

bit of it.

So they preferred to remain ignorant. And His solitude became complete. (Cf. note on Mt. 11:27)

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. By what route did Jesus return from the preceding incident to Capernaum? (Cf. Mk. 9:20) Where had He been? How do we know Capernaum was His immediate destination?
2. List several reasons why Jesus would have desired anonymity at this time.
3. Who was "gathering in Galilee," according to the better manuscript evidence for Mt. 17:22?
4. Why does Jesus refer to Himself as "the Son of man"? What does this title mean?
5. On what other occasions had Jesus predicted His own untimely death and bodily resurrection?
6. Indicate several motives for His repeating these predictions here.
7. List several factors which collaborated in causing the disciples to fail to understand His remarks about His death. (Cf. Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45)
8. Explain their great distress. Explain how "they were exceeding sorry."
9. What reason would explain why they were afraid to ask Him for further explanation? (Cf. Mk. 9:32; Lk. 9:45)

### Section 45

### JESUS QUIZZES PETER ABOUT TEMPLE TAXES

TEXT: 17:24-27

24 And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received the half-shekel came to Peter, and said, Doth not your teacher pay the half-shekel? 25 He saith, Yea. And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him, saying, What thinkest thou, Simon? the kings of the earth, from whom do they receive toll or tribute? from their sons, or from strangers? 26 And when he said, From strangers,

Jesus said unto him, Therefore the sons are free. 27 But, lest we cause them to stumble, go thou to the sea, and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a shekel: take that, and give unto them for me and thee.

### THOUGHT QUESTIONS

- a. Why ask Peter? What do you suppose was the motivation behind this question posed by the collectors of the temple tax? Did they just happen to meet Peter during their normal collection rounds and decide to take advantage of Jesus' presence to close out their books? Or do you think that there was something sinister in this query? Why not come to Jesus directly?
- b. Why did Peter answer as he did?
- c. On what basis could Jesus claim exemption from a tax that was required by God from every Israelite? Was not Jesus a true Israelite? Should He not have to pay like everyone else? Why this tax dodge?
- d. Maybe you can justify Jesus for not having to pay the tax, but why did Jesus pay the tax also for Peter? Did he enjoy the same exemption? After all, did not Jesus say: ". . . lest we cause them to stumble"? Did not this imply that Peter too would not have had to pay, technically, were it not for the fact that his not paying would have caused this scandal? Or, is that what Jesus meant?
- e. Be honest now: on a plain reading of this text, do you see anything miraculous in the way Jesus had Peter procure the tax money? If so, where? If not, why not?
- f. Do you not think that this "miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth" violates the principle that "miracles are not necessary to be done where ordinary means are available"? There were plenty of other places where Jesus could have obtained the tax payment without resorting to the use of His miraculous power. What possible good could come from a miracle that only one person, i.e. Peter, knew about? Or would others know about it too?
- g. Does it not seem to you that this concentration of the mighty power of God to find one little fish with a coin in its mouth is a misrepresentation of what we usually see in Biblical miracles? Do you not think it a grotesque distortion of the dignified, sober presentation of divine power, to think that God concerns Himself with so tiny a sum as this? God has more important business to

take care of than causing the right fish with the right coin to come up at the right time when Peter first throws his hook in! What is your opinion?

- h. This miracle, if you still think of it as such, brought no relief to suffering humanity. Therefore, it is unworthy of God and Jesus, so it probably did not really happen. Affirm or deny this and tell why.
- i. In the temptation scene in the wilderness Jesus refused to use His miraculous power to supply His own personal needs, even as desperate as His need for food. Here, however, we see a narrative which totally reverses this unselfishness, because Jesus Himself shared in the benefit of this "miracle," a deed contrary to what we see of His spirit elsewhere. How can you possibly justify the inclusion of this story in the Gospel? How can you possibly justify Jesus for doing it?
- j. Show how Jesus' decision to pay a tax He did not owe marvellously illustrates one of the most fundamental principles of Christian ethics, described by Paul in 1 Corinthians 6:12—11:1; Romans 14:1—15:7.
- k. How many people do you think heard this conversation between Jesus and Peter, and, consequently, knew about the conclusion Jesus drew from His own premises? In other words, how many would probably have actually benefited from His good example given here of paying a tax He did not really owe, in order to keep others from stumbling? Why did not He pay for the other disciples too, as well as for Peter? Would not this have been a greater example? Or were the others not involved?

### PARAPHRASE AND HARMONY

Upon the arrival of Jesus and the Twelve to Capernaum, those who collected the special poll tax for the upkeep of the temple approached Peter with the question, "Your teacher does pay the tax, does he not?"

"Why, yes, of course, He does!" he said.

However, when Peter got home, Jesus spoke to him first, "What's your opinion, Simon? Who is really subject to pay customs or tribute to earthly monarchs? Their own sons, or strangers outside the royal family?"

"The strangers," was Peter's reply.

"That means, then, that their own sons are exempt," Jesus reminded him. "On the other hand, since we do not want this refusal to pay to become a hindrance to these people so that they would be influenced to think or do something wrong, you go down to the lake and throw in your hook. Haul in the first fish that bites. When you open its mouth, you will discover a silver coin in it. Take that and pay them the tax for you and for me."

### SUMMARY

Jesus and the Apostolic company had no sooner arrived back in Capernaum when Peter was cornered by the poll tax collectors about Jesus' payment of the tax for the upkeep of the temple. Without hesitation Peter covered Jesus. But upon his arrival back home, Jesus clarified His own right to exemption from this payment as Son of the King. However, rather than horrify the moral sense of the Jews by His seeming refusal to obey God, He chose to pay the tax. By providing the necessary money in an unusual way, He paid for Himself and for Peter.

