

September 3, 2023 Sermon Manuscript

Matthew 17:24-27 (NIV)

²⁴ 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?”

²⁵ “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?”

²⁶ “From others,” Peter answered.

“Then the children are exempt,” Jesus said to him. ²⁷ “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.”

Giving to God from Love, Not Compulsion

Well, if it wasn’t clear from our scripture readings, this morning I’m gonna preach about *money as it relates to giving*. Although, I will confess that preaching about money is never very comfortable for me; and perhaps the notion of listening to a sermon about money isn’t too comfortable for you, either. Perhaps it’s because society today trains us to be rather private about money, and this tends to carry over even into the Church.

But also, I’m confident that many of you may have heard sermons about money & giving to the Church in the past that were unhelpful or even harmful, whether you’ve intuited that the preacher was using the pulpit to money grab, or perhaps you’ve heard sermons where the preacher has taught that this 10% tithe is a compulsory obligation that we must fulfill 1) to be a faithful Christian, 2) to *prove* we are trusting God as our provider, or 3) to stay in God’s good graces. Well, I can go ahead and tell you: that is not an idea I intend to promote today, though I’ll need to talk a *few* minutes longer than usual today in order to get this right.

Now, I don’t want to give the impression that the way we steward our money doesn’t matter to God, because it does. But this morning I want to share **good news** about financial giving, by proclaiming that the amount we give to the Church has **NO** impact on God’s heart toward us or our standing with Him. While local churches (like our own) rely entirely on parishioner giving for their survival, and giving can be spiritual beneficial in many ways, God invites us to give **VOLUNTARILY** out of love for Him and others, while He trains us to trust in His provision for what we need. #

This morning’s gospel passage ends up describing one of Jesus’ stranger miracles, and one that only appears in Matthew’s gospel. If it were up to the lectionary, we wouldn’t even spend a Sunday looking at it, as it has us skip right on to chapter 18. But what Jesus is up to in this passage is actually very relevant and important for how we imagine living faithfully before God today in 2023.

The passage opens with the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, ‘Doesn’t your teacher pay the temple tax?’” Jesus and his disciples had just arrived in Capernaum, which was Jesus’ home base as an adult, and so it is where He would be expected to pay this tax.

However, this temple tax was something entirely different from the government taxes that were collected by notorious and hated tax collectors on behalf of Rome. The temple tax was a religious offering that was expected to be paid once a year by every Jewish male 20 years of age or older, which paid for the religious services held at the temple and the upkeep of the temple itself. But, as we saw in our first lesson this morning, this custom had been commanded by the Lord all the way back in Exodus 30.¹ There, God commands that every male twenty and up will pay a half shekel every year - a half

¹ Exodus 30:11-16 (NIV)

shekel was the same as two drachmas - and this money would support the ministry of what at that time was the tabernacle, but later became the temple.²

Now, what's interesting is that you hear a lot about the tithe - giving ten percent of what you have to the Lord - but in the Old Testament God only commanded that produce and animals from the land be tithed. So while every male paid the temple tax, the ones who were meant to pay the tithe were only the landowners.³ Even into Jesus' day, the laborers like artisans, fishermen, and tradesmen - those who labored and worked the land - did not pay tithes on their income - all that was expected from them was the annual - two drachma or half shekel - temple tax, which amounted to about a day and a half's wage.⁴ And the poor were not expected to pay (10%) tithes on anything.⁵ Funny we don't hear *that* in a lot of sermons about money, do we? #

So that's the background of this question posed to Peter in verse 24. The temple tax collectors ask Peter if Jesus pays the temple tax. And we have to understand that for someone like Peter, paying the temple tax was just assumed for all males over twenty.⁶ So Peter replies to the collectors, "yes, of course (Jesus pays the tax)."

But when Peter and Jesus are together in the house, Jesus has something new to teach him. Jesus asks, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?" And the point Jesus is making is that earthly kings don't tax their own families, but only their subjects. So when Peter correctly answers "From others," Jesus concludes, "Then the children are exempt." Now, what does this mean? Well, Jesus is explaining to Peter why he, as the Son of God, is actually not obligated to pay the temple tax: because it is the temple of His own father!

