

## Matthew 17D

- We're following Jesus in His final year of life on earth, and it's a year of turmoil and conflict
  - The nation of Israel lost their opportunity to receive their King in the day their leaders rejected Jesus
    - Individually, Jews are still being saved, of course, as they place their faith in Jesus as Messiah
    - And for those who do believe, Jesus is ministering to them, teaching them and healing them at times
  - But for the crowds and the nation as a whole, Jesus is refusing to reveal Himself any further...He no longer teaches or heals publicly
    - Instead, Jesus is secretly preparing His disciples to assume charge of the Kingdom Program after He departs
    - But that work is difficult because these men are having a hard time grasping the idea that Jesus is leaving
    - And more than just His leaving, they can't make sense of Jesus' statements that He is going to suffer and die and rise again
  - Jesus has hinted at His death and departure on numerous occasions, and He's even stated it plainly once
    - Even though these men hear Jesus' words, they can't believe it and so they have yet to accept it
    - But they need to understand it, because ultimately it will be their responsibility to explain it to others
- So as we return to Chapter 17 today, we begin with Jesus taking yet another opportunity to remind His men of what lay ahead

**[Matt. 17:22](#)** And while they were gathering together in Galilee, Jesus said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men;  
**[Matt. 17:23](#)** and they will kill Him, and He will be raised on the third day." And they were deeply grieved.

- Here we see Jesus' stating for a second time the simple truth of what was coming for Him
  - Jesus says plainly He would be delivered into the hands of men to be killed but then be raised again on the third day
    - This is the essence of the Gospel, and it's at the core of our faith
    - We hear it preached today as history, but these men heard it preached as a prophecy
  - And as hard as it is for some today to believe in a historical resurrection of Jesus, it was even harder for them to understand it in advance
    - They must have asked themselves who could harm God's anointed?
    - And how could God send a Deliverer only to have Him killed by those He came to save?
    - In fact, if their Messiah could be killed, it would seem to argue against Jesus' claims to be the Son of God
  - On its face, that makes no sense...but when we understand the significance of Jesus' death, the plan becomes clear
    - Jesus came to die because God was making a way for us to be forgiven for our sin
    - That's what Jesus means when He says He will be delivered
    - We know Jesus was delivered by Judas and the Jewish authorities over to the Romans for crucifixion
    - But it wasn't merely Judas or the Jews or even Pilate who delivered Jesus over to death
  - It was the Father in Heaven Who delivered His own Son over to death for our sake

**Is. 53:10 But the LORD was pleased**

**To crush Him, putting Him to grief;  
If He would render Himself as a guilt offering,  
He will see His offspring,  
He will prolong His days,  
And the good pleasure of the LORD will prosper in His hand.**

- Jesus' resurrection – His return to life after three days – is evidence that He was dying to pay for our sins, not His own
  - Because anyone who dies because of his own sin never returns to live life on earth
  - The death of the ungodly results in a permanent separation from God and from the opportunity to enjoy this Creation
- But Jesus, having no sin of His own, could return from the dead because He was not under the penalty of sin
  - His resurrection proved that His death was not for His own sake
  - And therefore, it has become a payment for us, for all who receive it by trusting in it for their salvation
  - That's the Gospel...that we can be forgiven of all our sin by placing our faith in Jesus' substitutionary death
- That's the message these men were going to be charged with sharing with others
  - So they needed to understand it themselves
  - But that's the piece of the story that the disciples were having the most trouble accepting at this point
- And we see that clearly in their response in v.23 where Matthew says they were deeply grieved at what they heard
  - And at first it sounds as though the disciples had begun to understand what Jesus was saying which is why they were grieved
    - But Mark makes clear what was going on in their minds...which wasn't much, frankly

**[Mark 9:30](#)** From there they went out and began to go through Galilee, and He did not want anyone to know about it.

**[Mark 9:31](#)** For He was teaching His disciples and telling them, "The Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill Him; and when He has been killed, He will rise three days later."