### NOTES

#### IV. READINESS TO BE SUBMISSIVE BEYOND DUTY

##### A. THE PETTY PESTERING FOR PAYMENT OF THE POLL TAX

17:24 **And when they were come to Capernaum**, they had just returned from a long journey north to Caesarea Philippi (Mt. 16:13) and possibly to Mt. Hermon nearby. (See on 17:1.) This culminates a series of wide-ranging journeys outside Palestine. (See on 17:22.) The discussion of the temple tax is the first of two events that occurred upon Jesus' return to *Capernaum*, before He left Galilee for elsewhere, and there is an amazingly close connection between them. Bruce (*Training*, 224) is absolutely right to observe that,

. . . though the scene (of the temple tax question) occurred before the sermon (on relative greatness in the Kingdom) was delivered, it happened *after* the dispute which supplied the

preacher with a text. The disciples fell to disputing on the way home from the Mount of Transfiguration, while the visit of the taxgatherers took place on their arrival in Capernaum. . . . Is it too much to assume that His knowledge of what had been going on by the way influenced His conduct in the affair of the tribute money, and led Him to make it the occasion for teaching by action the same lesson which He meant to take an early opportunity of inculcating by words?

In the discussion of the temple tax, Jesus, the Son of God the King, magnanimously pays a tax that He does not owe, thus making Himself the servant of others in order not to place before anyone a temptation to sin. By forgiving Peter's presumptuousness, He illustrates His own rule to forgive indefinitely. Rather than take offense at Peter's compromising answer, He mercifully led him and the others back to that faith in Him they sorely lacked, especially in the preceding moment of failure at the mountain's base. Jesus Himself avoided harsh treatment by the kindness He showed in dealing tenderly with Peter's lack of understanding. The lesson of the first event is that stumbling-blocks can be avoided by gentle consideration of others, while that of the second is that stumbling-blocks occur by neglecting this consideration, and must be correctly removed. (Mt. 18)

**The half-shekel** (*didrachma*) means the yearly atonement money to be collected from every Hebrew over 20 years of age, as an offering, originally for the service of the tent of meeting, and then of the temple. (Cf. Ex. 30:11-16; 38:25f; 2 Kg. 12:4; 2 Chron. 24:5, 6, 9; also Josephus, *Antiquities* III, 8, 2; XVIII, 9, 1; *Wars* VII, 6, 6) The one-third of a shekel of Neh. 10:32 may represent a temporary reduction due to the poverty of the people. Though it was called an "offering," it was nevertheless compulsory, not only because commanded, but also to serve as a ransom for the payer during the census-taking: "that there be no plague among them when you number them." (Ex. 30:11-16) The plague during the census of David may be an example of this. (See 2 Sam. 24; 1 Chron. 21:27:23f.) The monetary value of the Hebrew half-shekel was two Greek drachmas (the *didrachma*) or two Roman denarii, hence the equivalent of two days' work of a common laborer. **They that received the half-shekel** were Jewish (*Wars*, VI, 6, 2), but not publicans, because no such outcast would have been permitted to handle what was destined for temple service.

Because *the half-shekel* is the temple tax, it is evidence for the early redaction of this Gospel. For, if the *Gemeindetheologie* school is correct to assert that "the unknown editors of our present Gospels dealt only with problems alive in their own given congregations (*Gemeinden*), then on the hypothesis of a later date for the writing of Matthew, how are we to explain this incident where Jesus is pictured as paying the temple tax, when the temple was destroyed in 70 A.D.? For congregations after that date this problem would no longer exist.

But if this temple tax payment were a pressing problem for early Christians living in Judea, problem to which the Evangelist gives a positive answer, then, we have positive evidence for the early dating of the final redaction of this Gospel. Before the fall of Jerusalem's temple, when the Christians had separated themselves from Judaism but continued to live in Jewish territory and under Jewish religious legislation, the question of the legitimacy of the payment of tribute to the temple would have become quite urgent. And, if the final edition of this Gospel comes from so early a date, there is no necessary reason why the Apostle Matthew himself could not have written it!

That this episode was never intended to deal with civil taxes in general is admitted by an exponent of the *Gemeindetheologie*, Cuminetti (*Matteo*, 237). He frankly notes that, if Matthew included this episode to illustrate not merely the temple tax question, but taxes in general, then Jesus' desire not to "scandalize them" (the tax-collectors) is nonsense. After all, for disciples to refuse to pay taxes in general on the ungrounded pretense to being sons of the King, would be to violate Christian orders to pay taxes. (Cf. Mt. 22:21; Ro. 13:6, 7) In this case there could be no scandal based upon a misuse of one's personal liberty not to pay, but only disobedience to a positive divine command to pay. The intention of the Lord not to scandalize the tax-collectors is comprehensible only if it is a question of the Jewish temple tax. In fact, "the force of the argument depends on the assumption that Jesus was a son of the king for whom the tribute was collected." (McGarvey, *Matthew-Mark*, 155) And He was not the son of any Roman Caesar!

The same should be said of Barclay's attempt (*Matthew*, II, 188) to date Matthew around 80 or 90 A.D., hence after 70 and the destruction of the temple. Vespasian, accordingly, enacted that the half-shekel temple tax be diverted from the now non-existent Jewish temple and paid to the temple of Jupiter Capitolinus in Rome. (Josephus, *Wars*, VII, 6, 6) Accordingly, says Barclay, Matthew

included this story to calm the nerves of Jewish Christians so they would be good citizens and pay their Roman taxes. Unfortunately for this explanation, the Vespasian order is not a Jewish law which had now been superceded, but a Roman one to which the Christians must render obedience. Problem: how could the Christians then justify their support of a pagan without compromise of their conscience toward God? How would this differ from incense to Caesar? A simple but adequate answer would be that Matthew was not addressing himself to the situation in Vespasian's time, because he was really writing long before the Jerusalem temple was destroyed.

