

# A Shekel in a Fish

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Date: 09 April 2017

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[ 0 : 00 ] Let's turn now together to the second passage we read in the Gospel of Matthew, chapter 17 and from verse 24. We're looking at these verses to the end of the chapter, verses 24 through to 27 of Matthew 17.

This is a continuation looking at the life of Simon Peter, mostly from the Gospel record that we have in the various Gospels. I'm sure those of you who are keen fishermen may have caught some surprising things in your time.

And sometimes, even especially with very large fish, those who go shark fishing, for example, find that sharks have swallowed some amazing things. I doubt if any of you will ever have landed a fish like this one, where you find a coin nicely, snugly tucked into its mouth.

But that's what happened when Peter, who of course was himself a fisherman by trade, after the Lord had directed him to do this. Just cast your hook into the sea, he says, and the first fish that comes up, when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel.

Take that and give it to them. That's to those who took the temple tax and give it to them for me and for yourself. Obviously, this is another episode in Peter's experience where he's learning more about the Lord, more about his own relationship with the Lord, and where, in looking at this passage, we can see how Peter undoubtedly would have understood something more about Christ and his relationship with Christ, as he experienced this remarkable incident with the fish.

[ 1 : 59 ] What do we make of the passage? What's it about? Why is it here? What does it convey to us? Well, the tax involved here, as we read from Exodus chapter 30, wasn't a tax that they gave to the Roman authorities.

This was a tax that God had specified long ago when the tabernacle was being set up in the days of Moses, so it was known as the temple tax. It was a tax for the sanctuary, as it's called in Exodus 30. And it was a tax involving what God himself called an atonement or a ransom for their souls. In other words, the people of Israel, by that and at other times as well, were reminded by God constantly that their lives were actually forfeit.

They had given over their lives in the way in which all of us have done in our sin against God. The fall of man, recorded for us in Genesis chapter 3, has brought us into this situation where our lives are actually forfeit and need to be redeemed, need to be bought back, need to have something done for us that will actually redeem us once again into a living relationship with God.

So you have to keep that in mind as you go through these verses, that it's this tax, this atonement money, this tax that was imposed as a reminder of a forfeit life, a life that was given away, a life through sin, that had become detached from God, was under the condemnation of God, and open to the wrath of God.

[ 3 : 42 ] And all of that comes into it, and it's from that that God redeemed us in Jesus Christ. The redemption that is in Jesus Christ, what the New Testament calls frequently redemption, which means to pay back or to buy back by the payment of a ransom, that's what Jesus did.

That's what the death of Jesus really is about. And so that tax, that atonement, that shekel that you read about here, was twice the amount of money that was required for each individual who had to give a half shekel, those who were 20 years old and upwards, as the atonement price, the atonement money that was imposed as a temple or sanctuary tax.

And what we'll see here is that as Jesus interviewed Peter with regard to this, we can see how the whole thing works towards the very final words of that passage, take that and give it to them, for me and for yourself.

And we'll see that that's really important, because Jesus is not just giving this money for himself, neither is Peter giving it for himself. The money that's being given by Peter to the temple authorities

is for himself and Jesus joined together.

And that's going to be such a crucial point for Peter to learn and experience how important it is for him to know that he is joined to Jesus, and that only by being joined to Jesus can he actually have a proper living relationship with God.

[ 5 : 24 ] So first of all, Christ paid the price of redemption. That's the first point. Christ paid the price of redemption.

Now we're not going to widen this up to look at the cross itself and the theology of redemption, as you find it in the New Testament. It's there in abundance, especially in the letters of the Apostle Paul.

Confining it really to the passage itself, when they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the half shekel tax, went to Peter and said, Does your teacher not pay the tax?

He said, Yes. And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first. In other words, he singled him out, and he put to him, What do you think, Simon, from whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax?

From their sons or from others? And when Peter said, From others, Jesus said to him, Then the sons are free. Now what does that mean?