**[Mark 9:32](#)** But they did not understand this statement, and they were afraid to ask Him.

- This is now the second time Jesus has stated He will die and rise again, yet it's clear these men were not following what it meant
  - Mark says they were too afraid even to ask Jesus to explain Himself
  - But to be fair, a proper understanding was probably beyond their reach at that point
  - Because they couldn't appreciate why Jesus had to die until they understood two central concepts of Christian theology
- First, they need to understand the significance of the incarnation – of God becoming man
  - Granted, it's impossible for anyone to truly understand how Jesus can be both fully God and fully man at the same time
  - But that's not the issue...we don't need to understand *how* that can be true
  - But we do need to understand the *implications* of that truth, and it's those implications that these men were missing
- Secondly, they didn't truly understand God's self-sacrificial love
  - Agape love, self-sacrificial love, is the way God loves
  - It's the kind of love that Jesus shows us and the kind we are called to show one another and the world
  - But that kind of love does not come naturally to our sinful hearts...it's actually the opposite of how we love
  - And yet that kind of love is at the core of Jesus' ministry and it is the motivation for His willingness to die for us
- Those two concepts – the incarnation of God and the self-sacrificial love of God – lie at the heart of all Christian theology and practice
  - And unless you appreciate these two ideas, you haven't fully understood the Gospel itself
  - If you don't understand them, then you cannot possibly understand why the Messiah came to die
- And the next two scenes recorded in Matthew serve to illustrate the disciples' confusion on these points

- We will study them, beginning with the first one today, which is a lesson on the significance of God becoming man

**Matt. 17:24** When they came to Capernaum, those who collected the two-drachma tax came to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the two-drachma tax?"

**Matt. 17:25** He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll-tax, from their sons or from strangers?"

- Jesus and the disciples return from the far north of Judea near Caesarea Philippi and Mt. Hermon and enter Jesus' adopted home town of Capernaum
  - And as they enter the city, they enter Peter's home, and while there a group of tax collectors come calling looking for Jesus
    - These men were assigned by the temple authorities to collect a certain tax required by the Law of Moses

**Ex. 30:11** The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying,

**Ex. 30:12** "When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them.

**Ex. 30:13** "This is what everyone who is numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as a contribution to the LORD.

- The Law required the sons of Israel to pay a ransom of half a shekel to the Lord each year
- The tax was paid to the temple for the operation of the temple, and it was required of every male Jew ages 20–50
- The shekel was a Jewish coin, but Romans used the drachma coin, which the Jews valued at 1/4th of a shekel
  - So 2 drachma was the equivalent of 1/2 shekel
  - Since there was no half-shekel coin in circulation at that time, it became customary to give 2 drachma coins instead
  - Or else two Jewish men might pair up and give a single shekel coin to cover the both of them

- Normally, the temple tax was paid around Passover in Jerusalem
  - But here we have Jewish temple tax collectors collecting months after the Passover and up in the Galilee
  - Which suggests that Jesus never paid the tax while in Jerusalem that year so they have come to collect back-taxes
- Since it was Peter's home, he goes outside to greet the men, and as he does they ask Peter if his rabbi pays the required tax?
  - Peter decides to answer these men without consulting Jesus first saying yes, Jesus would pay the temple tax
    - Now if the narrative ended here, we would assume Peter was correct and that Jesus did, in fact, owe the required tax
    - But because of what Jesus does next, we quickly discover that Peter answered presumptuously for Jesus
  - When Peter comes back inside, probably to ask Jesus for the money the tax collectors were waiting for outside, Jesus throws a question at Peter
    - Jesus asks when kings on earth institute a poll or customs tax, does that tax apply to the sons of the king or to strangers?
    - A customs tax was the tax assessed on goods passing through a kingdom along a trade route
    - So as goods flowed from the east to the west or vice versa, those goods would be taxed as they passed through customs
  - But the tax generally only applied to foreigners not to the citizens of the king's kingdom
    - In the Roman Empire, Roman citizens were not obligated to pay poll taxes
    - Poll taxes or tribute taxes and the like were assessed on non-citizens who lived in territories conquered by the Roman army
    - Similarly today nations may have taxes they impose only on foreign nations or foreign visitors but not on their own citizens
  - And at the very least, the king's family members would always be exempt from paying taxes imposed by the king
    - A king wouldn't expect his own family to pay a tax to their father

- Especially since his sons would eventually inherit the father's wealth anyway
- So only the strangers, whether foreign citizens or the king's subjects, were obligated to pay the tax
- And after hearing Jesus' question, Peter gives the correct answer, saying only strangers are obligated to pay customs taxes
  - And that leads Jesus to make His application

**Matt. 17:26** When Peter said, "From strangers," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt."

- Jesus uses this simple example to establish a principle that's true not only with human government but also with God Himself
  - The principle is this: a distinction should be made between the law giver and the law keeper
    - There are those who make the Law and those who are obligated to obey the Law
    - And the one who makes law for others is not obligated to keep that law himself
  - In our culture, we struggle a little to understand this principle because we have adopted a system of government that works differently
    - Our government follows principles like the rule of law and equal protection under law
    - Those principles hold that the law is the highest authority in the land and that no one in the government is above the law
    - Therefore, in our experience the one who makes the law is also bound to keep the same law
    - So therefore, Jesus' example doesn't make as much sense to us
  - But our way of government is actually a radical notion, and it was not the way governments worked in Jesus' day
    - In Jesus' day, most governments were monarchies and monarchs made the law for their subjects
    - And monarchs were generally above that law, literally