If this tax was not a Roman tax payable to publicans at the local tax office in Capernaum (cf. Mt. 9:9), and if the half-shekel for the temple was payable at Jerusalem to Jewish officials, then how explain the approach of these collectors? The answer lies both in their system and in their motives:

1. Concerning the system of collection, the Jewish fiscal organization should be noticed. On the first of Adar (February-March in our calendar) it was proclaimed in the Palestinean provincial cities and towns that the temple tax time had arrived. On the fifteenth of the month authorized money-changers set up booths in each provincial town and village. At these money-stalls, after the local money was exchanged for the sacred coin, the tax was paid to these money changers. Ten days later on the twenty-fifth of Adar, these pay booths were transferred to Jerusalem and set up in the temple precinct. If the tax had not been paid by the twenty-fifth, therefore, the payer could only pay it directly at the temple in Jerusalem. (Cf. Edersheim, *Life*, II, 111; also I, 367f)

Although Peter paid his and the Lord's tax at this time, there is no necessary indication in this fact that the time of year was near Passover, since the collectors may have accosted Peter merely because Jesus had just returned to Capernaum, and not because they were open for regular pre-Passover business.

2. Concerning their motives for approaching Peter on the Capernaum street, we may notice:
  - a. Jesus' official residence for the major part of His life had been at Nazareth, so the Capernaum collectors would not have been concerned with records of His payments for the ten years He would have been obligated to pay at age twenty until He began His ministry around thirty (cf. Lk. 3:23), because those years were the concern of the Nazareth census bureau and money-

changing tax-collectors.

- b. However, He had changed residence from Nazareth to Capernaum at about age thirty. (Cf. Jn. 2:12; Lk. 3:23; Mt. 4:13 notes) This put Him under the jurisdiction of the Capernaum office. But since His rapid-paced, itinerate ministry kept Him on the move from place to place, it took them nearly three years to catch up with Him, or at least with someone who could furnish correct information about His payment for this year. Further, He had been out of the country a lot recently. (See on Mt. 15:21; 16:5, 13; 17:1, 22.) During the six months from Passover (Jn. 6:4) until this return to Capernaum, He had been in town once only briefly. (Jn. 6:59)
- c. Their question does not necessarily betray any hostility, since it is framed in Greek in such a way as to permit Peter to answer "yes": "Your teacher does pay the two-drachma tax, does He not?" (. . . *ou telei didrachma*; See Blass-Debrunner, *Grammar*, §427 (2); 440; Arndt-Gingrich, 594) This may or may not be another move to entangle Jesus in such a way as to furnish a basis for saying that He was not keeping the Law or supporting the temple.
- d. Their approaching Peter, rather than Jesus, may evidence their timidity to approach the great Rabbi on such a mundane subject. They may have considered Peter a particularly important disciple, another factor possibly contributing to the jealousy behind the subsequent discussion of relative greatness. (Mt. 18)
- e. However, being conversant with Jesus' claims to superiority to many points of Jewish law and His disdain for "authoritative" traditions (cfr. Mt. 12:1-14; 15:1-20), they may be questioning whether He considers Himself exempt from paying this tax too. Since the Pharisees and Sadducees had fiercely debated whether this tax were obligatory or not (See Edersheim, *Life*, II, 112), they may be testing Jesus' views thereabout. This would be their preliminary investigation before attacking Him directly for ignoring what was obligatory obedience to God.

## B. THE PRECIPITATE PARRY BY PETER

17:25 **He saith, Yea.** On the basis of Christ's previous practice, Peter responds correctly that He does pay. Without even pausing to wonder whether Jesus NEEDED to present any of the offerings



commanded in the law, Peter leaps to the defensive and presumes to give a positive answer. Since, in the fisherman's estimate his Lord is a Hebrew of the Hebrews, and since the tax is obligatory for every self-respecting, Law-abiding Hebrew, Peter reasoned, his Master obviously HAD to pay the tax every year. Although Jesus had apparently paid the tax on former occasions, He had taken a position in the meantime, a position that Peter himself had accepted, i.e. that of being the Christ, God's Son. (Mt. 16:13-20) Now, in contrast to all previous years, were Jesus to pay the tax without explaining His motives for so doing, He would have caused very serious misunderstandings for His followers, especially those spiritually-minded souls who could sense the incongruity of the King's Son paying taxes to His own Father. But Peter, in his concern to place his Teacher in a favorable light with the tax people, had overlooked the relationship of Jesus' divine Sonship to their question. He had not thought through his own confession to see its practical ramifications for the earthly life of Jesus.

**And when he came into the house, Jesus spake first to him.** Returning home from some errand in downtown Capernaum where he had been accosted by the census people, he was met, not by a scolding for his impetuous inference, but by a puzzle. **Jesus spake first to him.** Had Peter intended to mention his conversation in town? Edersheim (*Life*, II, 111) thinks that he would have had no intention of telling Jesus about the conversation, since his defense of the Master was but another way of eliminating opposition to Jesus in its every form. He had answered without previous permission, so he probably sensed that the Lord would not have approved his decision. Whether he intended to bring it up or not, the Lord anticipated it and furnished His disciple not only the essentials for arriving at a correct solution to his question, but gave him additional proof of His omniscience. He showed Peter that He knew about the discussion while that disciple was away from Him. Feel the psychological soundness of His approach to a question about which Peter stood on the wrong side: *What do you think, Simon?* Rather than browbeat him for his wrongness, Jesus invites him to ponder a phase of normal, royal administration and give his opinion. *Simon:* is this a kindly, familiar use of Peter's real name (cf. Lk. 24:34; Ac. 16:14), or, when addressed to him who should have been "Peter" and what this implies, does it imply that Jesus addressed His friend as the man who yet needed to learn much? (Cf. Mk. 14:37; Lk. 22:31; Jn. 21:15-17)