[ 6 : 24 ] Why is he talking to Peter and asking Peter these questions? What is it really about? Well, it's about the temple tax, but then you ask the question, Whose temple is this?

To whom does the temple belong? It doesn't belong to Peter. It doesn't belong to the Jews. It doesn't belong to anyone less than God. It is his sanctuary.

It is his temple. It is he who owns that temple as a place associated with his worship and with his people. And as Jesus Christ stands here in relation to the temple, he comes to the temple as the Lord of the temple.

He comes to the Lord as the Lord of the temple and therefore as one who is, strictly speaking, exempt from paying the tax. He's the Son of God. And because he's the owner of the temple, it's not incumbent on him to pay the tax as is so for Peter and his companions and the Jewish people. You know that the Queen doesn't actually pay income tax. She's legally exempt from paying income tax. But she pays, certainly for some years now, she pays a sum equivalent to the tax she would have been taxed with had she been under the regulations for paying tax to the government.

[ 7 : 57 ] So she's exempt from paying tax, income tax, but nevertheless she pays it. And what Jesus is saying here is that because I am the owner of the temple, because I'm one of the king's, because I am the king's sons and I come to the temple as the son of the king and as the king, in fact, of the temple, I am exempt from paying its taxes.

Jesus does not need to pay a ransom or atonement money because, strictly speaking, in himself, he's not subject to that. He doesn't need to be redeemed.

He is sinless. He's the son of God. He's in this world as someone who is perfect, who remains perfect, who remained perfect all through. He doesn't need to pay that tax.

It's not something that he is required to pay because he is the son of God, because he's the owner of the temple, because he is the Lord. Therefore, he says, the sons are free.

And as the son of God, he too is free, exempt from paying this tax. And yet, he pays it. He doesn't say, I'm exempt.

[ 9 : 15 ] I'm the son of God. I am the Lord of the temple. So I'm simply not going to pay this tax. I don't need to pay it. It's got no relevance to me personally. I don't need to be redeemed.

And yet, he still pays it. And in fact, there's something quite remarkable in that when you compare it with something else in Matthew. If you cast your eye back to chapter 3 for a moment, and in chapter 3, verses 13 to 15.

Let's just read that from verse 13 to do with the baptism of Jesus. Chapter 3 at verse 13. Then Jesus came from Galilee to the Jordan to John to be baptized by him.

John would have prevented him, saying, I need to be baptized by you. And do you come to me? But Jesus answered him, Let it be so now, for thus it is fitting for us to fulfill all righteousness.

And that's saying pretty much the same thing. As John the Baptist rightly recognized, Jesus, strictly speaking, in himself, did not need to be baptized. The baptism that signifies washing from sin, what relevance does that have to Jesus in his own person?

[ 10 : 34 ] None at all. He's the sinless son of God. And John the Baptist recognized this. And when he came to be baptized, John himself actually said this as a kind of objection, because he was, of

course, concerned, why am I going to baptize this son of God?

And Jesus' answer is really telling, Let it be so now. Let it be like this. Because this is the way it becomes us to fulfill all righteousness.

In other words, Jesus is saying, while strictly speaking, you're right, John, I don't need to be baptized, but because I'm united to my people, I will do it for their sake.

And Peter is being told, because I'm united to, because Jesus is united to his people, he's going to pay this tax. In other words, Jesus enters into actions done by him and done to him that, strictly speaking, are not necessary for his own person as the sinless son of God.

But because he has chosen to unite himself with his people, he's taken their sin. He's taken their guilt. And because he's taken their guilt, he needs to place himself, needs in that sense, needs to place himself under the penalty of what their sin deserves.

[12:03] He puts himself into this world as a servant, as an obedient servant. He places himself in this world, the son of God in our nature, obedient to the will of his Father.

And every step that he takes through his life on earth, he's taking in union with his people and therefore acting for them and ultimately taking their place as he comes to the cross and his death on the cross.

