go through in the interim the abuse and death that he had predicted. But it seems to me that the prediction of his resurrection escaped them

entirely and they didn't really see it or it didn't register. Because later on, of course, when Jesus actually did die, the disciples did not seem to anticipate his resurrection.

And even when some had seen him, like some of the women, Mary Magdalene and the other women, when they had seen him risen from the dead, the disciples were not quick to believe it. It seems as though their expectation of his rising from the dead was entirely absent. But they were sorrowful when they heard him predict that he would die.

Now what I find a little bit strange about this is that Jesus told his disciples at least three times in the Gospels in advance that he was going to be crucified and that he would rise again the third day, but the disciples did not seem to get it. It didn't seem to register with them what he was predicting ultimately. And yet, on only one occasion known to us, Jesus made a similar prediction in the presence of his enemies.

That was in Matthew 12, 40, when he said, As Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of the fish, so shall the Son of Man be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth. And this was a prediction of his resurrection also on the third day, but of course a bit veiled. A perceptive listener could figure out perhaps what he meant by that.

But the interesting thing is that he only made a statement like that once, as far as we know, in the presence of those who were not his friends. And yet, to his friends, he made predictions like this at least three times. And yet, after Jesus died, his enemies remembered the prediction, and the disciples did not seem to have remembered it.

And so we can see that the enemies were probably listening more carefully for clues of his plan, really. I mean, they were suspicious of him. They expected him to try something sneaky, no doubt, a power play of some kind.

And so they may have been listening more carefully than the disciples, who, having spent all their time with Jesus, and of course having their guard down around him, were not listening as carefully as they should have, perhaps. And you know, it sometimes is the case that unbelievers hear and understand some of the things that are in the Scripture which Christians themselves overlook. This, I think, is one reason why certain cults arise within Christianity and are successful in drawing people to them, because most of the cults that I've known of, well, I don't know about most of them, but several of the successful cults, have at least discovered some things that are in the Bible which are not taught by the traditional churches, at least not regularly.

And in some cases, they have seen more clearly some of the things that are in the Bible than the Christians themselves have seen. I think of possibly the Jehovah's Witnesses, for example, whom I do not agree with at all in their essential theology. And yet there are things that the Jehovah's Witnesses have placed an emphasis on which the church in general has not.

I mean, one of those is the Kingdom of God. Certainly there's an emphasis in Scripture on the Kingdom of God, yet the average Christian couldn't tell you, if he was tortured, what the Kingdom of God is. And yet, frankly, I'm not sure the Jehovah's Witnesses know really what it is either, but they bring out an emphasis in their teaching on it, on the Kingdom of God.

And of course, when they can show the average churchman that the Bible says a great deal on this subject, it becomes convincing that they are the people who really see the Bible correctly, because after all, why did not my church tell me anything about this? Likewise, there are certain things that are emphasized in the Bible that the church has, for some reason, often covered over. And sometimes people who are critics of the Bible seize on those things, and they see them clearly. Maybe they don't see them objectively, but they see them, and they seize upon them in order to capitalize on the ignorance of Christians on certain things that are in the Bible.

I mean, many times I've heard non-Christians say, the Bible is full of contradictions. And when I was younger, I was convinced, of course, that this was absolutely false. And so I would always just say, well, show me one.

And in general, unbelievers were unable to do so. However, the time came when I began to meet quite literate unbelievers, and they were able to show passages in the Bible that, indeed, on the surface, they appeared to be contradictory. And the average Christian had never noticed them.

The average Christian had never seen them, and had not really ever learned how to deal with those passages and seek to understand them better. And so the unbeliever, in some cases, is paying closer attention. Sometimes I have met unbelievers who have made their own lists of what they consider to be errors in the Bible, whereas many Christians who read the Bible, perhaps with less care, have never noticed them.

Now, these are not, in my opinion, real errors in the Bible, and I don't believe the Bible really contradicts itself. I think there are passages which, read by a hostile person, can be construed, or may at first glance appear to be errors in the Bible. But when a person will pay close attention to the Scripture, and is not bringing with their examination an a priori hostility toward the text, in many cases, I dare say in all cases, those difficult passages or those seeming contradictions end up not being really problems at all.

In many cases, just a better and deeper understanding of the passage removes the difficulty. The point is, however, Christians need to be paying as much attention to the Bible as they can, because it's not uncommon, it seems to me, for a Christian to be somewhat biblically illiterate, unfamiliar with what God has said, and then to encounter someone who is an enemy of Christianity, and that person has been paying very close attention to the Bible in order to oppose it, in order to cause trials and difficulties and doubts in the minds of Christians when they encounter them. I believe that the Christian

should be, of course, the most familiar and the most expert in the Word of God of all people.

And yet, it's really a scandal that many Christians do not pay that close attention to what God has said, and they have only a cursory knowledge of what's in there. And it seems to me this is also the case with the disciples here. Jesus predicts to them that he's going to rise from the dead, but they miss it.

