

THE RADICAL RABBI: A RADICAL FISH STORY (MATTHEW 17:24-27)

1.9.22

INTRODUCTION

You ever had something happen to you where, when you told it to somebody, they were like, “C’mon; gimme a break. I don’t believe that.” They may have thought you were just telling them a “fish story.”

Dictionaries define a “fish story” as “an incredible or extravagant story.” The idea is of telling a tale that stretches the limits of believability. It’s like the story of catching a one-pound fish. After a few retellings, that fish has grown to five or six pounds, maybe more, and it went from being just a normal “reeling it in” to a 20-30 minute battle before it was finally in the boat.

The Bible has a few stories like that: Jonah being swallowed by a great fish is one of my favorites. The donkey who talked to Balaam is another one — not specifically a fish story but, for most people, talking animals would be considered incredible or extravagant.

I’m glad those stories exist because, when it comes to fishing itself, I have virtually no stories. The closest experience I have I know is completely true because it was founded in nothing but frustration. A friend of my dad’s took him and me ice fishing up to Mille Lacs Lake. So, we drive out their way before sunrise, and we finally get to the fish houses. My dad and I are going to be in one and my dad’s friend and his dad were in the other. Now these two fish houses were literally just a few feet apart. We had never been ice fishing before so my dad’s friend got us all set up before he went to his ice house. Now my dad and I fished for about eight hours. In all that time, my dad and I caught one crappie; it actually hit my line. Exciting it was not. But just a few feet away, my dad’s friend and his dad were catching whales. They caught five or six huge northerns and walleyes and a bunch of crappies. How could a few feet make that much difference? Needless to say, I’ve never been ice-fishing since. Some great fish story, huh?

But don’t despair. We’re actually going to look at a “fish story” today as we return to the ministry of the Radical Rabbi. It’s a great story with a lot of valuable “meat on the bone.” So, as we begin this particular fishing expedition, **let’s start with a word of prayer.**

TEXT

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?” — Matthew 17:24.

As far as we know, this was the last time that Jesus was in Capernaum, which had served as sort of an unofficial headquarters during His Galilean ministry. And wouldn’t you know that Matthew, the former tax collector, is the only one of the four gospel writers to include this story about a tax issue.

This particular tax, the so-called “temple tax,” was a fee required of all Jewish males between the ages of 20 and 50 years of age. It was collected annually in the month Adar (comprising parts of our February and March). It was always a fixed amount and, as opposed to the resentment shown over Roman taxes, the payment of the annual temple tax was a matter of national pride; in fact, Jewish males all over the ancient world would have paid this tax as a show of solidarity with Judaism, the Temple and the Holy Land. This was something that, at God’s command, had been initially imposed during the lifetime of Moses (Exodus 30:12-16). It was originally collected for paying for the servicing of the Tabernacle during the wilderness years, and eventually was used

for the care and upkeep of the Temple in Jerusalem. Incidentally, a drachma was the minimum pay for one day's work so the temple tax being asked for here was the equivalent of two days' wages.

Now there may have been a number of reasons why these Jewish officials were inquiring of Peter as to his master's intentions regarding the tax. For one thing, some priests applied an exemption to the tax to themselves. Jesus was recognized by a lot of people as at least some sort of rabbi. So, would He be trying to claim that exemption as well? Also, if Jesus was living off of charity, He would be exempt — a reasonable assumption for an often-itinerant rabbi. Which brings us to the matter of locale; Jesus seemed to almost always be on the move. So, did He maybe intend to pay this tax someplace else? Also, there was that little "cleaning out the moneychangers" incident in the Temple itself at the very beginning of Christ's ministry. Some considered that to be a sacrilege, a desecration of a holy place. So, did Peter's master even feel the least bit of loyalty to the Temple? Based on past behavior, it seemed a fair, if open, question.

So, back to the issue: "Does your master pay the temple tax or not?" Peter answered quickly:

"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?" - Matthew 17:25.

Now Jesus, of course, was already aware of this conversation between Peter and the Jewish tax collectors, so He decided to use it as a teaching moment. And He began by asking Peter a really interesting question: When kings impose taxes, who is being asked to pay — the king's kids or the subjects of his kingdom?

"From others," Peter answered. "Then the children are exempt," Jesus said to him — Matthew 17:26.

That's easy, Peter must have thought. The subjects pay. And Jesus affirmed his answer by His response: Then the kids owe nothing, right? But Jesus by His response was signaling a far bigger truth. The Son of God was now present in the world — Immanuel, "God with us." The Son should not be taxed for the upkeep of His Father's house. And more than that: Jesus was also the Christ, the Messiah, the very hope for which Judaism, and its Temple, had been waiting for centuries. And, as "children of the King," so to speak, His followers, all His disciples, in principle, should not have needed to pay, either. But Jesus had another point in mind as He continued:

"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" — Jesus Christ, Matthew 17:27.

At this point in His ministry, it was important for Jesus and His followers to be seen as supporters of Judaism in terms of being obedient to the laws of Moses, in much the same way that He responded to John the Baptist when He came to Him at the very outset of His ministry to be baptized; remember? ***John tried to deter Him, saying, "I need to be baptized by You, and do You come to me?" Jesus replied, "Let it be so now; it is proper for us to do this to fulfill all righteousness." Then John consented — Matthew 3:14-15.*** The temple tax had been instituted by His Father; as the obedient Son, He would pay it to publicly fulfill all righteousness.

