

Miracles of Jesus 12-10-07b

We pick up our study now in Matthew chapter 17, looking at the payment of the didrachma, the temple tax as it came to be known, based on the injunction in Exodus chapter 30, latter part of the chapter, having to do with atonement when a census is taken. And there are these census takers, slash tax takers in Capernaum who ask Peter, is your teacher not going to pay this tax, and Peter says yes he is, and then he goes in to check with the Lord and make sure he gave the right answer. And the Lord anticipates him and says, what do you think Simon? What do you think? Now is this a familiar sounding question? If you go back to chapter 16, verse 15, who do you say that I am? Who do men say that I am? What do men think about me? Well they think you are John the Baptist, Elijah, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets.

He says, who do you say that I am? What do you think? Here's men's view, what is your view? We have a very similar question going on here. What do you think? And this is interesting in a couple of ways because when Jesus gives the example, an earthly example of what kings typically do, Peter says, well the sons are exempt, it's the strangers, those who are outside pay the tax to support what is basically a benefaction, a benefit, a needful thing for them. Jesus says, then the sons are free, nevertheless, lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first, and when you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money, take that, and give it to them for me and you.

This is a really cool miracle to me in a lot of ways because first of all, who are the witnesses to this miracle? We've talked about how often limited the observation is of Jesus' miracles. When Jesus stills the tempest, one of His biggest miracles, so to speak, in terms of grandeur and scope, who witnesses it? Does anybody on the shore know that the reason the storm suddenly ceased is by Jesus' command? It's only the men in the boat. Who sees the daughter of Jairus raised? Five witnesses, Peter, James, and John, the mother and father? Very few.

Who sees this miracle? How many witnesses are there to this extraordinarily improbable thing? In the entire Sea of Galilee, you're going to cast, not even get a net and look through a bunch of fish, you're going to cast in a hook which is only going to get one fish. That fish is going to have exact change for the tax. All right.

This is extraordinary. This is a biggie. I put this up right with this tempest and the parting of the Red Sea.

It's impossible. I defy anybody. Drive over to Lake Ray Hubbard or someplace, throw in a hook, pull up a fish that's got anything useful in it, much less a coin, much less exact change for some toll that you have to pay to get out there.

Well, this is what Jesus does, and he predicts it. He doesn't say, go fishing and see what

happens. He says, you will find a coin, not in the fish's stomach, it's in the fish's mouth.

Jesus knows the size of the fish, the size of the coin, and that the coin won't be big enough to get swallowed. This is not your prize-winning bass that he's going to pull out of there. It's going to be probably one of those tilapias, and Peter will get a meal out of it as well as a coin, but it's going to be a little fish, and the coin won't go down its gullet, it's going to be in its mouth.

God puts it in the mind of this fish. First of all, God does something for someone to drop a coin into the sea. This fish is going to eat it, and then he's going to swim around waiting for Peter to throw in a hook, and he's going to go bite the hook, allow himself to be raised up, spit out this coin, and we don't really know the fate of the fish.

Peter might have eaten it, he might have thrown it back, but it's extraordinary. Now, if you were the Lord Jesus, and you said, well, we need a coin to pay this tax, Judas is walking around with a money box of contributions made for the support of the Lord's ministry from these faithful women and others, right? Didn't get a coin from there. Jesus didn't say, walk out in the road there, the main roadway of Capernaum, and look by the side of the road, and you'll find, have you ever been in the parking lot, you look down, there's a quarter.

I looked down in the parking lot once, and there was a \$20 bill blowing along the thing, and I looked around, there's nobody else in the parking lot, nobody just sacking through their purse, no guy lifting his wallet, it's practically empty, and here's this \$20 bill rolling down the thing, and I thought, well, this probably won't ever happen again in my lifetime. He doesn't send him to the road, he doesn't say, look under a rock, he doesn't say, Peter, stretch forth thy hand, and he stretches his hand, and he says, now look in thy hand, and there's a coin. He doesn't reach behind his ear, you know, pull a coin.