But that's not all! The implication of Jesus' statement is not only that *He* is exempt, but that all of the *children* of God are exempt. Now, remember that throughout the New Testament, including in Galatians 3⁷ read today, we are taught that through faith in Christ we have been adopted into the family of God as God's *children*.

So the implication is that, for those who are in Christ, giving financially in support of the religious services of what is today the Church is no longer compulsory. And this begins to make a lot more sense

¹¹ Then the Lord said to Moses, ¹² "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. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ All who cross over, those twenty years old or more, are to give an offering to the Lord. ¹⁵ 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. ¹⁶ 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."

² Centuries later, when Israel eventually constructed a temple under king Solomon, this annual half shekel payment became known as the "temple tax" to support the temple sacrifices in Jerusalem.

³ To be fair and clear, every male Israelite was a landowner in the period following the conquest. And there were other laws that God instituted that kept it that way (kept land in families), such as Jubilee, etc. Therefore things were quite equitable, and so the tithe was not a hardship. But at least by the time of monarchy that equanimity goes away, rental and sale of property becomes common. Therefore, the tithe originally assumed a level of equity that by Jesus' day Jewish society no longer guaranteed at all. Thus, only the landowners were paying tithe. When we translate this to our capitalist system (where those with capital are severely advantaged over those without), the spirit of what God laid out should reflect Jesus' day (rather than the post-conquest era), where lower class people are not made to feel they must tithe.

⁴ Two Drachmas = half Shekel = approx three Denarii

⁵ David Croteau, *You Mean I Don't Have To Tithe?*

⁶ In that culture men who didn't pay it would've been universally condemned as godless and unfaithful.

⁷ Galatians 3:23-29

^{3:23} Before the coming of this faith, we were held in custody under the law, locked up until the faith that was to come would be revealed. ²⁴ So the law was our guardian until Christ came that we might be justified by faith. ²⁵ Now that this faith has come, we are no longer under a guardian.

²⁶ So in Christ Jesus you are all children of God through faith, ²⁷ for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. ²⁸ There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. ²⁹ If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise...

But also in Ephesians 1 Paul writes, "In love (God) predestined us for adoption to himself as sons through Jesus Christ" (vv. 4-5); in Romans 8 Paul says, "For all who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God" (v. 14); and Jesus himself confirms this, in John chapter 20, when he tells his disciples, "I am ascending to my Father and your Father, to my God and your God" (v. 17).

when we look back at the Exodus passage and notice that God had called this - two drachma or half shekel tax God had instituted - He'd called it "atonement money". In verse 16 God says, "16 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." Atonement refers what reconciles us to God for our sins. God required this annual offering from his people for the forgiveness of their sins! So in Judaism, paying the temple tax was part of receiving God's forgiveness. But in Jesus all of this changed because for those who place their trust in Jesus, forgiveness comes only through him!⁸ #

Well, I think this is really important for us to hear today, because I'm gonna bet that quite a few of us - even if we don't *think* our standing with God is based on how much we give - a lot of us may *feel* like what we give or don't give could impact how God feels toward us. But the good news is that the amount we give to the Church has NO impact on God's heart toward us or our standing with Him. While local churches (like our own) rely entirely on parishioner giving for their survival, and giving can be spiritual beneficial in many ways, God invites us to give VOLUNTARILY out of love for Him and others, while He trains us to trust in His provision for what we need.

So Jesus is not under obligation from God to pay this temple tax, and as a follower of Jesus, neither is Peter. AND YET, as our Matthew passage continues, we see that Jesus ends up paying the temple tax voluntarily - and miraculously - for both himself & Peter! After telling Peter that they're exempt from the temple tax, Jesus tells Peter in verse 27, "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." What Jesus is saying is that even though He & Peter are no obliged to pay the temple tax, He's going to do it anyway - and miraculously, no less - and the reason is for love. You see, because the Jews in those days had no clue He was the son of God or about what He'd just taught Peter, Jesus doesn't want to create a stumbling block to them believing in Him if they hear He doesn't even pay what all males 20 and up were expected to. So, after ruling out compulsory giving for those who are in Christ, Jesus provides a new motivation for giving: and that motivation is love.