Now, all that said, Jesus may not have had even these few funds at hand in order to pay the tax. So, He sent Peter on a mission: Go on down to the lake (the Sea of Galilee) and put in a line. I'm sure Peter was initially thinking, What? A line? I'm a commercial fisherman. I fish with nets, not

some piddly little line. Maybe Jesus even repeated His instructions: Peter, go down to the lake and put in a line. And then He expanded on His instructions: The first fish you catch, open its mouth and you'll find a four-drachma coin. Give that coin to the temple officials. That should be enough for both of us. And that's where the story ends.

This is an incredibly unique story, and not just because Matthew gives us its only telling. The miracle — Peter going down to the lake with a single line and, in the first fish he catches, he finds the exact amount of money to pay the temple tax for both of them — is assumed; it's never fully declared by Matthew in his gospel. All of Christ's other miracles are presented loud and proud; there's a conclusion, whether it be a healing or a providing or whatever. A problem presents, a miracle occurs, and the people rejoice over what they have seen and experienced. Not here. So how can we be assured it happened? Simple: Jesus said it would. We're talking God's word here, and God's word is always a word in which we can place all our complete faith. As Joshua said so well at the end of his life: ***"You know with all your heart and soul that not one of all the good promises the Lord your God gave you has failed. Every promise has been fulfilled; not one has failed"*** — ***Joshua 23:14***. And Paul gave us this assurance: ***[N]o matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ*** — ***Paul, II Corinthians 1:20***. So we also assume that Peter, in this moment, placed his faith that, as Christ said, so would it happen.

Also, this is the only miracle we are aware of where Jesus is doing so to meet His own needs. Now He is not doing this just for Himself; Peter is also benefitting, as is Christ's public support for and obedience of God's law in paying this particular tax.

It is also the only miracle we're aware of that involved money — and the money was important. The temple tax, commanded by God, was a reminder that the Jewish people had been redeemed totally, solely, only by God's powerful hand out of the land of Egypt and over four hundred years of slavery. Only God had accomplished that — so anything that kept that amazing moment in mind was important to celebrate.

Jesus had used fish, like lots and lots of fish, to fill the nets of Peter and the others at the beginning of His ministry, and He would do it again toward the end. But this was the only miracle where He made use of a single fish. And no nets — just a hook on a line.

And lastly, while all the disciples were the frequent observers, if not beneficiaries, of Christ's miracles, this was one of a number of miracles that appear to be solely for the benefit of Peter. He healed Peter's mother-in-law from a fever that had her bedridden. He enabled Peter to walk on the water in the storm on the Sea of Galilee. When Peter wildly swung his sword in the Garden of Gethsemane when Jesus was being arrested, inadvertently cutting off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's servant, it was Jesus who possibly saved Peter from a lifetime of death by immediately healing that severed ear. And following Christ's return to heaven, it was another miracle that allowed Peter to walk out of locked prison gates to freedom. It seems that Jesus wanted Peter to very much understand exactly who He was. All these things make this particular "fish story" an incredibly special story in Christ's ministry.

APPLICATION

Last week we talked about the ability to be awed, to be "wowed," by God. And one of the things we mentioned in line with that was learning to see the wonders of God in the details, in the smallest things that would still be unable to happen without His amazing sustaining grace. Today's story is a wonderful example of what the wonders of God in the details look like.

Think about this: Jesus was immediately arranging for one coin to find the mouth of one fish who was going to find one hook off of one line being dangled by one guy — all of that being done in a lake just slightly smaller than our own Lake Mille Lacs, and all that to pay a simple little annual tax. Now that’s wondrous, and it is all God, in the person of His Son, showing His power and grace in just one instance.

That is the great lesson from this story — that we can trust God and His Son, Jesus Christ, to meet all our needs whenever they occur, no matter what they might be. Paul, writing from a Roman prison, said it so well: ***My God will meet all your needs according to the riches of His glory in Christ Jesus — Paul, Philippians 4:19.*** This story is what “the riches of God’s glory in Christ Jesus” looks like.

CONCLUSION

I’m not sure how many of you remember this but, the Sunday I came here to candidate, back in August 2018, I spoke from II Kings 6 about the prophet Elisha, and about how one time God, through him, retrieved an iron axe head that had accidentally fallen into a river. It was a small miracle that, unless you were right there, you might not have even known had happened. And yet, 2500 years later, we can still talk about that moment or, some 500 years after that, about a single fish holding a single coin being caught by a single guy holding a single line dangling a single hook.

I love those stories. And why? What’s the lesson? God cares about every aspect of our lives. But it’s how He cares that is so cool for us to consider. I mean, think about this: Jesus Christ comes into the world to be the Savior of all mankind, to wash away people’s sins with His very own blood. What could ever be more important than that? But, in the meantime, in this particular moment, He’s being asked by some guys to be concerned about a “temple tax.” So why should He care about that? You know, we all too often group life into “big things” vs. “little things” or “important things” vs. “unimportant things.” What’s amazing about God is that everything about our lives is important to Him. It’s all important; it all matters — even He and Peter’s being able to pay a tax.

And why would that be? So, that we would then talk to Him about everything, that we would bring Him every detail about every moment in our lives. There simply is no such thing as a problem too small for God, too insignificant to arouse His interest. That’s the love He has for us. Every detail of our lives — every high, every low, every win, every loss, every triumph, every tragedy, every boulder, every “pebble in our shoe,” matters to this God who has always loved us with an everlasting love. That’s why Peter calls Him ***the God of all grace — I Peter 5:10a.*** He’s there for everyone for everything! Now that’s something to be “wowed” about!

Don’t cut yourselves off from that love. Claim it in all its wonder; that’s what it’s there for. Remember the wonderful words of Christ to His followers: ***“Come to Me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take My yoke upon you and learn from Me, for I am gentle and humble in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For My yoke is easy and My burden is light” — Jesus Christ, Matthew 11:28-30.*** Let’s pray!