### C. THE PRIVILEGED POSITION OF THE PRINCE

**The kings of the earth.** Is there an antithesis implied here: "the King of heaven"? (Cf. Dan. 4:37; 5:21-23; Mal. 1:14) **From whom do they take toll or tribute? From their sons, or from others?**

NOTE: *toll* (*télos*) is just any kind of tax, customs, duties, the collector of which is called a *telónes*, like Matthew. *Tribute* (*kênsos* = Latin: *census*) is a census tax, or poll tax, payable every year. This latter word, while a common Roman word referring to the census tax (cfr. 22:19), shows Peter that the Lord knows about the Jewish census tax discussion downtown.

The question is easy because of the absurdity it involves: *Toll or tribute* is tax money for the support of the kings themselves and *their sons* as well. To tax their sons is tantamount to taxing themselves, like one hand paying the other. No, kings collect taxes, not from their own sons, but from those outside the royal family, i.e. from *strangers*.

#### 1. THE PROPER PREROGATIVE OF A POTENTATE'S POSTERITY

17:26 **And when he said, From strangers,** he had answered correctly, but Jesus must make His real point, using the half of the answer that Peter omitted: **Therefore the sons are free.** Two reasons prohibit our seeing in the plural *sons* any application of His principle to the disciples, or even properly to Peter:

1. The essence of the argument does not depend upon whether the royal family is represented by one son or by several, since the contrast is between those who are members of the royal family, hence exempt, and those who are not, hence obligated to pay. (Plummer, *Matthew*, 245)
2. The question raised by the collectors is not whether Peter, or the Twelve, pay, but whether Jesus Himself does. It is nowhere doubted that the disciples are liable. In fact, all God-fearing Hebrews were "sons of God" in this secondary sense (cf. Hos. 1:10; Isa. 43:6), but the very law in question rendered none so bound to pay this tax as they.

So the plural *sons* does not consider Peter and Jesus together as "sons of God's Kingdom," Jesus as God's true Son; Peter, His

disciple, a true "son of the Kingdom." In fact, what was Jesus implying in His conclusion about the exemption?

1. The tax money in question was designated for the service of the temple, the house of the true King of Israel, God Himself. Josephus (*Antiquities* XVIII, 9, 1) affirms that Jesus' contemporaries considered this tax as offered to God.
2. Both God and Peter had confessed Jesus to be "the Son of the living God." (16:16; 17:5)
3. If He is the Son of God, the King and Owner of the temple, then the tax destined for its service does not apply to Him. Should He contribute tax money to His own Father's house? (Cf. Jn. 2:16) Why should He weaken His title as "Son of God," or appear to disown it by acting in a manner out of character with its dignity?

If this is all Jesus said about His own exemption, then we may admire His kindness in not exulting over Peter's wrong thinking, by saying: "So, you see, Simon, how WRONG you were to commit me to pay taxes I do not even owe?" He just gently draws out the implication and lets Peter think it over and see the obvious conclusions. This is the face value of His little puzzle, but consider the unstated, but nonetheless indisputable, magnitude of these implications:

1. In His attitude, God's Son towers above the Temple of Javéh and the Mosaic legislation that collected half-shekels for its service. Indeed, "something greater than the temple is here!" (Mt. 12:6) He challenges His obligation to pay this tax only for Himself, because all those who were not sons in the unique, unshared sense of His Sonship, were still liable.
2. Without any preamble or a word of explanation from Peter, Jesus led him around a veritable labyrinth of theological speculation about whether the Messiah, as typical Hebrew, should offer sacrifices, and, by means of a simple illustration, pointed out the right solution. Only One with the certainty of Heaven could keep it that simple, that true and that conclusive. If He were not the Son of God in the highest sense of that word, even His conclusion, so rich in implications, is blasphemy, and He would have no choice but to pay the tax like everyone else.
3. Another reason for not submitting to the tax, which could have laid before the disciples, is based on one of the purposes of the tax. It served as a ransom for the souls of the individuals being counted

in the census. (Ex. 30:11-16) How could He who is the God-appointed ransom for all men somehow be thought to need a ransom for His own life? To admit obligation at this point would cast doubt on His true relation to God and to all other human beings.

## 2. POWERS POSTPONED BY A PRACTICAL PLIABILITY AND A PURPOSE TO PROTECT PEOPLE

17:27 **But, lest we cause them to stumble . . .** *We* means both Peter and Jesus, because the former had rashly taken a position that committed the other to pay. So both would be involved in any scandal caused by Jesus' refusal to pay it now. The collectors of the half-shekel would not have understood Jesus' divine right not to pay. Unless convinced of His deity, they would have interpreted His proper refusal to pay as claiming a liberty He did not truly possess and as evidence of a lack of reverence for God, the temple and the Law, and they would have been unnecessarily horrified, whereas there was no Hebrew in all the history of Israel that ever had a higher, more intelligent regard for God and His will.

### THE ASTOUNDING QUESTION ARISING OUT OF THIS SITUATION IS: "HOW MANY OTHER INDIGNITIES AND INCONGRUITIES DID JESUS HAVE TO ENDURE AS A HUMAN BEING?"

Does this section furnish an answer to the question whether Jesus attended the feasts, offered the sacrifices, and generally respected every other requisite of God's Law given through Moses? May we conclude, on the basis of what He reveals about Himself and His policy in this incident, that it was His normal practice to do everything that it was right for a Hebrew to do? (Mt. 3:15)

1. He had been born under the law to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive the adoption as sons. (Gal. 4:4, 5) There was no intrinsic need for Him to be circumcized (Lk. 2:21) or purified (Lk. 2:22f), except "to perform everything according to the law of the Lord" (Lk. 2:39). Is the temple tax question but a tip of the iceberg of legal obligations which Jesus made it His standard policy to respect?