And in **our** context today, giving to the Church is a way we can show love to God and our neighbor. Practically speaking, every local Church has to have money to run. In fact, this very church had to shutter for a few years for lack of funds during the Great Depression. Therefore, even though the giving of Church offerings has *no bearing* on God's heart toward us or our standing with Him, giving is an opportunity to love God and others. If we believe that everything we have is a gift from God, then one way we can show love and give thanks is by giving a portion of it back. And if we believe the local Church is God's primary instrument for making disciples, then we are loving others when we support its ministry.

However, I would be remiss if I didn't insist that giving financially to the Church is not always loving; indeed, there can be instances where giving to the Church is an unloving way to steward the funds we have, and so pastorally I would discourage it. For example, one situation where it is *not* loving to give to the Church is when a married person wants to give but their spouse is not on board with it, with giving money that is under both of their authority. This might happen when one person in a marriage is a believer and the other is not, or if they're both believers but just in different places regarding what amount they believe is best. In such situations, there is risk of the one who wants to give causing the one who

⁸ What's fascinating is that in the New Testament we see the same language used in that Exodus passage in reference to the tithe being used in reference to Christ. In Matthew 20 Jesus himself will say that He came "to give his life as a ransom for many" (v. 28). 1 John says, "It is he who is the atoning sacrifice for our sins, and not for ours only, but also for the whole world's" (2:2). Both instances use that same language that was used in Exodus 30 for the temple tax, but now in reference to Jesus, because now God's acceptance of us is no longer determined by religious giving, but solely by what Jesus did for us on the cross!

doesn't or who wants to give less to take offense against the church or against Christ.⁹ So that's one instance where pastorally I would discourage giving.

But even more important, another situation where giving to the Church is not the most loving decision is when giving to the Church would be *at the expense of their needs or the needs of those under their care*. This is one reason I'm especially down on the teaching that the tithe is universally compulsory: giving 10% is going to impact one who has very little a lot more than one who has plenty or a lot - which again is why even in the Old Testament God only instituted the tithe for landowners and not those who just worked the land or the poor; this created a much more equitable society. So when the church teaches that giving is universally compulsory - or that the 10% tithe is - I believe it is spiritually abusive and harmful to many. And I know one story that is often used in support of it is that of the widow's mite from Mark 12 and Luke 21, where Jesus sees the disciples put in the only two copper coins she has.¹⁰ But while many commonly interpret this passage as an example of this woman's great faith; they miss the way Jesus is critiquing the temple leadership for being more focused on filling their coffers than caring for their poor.¹¹

So, in regard to deciding how much to give, one needs to weigh the top priority of their own needs and those under their care, and then consider how much is best and loving to give to the Church or those less fortunate from what is left over. And here at St Matthias, we try to explain what the financial needs of the Church are each year at our stewardship drive, which will be later in the fall. And, certainly if no one gave significantly, the Church could get into financial trouble pretty fast. This parish has always given generously and been responsive toward needs that have arisen. But the decision of whether to give and how much to give is a voluntary one based on love for God and others.¹² And if one wants to commit to the tithe - to giving 10% - this is a voluntary decision. For Amanda and I, we choose to tithe,¹³ but we also have a stable income, and 90 percent of it is able to fully meet our needs and the needs of those under our care. So we're in a situation where we believe that fulfilling a 10% tithe to the Church is the most loving decision.

The good news is that the amount we give to the Church has NO impact on God's heart toward us or our standing with Him. While local churches (like our own) rely entirely on parishioner giving for their survival, and giving can be spiritual beneficial in many ways, God invites us to give VOLUNTARILY out of love for Him and others, while He trains us to trust in His provision for what we need. #

Well, the last element I want to highlight *from today's passage* is how Jesus goes about paying the temple tax: through the miracle of a coin in a fish's mouth, a fish which Peter catches at Jesus' instruction. What this points to is how God intends to be our provider. Everything we have is a gift from God, and elsewhere Jesus teaches us to seek His kingdom first and He will provide for our physical needs.¹⁴ But as you well know, God doesn't just zap our bank accounts. Instead, He has given us

⁹ And I've suggested to some in this position that they give only out of money that is solely under their authority, apart from their spouse, if there is any.

