

## THE BOOK OF MATTHEW

### Lesson 62, Chapter 17 and 18

Last week we began to delve into the interesting story that ends Matthew chapter 17 about a certain tax collector coming to Capernaum where Yeshua was residing with Peter, and the tax collector asks the question " doesn't your Master pay the tax?". Peter is the one who answers the question in an unequivocal way: "Of course He does". Yeshua doesn't dispute Peter's response in any way, so a reasonable assumption is that Jesus does pay the tax voluntarily.

An additional assumption made by Bible interpreters throughout the ages is that this is the Temple tax that is being referred to and not some Roman taxation. The words "Temple tax" are not in the original Greek manuscripts. However, the amount of the tax (even though stated in Roman drachmas) is equal to the Hebrew 1/2 shekel. And 1/2 shekel was the annual Temple tax due. So it seems most likely that this was the Temple tax and not something else.

Let's pause to re-read this short section at the end of Matthew 17.

#### **RE-READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 17:24 - 27**

Interestingly, the Temple tax was not mandatory for the Jewish people. The people were certainly pressured to pay it, but not paying did not bring on a penalty. So this explains why a discussion on the matter of this tax led by Jesus was even appropriate. That is, it is fair to read into the action and words of the story that if it was legally required to pay the tax that Christ would **not** have balked at paying it. Peter's statement that Yeshua **does** pay the Temple tax needs to be taken as accurate; there's no reason to see it otherwise. So Yeshua certainly does not see paying this legal, but non-mandatory, tax even to a

hopelessly perverted Temple authority as spiritually wrong or immoral.

When Yeshua speaks of "the kings of the earth" in His discussion with His disciples this is to be understood as in contrast to "the king of the Kingdom of Heaven". And essentially it is this contrast of kings and kingdoms that plays out the rest of the way in this short story. So the question Christ asks (in order to make a point) could be re-phrased in this way: "Ok. If the sons of earthly kings are not obligated to pay taxes for the privilege of being a member of that king's kingdom (the way all the other people in that kingdom have to) then should the sons of the king of the Kingdom of Heaven have to pay taxes for the privilege of being members of the Kingdom of Heaven? Or, as in both cases, is it only non-family members who pay? The disciples answer that it is of course that no king's son pays a tax.

When we understand from Yeshua's perspective that all God worshippers... all members of the Kingdom of Heaven... are considered as sons...as family... then He is saying that there is no legal monetary cost per se to become a member of God's Kingdom or to maintain that membership. God doesn't collect taxes... God doesn't require tribute (like an earthly king does) on those who are part of the Kingdom of Heaven, because they...we... have a very special relationship with the king. Another way to say it is that since there is no required fee to be paid in order to be part of God's Kingdom then even the poorest of the poor don't have to ever be concerned about affordability or being thrown out of the kingdom because they didn't have the funds to pay a tax. I do want to point out that in other statements from Christ (and from the Law) contributions in the form of charity donations are expected but only when it comes sincerely from the heart. But in one form or another, these charitable donations are for the purpose of helping to provide for their fellow man as opposed to going into the pocket of the Heavenly King.

The other thing that was embedded in Yeshua's question is something that all Jews of that era knew without it having to be said: the High Priest attempted to frame the paying of the Temple tax as a sort of validation that a Jew was indicating his allegiance to the Temple system as the earthly and visible representation of God's Kingdom. So to not pay it was to put oneself outside the Temple system and its benefits, and therefore outside of God's Kingdom. In other words, paying the Temple tax was the way of showing a continuing membership in the kingdom. To which Jesus replies that sons (worshippers of God, the king of the Kingdom of Heaven) are exempt from having to do this.

If the story ended here we could probably breathe a sigh of relief and be satisfied with Christ's statement as to why His disciples (and all Jews for that matter) had, in God's eyes, no obligation to pay a tax to the Temple... to the religious authority. But then Yeshua throws us a curveball. He says... BUT... HOWEVER... meaning "on the other hand". So He is about to modify the proverb He has just made. And just to be clear: a proverb is not a law or a commandment. A proverb is a wisdom saying that by nature is a generality. In modern English, we might call it a divine rule of thumb.

In one of the more famous Bible stories, Yeshua tells the fisherman Peter to go to the Lake, throw in a line, and he will catch a fish. In that fish's mouth will be a one shekel coin and Peter is to use that coin to pay the Temple tax for both Peter and Yeshua. Why pay the tax when they don't have to? To avoid offending "them". "Them" who? The High Priest organization that runs the Temple. The religious leadership of the Jewish people who even Christ has spoken against as being corrupt.