There is method, there's a reason for this method, don't you think? Why this method from so many others? I personally like the ear one myself, I think that would have been a nice precedent for all future magicians, but he doesn't. He says, follow these steps. Why these steps? Well, to quickly review, this whole thing came about because there's the earthly issue, this mundane thing of, hey, you know, you need a half shekel for Jesus, and obviously the rest of the disciples are going to need to pay this tax, however, it's only an issue for Jesus and Peter.

You notice at the end, give it to them for me and you. When I was a little boy, and they gave me this at Sunday school, I asked my, or at least I thought, I don't remember if I actually asked the teacher or not, but it occurred to me, well, what about the other eleven disciples? How come, why wasn't there a whole bag of money in the fish's mouth to pay for all the disciples? Well, I don't know. The only speculation I have is that Peter is a resident of Capernaum, and Jesus is his guest, and so those two certainly need to pay out of that household, but aren't James and John the sons of Zebedee, aren't they in the

vicinity? Isn't Andrew Peter's brother part of the disciples? Why doesn't Jesus say, well, there's a coin in there for James and John, there's a coin for you and Andrew, there's a coin for me, and let's go ahead and pay.

The other guys, maybe they're being taxed back in their hometown in absentia or something. It seems like a mundane point, but it's interesting to me that it's only Peter that is included with the Lord in this provision, not the other eleven disciples. You can make a case that at a minimum there are three more that need the tax paid, and it would have been real easy, Jesus, Peter, Andrew, James, and John.

You've got five guys there, so you could just pay them all at once. What do you think, Simon? This is right at the heart of the story. What do you think? This is at the heart of your story.

This is at the heart of my story. It isn't that there is a tax. It isn't that somebody is asking questions about whether it is going to be paid.

It isn't that there is an ocean and a fish and a coin. The issue revolves around what do you think? Fill in your name here, Simon, Shmuel, whatever your name is, fill it in. What do you think? What is the nature of this from a higher point of view? It's not just a question of where do we get the money to pay this tax.

Jesus elevates it. He says, now think about this. Isn't this a wonderful point for meditation about atonement? It raises the issue of atonement.

You can think about the Lord Jesus and the fact that He is the great atonement. He's the Lamb of God. It's not a coin that satisfies the righteousness of God.

This was a means of sustaining a temporary... And remember, in Exodus, it's not even for the temple, it's the tabernacle, which was supplanted and replaced with something better. Now the whole Levitical system is going to be supplanted and replaced with something better. Lots of fruitful meditation going on here.

But all Peter can think about is, Lord, where are we going to get this money? And Jesus says, stop and think. What do you think? Think about it in broader terms. Think about people who are in and people who are out.

Those who already have a relationship with the king don't have to pay a tax in order to support having a king. They have a king. It's their father.

It's their birthright. And that makes the tax of no consequence. And this, in a way, is reflecting the soon disappearance of that Levitical system.

The king is here. The sons of the kingdom are being identified and are identifying themselves with the kingdom. And with that relationship, the old stranger system will go

away.

So there's a hint that this form will soon be passing away in this. But I'm fascinated by Jesus saying, then the sons are free. Having made this theological point, he's back to the practical matter.

So he thinks about the heavenly issue here about being a son, being related to the king, and this rather mundane issue not pertaining. And this, of course, also reflects on the people of Israel who are failing to identify themselves with the kingdom, failing to identify the king. And there is a distinction.

There's a distinction between the sons and those who are not. There's a distinction between those who recognize Jesus Christ and have faith in him and those who don't. For you and for me, there is a distinction.

We are different. You can stand in ranks in uniform, as many of us have done, some of us still do, and you look like everybody else. That's what a uniform is.

It's not a diaphorm, well, it is now, but it didn't used to be, uniform. Everybody looks the same, everybody's got exactly the same thing on, but you can be standing there and you're not like everyone else. We're different.