- They, and often their families or members of their court, were not bound by those laws
- In the case in the Roman Empire, there were two sets of laws: one for Roman citizens and another for non-citizens
- So as you study this passage with me, you need to reorient your thinking to see it from a first century perspective
  - A law giver inherently had the right to decide what his subjects must do without being obligated to do it himself
  - That was normal and expected, and it is not inherently wrong or unrighteous
  - It was simply the way law worked in that day
- Peter knew this, of course, and so he answered the question correctly
  - Only the strangers must pay taxes to a king because the sons of the king would certainly not be expected to do so
    - But now why did Jesus ask Peter this question?
    - Jesus was pointing out to Peter that he erred when he told the tax collectors that Jesus was bound to pay the temple tax
    - Jesus was not required to pay that tax because that tax was commanded by God to support the house of God, the temple
  - And therefore the Son of God was not obligated to pay His own Father a tax for the upkeep of His own house
    - That's the point Jesus is making to Peter, but implicit in that point is a lesson about Jesus' identity
    - To apply this principle to Jesus means you must acknowledge that Jesus is God just as a son is the future King
    - And that's why Jesus asked Peter this question
  - Peter and the other disciples did not yet see Jesus as He truly was: God in the flesh
    - And if Peter had known that, he would have handled this moment very differently

- Ask yourself this question... what if the Son of God had appeared inside Peter's house not in His lowly form as Jesus of Nazareth
- Rather, imagine Jesus standing in Peter's house in His full glory
- Imagine Peter's house filled with the glory of God shining as brightly as the sun, with a voice like thunder and all the rest
- And then while Peter is standing in awe at the glory of Christ, there comes a knock at the door
  - Then Peter goes outside to greet tax collectors who ask Peter if Jesus was going to pay the temple tax or not?
  - How do we imagine Peter would respond to that question under those circumstances?
- Do you suppose Peter might have said, "You guys are welcome to go inside and collect it from Jesus yourselves."
  - The point is clear: if Peter had appreciated the deity of Jesus, he never would have imagined asking the Son of God to pay a tax
  - Especially a tax levied on Israel for the upkeep of God's house
- So then why did Peter tell those men that Jesus should pay that tax?
  - The answer is Peter failed to appreciate the incarnation of God
  - Peter knew Jesus was the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, but he had not fully grasped that Jesus *was* God
- We too struggle at times to appreciate what it means that God became man
  - But for all that we can't know, there is this at least we must know: Jesus is fully God and fully man, and no less one for the sake of the other
    - So as hard as that may be to appreciate that truth in all its dimensions, we must be careful not to dismiss it either
    - We can't see Jesus only as God such that we overlook what it meant for Him to enter into His Creation
    - And of course, we cannot see Jesus merely as human so that we fail to appreciate Him as our Creator
  - Both sides are essential to the Gospel, for without both Jesus cannot be our Savior

- If Jesus wasn't fully man, then His death couldn't pay the price for our sin
- God requires a person's life for the sin of a person, so Jesus had to be fully human to serve as a substitute for us
- But if Jesus wasn't also fully God, sinless and perfect, then He wouldn't have been qualified to be our substitute
  - Being only divine, Jesus entered the world without sin of His own
  - And therefore His death was available as a payment for our sin
- So if Jesus is going to save anyone, He must be both God and man
  - That's why Christians maintain that no one may enter Heaven except by faith in Jesus
  - No one else could do what is required to reconcile us with God
- In this case Peter was seeing Jesus more as man and less as God – and perhaps not as God at all
  - And his confusion on this point is one reason why he and the other disciples were struggling to understand *why* Jesus would die
    - If Jesus was merely a man and not God, then the prospect of His untimely death is devastating
    - It's like Alexander the Greek dying early or JFK dying early...it would seem to bring an end to the Messiah's mission
    - It would seem to suggest God failed in His promises and it would call into question God's authority
  - But when I understand that Jesus is God becoming man so that He may die, now I see the outcome very differently
    - It's not a failure of the plan...it is the plan!
    - And so I'm forced to consider what did God accomplish by becoming a man and dying and then returning to life?
    - And that question leads me to the important theology that is the cornerstone of the Christian faith

- So if you learn nothing else from your Bible, you must learn this: Jesus' death was the plan of God to save you and me from eternal punishment