How, exactly, we are to understand the matter of the miracle of the fish and the coin in its mouth is not clear. Obviously, we must begin with the miraculous nature of it. It seems to me that we need to understand that it is God providing the coin to pay to the Temple. Therefore God is clearly saying not only "you should pay the tax" but also that He is providing the means (in this case, a miraculous means). All this for the sake of not offending the religious authorities. Folks, for me this is one of the most important, practical lessons for Believers in the entire New Testament. Basically, it is a blow against hard-headed idealism and a call for reasonableness. It is a call to avoid mechanical obedience to laws and rules. Unfortunately, a goodly number of people who follow the Hebraic Heritage way of understanding Holy Scripture and in obeying God's laws and commands can fall into a mindset that very much mimics the Ultra-Orthodox Jewish mindset that follows rules and laws to the letter such that the spirit of that rule or law falls by the wayside. It can come off not only as unreasonable but even as mean. Which means that it is counterproductive to the Good News of the Kingdom of Heaven.

It is interesting that the institutional Church often takes the meaning of this proverb to the opposite extreme. That is, our personal freedom to decide however we want to on most things in life has no limits. So even though the rule is that Believers (as sons) don't have to pay the Temple tax, we can (if we want to) pay it anyway. It is regularly seen as being an anti-Law of Moses statement.

This short little narrative and proverb about the Temple tax and the fish has a number of important facets to it and we'll cover only a few. First: this proverb is essentially about the relationship between God and the Jewish people. Or better, between God and Israel. God sees Israelites (Jews) as sons. It is interesting how Christianity has re-interpreted this statement to mean that the Church (meaning gentile Christians) are the sons of the king in this story. In one sense this is true. But by what possible means can this be true since clearly gentiles had no involvement whatsoever in this debate about paying the tax? How did it happen that gentile Believers became "sons of the king"? And does this mean that sonship was later removed from Israel and transferred to the gentile Church? Most of the Church since around the 4th century says that it does. This belief goes by the label of Replacement Theology. It is a false, but widespread, doctrine that has greatly harmed the relationship between gentile Believers and Jews, and has put up a nearly impenetrable barrier to Jews to know their own Messiah... Yeshua of Nazareth.

Paul addressed this specific issue in Romans 11 of not only how gentiles can legitimately become sons of God, but also how it is that gentiles are **joining** God's already existing sons (Israel) and not replacing them. He employed the illustration of Israel as the Olive tree and used the cultivation method of grafting as a metaphor for how gentiles can be joined with Israel and their covenants in order to become sons. You can go to my lessons on the Book of Romans on TorahClass.com for an extensive examination of this chapter.

Second; Christ told His disciples that they should pay the Temple tax not because it was required but because by not doing so they would cause an unneeded offense to their religious authorities. Thus the ways we carry out the Laws of Moses or even the wisdom of the many proverbs, must be done with consideration about how it might affect others. We must at times rein in our personal freedoms for a greater good. In the example that is used herein Matthew 17, it was understood within Jewish society that paying the Temple tax was a visible display of being counted as an observant Jew. The consequence of NOT paying was a mostly social one; that is, other Jews would take that refusal as meaning the non-payer had forsaken an important element of his Jewishness. Naturally this was the human perspective and not God's. Yet, to Christ, the human perspective does matter. Appearances DO matter and we must never forget it.

So what is the proper application for us in modern times? Does this mean that

whenever it pleases our religious authorities or our civil government or even our society that we can (or should) break God's laws and commands in order to placate others and not offend them? That as Believers we are to go with the flow of our society, no matter what that might be so as not to upset people? No! This freedom that we have does not give us license to do what is morally wrong in God's eyes. Without doubt Paul struggled within himself of how to carry this concept through, and even more how to explain it to others. In 1Corinthians Paul speaks directly to this issue. I'm going to use the CJB wording (in academic language the CJB is called a dynamic translation) because I think it hits the nail on the head in a very understandable way, and avoids the pitfalls of misunderstanding that most other Bible versions stumble into.