So he's paying this ransom price, this atonement money, not strictly speaking because he's required himself to do it, but because he wants Peter to understand, I am acting in union with my people.

I am acting as joined to them and they with me. So what I do for them, I do it in a way that they are connected with what I'm doing.

And that, of course, follows, as we'll see later on, into his death, the death that he died on the cross. But why is that? Why does Jesus actually need to place himself in that situation where he takes our guilt, where he dies that death?

[13:15] Why couldn't God just have forgiven sin by making a pronouncement? Some people ask that question, it's a perfectly reasonable question. Why should the Son of God have to come into this world and die the death he died and suffer the sufferings he suffered?

Would God not have been able just to look over sinful mankind and with a pronouncement of his will say, I forgive you. Your sin is dealt with.

I'm forgiving it. It's taken away. I don't regard it against you anymore. Well, that would have been possible in one sense if sin was not so offensive against God.

if we wrong somebody in order to make it up to them we need to make reparation. We need to make amends for the wrong that we've done to people.

Not acceptable just to simply say something in your mind as if to say, well, that person has wronged me but I forgive them. Or even if you've done the wrong it's not right just to say in your mind, well, I need to make amends and I'm sorry I did it but I don't need to go to the person and really make amends personally to them.

[14:29] It doesn't work like that. And you carry that over into our relationship with God and the seriousness with which God regards our sin, our rebellion against himself, our casting off of his authority and of all that he gave us to begin with as described in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 1 and 2.

We need to make amends for our sin, for our rebellion against God and it is we who need to make amends. God is not going to accept an angel instead of us human beings as if that would be enough, as if that would be fitting.

Human beings sinned against him. We all fell in Adam's transgression and it's human beings that need to make amends. How are you going to do it? We're not actually qualified now to do it.

We can't do it because our sin prevents it. We can't give to God an acceptable atoning offering. We can't give to God our self in our perfect lives or in a death that will make up for our sin.

It's impossible. that's the great thing about God. He has done it for us. He has come into this world in the person of his son Jesus Christ and taken that sin to himself and taken the penalty and the punishment to himself and taken the guilt to himself and paid the price of it and made amends.

[15:58] And he's done that in union with his people. He has done this as an arrangement that God himself has made and he has come to make amends for us who could not do it ourselves.

Is it any wonder that Newton regard to grace as amazing grace? The amazing grace of God. The undeserved favor with which God comes to view us in our sin and make amends and make amends

for us through the redemption that is in Christ.

The price that he paid is an atonement price. It's the redemption price. It's the price that we could not pay because we are spiritually and morally bankrupt. And God, even though he knew that, was pleased in Jesus Christ to make amends, to pay the price of sin, to pay the price of our redemption. Before we move on, there's one thing just to look at in passing, really in relation to that as well. What do you think, Simon? He then went, as we've seen, to say, well, the sons are then free. However, not to give offense to them. And that's also very important because it could be said if Jesus had not paid the tax, if he had simply said, well, I'm exempt from it but I'll give you enough to pay for your contribution, Peter.

[ 17 : 29 ] He knew very well that people would then, the officers of the temple especially, and the Jewish people themselves then would have said, well, this man is treating the temple with utter disrespect.

He's asking us to be respectful of God and this is how he treats the temple tax. He himself just can't care, doesn't care to pay it for himself. So he can't really be anything other than indifferent to the temple.

In other words, there is an element, of course, all the time in Christ's life of a self-denial, a denial indeed of his own rights as the Son of God in order to actually make amends for his people and put himself where they are.

And indeed, that's why you find in the same passages in Matthew in chapter 16 which we looked at not so long ago. In verse 24, Jesus said, if anyone will come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.

For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. In other words, what he's saying there is you have to die to self to be a disciple of Jesus means and includes that you die to self, that you actually forgo what you might sometimes see as your own rights indeed.