They're not paying close attention. The unbelievers heard him say something like that, and they remembered it. We know they remembered it because later on in Matthew 27, they came to Pilate and said, you know, we remember when this deceiver was alive, he said that he would rise again in the third day, so we better guard the tomb to make sure the disciples don't steal the body and then claim that he'd risen from the dead.

Well, they hardly needed to do that. The disciples had forgotten altogether that Jesus had predicted it, and they made no effort to steal the body. But the point is, the enemies of Christ sometimes put us to shame in their closer attention that they give to what God has said.

Not so much because they adore him, as we do, but in many cases just to oppose him. But it is a shame when a Christian encounters a non-Christian, and that non-Christian knows the sacred writings of the Christian better than the Christian does. By the way, it's possible for a Christian involved in evangelism to become better acquainted with the sacred writings of some other religions for the sake of refuting them than those adherents themselves.

There are Christians who certainly know the Koran better than many Muslims do. There are Christians who know the Book of Mormon better than many Mormons do. And frankly, if you want to have an impact on changing the minds of such people, it is not unwise to become very familiar with their sacred writings so that you can do what many people try to do toward the Bible, and that is show where there are problems, where there are errors.

The thing is, while Christians may do this toward other religions, people of other religions or atheists themselves may try to do the same thing to the Bible. And the Christian ought to, as I say, be well acquainted with those parts of the Bible that are likely to be seized upon by the enemies of Christianity, and to acquaint oneself with them and to know how it is that these are to be understood. Anyway, I just see that as an interesting point where we see the disciples once again being told plainly a certain thing by Jesus, but they're not paying that close attention.

They don't get the whole picture. And yet people who are not friendly toward Jesus, when told less frequently and less plainly the same thing, they understand it, they seize upon it, and they don't forget it. Now there's this other story, an interesting one.

It appears to be a miracle story, though there are some who would say there's really no miracle recorded in the story. And that is where Jesus tells Peter to go and get a coin from a fish's mouth. It begins this way.

There were those who came to collect the temple tax. Now we're told this happened in Matthew 17, 24, when Jesus and the disciples had come to Capernaum. Now Capernaum is where Peter had a house, and this house became the base of operations for Jesus and the disciples, for the most part, when they were in Galilee.

And so the house in question was probably Peter's own house. And Jesus was inside the house on one occasion, and Peter was outside, and he was approached by these people who would collect the temple tax. Now the temple tax was something that in the book of Exodus was imposed upon every Jewish person.

They were to pay basically a half shekel of silver. It's not very expensive. It was probably the equivalent of about 50 cents.

And therefore it was not a burden for people to pay it. And yet, of course, the combined half shekels of all the people of Israel would come to a considerable amount. And it was for the purpose of maintaining the temple.

The temple was a building that needed to, or in the old days, the tabernacle, that parts had to be replaced and repaired and so forth. Just the maintenance of the property needed to be done, and there had to be funds for that. So this temple tax was exacted in the book of Exodus.

It was, as I say, not a burdensome amount. It was not a hard tax to pay. But once everyone paid it, it was a considerable sum of money.

I mean, if there were 3 million Jews in the days of the Exodus, and each gave 50 cents, that would be like a million and a half bucks worth of money for maintenance on this property. Now, it would appear that because the temple didn't need as much maintenance as the money that came in would require, it would appear that the paying of this temple tax became not mandatory, but voluntary. And therefore, there would be people who did not pay it and people who did.

But of course the assumption would be the more pious sorts, the more godly sorts, would be concerned about the temple and would therefore be glad to pay this temple tax. And a person might even show his spirituality vis-à-vis others who are less spiritual by the fact that he did pay this voluntary temple tax and others did not. And the people who collected this tax were not sure whether Jesus would pay it or not.

In fact, the way they asked the question to Peter, it seems that they assumed that he did not, because they came to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the temple tax? Now, if they had simply said, Does your teacher pay the temple tax? That would have

been more of an unsuggestive, unbiased kind of query, just seeking information. Is this something Jesus does or isn't it? Of course, one might say it's none of their business in a voluntary tax, but it would not be so suggestive of suspicion as the way they worded it. They said, Does your teacher not pay the temple tax? Doesn't he pay it, they're saying? Which is suggesting, although they don't know for sure, that perhaps Jesus doesn't show this mark of piety and dedication to God that the more godly sort do.

Now, why would they think that about Jesus? Jesus was a godly man, obviously. Everyone knew that he was a man of God. Why would they think he wouldn't pay the temple tax? Well, I think that Jesus in his life may have given the impression to some that he was an enemy of the temple.

The temple was the center of all the practice of the law and the sacrifices and so forth. And remember, very early in his ministry, Jesus once made a statement that was misunderstood. He said, Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.

Now, he was speaking about the temple of his body. He was speaking figuratively, not literally, but he was misunderstood. And the people who heard him thought that he meant destroy the temple in Jerusalem, and he would raise it up in three days.