**CJB 1Corinthians 9:19-23** <sup>19</sup> *For although I am a free man, not bound to do anyone's bidding, I have made myself a slave to all in order to win as many people as possible.* <sup>20</sup> *That is, with Jews, what I did was put myself in the position of a Jew, in order to win Jews. With people in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah, I put myself in the position of someone under such legalism, in order to win those under this legalism, even though I myself am not in subjection to a legalistic perversion of the Torah.* <sup>21</sup> *With those who live outside the framework of Torah, I put myself in the position of someone outside the Torah in order to win those outside the Torah-although I myself am not outside the framework of God's Torah but within the framework of Torah as upheld by the Messiah.* <sup>22</sup> *With the "weak" I became "weak," in order to win the "weak." With all kinds of people I have become all kinds of things, so that in all kinds of circumstances I might save at least some of them.* <sup>23</sup> *But I do it all because of the rewards promised by the Good News, so that I may share in them along with the others who come to trust.*

Appearances didn't stop mattering when we became followers of Yeshua. Adapting ourselves to the culture we find ourselves in, in order to not create stumbling blocks to people in that culture from finding Jesus, is critical. We can create barriers for people that don't need to be there. Again, as Paul explains, never does this mean we give up or disobey the Torah. It means that we regard ourselves less, even doing things that are not necessarily comfortable for us if it opens a way to penetrate a culture or even opens up an individual's mind to hear God's Word of truth and salvation. Every case, every circumstance, is different so we must seek Heavenly wisdom to know what is right.

The third facet of this proverb is this: as Believers, we belong (at least in the present) to a number of realms. We belong to families, communities, nations, congregations, and to God's kingdom. Therefore we must always weigh the broader consequences of our choices and actions. How what we do affects each of these realms. And yes, as the world grows smaller and more integrated, those choices and consequences become more complicated. Nearly every choice we make is going to please some and offend others. Nonetheless the bottom line is as Paul says in Romans 14:

**CJB Romans 14:7 <sup>7</sup> *For none of us lives only in relation to himself, and none of us dies only in relation to himself;***

Let's move on to Matthew chapter 18.

### **READ MATTHEW CHAPTER 18 all**

This chapter deals with more wisdom sayings... proverbs. When I say proverbs I don't mean those 800 or so listed in the Bible Book of Proverbs; rather I mean it from the literary sense. Any wisdom saying could legitimately be considered a proverb. "Don't cry over spilled milk". "Two wrongs don't make a right". "A watched pot never boils". "A chain is only as strong as its weakest link". Although modern, these are all proverbs... wisdom sayings... rules of thumb. Yeshua spoke many of them; most were actually already known proverbs in Jewish culture.

While we might be able to call verses 1-7 a proverb, it is probably better to see it as a moral teaching and not to label it because proverbs tend to be a little more concise. The main subject and point of this moral teaching is that one of the prime virtues of any Believer must be humility. In fact, Yeshua questions whether a person that doesn't display humility is even suited for a place in the Kingdom of Heaven.

The question asked by the disciples is apparently the result of a debate they had been having among themselves. The Gospel of Mark fleshes out this aspect of the moral teaching a bit more.

**CJB Mark 9:33-37 <sup>33</sup> *They arrived at K'far-Nachum. When Yeshua was inside the house, he asked them, "What were you discussing as we were traveling?" <sup>34</sup> But they kept quiet; because on the way, they had been***

***arguing with each other about who was the greatest. <sup>35</sup> He sat down, summoned the Twelve and said to them, "If anyone wants to be first, he must make himself last of all and servant of all." <sup>36</sup> He took a child and stood him among them. Then he put his arms around him and said to them, <sup>37</sup> "Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the One who sent me."***

Although the reasons for this argument to have erupted aren't stated, I suspect it may have had something to do with Yeshua clearly setting Peter apart from and above the others (back in Matthew 16). While this setting apart seems to have been as much spiritually based as it was about leadership of the Jesus movement, in the disciples' minds such preeminence was directly connected to the Kingdom of Heaven. Now we have a question we must answer. When the Kingdom of Heaven is brought up were the disciples thinking in the same terms that most modern Christians do? That is, most Christians think of the Kingdom of Heaven as something that is not physical but rather invisible. Something that is entirely spiritual and not tangible. But were the 12 disciples thinking in terms of the future, at the End of Days, or perhaps when they are disembodied souls living in Heaven? I think not. I tend to think that they took Jesus at His word that the Kingdom of Heaven had already arrived on earth. It was here, now, and they were part of it in a real and tangible way. After all, that exact thing was the Good News that Christ had sent them out to preach.

I bring this up because for the disciples this question about leadership in the Kingdom of Heaven wasn't some arcane theological debate such as how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. They were concerned with the here and now, and so were thinking in terms of how Christ is currently placing each of His 12 in a leadership pecking order. And thus to be the greatest among them meant to be the #1 disciple that was at the top of the Kingdom of Heaven leadership structure. This would have been especially important to them because Christ had just recently told them that He was soon going to die and not be with them any longer, so the natural concern was who does Yeshua want to take over as the next leader? Therefore in response to their question, Yeshua makes it personal. "Yes", He says; "Until YOU change and become like little children YOU won't even enter the Kingdom of Heaven".