2. The changes in OT legislation, that Jesus taught would go into effect after His death had set aside the old covenant. (Heb. 9:15-17; Col. 2:13, 14; Eph. 2:14f) Examples:
  - a. The distinction between clean and unclean meats (Mt. 15:11; Mk. 7:19)
  - b. The centralized place of worship (Jn. 4:21-24)
  - c. To what extent did He participate in Passovers without offering sacrifices and sharing in the meals? (Jn. 2:13-23; Lk. 22:15; cf. 1 Co. 10:18)

The Bible does not positively say whether Jesus did or did not offer animal sacrifices—even as thank-offerings to God for His goodness. Nevertheless, simple silence on this question is not a positive argument. Rather, His refusal to offer sacrifices without accompanying His refusal with appropriate explanations to His contemporaries would have caused far more scandal than His refusal to pay the temple tax! For Him to have offered such sacrifices in the temple when not obligated to do so and when fully aware of the temporary character of the Mosaic system would not have contravened His deity, any more than paying the ransom involved in the temple tax would have disproven His right to be the Redeemer, any more than submission to John's baptism would have proven Him sinful merely because one of the primary purposes of that rite was "the forgiveness of sins." (Mk. 1:4; Lk. 3:3)

3. There is no warrant for affirming that Jesus and the Apostles had never paid the temple tax during the three preceding years of His ministry, as if Peter hurried anxiously to get a ruling from Jesus on the matter. Such anxiety would have been psychologically impossible, if a precedent had already been established. But there is no textual indication that Peter was anxious for a ruling or that he even wanted to talk about it. Jesus' anticipation of Peter's mentioning the tax conversation can be interpreted differently, not as anxiety on Peter's part, but as urgency on the Lord's part. The Lord desired to furnish Peter additional proof of His Sonship to God. It is better to assume that Peter well knew that the Lord paid every year, for the simple reason that, had He not done so, Peter could not have truthfully answered "Yes" regarding a yearly tax. Also, would not the Apostles have already questioned Jesus about His non-payment and already received the information just now revealed to them in our text?

If we rightly object that Jesus did not have to subject Himself to the

indignities of offering animal sacrifices required of other Hebrews, we still have not positively affirmed that He did not actually offer them. In an exquisite passage rich in insight, Bruce (*Training*, 217ff) observes:

Surely, in a life containing so many indignities and incongruities,—which was, in fact, one grand indignity from beginning to end,—it was a small matter to be obliged to pay annually, for the benefit of the temple, the paltry sum of fifteenpence! He who with marvellous patience went through all the rest, could not possibly mean to stumble and scruple at so trifling a matter . . . He wished them to understand . . . that it was not a thing of course that He should pay, any more than it was a thing of course that He should become a man, and, so to speak, leave His royal state behind and assume the rank of a peasant: that was an act of voluntary humiliation, forming one item in the course of humiliation, to which He voluntarily submitted, beginning with His birth, and ending with His death and burial.

For our magnanimous Lord, the dilemma was easy to resolve: to refuse to pay, merely to prove a point for some, would cause others to stumble and cost the salvation of some precious souls, but to pay when under no obligation to so do, costs exactly one *didrachma* and He could teach His disciples deference! So He paid, and in so doing He did not violate either His own freedom or the conscience of others. Rather, by submitting, He demonstrated his majesty. **Lest we cause them to stumble**, expresses Jesus' concern for the weak and ignorant. (See on 18:12, 13.) By His example He instructs all disciples not to abuse their freedom and to be sensitive to unbelievers, refraining from unnecessarily offending those who could be positively influenced to accept the Gospel. Although we cannot permit or refuse compliance to a thing on any other grounds, we cannot refuse on this one. The requirement wholly uncalled for in Jesus' case He found absolutely irresistible on the ground of others' weakness. Although He was exempt from the tax because of Who He was, His interest was not in exercising His proper prerogatives, but in helping to protect others from stumbling. Jesus' justification for waiving His privileges may well have been identical to that of Paul. (1 Co. 9:1-23) To relinquish one's own undeniable, inalienable personal rights for the good of others is true self-denial and the story of Jesus' life. (On self-denial, see "The Cost of Our Salvation" after 16:28.) Behold

how "though He was rich, yet for our sakes He became poor!" He did not possess one half-shekel to His name, and yet His honesty would not divert community funds for private need.

### 3. THE PRAISEWORTHY PERFORMANCE OF THIS PRINCIPLE OF PRECEDENCE

He paid by procuring the money in such a way as to furnish surprising evidence that He really was the King's Son and exempt as He had said. **Go thou to the sea** (of Galilee just outside Capernaum) **and cast a hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a shekel: take that, and give unto them for me and thee.** How would this particular choice of miracles have impressed His fisherman-Apostle? This alone justifies the miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth against all His detractors. Anyone who can either create a fish with the right coin in its mouth and bring it to Peter's hook as the first one to bite, or else knew that such a fish would so come, and tell the fisherman to go catch it, qualifies for temple tax exemption, because only Deity can do that! Jesus is not the mere son of an earthly potentate, but the Son of the Owner of the cattle on a thousand hills, and if He cannot make use of one small fish to bring Him a coin to fill the need, what kind of Son is He?! The moral purpose and spiritual instruction in his miracle were aimed squarely at Peter, and indirectly and secondarily at us. The coin itself was not *a shekel*, as translated in our text, but a *statér*, a silver coin equivalent to the Jewish shekel, hence enough to pay two half-shekel taxes.

