

*When they had come to Capernaum, those who collected the drachma coins came to Peter, and said, "Doesn't your teacher pay the drachma?" He said, "Yes." When he came into the house, Jesus anticipated him, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth receive toll or tribute? From their children, or from strangers?" Peter said to him, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Therefore the children are exempt. But, lest we cause them to stumble, go to the sea, cast a hook, and take up the first fish that comes up. When you have opened its mouth, you will find a stater coin. Take that, and give it to them for me and you." (WEB)*

There are lots of claims in this world. Insurance claims and mining claims and claims to fame and fraudulent claims and legal claims and even outrageous claims.

You know it seems like every time a rich person dies, the crazies come out of the woodwork. They claim to be illegitimate children or cousins—but these days you can test that with genetics. The claim may be that the dead person made a promise to them—and they make a claim on the estate. Years ago, when Howard Hughes died, there was a man who claimed that he had found Mr Hughes in the desert and helped him. Seems, according to his testimony, that he was promised some of the estate.

Years ago, there were traveling preachers who claimed to be faith-healers—and yet they were really frauds who “salted” the congregations with their employees. These plants wore braces and used crutches and hobbled down to the front to be “healed.” When the “faith-healer touched them or sometimes smacked them on the forehead—they would shed their braces and crutches and dance and shout down the aisle. Of course they took up offerings and made their living by fleecing the flock. They seldom stayed in one place for long for fear of being found out.

About that same time, there were salesmen who sold “patent medicines” by setting up a medicine show and entertaining the people—then offering their medicines for sale. These medicines would grow hair and remove hair. They would strengthen the eyes so that you wouldn't need glasses any more. They would repair the liver—which is really funny if you remember that the medicines were mostly alcohol with some herbs for coloring and smell. They would improve your hearing and cure athletes foot. Those medicines would remove warts—cure headaches—and freshen the breath.

These folk used the same kind of planted employees who would pretend to be healed by the medicine. Of course there was no healing to be had. In realty they damaged livers, caused headaches, caused the eyes to see double, and grew hair on your tongue—well maybe not that last part. These days, medicine companies can't make claims that they can't substantiate.

In the passage we read a while ago, Jesus makes a claim—though it is a subtle one. The difference between him and the other claims I talked about is that he was able to prove his claim.

There are several important teachings in these four verses and the only way I know how to deal with them is just wade right in and go verse by verse.

Then at the end, I will point out some specific truths that we will find.

In verse 24 we see that Jesus and the disciples have returned to Capernaum after having been absent for a significant amount of time.

I say this because it was way past the time to pay the tax—they were about six months late. Since there were no exemptions, Jesus would have HAD to pay the tax in the past so we can reasonably assume that he was late from being away from home.

The temple tax had its roots in the atonement money taken up by Moses. This “sin tax” was used in service of the tabernacle of God. Later, Joash collected it for temple repairs. In the time of Nehemiah there was an annual collection for the service of the temple and that continued until Jesus' time. Every adult male was expected to pay this tax. Each man paid the tax in his own city or town and the money went to Jerusalem.

In Matthew 4:13 we are told that Jesus had taken Capernaum as his home and it seems that Peter's house may have been there—if so, that familiarity may have been why the collectors contacted him instead of Jesus or another disciple. The Jewish Mishnah, or oral law, laid out the method of collecting—and it was a “mild asking” just as this collector did—there was no law, it was a custom to pay. They may have also asked Peter because they didn't want Jesus to make a scene. By this time, it was probably well known that he didn't always play by the rules. One last thing—the half-shekel was no longer coined so it was customary for two men to go together and pay one shekel.

Peter didn't hesitate. He told them that Jesus did, indeed, pay the tax and I take that to mean that he had seen Jesus pay before and that it was Jesus' custom to pay the tax. Peter was the kind of person who would speak for someone else, but in this case he may have been a bit embarrassed. Given the lateness, the collector may have been insinuating that Peter and Jesus were not Good Jews. Suggesting such a thing was quite an insult. You might be a poor excuse for a man or a father or a farmer, but you always wanted to be seen as a good Jew.

It seems that Jesus was staying at Peter's house—because when Peter got home, Jesus brought up the subject. I believe the King James version of the Bible says that Jesus “prevented” him—and I suppose that means he anticipated the question and spoke before Peter could bring it up.

Being Jesus, he spoke in a riddle or parable of sorts. He started by asking what Peter thought—here are two friends just talking about religious requirements. Peter was going to bring it up but Jesus asked first. “Simon, what do you think...” I was thinking earlier that this may have been a question Peter seldom heard—that he was the kind of person you never need to ask—because he would have already told you.

Anyway, the question had an obvious answer. “Who pays taxes to the king, his family or his subjects?” And Peter's reply shows that he at least had a grasp of the obvious, “His subjects pay the tax.”

“Then the children are free...”

This passage is a wonderful example of understatement and implication. Jesus made the point using earthly kings as an example. Although he left Peter and us to make the connection, it seems to me it is a strong statement—a strong claim, if you will.