The point here is that the very fact that the debate about who was greatest was occurring and the question was openly asked says that the disciples have their priorities all wrong. They aren't thinking or operating in the right attitude. Who is

the greatest ought not even be on the agenda IF they were like these little children. Remembering they were at Peter's home in Capernaum it is natural that literal little children would be hanging around. So the children provided a ready object lesson for Jesus to put across an important point to the disciples. I also want to note that this was an in-house issue (so to speak) that was being dealt with. This concerned Yeshua's inner circle of the 12. So, to be clear: the matter is focused on leadership of the movement.

So what is it about children that Yeshua is highlighting as a quality that the greatest in the Kingdom hierarchy must exhibit? Obviously, a child was not to be seen as a religious model for adult followers of Jesus. He is not suggesting that mature adults need to enter a second childhood or (as we see too often in the West) that Jesus has somehow elevated the worth and place of children onto an equal footing with their parents, or that their welfare belongs as the chief concern of society in general. It's not that in Hebrew society children had no worth; but they did have less worth than an adult from a very practical sense. An adult could produce more children and could produce more work. Rather the quality present in children that Yeshua wants to see in His disciple is revealed in verse 4.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Matthew 18:4** <sup>4</sup> ***So the greatest in the Kingdom is whoever makes himself as humble as this child.***

So the idea is not for anyone to become childish; nor that a child is the ideal disciple. It is that in Jesus's eyes a child is inherently humble. And since in my opinion the topic of interest in this debate about who is greatest is all about the leadership hierarchy (especially after Jesus's prediction of His own death is fulfilled), then it can be said in general that little children never even think about such things as who among them is the greatest or who will be in charge of the others. So it is not just an inner attitude of humility that Yeshua seeks but also it is something that must be reflected in their behavior and in ours.

So let's be clear; this childlike quality Christ wants of His future leaders has nothing to do with possessing an innocence, or a joyful impulsiveness, or being simple-minded, or even not being seen as sinful or wicked. Rather it is about not seeking position, advantage, or status among the believing brethren. It is about reversing the typical human societal tendency to see how we can become powerful by moving up in the pecking order of whatever realm we're in. It's about not thinking too much of oneself because we find ourselves in a leadership position. And yet humility is also not adopting a low self-worth. If anything,



humility is about knowingly having the strength to do things others can't, but using that strength to help others by serving them. That is the essence of the meaning of the term "a servant leader".

Verse 3 describes this becoming like little children as a needed "change". In Greek it is **strepho**, and literally **strepho** means to turn. "To turn" captures the Hebrew sense of the concept of repentance. Repentance is not an attitude of sorrow. Repentance is an actual change in physical behavior. It is to turn from the things we've been doing to something else. So Yeshua is telling the disciples that their behavior has to become something else, and that something else is humble.

Judaism incorporates the idea that one who changes and adopts Judaism (presumably a gentile) embarks on a do-over of their spiritual life. In the Talmud, **Y'bamoth** 48b, we read that the Jewish convert is likened to a new-born child. That is, life has begun afresh. And this may well be what Christ has in mind as He uses a small child to make His point. The change is not merely in change in direction, but it is a total renewal. In fact, in one of Yeshua's more famous sayings, He says this as recorded in the Gospel of John:

<sup>CJB</sup> **John 3:3** ***"Yes, indeed," Yeshua answered him, "I tell you that unless a person is born again from above, he cannot see the Kingdom of God."***

I suspect that this expression of being born again in order to enter the Kingdom and Yeshua telling His disciples to adopt a child-like humility to enter the Kingdom are fully connected in meaning.

In Matthew 18:5, Yeshua moves from using children for the purpose of illustration and metaphor, into their being the objects of one's actions. What I mean is that the literal receiving of a child is an actual thing that is to occur, but it also doubles as an example of an adult Believer's life of humility in action. Commonly, Christian commentators see this verse as an allegory. That is, in their view little children doesn't really refer to actual little children; rather it is symbolic of all those who are new to the faith (young or old). I find that rigid position at odds with the words that come later in the verse that speaks of "little ones". In Mark 9 Yeshua actually embraces a small child and says "whoever welcomes one such child welcomes Me". So child, or little child, or little one is a direct reference to children... not to new Believers.