¹⁰ (Mark 12:41-44, Luke 21:1-4)

¹¹ Obery Hendricks: "When a poor widow made her own meager contribution, Jesus took this as an opportunity to publicly denounce a system that made even those who had virtually nothing feel they had to contribute their last or risk being excluded from God's blessings, a system that was so focused on filling its own coffers and enriching those who administered it that in the name of God it would even leave widows destitute: "Truly I tell you, this poor widow...out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on" (Mark 12:43-44). By denouncing the Temple for its role in the impoverishment of the widow, Jesus shows it to be guilty of one of the worst sins in the Hebrew Bible, mistreatment of the needy widow—also one of the very sins Jeremiah said would result in the Temple's destruction (Jeremiah 7:6).

¹² In the early Church and the period of the Church Fathers, the emphasis was on giving what they deem is best. But as the Church merged with the state in the fourth century, eventually the tithe of ten percent began to be taught as compulsory, and then in the Middle Ages many of these nations where the Church and state was merged - including England - the tithe got codified into law. After churches were disestablished in America (for a while a portion of taxes paid to one's state would be passed on to the Church where they were a member), many churches lacked sufficient funds. So in the 19th century and into the 20th, the stewardship movements and tithe movements impacted most denominations, such that the tithe became commonly taught as compulsory.

¹³ Although it is also done in submission to our Bishop, who believes the tithe is appropriate in most situations and expects clergy to tithe.

¹⁴ Mt 6:33

varying abilities and energy, not to mention privileges and opportunity - to in most of our cases earn a living. And so, it is likely no accident that Jesus chooses to provide this coin by having Peter fish for it, since you'll remember that fishing was Peter's trade, his skill. Peter goes and fishes, and yet God is still the miraculous provider.

So where giving to the Church is not going to be unloving to others or prevent needs from being met, there are many ways that giving can be spiritual beneficial for us. Not only can it be an opportunity to not only love God, but to learn reliance upon Him, to reject the lie of mammon that rules our world, and to experience joy. Similar to fasting, where abstaining from food gives God the opportunity to supernaturally sustain us and give us strength, giving sacrificially can provide an opportunity for us to learn a truth experientially, in this case the truth that God really is our provider in a world¹⁵ that constantly lies to us saying that it's all up to us. Like that coin in the fish's mouth, I have found the Lord has provided for my needs while I've given sacrificially - whether I was always giving for good motives or not is another story - but because I've experienced that for so long, it's not too hard for me to believe God will continue doing it in the future, come what may.

But also, similar to taking a sabbath - which reflects a belief that there is more to life than our work and that our worth is not found in our work - similar to that, giving away from our treasure is a way for us to say that life is not about money and the accrual of wealth.

And finally, giving to God is an opportunity for us to experience joy. It is quite joyful to realize that God wants to provide for our needs and that our worth is *not* in what we do or how we perform, and to believe those things deeply enough to act on them in some way. It is a joyful experience to honor God for all His goodness toward us by giving something back to Him. And finally, it is a joyful thing when we're able to give of ourselves for the benefit of others - as Jesus said, "It is better to give than receive."¹⁶

The good news is that the amount we give to the Church has NO impact on God's heart toward us or our standing with Him. While local churches (like our own) rely entirely on parishioner giving for their survival, and giving can be spiritual beneficial in many ways, God invites us to give VOLUNTARILY out of love for Him and others, while He trains us to trust in His provision for what we need.

So if you feel like you have a lot of baggage around money - maybe you carry with you an image of God who expects you to tithe at all costs or maybe you know money is a real idol for you, maybe you just feel unclear about what God would have you do and are confused about which way is up or if this sermon has brought up questions for you: come talk to me. Let's work through it a bit.

But my prayer is that with any fear of God's anger or disappointment off the table, and having no reason to fear God would lead us to anything that would harm us, that we will be able to ask Him how He is inviting us to steward what He's given us in love for Him and others, and be at peace that whatever He says is enough.

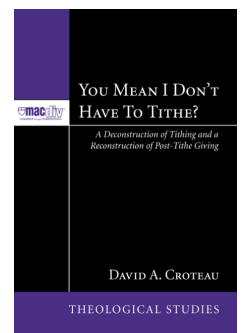
In the Name of the Father and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

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¹⁵ Ps 24:1-2

¹⁶ Acts 20:35