**Take that, and give unto them for me and thee.** Why pay for Peter too? He was not a Son of God, hence not exempt in the way Jesus was. However, his constant association with Jesus in His whirlwind ministry may not have permitted him leisure to pay his just dues as a true Hebrew. Therefore, when Peter took Jesus' payment to the collectors, they might well have questioned Peter about his own tax payment, and were they to find him delinquent, there would be another cause of stumbling. So Jesus paid for them both to eliminate any possible cause for scandal. The money the Lord furnished, however, was not "for us," as if both were sons of God in the same sense, but *for me and for yourself*, the Son who is exempt and the citizen who is not. The payments are identical, but the reason for which each of them is paid is different.

## OBJECTIONS TO THIS "FISH STORY"

1. **There is no real miracle here.** Some would suggest that Jesus' reference to the fish be understood metaphorically: "In the fish that you will catch you will find what will pay for us." Accordingly, this might mean that the fish would sell for the right amount. And since we are not told that Peter actually did find a coin in the mouth of a fish, the confirmation of the prediction's exact terms is missing.  
*ANSWER:* Matthew did not need to elaborate on Peter's obedience to Jesus' orders, the latter not being essential to the account of Jesus' teaching about the temple tax. The fact that the miracle is not described means that the emphasis of this story is not on the miracle, Matthew's purpose being to teach Jewish Christians their duty not to abuse their freedom. However, the natural impression on the reader is that the order was obeyed and that the miracle really occurred. This impression is confirmed by the skeptics' own attacks based on this impression. But to demythologize the miracle by reducing His statement to "You will find our tax money (in the sale of) the very first catch," excludes divine foreknowledge and, in its place, substitutes simple, human probability prediction.
2. **It was not beyond human power to earn such a trifling sum.** "A day or two of fishing by the Apostles would have brought in enough money to pay the tax for themselves and Jesus too. Therefore this miracle violates the usual principle that supernatural means are not used where natural means suffice. Poor as Jesus and His disciples were, the putting together a sum equivalent to the salary for four working days is not so serious a matter as to require a miracle to raise such a trifling sum."

*ANSWER:* Natural means would never have sufficed in this situation to prove what Jesus proved by this sign of His true Sonship, nor demonstrated that Jesus needed not to submit to the humiliation of paying a tax for the support of the royal house. Divine power is required to testify that all nature serves HIM, and that, as His father's Son, He possessed all things. Admittedly, the intrinsic value of the sum is trifling, but this can never be thought the basis for considering the miracle as having been worked for a very trifling purpose! Is it a trifling purpose to show His disciples how profound was His voluntary submission to a servile obligation, despite His full consciousness of His own identity? And is it a trifling purpose to establish that identity by choosing a



manner of payment which would contemporaneously illustrate Himself "as the Lord of nature, to whom all creatures in land or sea were subject, and all their movements familiar, while yet so humbled as to need the services of the meanest of them"? (Bruce, *Training*, 219) Even so, Jesus sent Peter to go fishing. He did not will the fish to come to Him at the edge of the lake and drop the coin within His reach. He made use of ordinary human means to complete the miracle.

3. **It served the personal need and was done for the personal benefit of the one who worked the miracle.** "If this story be taken in its crude literalism, it would show Jesus using His divine power to satisfy His own personal needs. But He had decided never to use His miraculous power selfishly to satisfy His own hunger or to enhance His prestige as a worker of wonders. (Mt. 4:1-11) Thus, taken literally, this story violates Jesus' own character and wilderness decision."

*ANSWER:* Instead of seeming to compromise the completeness of His humiliation, this miracle only makes it that much more glaringly conspicuous, as if the miracle story proclaimed: "Notice who it is that must pay this tax and is so painfully poor that He must stoop to such a level in order to pay it! It is He who has 'dominion over the works of your hands . . . the birds of the air, and the fish of the sea, whatever passes along the paths of the sea!' " Psa. 8:6-8; 50:11) So, rather than profit in such a way as to alleviate His human life of hardship by the use of His divine power, He is still teaching others the reality of His humiliation. If this seems an exception to His normal rule of doing nothing miraculous for His own benefit, "the exception, however, had the same reason as the rule, and therefore proved the rule." (Bruce, *Training*, 220)

3. **The story is immoral in that it encourages man to suppose that by a stroke of good luck he can solve his problems, meet his obligations without exertion on his part.**

*ANSWER:* Those who accuse the Lord of solving His problems without exertion should consider how much it cost Jesus to place Himself in the incongruous position of becoming a man at all. Let them decide whether HE would have considered it a "stroke of good fortune" or "meeting one's obligations in a lazy, effortless way," when His entire life was one grand indignity, one continuous and voluntary servanthood, from start to finish. No, the miracle story, by its very nature and the lessons it teaches, distinguish Jesus the miracle-worker from any common mortal who would

excuse himself for effortless laziness and refusal to pay the normal price of work for all things.

4. **The miracle is grotesque and unworthy of God:** "The very idea of using a fish to deliver tax payments, indeed!"

**ANSWER:** Consider God's use of animals to do His bidding: Nu. 21:6; 22:21-33; 1 Kg. 13:24; 17:4-6; 2 Kg. 17:25f; Ezek. 14:15, and especially God's use of the great fish to deliver Jonah! Jon. 1:17; 2:1-10. Why shouldn't He have had to take the coin from the FISH's mouth when HE could have taken it from an ANGEL's hand! On the other hand, Jesus did some other scandalous things (Mt. 11:6) like going to a cross. (1 Co. 1:18-23) More grotesque than that . . .!