So what does it mean to receive a child in Christ's name? And that it is the same as receiving Christ? We find a similar sentiment and instruction later on in Matthew in chapter 25. It is always important in Bible study to find these connections as when we see them both in use, one helps to explain the other. Turn your Bibles to Matthew chapter 25.

### **READ MATTHEW 25:31 - end**

To receive a child in Yeshua's name means to accept him or her in the manner that Yeshua would. In the Bible, Old and New Testaments, a name is not merely a personal identifier as it mostly means is our day. Rather a name reflects certain attributes. So to receive a child in Christ's name also means to approach them based upon Christ's attributes. Please notice that this statement is not about merely being nice to the young, the weak, the needy, and those who have no power. It is also not about us having an option to do or not to do. So from the negative sense, NOT receiving or NOT providing for the helpless and needy bars the door to the Kingdom of Heaven to the one who refuses to do what is right by serving them. So the idea also includes the concept that when we look upon that child, or that poor person, or the one who has no food and is hungry, we should behave as though we were encountering Jesus Himself. Not in the sense that those people are necessarily Christ-like, or are even Believers; but rather that always in Yeshua's ministry He identifies Himself and His purpose with the powerless, the poor, the hungry, and the child. These are those He came to help, to heal, to save, and to provide for. We, as His disciples, are to recognize this, and realize that when we pursued our forgiveness and salvation in Him, we also signed up for being His hands and feet on earth... doing these things in His stead as we wait for His return. Now I'd like to issue a caution; we are not to spiritualize this commandment or to turn it into merely a range of emotions or warm fuzzy feelings towards the needy. Yeshua has essentially created a kind of personal union with the downtrodden... with those who need real and actual practical help with the daily needs of life. And we are to act accordingly without much regard to the exact nature of the cause of their circumstances.

Now that Yeshua has explained what Believers should do, He issues a warning to those who might act to hinder or take advantage of the powerless; especially of a child. But there is an important change about the children that we mustn't overlook. The warning shifts from children in general to children who trust in Him. And for the children who have come to trust in Christ, anyone that would "ensnare" them it would be better for them to simply die by drowning. And yet I

need to remind you that in that era the realm of the deep sea was seen nearly universally as wicked and terrifying. It was believed that evil spirits lived in the deep. And so to be dragged down to the depths of the sea by means of a heavy millstone around one's neck was perhaps one of the worst possible ways to die. To finish the thought, Yeshua says woe to the world because of the snares that have been set, and woe to the person who sets that snare. Let's work through this statement.

Yeshua's tone suddenly shifts from assurance and encouragement, to a warning and a not-so-veiled threat, still using children as the illustration but also in a totally literal way. In the literal sense, Yeshua is issuing a warning against anyone who would lead a child astray who is trusting in Him. It seems to me more directly that this is probably about convincing a trusting child to give up that trust. Or to do things to that child that so harms them or makes them so fearful that trusting anyone or anything becomes a near impossibility.

When Yeshua says woe to the world because of snares, we find it worded a number of different ways in the many English Bible versions. The King James says "Woe to the world because of offences". The NAB says "Woe to the world because of things that cause sin". The NAS says "Woe to the world because of its stumbling blocks". The YLT says "Woe to the world from the stumbling blocks". So the issue is this: is Christ saying that the world is the cause of the snares, or that the world suffers from the people who set the snares? The Gospel of Luke says something very similar.

<sup>CJB</sup> **Luke 17:1** *Yeshua said to his talmidim, "It is impossible that snares will not be set. But woe to the person who sets them!"*

It seems to me that what is meant is that the world is, and will continue to, suffer woes because various people will set snares that cause others to stumble. But more importantly, what do the snares prevent people of the world from doing such that Christ is so concerned about it? It is that these snares, these wicked traps, stop people from seeking the Kingdom of Heaven and therefore of having any opportunity to entering in.

The Greek word that is translated as snares or offenses or stumbling blocks is **skandalon** from which we get the English word scandal. A **skandalon** is actually the name for the stick that holds up the edge of a trap used to ensnare small animals. The idea is that the prey is unaware that a trap has been set. The

person who springs the trap on the unsuspecting prey behaves as that small stick. So the warning Christ is giving to the world serves the same function as an air raid siren. That is, Christ is not threatening the world but rather is saying the world is going to suffer woes because of these snares... so look out! Seek shelter! However, He is threatening the wicked individuals who set the traps and behave as the **skandalon** stick. No doubt the woe to the individual that sets these traps is the great judgment at the End of Days that will declare those individuals guilty, and they will be burned up as chaff.

We'll discuss this a little more and move into verse 9 next week.