

Matthew Round / General

Matthew: Christ The Promised King / Adoption; Freedom; Service; Providence / Matthew 17:24–27

big idea: love limits its freedom

intro me; fill-in notes; q&r "everything's in the app"

Have you ever met someone who just seems to think they're special, they're *really* someone - and obviously you're not? Always feels they are a rank above you, you know, that everyone ought to stand when they come into a room? Ever known anyone like that?

Now imagine that person choosing to put their life on hold and just come look after you for a day. Vacuum your carpets. Do your homework. Carry your bags. That would be quite something, wouldn't it? That'd make you sit up and think!

We're continuing our journey through the life of Jesus as Matthew's gospel tells it - and today's story is definitely going to make us think! Come with me to Matthew chapter 17 and we'll pick up the story at verse 24. Matthew chapter 17 - page 984 in our blue bibles, and look for the tiny 24. And Suzi / Joe is going to be reading for us today. Matthew chapter 17 verse 24.

Matthew 17:24–27 NIV

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" "Yes, he does," he replied. When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the children are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not cause offense, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

That's a short story: there's this tax; Jesus explains he doesn't have to pay it; but he pays it anyway - through a miracle. Short story but there's plenty to think about. We need bit of background before we can really wrestle with what's going on here, though.

Let's start with this two-drachma temple tax. Jewish religious worship centred on the temple in Jerusalem and a bit like our church here, what went on there had a cost: there was a building to look after, the people who worked there to pay, and stuff getting used up all the time - there, sacrificial animals; here, mostly coffee. How was all that paid for? Well, it seems in Jesus time, mostly through an annual tax paid on every Jewish guy over 20.

Two drachmas - which would be two days' wages for an ordinary labourer. But

notice there's some uncertainty over whether Jesus will pay. If this was a Roman tax, a government tax, there wouldn't be an option. The authorities will come for you if you don't pay. But there's a question over whether Jesus will pay this temple tax.

There's a question because it's not entirely clear this tax had a solid footing in the Torah, the ancient rulebook of the Jewish people. There's something which looks a bit like it back in the story of Moses connected to a census, counting all the people. There's a how-to guide with all the details in Exodus 30.

Exodus 30:12–16 NIV

"When you take a census of the Israelites to count them, each one must pay the LORD a ransom for his life at the time he is counted. Then no plague will come on them when you number them. Each one who crosses over to those already counted is to give a half shekel, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. This half shekel is an offering to the LORD. All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the LORD. The rich are not to give more than a half shekel and the poor are not to give less when you make the offering to the LORD to atone for your lives. Receive the atonement money from the Israelites and use it for the service of the tent of meeting. It will be a memorial for the Israelites before the LORD, making atonement for your lives."

but we only hear God commanding Moses to take a census twice, not every year (Num 1:1-2 and Num 26:1-2). And then there's silence until around 800BC, when 2 Chronicles 24 mentions an annual levy for the temple which they connect back to Moses. Then once more, 400BC-ish, there's talk of a command for an annual levy in Neh 10:32-3 - but for a different amount.

In Jesus' day, some Jewish groups questioned whether this temple tax was really legit: one group, the Pharisees pushed it, another group, the Sadducees thought giving towards the temple should be voluntary, and yet another group, the Essenes only paid it once a lifetime, not once a year. So it makes sense a new group forming around Jesus might have their own opinion, right?

Peter's confident Jesus will pay - he doesn't even think he needs to ask - but Jesus has something to teach Peter. And us too. First, Jesus wants to teach us about privileges. Privilege can be a bit of a dirty word in our culture: something we might have, but we should feel guilty about it if we do. Jesus has something much more wonderful in mind here. And he tells us a little story to explain:

| Matthew 17:25–26 (NIV)

| "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?" "From others," Peter answered. "Then the children are exempt," Jesus said to him.

Do princes and princesses pay taxes? Well, the situation here in the UK is complex and historically knotty as you might expect: there's a sovereign grant, crown estates and duchies and the like - but it seems our princes and princesses, and even our king pay some taxes - voluntarily, to be fair.