**[Rom. 10:9](#) that if you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved;**

- This simple lesson was Jesus' way of leading Peter to a larger thought... to consider the importance that Jesus is the Son of God
  - And as the Son of God, Jesus is the lawgiver and as such He is not subject to the laws given to mankind
  - More importantly, Jesus is divine
- Perhaps the hardest thing for Peter and the other disciples to accept was not that a man could be God but that God should be willing to become a man
  - Every time Peter set his eyes on the earthly Jesus, he saw something very ordinary
    - But plain and ordinary aren't what we expect to see when we think of God
    - So the temptation is to explain it away as if Jesus was something less than God...it's as though His humility denied His divinity
  - And that's the way the Father wanted it to be...as Jesus says

**[Matt. 20:28](#) just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."**

- God did not come to earth as a man to show off His power and authority...though He did show Himself to possess great power
- He didn't come to rule over us...though one day He will rule over the world
- No, rather as Paul says

**[Rom. 5:8](#) But God demonstrates His own love toward us, in that while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.**

- And He came in ordinary packaging as a part of that strategy

- Jesus wanted to be approachable so that no one might feel as though God was too powerful or awesome to accept them
- So that He could sympathize with our circumstances, identify with our needs, and model righteousness as our example
- But that ordinary appearance also allowed Peter to underestimate Jesus' divinity
- And Jesus' divinity and humility come together in a beautiful way at the end of Chapter 17

**Matt. 17:27** "However, so that we do not offend them, go to the sea and throw in a hook, and take the first fish that comes up; and when you open its mouth, you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for you and Me."

- Jesus has explained to Peter that He is God and therefore He is exempt, but the problem of the tax collectors remains
  - Imagine if Peter had gone back outside and told those men that he was mistaken, and since his teacher was God, he was exempt from the tax
    - How do you think that scene would play out?
    - At the very least, it would have become opportunity for the Pharisees to make an accusation against Jesus
    - More over, any suggestion that Jesus was God would have been very offensive to the religious leaders of the day
    - It would have been seen as blasphemy though of course it was a true statement in Jesus' case
  - So Jesus says to avoid offending these men, we will pay the tax but in a way that reaffirms the lesson He's teaching Peter
    - He tells Peter to go fish in the Sea of Galilee, which was barely a few hundred feet away
    - The first fish he catches will possess a shekel in its mouth and with that one shekel Peter can pay the tax for himself and for Jesus
  - This solution is notable for several reasons
    - First, it's obviously a miraculous provision, which only serves to underscore that Jesus is God

- How else could you explain this situation except that God is providing a payment for Himself by His own means
- That a fish could be prepared to swallow a coin and then be directed to the hook at exactly that moment
- Certainly, it's another reminder that Jesus is not merely a man
- Secondly, it demonstrates the humility of Jesus to condescend to pay a tax He didn't owe, which is itself a picture of the Gospel
  - He is fulfilling His purpose in putting Himself in our place which was an act of humility on God's part

[Phil. 2:5](#) Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus,

[Phil. 2:6](#) who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped,

[Phil. 2:7](#) but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bond-servant, and being made in the likeness of men.

[Phil. 2:8](#) Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.

- Thirdly, consider why Jesus elected to use the mouth of a fish to provide the payment? Why not have Peter find a coin under a rock or behind a tree?
  - Jesus was extending the teaching a step further for Peter's sake
    - When Peter was called by Jesus to follow Him, Jesus said He would make Peter a fisher of men
    - So here Peter goes fishing and returns with a needed provision
  - The message there was clear...obey Jesus and He will provide through your ministry
    - The act of fishing for men will also result in the receiving of provision for all needs
    - In fact, notice Jesus tells Peter to use that shekel found in that fish to pay for both of them
    - Remember, the tax was half a shekel per man, so Jesus is allowing Peter to pair up with Him for that payment
  - But also notice, Jesus doesn't say pay for "us" but rather for "you and me"

- I think that detail is important because Peter and Jesus were not equals
- Jesus was providing for Himself and providing for Peter but for different reasons
- Peter was obligated to pay a ransom, but Jesus was humbling Himself to make that payment on Peter's behalf
- The incarnation of God is both the means by which we are saved and the example by which we serve others
  - We receive the payment of Jesus made on our behalf recognizing He made the ultimate sacrifice for us
    - And from that understanding, we seek to serve Him selflessly by mimicking His humility in our own work
    - If Jesus can leave the right hand of the Father to become man and then die on a cross for my sin, maybe I can get out of my recliner and serve someone in the body of Christ
    - Maybe I can set aside my own desires for the glory of Jesus
    - Maybe I can serve others the way He served me