[ 18 : 53 ] If you go to Peter's first letter, you'll really see if you study one of the things about studying his life as we're doing, though we're not going into it in minute detail, but hopefully enough so that we'll see when you then read the first epistle of Peter especially, you'll see how much he learned from his experiences with Jesus as they're recorded in the Gospels.

And a lot of the teaching you find in first Peter goes back to things that he experienced and was taught by Christ as one of his disciples.

And one of the things he says there in chapter 2 and verse 23 is about Jesus where he is very specifically referred to as our example that when he was reviled he did not revile in return but committed himself to him who judges righteously.

What do you do when people revile you? You don't revile them back. You do what Jesus did. You commit yourself to him to God as he did to the Father who judges righteously.

You deny yourself. You take up your cross because taking up your cross in that spiritual sense just as Jesus when he took up the cross and went to walk with that physical wooden cross as he set out to go to where he was going to be crucified.

[ 20 : 21 ] What would you say about a person carrying the cross carrying a cross in those days under the Roman authorities? You would say that person is going out to die. The cross meant nothing less.

and in the spiritual and moral sense that's what Jesus indicates by the essence of being a disciple it means when you actually take up your cross when you begin to follow Jesus what you're really saying is well I'm going out to die to myself to my pride to my insistence on my importance to my ego because that belongs to Jesus now and I do it to please him.

You take up your cross you deny yourself they fit together those two phrases lest we give them offense go to the sea and cast a hook Jesus is concerned you see that those who administer the temple and the temple tax will not be unnecessarily offended now the gospel is offensive in the sense in which it really hits human pride your pride and my pride and the pride of everybody else who's confronted by the terms of the gospel by the terms of Jesus but it's a very different thing to unnecessarily give offense to people when you witness to Jesus you do it tactfully and lovingly and patiently and not giving back in kind the kind of reviling or abuse or shame with which you're treated that's what Jesus did that was his concern he paid the price of redemption secondly

Christ is united inseparably with his people as we've said it's working towards this emphasis on give it to them for me and for yourself remember the tax was a forfeit it was for a forfeit life a life that had

become subject to death and needed to be paid needed to be bought back by a payment well that's the payment Jesus paid it in his own death and that's what symbolized if you like by the payment of this temple tax here but he does it in union with Peter that's so important take that and give it to them for me and for yourself for me and for yourself and you have to apply that principle of being joined to Christ of union with Christ to Christ's death to Christ's resurrection to everything indeed that Christ did and everything Christ is doing now in his intercession from heaven when Jesus died on the cross he died united to his people when he rose from the dead he rose united with his people Romans chapter 6 let me just remind you chapter 6 and verse 5 of what it says there briefly he says there for if we have been united with him with Christ in a death like his we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his now he goes on to speak about putting sin to death and so on and no longer being a slave to sin if we have been united with him in the death in which he died then also we're united with him in the resurrection with which he rose from the dead that's one of the most wonderful facts in the whole universe that Jesus was united and is united to his people and that he was united to them in everything he did in his ministry in this world right through to his death and resurrection from the dead and it's that union with him that really brings us as we'll see in a minute to actually possess and be partaker of the life the redemption life that he's bought for us because his atoning death this payment of the atonement price in himself that this half shekel symbolized if you like that's what exactly met God's demand and our needs at the same time nothing less than the death of Jesus was demanded and required by God and nothing less than the death of Jesus was required or needed by us for our salvation there is the Jesus that really comes to the fore again we mentioned this a number of times as we're looking at the life of Simon Peter which we are but what keeps coming through of course necessarily all the time is the person of Jesus himself the greatness of Jesus the wonder of Christ and who he is and what he's doing here and that comes through once again when you think of this as Christ united to Peter united to his people in paying the price of redemption united inseparably with them and so in conclusion what about the practical relevance of union with Christ let's try and bring it down to the practical everyday experiences that we must have as followers of Christ the practical relevance of union with Christ two things first of all it provides us with a vital connection a vital connection to life to spiritual life the shorter catechism in catechism number 30 asks the question how are we made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ the life that he bought for us by the payment of himself in his death as the ransom price how are we made partakers how do you plug into that well you do it as the catechism answer says we are made partakers of the redemption purchased by Christ by the effectual application of it to us by his holy spirit by the holy spirit that's how we come to be joined to Christ with this vital connection the holy spirit in his work in our souls creates faith in us and unites us to Christ in our effectual calling the spirit applies to us the redemption purchased by Christ by working faith in us and thereby uniting us to Christ in our effectual