Unfortunate for our UK royals - things just aren't what they used to be! See, Jesus' story reflects the historical norm: of course the king's children don't pay! They are where the taxes go. They're the ones *being paid*. Peter knows that - it's totally obvious: the children of the king don't pay - it's all the others that do. The children are exempt as Jesus puts it - or, more literally, they are free.

So what? Jesus isn't teaching us royal finances for the benefit of the few special blue bloods around - sorry if you *are* a royal! So what's his point? He is showing us his own privilege. The privilege of the Son of the Great King.

If you've been with us the last few weeks, one of the things our narrative has been underlining as we've worked through it is this truth about Jesus' identity: that he is The Son, The loved. The well-pleasing. The one and only. Two weeks' back we heard God the Father's repeated words stating, emphasising this unique family relationship. Mt 17:5

| Matthew 17:5 (NIV)

| "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased. Listen to him!"

Jesus point? While others pay, the children are free. A tax for the temple, for the house of God the great King, might be paid by others - but the Son is free. Jesus does not need to pay. The privilege of the Son.

And if we think about the temple this tax relates to, if we trace it through the bible, we'll find it leads directly to Jesus. Fundamentally the idea of temple is the place where God meets with humanity. If we follow the thread, we have God walking with Adam and Eve in the Garden - a proto-temple, God meeting Moses on a mountaintop - the meeting of heaven and earth, God establishing the tabernacle, that special tent where he meets with people; God designing a permanent temple in Jerusalem and filling it with his presence, where people come to meet with him.

And then, John 1:14 tells us this as he introduces who Jesus is:

John 1:14 NIV

The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

In Jesus, God is meeting with people directly, face to face. That word 'dwelling' there is literally "tabernacling" in the original language. That's an awkward word but John uses it deliberately, connecting Jesus to that tent for meeting God, the tabernacle. Jesus is the true and better temple. Jesus has pointed this out himself, earlier in Matthew: Mt 12:6

Matthew 12:6 NIV

I tell you that something greater than the temple is here.

So with that in mind, perhaps it would make sense not just for Jesus to be free from this temple tax, but even to be the one to *receive* it. Does that make sense?

But wait, there's more.. Jesus' parable wasn't just about a King's Son, one prince:

look closely. It was about the *children* of the King. Is that just a random detail, insignificant? In English and the original language here, there's only a few letters difference between children and child. Are we in danger of reading too much into things if we make something of that?

Well, as we go on through today's reading, though there's this freedom, Jesus sets out a supernatural and frankly rather bizarre way in which the tax will be paid: through the mouth of a fish. As he does that, notice in v27 it's "we" that are not to cause offence. Notice it's a *four* drachma coin that will be found for a *two* drachma tax; Jesus is explicit "give it to them for my tax *and yours*". Jesus means to include Peter as one of the children, one of the free who need not pay, just as he includes Peter in God's miraculous provision.

This is big: this freedom, the Privilege of the Son, is extended by Jesus - and through Jesus; It becomes the privilege of all God's children.

And if we pick up that idea of temple again, it actually makes sense: where now does God meet with people? Where now does our world encounter him? In his church. Not the building, the people. Through us - through you and me. As God's Holy Spirit comes to live within every true follower of Jesus, it is in us that our world meets with God. What a privilege - and responsibility for us: we are the temple, yes, when we are gathered together like we are this morning - but also when we are scattered through the week. You and I are walking talking temples, each of us a place where people meet with God. That's quite epic.

Alright. But .. so what?

Jesus doesn't dig in to the riches and significance of this privilege, this freedom in today's passage - even though it's awesome - in the true sense of the word. If you start to think about what it means, that in Jesus, we can become children of God, enjoy the freedom and the privileges which belong to that exalted identity, princes and princesses of the universe... It's absolutely huge.

And if you're not a Christian here today, see what awesome privilege is on offer to you through Jesus - what's just a step of faith away from you, what could be yours if you would only ask. What you are turning up your nose at, leaving unclaimed and ignored when you will not, or dare not, take that step of faith towards Jesus.