Later, as the report of his statement was passed along through the grapevine, it was misconstrued so that at the time that he was on trial three years later, some witnesses said, We heard him say that he would destroy the temple and raise it up in three days. And later, when he was hanging on the cross and those who were at the foot of the cross were seeking to verbally abuse him, they said, You who destroy the temple and raise it in three days, save yourself. So somehow, Jesus' statement was greatly misunderstood, and it was popularly thought that he had predicted that he would destroy the temple.

And, of course, that might raise questions as to whether he approved of the temple at all. There's a very good possibility that Jesus never participated in the ordinary temple worship. Now, we do read in the scripture of Jesus going to the temple on the occasions of the Jewish feasts, when all Jews were required to go.

We also read of him teaching frequently in the temple. But the ordinary temple activity was the offering of animal sacrifices, and we never read that Jesus ever offered any. And it may be that Jesus quite visibly and quite conspicuously did not participate in that.

And why should he participate? The sacrifices were for sinners. Jesus was not a sinner. He didn't need to make an atonement for his own sins.

And therefore, it's very likely, it seems to me, that Jesus did not offer animal sacrifices. And this being a conspicuous omission in his life, some may have felt like he was protesting against the whole institution of the temple and all. In any case, there were some who wondered whether Jesus was for or against it.

Remember, Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount had to clarify that. He says, Don't think that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets. Now, the reason he said that is because there were some who thought perhaps that that was what he had in mind, to abolish the law and the prophets.

And because of that, those who gathered the temple tax may have perceived Jesus as one who was sort of a conscientious objector against the temple. And therefore, since the temple tax was a voluntary tax to pay, they may have felt that Jesus would be one who would be a tax resister in this case. And so they said to Peter, Does not your master pay temple tax? And Peter, realizing that the payment of the temple tax was sort of a badge of godliness, and that anyone who wished to maintain a reputation of being one of God's people would want to pay this tax, he answered for Jesus, Yes.

In other words, he said, Jesus does pay the temple tax. However, the way the story is told, I have the impression that Peter was just guessing, that Peter was not aware of whether Jesus really did pay the temple tax or not, but he was answering as he thought best to protect Jesus' image here. I think in Peter's own mind, he didn't know whether or not Jesus paid temple tax.

He had never seen him do it. At the same time, he didn't want Jesus' reputation to be bad, so he just answered dutifully, Yes, Jesus does pay that tax. But it's interesting, the narrative goes on and says, When Peter 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 persons or from strangers? Their own children or from strangers? Now, the fact that it says that Jesus anticipated him suggests that Peter had it on his mind to ask Jesus about this.

Here, Peter answers for Jesus because he's on the spot, and he wants to give the most flattering answer he can about Jesus, but then he's not really sure, and so he's coming in, apparently, with the mind to ask Jesus this very thing. But before he can open his mouth, Jesus anticipates the question, and rather than waiting for Peter to ask it, he goes ahead and answers it. But he does so with a question, like Socrates and many other good teachers.

Jesus recognized that sometimes the best way to get a point across is to arouse curiosity first by asking leading questions. And so he asked Peter, Think about this, Peter. You know there are kings who exact tribute from other people.

These people that they exact tribute from, are they their children, or are they conquered enemies, conquered foreigners? Now, of course, this situation was very close to home because the Jews at that very time, Peter and Jesus himself, were living under the Roman dominion. The Romans had conquered Palestine some hundred years earlier than this, and the Jews were paying tribute to Caesar in Rome. And it was very clear that these people didn't have to guess.

They were very familiar with the fact that when a conquering power would be victorious over a lesser power, they would put those people under tribute, which simply means that the conquered vassal people would have to pay, usually yearly, some sum to the conqueror to enrich his kingdom. But the conqueror did not, of course, impose this tax and this tribute upon his own children, upon the princes in his own empire. And so Peter knew this, and Jesus said that.

From whom do the kings of this earth take customs and taxes? From their own sons or from strangers? And Peter answered correctly. He said, From strangers. And Jesus said, Then the sons are free.

Then he says, Nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, 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 money. This word, piece of money, is a stater, which is the exact temple tax that would be paid by two people. And take it and give it to them for me and for you.

Now, here's something I think significant, but we are going to have to take it up again next time. I look and I see that my clock has brought me to the end of my opportunity to talk about this today. I want to talk about what Jesus meant when he said the children are free from this temple tax.

And then, of course, this business about going and catching a fish and getting a coin out of its mouth. There is some question as to whether there is a miracle that Jesus is anticipating here or whether there's some other explanation. The text does not actually say that a miracle was worked here, but if there was one worked, then it is perhaps the only instance in the Bible where Jesus would have worked a miracle so as to cover his own finances, so as to cover his own obligations.

Jesus, of course, worked many miracles that were beneficial to others, but we don't have really record of Jesus performing miracles to benefit himself. And if this story of a fish having a coin in its mouth is an example of Jesus working a miracle so that the money for his own tax obligations comes through, that means we have an unusual situation indeed. We'll have to take it up, however, next time as we'll continue looking at this same passage and try to get a little bit of light on what really was happening here and why.

I hope you'll tune in next time and we'll continue this examination.