

## TRIBUTE MONEY AND A FISHING TRIP

### Matthew 17:24-27

**Introduction:** Not too many people go fishing for reasons other than to enjoy the outdoors and attempt to outsmart the fish and try and get them into a frying pan. The Bible does not always present things in a fashion that modern man thinks and acts. This is especially true with the Lord Jesus Christ. As you follow His footsteps through the Gospels you find that He constantly had a purpose in mind and that was to demonstrate who He was and how He could impact other people's lives. That is a far cry from the "Me Generation" we are surrounded by. That is those who take "selfie pictures" and then display the folly on a thing called "Facebook" so the whole world can know where their focus is – on themselves. Jesus never focused on His needs but those of others. He did focus on demonstrating who He was and what His purpose on the earth was/is.

The narrative we are looking at today is one that we seldom use as a text for a sermon although there are some principles here that we should pay attention to. Several years ago, in the late 1900's (1998 to be exact), there was a pastor who sold the ministry of his church in Indianapolis to what he called "civil disobedience." He concluded that the church was not to serve "mammon" and therefore were exempt from the laws of the government. This was especially applicable (in his mind) to paying social security and income tax for his school teachers and other employees of the church. The "infamous" Internal Revenue Service (IRS) came down on the church and eventually took all the property of the church, to cover a \$6 million tax debt, and pay for the income tax and social security that was illegally withheld from the government. The pastor held that the "church was governed only by God's law and thus not subject to any form of taxation." The law says that "registered churches with 501c3 status" are exempt from certain taxes but not from paying social security and income tax for employees. The government did not see it the way they did. Thus the government won the battle.

Now, the question for believers is, "Do we pay taxes or do we not pay taxes?" It is interesting because the Bible does address this subject. We need to remember what the New Testament says about our responsibility to the government. **1 Peter 2:13-15 (KJV)** <sup>13</sup> [Submit yourselves to every ordinance of man for the Lord's sake: whether it be to the king, as supreme;](#) <sup>14</sup> [Or unto governors, as unto them that are sent by him for the punishment of evildoers, and for the praise of them that do well.](#) <sup>15</sup> [For so is the will of God, that with well doing ye may put to silence the ignorance of foolish men.](#) This verse tells us what we are to do in respect to the government. We are to obey the laws of the land. When it becomes a law we are to be subservient to it. That means we are to obey things like traffic laws. According to one source we have statutes, regulations and common law or case law. This final category is laws that have been passed by Congress either federal or state that govern the welfare of the people and land. The tax law we are currently under says that every citizen

(and business) are subject to the laws that govern taxes. We need to address why the government needs taxes. They provide police protection, garbage collection, utility services, schools, and we could go on. I think you get the idea. The purpose of this message is not to discuss laws but the responsibility of the Christian to obey laws such as tax laws. This is the subject of our text.

**1. THE TAX MAN COMETH, Matthew 17:24.** Notice that when Jesus and the disciples came to Capernaum (the city of Nahum) the tax man came to Peter and asked him if his 'master' paid tribute (or taxes). Notice the quick reply by Peter in **verse 25a** "He saith, Yes." It did not take Peter long to answer the question so evidently this had been something that Peter had observed although the narrative suggests that they had not discussed the matter before. The reason I say that is because Jesus says to Peter, "What thinkest thou, Simon? Of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? Of their own children or of strangers?" (Matthew 17:25). We will discuss this in the next point of my sermon. All I want you to see now is that the question comes up with Peter and it comes immediately after "they that received tribute money came to Peter." It is obvious that Jesus knew what Peter had encountered before entering the house. There is a strong possibility that Peter was intending to ask Jesus about the tax but Jesus got the question first. It is amazing how the Gospels demonstrate Jesus' ability to know what one was thinking or knew about a person having never met them. Look at **John 1:47-48 (KJV)** <sup>47</sup> Jesus saw Nathanael coming to him, and saith of him, Behold an Israelite indeed, in whom is no guile! <sup>48</sup> Nathanael saith unto him, Whence knowest thou me? Jesus answered and said unto him, Before that Philip called thee, when thou wast under the fig tree, I saw thee. **John 2:25 (KJV)** And needed not that any should testify of man: for he knew what was in man. **John 21:17 (KJV)** He saith unto him the third time, Simon, son of Jonas, lovest thou me? Peter was grieved because he said unto him the third time, Lovest thou me? And he said unto him, **Lord, thou knowest all things;** thou knowest that I love thee. Jesus saith unto him, Feed my sheep. Look at **Psalms 139**. Jesus is God and God is what theologians call "omniscient" which means "know all things." This along with "omnipotent" = all powerful and "omnipresent" = everywhere at all times. This is another verification that Jesus is God in the flesh.

