

Week of July 18, 2021

Matthew 17:24 - 18:9

²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, the people who collected the half-shekel temple tax came to Peter and said, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" ²⁵ "Yes," he said. But when they came into the house, Jesus spoke to Peter first. "What do you think, Simon? From whom do earthly kings collect taxes, from their children or from strangers?" ²⁶ "From strangers," he said. Jesus said to him, "Then the children don't have to pay." ²⁷ But just so we don't offend them, go to the lake, throw out a fishing line and hook, and take the first fish you catch. When you open its mouth, you will find a shekel coin. Take it and pay the tax for both of us."

^{18:1} At that time the disciples came to Jesus and asked, "Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?" ² Then he called a little child over to sit among the disciples, ³ and said, "I assure you that if you don't turn your lives around and become like this little child, you will definitely not enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Those who humble themselves like this little child will be the greatest in the kingdom of heaven. ⁵ Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me. ⁶ As for whoever causes these little ones who believe in me to trip and fall into sin, it would be better for them to have a huge stone hung around their necks and be drowned in the bottom of the lake. ⁷ How terrible it is for the world because of the things that cause people to trip and fall into sin! Such things have to happen, but how terrible it is for the person who causes those things to happen! ⁸ If your hand or your foot causes you to fall into sin, chop it off and throw it away. It's better to enter into life crippled or lame than to be thrown into the eternal fire with two hands or two feet. ⁹ If your eye causes you to fall into sin, tear it out and throw it away. It's better to enter into life with one eye than to be cast into a burning hell with two eyes."

Of Taxes and Being Great

Taxes are never a pleasant issue to discuss, but the tax Jesus speaks of in Matthew 17 isn't a tax like you or I pay to the state and federal government. The Temple Tax was a fee all Jewish people paid to the Temple in Jerusalem for its upkeep (sort of like offerings you might make to the church). Jews from all over the world would pay it annually, with huge convoys taking the money into Jerusalem each year. On the one hand, this was a deeply held tradition, dating back all the way to Exodus, which commanded an offering of half a shekel. But on the other hand, the Temple leaders were not using the money justly, so it had become yet another corrupt system whose continuation was antithetical to God's intent. In paying the tax, but using money found in the mouth of a fish, Jesus found a middle ground where he appeased the temple rulers but didn't use his own money to fund something he didn't approve of. Jesus already knew he was going to confront the injustice of the religious elite, so this wasn't the time for action. But the disciple's next question to Jesus gives us instruction for how we can deal with similar situations.

Every competitive soul thinks about it - who is the greatest? Jesus' answer isn't what we expect, but his answers never are. Not only are we to be like children - innocent and uncorrupted by the world - but we are also not to cause others to fall into sin. The first part is hard enough, but to add in not becoming a stumbling block for others means that it's not only our actions that matter, it's all facets of our life. If and when we are put into a similar situation as Jesus was in his temple tax conundrum, it feels like a lose/lose, no matter what happens. If we refuse to participate in an unjust system, at best we'll be criticized, at worst we'll be arrested or harmed. If we do choose to participate in that system, we're tacitly supporting the injustice of it. Jesus falls hard on the side of not participating and taking the consequences no matter how severe they are. It's not a particularly practical solution, and it's one that takes incredible amounts of courage. But more than courage, it takes a commitment to understanding God's sense of justice to know where to draw hard lines we will not pass. Our society will frequently use the language of justice and injustice to entice people to act, but they're not always in line with God's sense of justice. People are even convinced that acting in violence will be the more just way of being, and that can never be true. True greatness, a kind of greatness that is evident in how we respond to injustice,

comes from deep trust in God's promises and a commitment to live according to God's word. It's not a simple task, nor is it easily definable, but it can be discerned when our aims match God's, something scripture tells us is simple - love. If love, not for ourselves, but for others, especially the least among us, is our aim, then we are acting with righteousness. And that's the best we can do, trusting that Christ has paved the way despite our faults.

Loving God - you are the way. By your love you created the world and all that is in it. Out of deep love you continually offer forgiveness to your children. And through love Jesus died on our behalf. May we trust in your love and commit ourselves to living it, and through our living it, be creators of justice. Amen.