#### EVIDENCES OF JESUS' DIVINE DIGNITY REVEALED IN THIS SECTION

1. Omniscience is revealed by His anticipating Peter's recounting the temple tax discussion. (17:25)
2. His consciousness of His true Sonship. (17:25)
3. His considerate deference to others' weakness shown in His unwillingness to take offence at nor scandalize those who would not understand His reasons. (17:27)
4. His omnipotence was again manifest in drawing the right fish (the one that had precisely the right coin) to Peter's hook first. (17:27) Or else, by divine omniscience He knew that the coin was there and that the fish would come to Peter's hook. He knew and foretold that God would pay His tax in this way.
5. His generousness with Peter: not only did He not scold him for his unfitting answer, but He shared His own bounty to pay Peter's tax along with His own. (17:27) God does things like this.

Barclay's note (*Matthew*, II, 183f) beautifully concludes Jesus' lesson to us from this chapter:

We see here the constant demands which were made upon Jesus. Straight from the glory of the mountain top, He came to be met by the demands of human need and human suffering. Straight from hearing the voice of God, He came to hear the clamant demand of human need. The most precious and most Christ-like person in the world is the person who never finds his fellowmen a nuisance. It is easy to feel Christian in the moment

of prayer and meditation; it is easy to feel close to God when the world is shut out, and when heaven is very near. But that is not religion—that is escapism. Real religion is to rise from our knees before God to meet men and the problems of the human situation. Real religion involves both meeting God in the secret place and men in the market place. Real religion means taking our needs to God, not that we may have peace and quiet and undisturbed comfort, but that we may be enabled graciously, effectively and powerfully to meet the needs of others.

As noted before, the second half of this lesson will be concluded with Jesus' sermon in chapter 18.

### FACT QUESTIONS

1. Where had Jesus and the Apostles been when they arrived in Capernaum?
2. What is this "half-shekel" tax that the collectors ask about? What was its purpose? What Scriptures speak about this tax?
3. Why do the collectors ask this particular question? Did they expect Peter to answer yes or no?
4. Where was Peter when accosted by the collectors?
5. Who were "they who receive the half-shekel"? Were they the same as "publicans"? How do you know?
6. In this section Jesus demonstrated His deity and divine dignity in various ways. What are they?
7. What does this section indicate about Jesus relation to the Mosaic Law and its institutions?
8. Why did Jesus anticipate Peter when he came home? How did He do this?
9. What is the principle behind Jesus' question and the point of His own conclusion?
10. Why did Jesus pay the tax? Of what grand principle in Christianity is this an excellent illustration?
11. Explain the mechanism in this situation whereby Jesus and Peter would cause these tax collectors to stumble, were they not to pay the tax these thought was due.
12. Explain how Jesus paid the taxes.
13. Prove that there is (or is not) a miracle involved in the peculiar way Jesus secured the tax money. Indicate the purpose(s) involved

in His getting the money this way.

14. Show how this incident is excellent psychological preparation for the teaching the disciples must have and will receive in the incident that immediately follows in Matthew 18:1-35.

## INTRODUCTION: THE UNITY OF CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

No chapter is better connected nor better reveals the mind of the Lord back of every paragraph, uniting its every concept from beginning to end, than chapter 18. The most remarkable characteristic of this section is not merely its wholeness, but the amazing number of threads per verse that connect and interweave ideas throughout the entire chapter.

Perhaps the best way to experience this unity at first hand is to pick out an idea as if it were a thread of one color, and then trace it through the chapter to see its various applications. Then, pass to another colored thread of thought and follow it through the Lord's message. The ever-pleasing result will be a growing appreciation for our Lord's ability to deal with His disciples' initial dispute and the deeper spiritual problem that caused it, as well as a sense of amazement at the long-term, final answers Jesus gave to our most complex modern problems.

Here are some of the themes you might wish to trace throughout this chapter:

1. Right and wrong ambition in the Kingdom of God.
2. Relative rank: one's relationships to those who are his inferiors and superiors.
  - a. Definition and illustrations of "inferiors";
  - b. Redefinition of "superiors."
3. Responsibility for others' spiritual growth, needs and failures.
4. Responsibility for one's own spiritual interests and needs.
5. Standards of judgment and a concept of mercy.
6. Greatness in the Kingdom, or, relative importance to God and the Kingdom.
7. The perils of pride, despising others and unmercifulness.
8. The various faces of humility.
9. Jesus' love for the least, the last and the lost.
10. Christian discipline as this reveals itself in personal self-discipline

and in congregational discipline.

11. The picture of the Church that Jesus paints: the Kingdom of God is not a community of plaster saints typical of an ideal purity impossible to realize. Rather, it is a congregation of people who continue to make mistakes, to sin, to cause occasions of stumbling and refuse to forgive, and who always need forgiving. And it is an assembly that lives in the awareness that God loves and cares for each single member without exception and is conscious that Christ is in its midst, and so acts with full authority and confidence.
12. True and false concepts of structures of authority.

Additional proof of the chapter's unity is the fact that each of these themes is so important to the texture of the final result that one outline of the chapter will just not exhaust its meaning, since to outline means to summarize, but to summarize means to omit some of the chapter's thematic developments. The outline we will be following is an attempt to represent as many of these themes as possible.

This chapter is an interesting study of human motivation to action. It shows how holy and unholy ambition are related, yet contrary. As you go through the chapter, ask yourself, what are the various sound psychological devices used by the Lord to help disciples to aspire to true greatness as He defines it?