You and I need to answer this question ourselves. Do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? The answer for us in the United States is a resounding yes. Now to answer the question that is also posed. Do they take it "...of their own children or strangers?" The answer Peter gives is "Of strangers" (**verse 25**). There is much evidence that the Roman government required of the Jews a "tribute" (or tax) to maintain the Roman army which occupied Judea and the surrounding area. There was also a tribute money that was required of the Jews for the maintenance of the Temple (sometimes called the "Temple Tax"). If you read the Old Testament you find that the tax on the Jews could become rather expensive. Regardless there was a tax required of the citizens of Canaan which made up the land of the Jews. The

matter of tax was one that could have been fostered by the Romans to try and catch Jesus and his disciples in order to accuse them to the Roman government. It is to be noted that during the trial of Jesus before Pilate. Note **Luke 23:2 (KJV)** *And they began to accuse him, saying, We found this fellow perverting the nation, and forbidding to give tribute to Caesar, saying that he himself is Christ a King.* Of course according to our text in **Matthew** this is an unfounded accusation. The point is that the matter of taxation was a hot topic in the days of Jesus.

You and I today need to ask ourselves the question about the matter of paying taxes. What is our responsibility? Do we have to pay taxes? Yes! There is a lot of people who do not pay taxes and think that it is their God given right to not pay them. The law says we are to pay taxes. The Bible says we are to follow the law of the government. Now how do you answer that? I remember when I first moved to Louisiana, one of the members of the church told me that if I did not file a Louisiana State Income Tax form then they would never know I lived in Louisiana and would not have to pay the State Income Tax. Do you know what I did? I filed a State Income Tax form and paid my State Taxes. Do you think it is honest to avoid paying taxes on our income whether it is State or Federal taxes? The last time I checked the Bible says that the believer is to tell the truth about all things. That includes our income tax form and reporting our income.

- 2. THE THINKING MAN'S QUESTION, Matthew 17:25.** The Lord poses a question to Peter. *"...of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? Of their own children or strangers?"* Now we need to explain the difference between a "stranger" and "their own children." The suggestion from the question is that a king of the earth would take taxes from everyone except his own children. Peter did not have to think on this answer. It was a logical conclusion that the kings of the earth would tax everyone outside his own household and in the modern sense those he desires to exempt from the law. Jesus is wanting to get Peter to think about the obligation they have to paying taxes. Someone of the "tax collectors" wanted to know the answer of whether Jesus and His disciples paid taxes. The implications here are that Jesus, as the Son of God, was actually exempt from paying the Temple tax. That is why Jesus uses the "king of the earth" as an illustration. Peter's answer that the kings of the earth collect taxes from "strangers" gives credence to what Jesus is trying to teach Peter and the other disciples. Jesus as the Son of God was exempt from paying the tax yet there was a higher motivation in paying the tax. This is found in our next point.
- 3. THE TRIP OF A LIFETIME, Matthew 17:26-27.** Jesus points out in **verse 26** that the *"children are free."* As we have said Jesus is exempt from the taxes. That is a statement of His deity. Yet Jesus is making another point. Look at the first part of **verse 27**, *"Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them..."* The point is that Jesus is teaching His disciples an important

biblical principle. The child of God should do all they can to keep from being an offense. **Proverbs 18:19 (KJV)** *A brother offended is harder to be won than a strong city: and their contentions are like the bars of a castle.* This is something we need to learn. We should be like the Lord Jesus Christ and do all we can to keep from offending others. Jesus and Peter have just encountered the people of the Temple. There are always Pharisees and scribes watching the proceedings of the activities of Jesus and the twelve. Jesus did not want to offend them. They would probably not be won if they found fault with the activities of Jesus. They usually found many faults, but Jesus is talking about something that could be controlled by Him. There are things that some will take as an offense but we should do all we can to avoid causing an offense. The Apostle Paul was careful about offending people. Note **Acts 24:16 (KJV)** *And herein do I exercise myself, to have always a conscience void of offence toward God, and toward men.* He told the people at Corinth in **1 Corinthians 10:32 (KJV)** *Give none offence, neither to the Jews, nor to the Gentiles, nor to the church of God.* In another place he told them **2 Corinthians 6:3 (KJV)** *Giving no offence in any thing, that the ministry be not blamed.* We should want to live a life that is void of offending anyone.

Now Jesus sends Peter on a fishing trip.

Professional fishermen do not go fishing to find money in the mouth of the fish although professional fishermen are being paid to fish. This incident is different because it is one of the miracles Jesus performed. He wanted to help Peter on two fronts. **One**, he wanted Peter to know that paying taxes was something he wanted to participate in and be one who followed the laws of the government. **Second**, he wanted Peter to know that there are some miraculous events that help us in time of need. Now, there is another lesson to be learned here and that is that a working person should have no difficulty in paying their taxes. A job has a lot of benefits and one of them is it enables us to obey the law and pay our taxes. Jesus did not leave any room for cheating here. Jesus taught Peter (and the other disciples) that an occupation is a benefit. It does several things. It helps feed and clothe the family, it makes a person's worth go up, and it enables one to take care of their obligations. The government is for our benefit. Taxes help provide the services we need such as police protection and other things that make our life a bit more satisfying.