It seems to me that Jesus was claiming that he and Peter were exempt from paying the tax that supports the temple because they are children of the king.

Let me put it another way: “Kings do not tax their children and since I am a son of the king, I do not owe this tax.” Further, by including Peter in the equation he implies that as one of his followers, Peter is also a child of the king and exempt from the tax.

This important to me because I believe that you and I can also apply this to ourselves. We are part of the royal family and have privileges based on that relationship. We are children of the king!

I've always heard that it isn't what you know but who you know—and I always thought that wasn't very fair. You ought to stand on your own merit. But since I am also a realistic person, I recognize that you sometimes have to play by the unwritten rules even if you don't like them. When I got out of the Air Force, I found a job I wanted with state government. I had an interview and it seemed to go well, but in a world all wound up in politics, I didn't want to leave anything undone.

My dad worked for the same agency and I asked him to put in a word. I called two or three others and asked them to do the same. One of those owed a big favor to my grandpa—who had died a few years before—so in a sense I called in grandpa's favors because I wanted that job. I got the job, but I never did know if I got it for myself or because of who I knew.

If you are a Christian, the rules are different for you. The law is still the law—but the penalty of the law is no the same. You and I still sin and fall short of the glory of God but as children of the king, we don't have to pay the whole price. In the figurative sense, we don't owe the temple tax anymore. We don't owe the sin-tax. Of course we are told in Scripture that the “tax” on sin is death—but as children of the king, we don't owe it any longer.

“But so that they don't stumble...” So here the son of the king says that even though he doesn't owe it, he will pay. He has the right to refuse but he will not. He doesn't want to create the impression that he despises the temple or temple worship. During his lifetime, he showed he was more than willing to go up against the money changers and to challenge the rules of the Sabbath. HE was more than willing to challenge traditions right and left—but here he decides to pay. I've thought a lot about this and I finally decided that maybe it is because this tax has to do directly with the temple and with God. Maybe he didn't want anything to imply he didn't respect either of them.

So Jesus told Peter to take a hook and go catch a fish. Not a net, a fisher's hook. Unless I'm mistaken, this is the only place in Scripture where we find a hook being used to catch fish.

“Go get a hook and drop a line in the water and when you catch that first fish—look in his mouth and you will find a coin that will pay the temple tax for you and me.”

So here are some of those important teachings I talked about:

The first one is the claim implied by Jesus—he implied that he was the son of the king and implied that Peter was also a son of the king.

They were not obligated to pay the tax—they knew the right person if you will. He made a claim and in a real sense he proved that claim. Not by having someone throw down their crutches and dance a jig. Not by genetic testing. By his nature and his abilities.

If you remember, he asked Peter that original question before he spoke—he knew what was going to be asked. He had the nature of the king.

Last week we talked about Jesus having the essential elements of God and here we see the omniscience of God in Jesus. By knowing what Peter wanted, he was showing his nature.

Then also, he showed his God-ness through the implied miracle of the coin in the fish's mouth. I say implied because we are not given a fishing report. I assume that Peter did as Jesus told him and I assume that there was a fish and I assume that there was a coin in its mouth. Given all of those facts, we again see Jesus showing his God-ness—by controlling nature as only God can. Just like the Father, Jesus was all-powerful. He showed this over and over. Like when he calmed the sea and when he fed the multitudes with just a few fish and some bread.

Another thing I find interesting in this passage is the contrast between the earthly station of Jesus of Nazareth and the power and glory of Jesus as the Christ, the Son of God.

Like many of the people of his time, Jesus was so poor that he couldn't afford the thirty-five cent temple tax. This is the social position he occupied. Being the Son of God, he had the power to do whatever he chose to do—what he wished. Last week we read that all of creation was made by him and through him—that nothing was made apart from him. So, as low as his status was here—a coin in a fish's mouth was nothing to him.

Notice though that when he walked on this earth, he used his power in service of others. He healed others. He fed others. He calmed the sea for others. He made wine for others. When he was on the cross, they taunted, "He saved others, why can't he save himself?" Of course, we understand that he chose NOT to save himself. He had no selfishness, even at the end.

Also, note that he used that power to pay the temple tax—in order not to offend others. Along that line, the next to the last teaching we find here is that we are to do whatever is in our power to keep from offending—just as Jesus did here. I know, I know—Jesus offended the Pharisees over and over but he was making a specific point and teaching what was right.

The last thing we find in this passage is the most important to me personally. When Jesus implied that Peter was a son of the king—and exempt from the temple tax—he was also implying that we are children of the king. Sometimes I get all wound up in life and all involved and I forget that I AM a child of the king. I don't owe the temple tax and I don't owe the sin tax. As the song says, "Jesus paid it all." Just as he did for Peter, he did for you and me.

Christians, I challenge us today to live like children of the king—recognizing how special and wonderful that is and how important we are in the eyes of God—BUT—also remembering the responsibility that carries into every part of our lives and relationships.

If you haven't come to that place of fellowship with God through Christ, I'd love to talk with you about that. There are many benefits of knowing someone important—but there are many more benefits to being a part of the royal family!