The more one works with each paragraph in this study, the more he becomes convinced that one can take almost any motif anywhere in the chapter and see its connections with almost any other which precedes or follows it! Even the scholar who begins with the pre-supposition that some unknown editor arranged these otherwise unconnected materials into one discourse, if he permits himself to entertain the not improbable possibility that that unknown editor was a gifted, intelligent Christian, hence knew exactly what he was about, must be smitten with the surprising cohesion with which every single idea in this chapter is intertwined with every other. Judged merely from a literary standpoint, this speech is an unexcelled masterpiece on human relations. Its lucidity and incisiveness, its simplicity and far-reaching applications, its tenderness and its terrible power to strike terror in the conscientious, all present us with a wisdom so high as to be worthy only of Him who identified Himself as the Son of God. Only eternity can bring to light the brilliance of character produced in His disciples and all the lasting good done in the world and all the problems resolved in the Church by this single lesson by our Lord!

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN OUTLINE AND SUMMARY

Section 46. Jesus Trains the Twelve in Personal Relations (18:1-35)

**SITUATION:** DISCIPLES DREAMING OF DISTINCTIONS: Argument among the disciples about relative status in the Messianic Kingdom (18:1; Mk. 9:33f; Lk. 9:46f)

**RESPONSE:** JESUS' SERMON ON THE IMPORTANCE OF OTHERS

**TEXT:** "The secret of true greatness is humble service to others."  
(Mk. 9:35)

**OPENING ILLUSTRATION:** The little child in the midst. (Mt. 18:2; Mk. 9:36; Lk. 9:47)

**DEVELOPMENT OF THE HUMILITY THEME:**

- I. Your position in, and relative importance to the Kingdom of God is measured by your humility. (Mt. 18:3f)
  - A. Entering the Kingdom depends on humility: "only the humble need apply!" (Mt. 18:3)
  - B. Relative rank in the Kingdom depends on humility: "The humblest is the greatest: the most important is he who admits his deep spiritual need!" (Mt. 18:4)
- II. Your humility is measured by your openness and sensitivity to so-called "inferiors" in the Kingdom: "There are NO UNIMPORTANT PEOPLE in the Kingdom!" (18:5; Mk. 9:36b, 37; Lk. 9:48-50)
  - A. Receiving the least important means receiving the King! (Mt. 18:5; Mk. 9:37; Lk. 9:48)
  - B. John's question about the unaffiliated miracle worker the rebuke of whom implied a sectarian rejection of all but themselves. (Mk. 9:38; Lk. 9:49)
  - C. Jesus' answer: a lesson on exclusiveness and bigotry versus tolerance (Mk. 9:39-41; Lk. 9:50)
    1. "Do not forbid him: I am in control here."
    2. "Whoever helps me will not soon turn against me."
    3. "Whoever is not actively opposed to you, permits you to work."
    4. "Whoever helps you in the smallest way will be rewarded."

III. Your humility is measured by your concern about your own sins

- and liability to sin and what this does to others. (Mt. 18:6-9; Mk. 9:42-50)
- A. "The one who causes stumbling is better off dead!" (Mt. 18:6; Mk. 9:42)
  - B. "The world is bad enough off without YOUR contribution to its stock of stumbling blocks!" (Mt. 18:7)
  - C. "Your own most important and justifiable bodily members can cause you to stumble, so are better dispensed with than permit them to cause the loss of your soul! No sacrifice is too great! (Mt. 18:8, 9; Mk. 9:43-48)
  - D. "How do you want it: saved by the fire or saved for the fire?" (Mk. 9:49, 50)
- IV. Your humility and sensitivity to the weak is measured against Heaven's concern for them. (Mt. 18:10-14) The problems of "inferiors" immediately and actively involve the sympathetic concern of Heaven.
- A. Ministering angels have God's immediate audience. (Mt. 18:10)
  - B. The Good Shepherd came to seek the lost little ones. (Mt. 18:11-13)
  - C. God Himself has no desire to lose any we might designate "inferiors." (Mt. 18:14)
- V. Your humility and sensitivity to others is measured by your concern about others' sins. (Mt. 18:15-20) Does it really matter to you about the gain or loss to the Kingdom of a brother? "If your brother sins . . .
- A. Make a personal effort to regain him. (Mt. 18:15)
  - B. Get other helpers as witnesses. (Mt. 18:16)
  - C. Enlist the strength of the congregation (Mt. 18:17-20)
    1. The special weight of the common judgment of common believers: God will recognize Church decisions rightly taken! (Mt. 18:18)
    2. The special power of the common prayer of common believers: God will answer their prayers! (Mt. 18:19)
    3. The special honor of the common meeting of common believers: Jesus Himself is present and personally interested!

VI. Your humility and sensitivity to others is judged by your readiness to forgive or show mercy. (Mt. 18:21-35)

A. Peter's question: "How many times forgive?" (Mt. 18:21)

B. Jesus answers: "No limit: mercifulness is the rule in God's Kingdom!" (18:22-35)

1. Consider the greatness of God's mercy to you. (18:23-27)

2. Consider the smallness of your brother's sins against you. (18:28-30)

3. Consider the consequences of indulging an unforgiving spirit. (18:31-34)

CONCLUSION: You endanger your own position in the Kingdom by unmercifulness and reckless superiority! (Mt. 18:35)

## Section 46

### JESUS TRAINS THE TWELVE IN PERSONAL RELATIONS

(Parallels: Mark 9:33-50; Luke 9:46-50)

TEXT: 18:1-35

#### A. Humility and True Greatness

1 In that hour came the disciples unto Jesus, saying, Who then is greatest in the kingdom of heaven? 2 And he called to him a little child, and set him in the midst of them, 3 and said, Verily I say unto you, Except ye turn, and become as little children, ye shall in no wise enter into the kingdom of heaven. 4 Whosoever therefore shall humble himself as this little child, the same is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

#### B. Responsibility

5 And whoso shall receive one such little child in my name receiveth me; 6 but whoso shall cause one of these little ones that believe on me to stumble, it is profitable for him that a great millstone should be hanged about his neck, and that he should be sunk in the depth of the sea.