[ 27 : 22 ] calling and our effectual calling as catechism 31 puts it involves among other things our being persuaded and enabled to embrace Jesus Christ you see there it is there's the vital connection you're being persuaded and enabled to embrace Jesus Christ not just persuaded but enabled with the persuasion intellectually or in your mind comes the enabling that your whole soul reaches out and takes him and embraces him and makes him yours you become partaker of that redemption by the work of the Holy Spirit creating faith in you and that faith is the connection point where you're connected to Christ you see what happened as described in Genesis 3 when we fell from the state God created us in into a state of sin and misery and death we became unplugged from life from the source of life and that connection needs to be remade recreated and it's recreated by the work of the Holy

Spirit creating faith in us so that when you come by the Holy Spirit to trust in Christ to place your trust in him that's really the essence of faith you're then coming back into contact you're being replugged into the source of life that we lost in Adam it's reconnected we're reconnected in the last Adam as Jesus is described in the New Testament it's a vital connection are you plugged into life this evening everyone is plugged into life into Jesus has something in their lives that shows that that's the case it has an effect on your whole life it affects your mind your thinking your attitude your behavior your speech how you go about life what your priority is how you relate to other people how you think of eternity and of death and of God's judgment how you think of Jesus himself everything changes in your outlook in your attitude in your hopes in your aspirations the moment you come to be plugged into Jesus now that doesn't

mean that this all of a sudden just happens in a spectacular moment and that you remember that particular moment and where you were and what you were doing for the rest of your life for some people it might be like that but not for the majority it might be the case with you that you just can't put your finger on the exact moment when you were plugged into life but you do know if you have been plugged into life in Jesus that life is not the same as it used to be that you don't have the same outlook the same priorities that things have changed and that's what Peter is learning here for me and for you Jesus says that's the first thing that vital connection the second thing in terms of a practical relevance is that

Jesus is a constant companion because you take these wonderful words with you really into the whole of your life as a disciple of Jesus and indeed on into eternity every single thing that you meet with every challenge that you meet with every pain that you have to go through every single incident in your life that puzzles you listen to the voice of Jesus saying to you this is for me and for you this is not for you on your own you're not facing this on your own you're not going to have to cope with this on your own you're not going to meet this whatever situation it is and rely upon your own strength it's for me and for you it's for me and for you it's me and you together Peter that's what Jesus is saying constant companion Psalm 23 we'll sing in a moment yeah even when I walk through the valley of the shadow of death

I will fear no evil why because you are with me your rod and your staff comfort me and however precious as they are the rod and the staff are it's the person of the shepherd himself that really makes all the difference that he is there with you that you face the situation with his companionship with his union with yourself and with your life you remember when Lazarus died in John chapter 11 where you find Jesus coming to Martha and to Mary his grieving sisters how he dealt with them he dealt with Martha and Mary in very different ways because he knew their personality and therefore he knew their individual needs he spoke to Martha he questioned