You could be a child of the one true King. Claim that through Jesus today. Talk to someone you came with, someone you know; talk to our host if you're online. Talk to me later. Don't just walk away from this, empty and unchanged.

What a mighty privilege - we can't really get our heads around it. But even if we only start to grasp the very edge of what it means, we will begin to correctly feel the weight of what Jesus does next: he gives it up. he lays it down. He's the Son of the King - he's free, he owes nothing to anyone. Yet he chooses to pay. Chooses to take the place of these "others" - the outsider, the stranger, the foreigner - rather than claim his privilege as a child of the King.

Why? ... "so that we may not cause offence" Mt 17:27

| Matthew 17:27 (NIV)

| "But so that we may not cause offense..."

It's a shocking thing the Son has done - so this is important. If *the* son willingly gives up his privilege so as not to cause offence, surely every Christian who shares this privilege through him should, too. In fact, Jesus *has* just given up Peter's privilege *for* Peter - "you didn't have to pay, Peter - but you're going to" - so you and I should probably be ready for Jesus to do the same for us, too!

As we start to unpack this, it's important we don't jump to conclusions too quickly. Is Jesus teaching us to *never* cause offence, *always* choose compliance with the world around us? Never rub anyone up the wrong way? That sure would make life easier - but that's definitely not what he's teaching.

We know that because Jesus deeply offended people earlier in this same gospel by his actions and words - there are plenty of times he doesn't hold back on criticism or reject others' ways. He's absolutely not that "easy-oasy, whatever goes, I'm flexible" kind of guy.

Back in chapter 15 there's a controversy over washing hands before you eat - a tradition that's really important to the religious leaders - and frankly something that just doesn't feel like a big deal to go along with in order to keep the peace: splish splash, less germs, all done.

But Jesus will absolutely not comply. Instead he lays into them so sharply the disciples are left wondering what's going on. Mt 15:12

Matthew 15:12 NIV

Then the disciples came to him and asked, "Do you know that the Pharisees were offended when they heard this?"

But of course he knew he'd offended them - he intended to. So it's not as simple as Jesus teaching us to never cause offence, always go along with others. What's different between chapter 15 and today's passage? How are you and me meant to figure out when we should go along with things, not make a fuss, and when we should have the courage to stand out and stand up against them?

Dead dude JC Ryle has an excellent way of putting it, capturing the key difference between these situations:

"We should never give up God's rights but we may sometimes safely give up our own"

In Mt 15 Jesus offends the Pharisees rather than going along with them because the Pharisees have placed their ways over God's ways - and in opposition to God's ways. To go along with them wouldn't just be giving up Jesus' freedom, it would be giving up *God's* rights. It's never *our* place to give up *the Lord's right* to obedience.

The lens to use here as we think about our freedom and rights as God's children, this incredible privilege, is the lens of love, the lens of serving others. That's how we can

begin to see the way to go. That's what guides Jesus.

In chapter 15, what, truly, would be loving those Pharisees, best serving their good? If Jesus were to honour their tradition over God's ways, he wouldn't be loving them - he'd be leading them further away from God, implicitly approving, agreeing with them that their traditions should outrank God. Jesus offends them because he loves them.

As we wrestle with this question of where to give up and where to stand up, Jesus shows us the way. There's a famous passage in Philippians chapter 2 celebrating how Jesus gives up his rights in order to serve, to seek, to save - and encouraging us to share that same attitude: Phil 2:4

Philippians 2:4 NIV

not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others.

In today's passage, what would be true service to those collecting the tax? Not to cause offence. Not sure who needs to hear this, but as Christians, we don't *always* have to cause as much offence as possible!

We should never give up God's rights - but out of love for others, looking to their interests, we may sometimes safely give up our own. Jesus doesn't need to pay but he gives up that right so there's no stumbling block in their way - because Jesus hopes they will journey towards true faith in Him.

In another passage in the bible, Paul, one of Jesus' first followers, explains this is exactly what he's doing too:

1 Corinthians 9:19 NIV

Though I am free and belong to no one, I have made myself a slave to everyone, to win as many as possible.