[ 32 : 58 ] Martha he got Martha to speak back to him he drew things out of her by way of conversation that's the kind of person she was she was somebody who scurried around quite a lot a very active person a person that needed to be spoken to in that way and kept busy if you like that way in a question and answer session Mary was the quiet one the one who sat at his but he stood beside her he stood at that graveside as she wept and he wept beside her he was there with her he was joined to her she wasn't facing that alone she wasn't just facing it with her sister's help she had the Lord in her life she had the Lord as her companion it meant everything to her that he was there that he was there beside her that there for her that she was facing this in union with himself take that and give it to them for me and for yourself oh tonight how precious these words are as you think of what you face in this life of the trials that you need to go through of the temptations you face each day of the uncertainties of life as it goes on of the uncertainty of the future which you and

I cannot see into doesn't really matter ultimately though does it because this he says is for me and for you I'm going to walk with you through it I'm going to be there by your side and even when you come to death which all of us will come to one day we're not going to face that without him if our trust is in him if we have given ourselves over to him if the Holy Spirit has created this faith in our hearts by which we are vitally connected to Jesus then the life that he's given us is not going to be interrupted not even by death and the companionship that's part of that connection is not going to be interrupted when death comes out way he'll walk with us through that he'll walk through to the side we won't find him absent he'll be with us as our companion through all eternity and isn't that one of the most wonderful things of heaven that

Jesus will never be absent that you will never be conscious of Jesus not being near to you that Jesus will be your constant companion even beyond death and into eternity itself and did he say to the thief on the cross truly truly I say to you today you will be with me in paradise he didn't just say to him truly I say to you today you are going to be in paradise yes that was true but that's not all he said he said today you will be with me you will be my companion in paradise and isn't that what Jesus prayed for in John 17 before he went out to face the cross and his trial father I will that they also whom you have given me be with me where I am that they may behold my glory which you have given me this morning we took a look briefly at faith looking towards our homeland in the city of heaven that's the faith that we need for this from this passage as we've seen the faith by which we are connected to Christ and the faith that brings us onwards through his grace and by his companionship and all that it means beyond death itself are we tonight you and

I vitally connected to this Jesus are we content with something less than that do we imagine that something less than that is going to be sufficient for us are we going to wake up on the day of our death to realize that we have been wrong in thinking we could come to heaven without the companionship of Jesus without being united to him without trusting in him as the hymn writer Mary D.

James American hymn writer mid 1800s wrote as follows O blessed fellowship divine O joy supremely sweet companionship with Jesus here makes life with bliss replete in union with the purest one I find my heaven on earth begun O wondrous bliss O joy sublime I have Jesus with me all the time all wondrous bliss O joy sublime I have Jesus with me all the time for me he said and for you yes surely you too let's pray we thank you Lord for every help you give us as we come to your word and to our attempts to speak from what your word contains to declare the gospel for your help in hearing your word and listening to it proclaimed we pray now for your help

[ 39 : 17 ] O Lord in laying to heart what you have spoken to us about we pray that by your spirit we may know of your own word of truth coming to bear fruit in the days ahead as we seek to be followers of Christ O make your companionship very real and very precious to us in the days ahead and that that would be so for all especially whose hearts are crushed and heavy with sorrow with trial this evening go before us now and accept our worship for Jesus sake Amen we'll sing in Psalm number 23 now from the St.

Psalm version of Psalm 23 The Lord is my shepherd no want shall I know he makes me lie down where the green pastures grow he leads me to rest where the calm waters flow Psalm 23 that's on page 28 in the psalm books The Lord is my shepherd no want shall I know no one shall I know he makes me lie down where the green pastures grow he leads me to rest where the calm waters flow by wandering steps he brings back to his way in straight paths of righteousness making me stay and this he has done his great name to display though

I walk in death valley where darkness is near because you are with me no evil I fear your rod and your staff bring me comfort and cheer in the sight of my enemies at table you spread of hand I on go thanks to power your obe f and

Follow me closely in all of my ways. I will dwell in the hands of the Lord all my days.

I'll go to the main door again this evening after the benediction. Now may the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the communion of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.

[ 42 : 56 ] Amen.