We have privilege as God's children. We have freedom. Yet we can lay that down, give that up, for the sake of others. We can do that to serve those who don't know Jesus yet, that we might win more of them to everlasting life as a child of God. So, practically, how might you and I live this out?

Probably not through voluntary submission to Jewish food laws or tax traditions, like Paul or Jesus. But still we live among different cultures, groups and even individuals who have their own patterns and rules. And though we're free from them as children of the great King, we can lay that down for the good of others.

For example, I'm pretty keen on meat. As a Christian, I'm free to eat meat - Jesus has declared all foods clean. But when I go to dinner with vegetarian friends, I can lay down that freedom so as not to cause needless offence. No bacon in the pocket to rub under their noses. Bean casserole is just fine - its a sacrifice, but one worth making.

For some cultures, pork is off limits. Or beef. I know there are religious roots for both of those but still, when I'm exercising hospitality, I don't need to only cook them beef just to make a point. I can give up my freedom, my rights, out of love for

others.

But the further we get into this, the more complicated it becomes. Should I go to this wedding that's outside of God's design? Celebrate that declaration in opposition to His design? Would I be giving up my freedom to love others? Or would it be the opposite of loving and serving them? Would I have given up God's rights, not just mine, implying with my presence or approval that he need not be honoured as Lord?

That's really tricky. But at least if we are asking these questions, targeting service of others, we are looking in the right direction: is this me giving up my rights? or me giving up God's rights? Is this really loving service? It takes some deeper thinking. And honestly I think it's hard to find a clear answer in many cases. I think we'll come to different conclusions from one another sometimes. We are really going to have to seek wisdom from God, remembering James 1:5

James 1:5 NIV

If any of you lacks wisdom, you should ask God, who gives generously to all without finding fault, and it will be given to you.

What we can be clear on is we are to choose to serve others rather than ourselves; to give up our privileged position just as Christ gave up his. What will truly serve them is often a thornier question.

And this tension between our freedom and not causing offence doesn't just have significance as we engage with the world out there - it's key inside God's family too. As a church, we try and practice what we've called "theological humility," recognising that Christians come to different conclusions on many issues even when reading and treasuring the same Bible. We ask one another to keep secondary issues secondary for the sake of the gospel, not to insist everyone share our own understanding, trying not to be stumbling blocks for one another.

We do this because the bible teaches us to - In the book of Romans, chapter 14. It explains how Christians should conduct ourselves around "disputable matters" where we don't agree with one another, calling for the same attitude Jesus displays in today's passage: laying down our rights, our freedoms, to seek another's good. It teaches us not to look down on those who understand differently from us, not to judge them or treat them with contempt, but instead to work for peace, to try and build one another up anyway, to welcome or accept one another - even as Jesus has accepted us. See the same word-picture of a stumbling block showing up again here.

Romans 14:13 NIV

Therefore let us stop passing judgment on one another. Instead, make up your mind not to put any stumbling block or obstacle in the way of a brother or sister.

Again, this is easier in theory than it is in practice - but it's another place Jesus' teaching in today's passage really does come home for us. Another place where we have to try and walk the difficult balance of being ready to give up our own rights and freedom - but not give up God's. This is tough to apply in detail and we'll need

the same wisdom from God.

But before I close, one final encouragement from today's passage: God's supernatural provision. It's a hard calling to lay down our rights, to give up our privilege for the sake of others. It's a difficult thing to know what is truly serving others with love.

But as Jesus calls us into this, we also see God provides what we'll need for it. Here, the tax money. Very practical, simple material, just provided in an extraordinary way. For you, for me, often what we need is more wisdom - is this love? or that? But probably if we're honest, more often still what we really need is grace and love for others beyond what we find it in our own hearts.

God can and will do the same miracle of provision for us, he can give us this gift, this power to extend grace to others, to have and act out real love for them, through His Spirit, alive within us. We can and should ask for it. We can and should depend on it.

So here we land: a short passage - but a lot to think about. A real challenge for us to see Jesus in his perfect wisdom and love able to navigate each situation perfectly, knowing when to cause others to stumble for the honour of God, and when to *avoid* doing that out of love for them.

We need God's help to live this out - so let's ask him for that together now as we pray.