We are children of God. We are body and bride of Christ. We are indwelt and filled and sealed and gifted and regenerated by the Holy Spirit.

We have an eternal destination. We are living this life for a completely different purpose than perhaps the person on our right and the person on our left who are stuck with just coming up with a diadrachma every year. There are higher, grander things.

The issues in our life are different. We might pay the same tax, we might march to the same drum, but it's for a different reason, a different purpose, it accomplishes a different thing. We have to remember this.

If you don't remember anything else out of this miracle and out of this lesson, remember this. The minutes of our lives are different than the minutes of the lives of anybody that does not have a relationship with Christ. The events of our lives, the details of our life, the decisions and the actions and the thoughts and intents of our heart are different because they are connected to eternity.

They're connected for good or for ill, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, they're connected. We are either laying up for ourselves treasure in heaven or we are storing up wrath on the day of wrath and the righteous judgment of God. You remember our memory verse from Romans chapter 2, those who by patient continuance in well-doing, patient continuance, this is the minutes and the hours of our life.

We're doing what other people are doing. We're washing clothes, we're driving cars, we're accomplishing jobs, we're showing up for appointments, we're being where we're supposed to be, doing what we're supposed to do, but it's different. Patient continuance in well-doing.

We are seeking for what? Accomplishment of the day's tasks, checking the things off the list, seeking for what? Righteousness, glory, eternal life. We have our eyes on the transfigured Christ, not the earthly Christ, not where is he going to come up with a coin, the heavenly Christ, Moses and Elijah, the revealed glory of the future. That's what our eyes should be on.

That's what Peter's eyes should be on. That's what our eyes should be on. Don't take life for granted.

Don't take circumstances for granted. They're not just any old circumstances. You look at this, Peter in this moment on this day had no concept, not the first clue, would not have dreamed in a million years that this little episode and this little conversation would be recorded in the inspired pages of Scripture to be reviewed by hundreds of millions of believers ever after into the eternal future.

For as long as God is on His throne, this will be in the eternal and abiding Word of God. He had no clue that this little happenstance, this little momentary conversation and dialogue with the Lord Jesus was something of consequence. He said, well, somebody's asking me for a tax.

Let me go ask the Lord where we're going to get the coins. He just wasn't even thinking. And Jesus stops him and says, what do you think? What do you think? Your thinking matters.

It's in the pages of Scripture, what Peter thought. Can you imagine what would happen if there's a future Bible and all of our lives are in it at this level of detail? Who knows what God's going to do? Peter certainly had no concept, but here's the point. Our lives matter.

The minutes, the hours, the events, the challenges, the decisions matter. They're being recorded. They're in the books.

It's either gold, silver, and precious stones, or it is wood, hay, and stubble. Don't think that, well, nothing's going to get written down until an angel appears at the foot of my bed and says, go to Africa as a missionary, and I will either decide pro or con, and that will be in the judgment. It's right now.

It's what you decided this morning when you got ready for church. It's what you will decide this afternoon when you decide what to eat and how to eat it and how to clean up afterward and what you're going to do with the remainder of the day. It is what you decide in every single event.

This is the grist. This is the material that will be reviewed and is being recorded for the judgment. That's what it is.

It's not big mountaintop experiences or deep valley experiences alone. It's everything. Jesus says, nevertheless, lest we offend them.

This is interesting because Jesus says, so you and I both know now and agree that I don't owe this tax. That's the upshot, right? I am the lamb of God. I don't have to pay a coin for atonement when I am the atonement.

I am not just going to give a coin. I'll be giving myself. I've been telling you this for weeks, right? Got to add a coin on top of giving everything I am as a sacrifice for the sins of the world to make atonement and you want a coin on top of that? It's absurd.

As absurd as asking the king to pay a tax for the support of himself. Nevertheless, lest we offend them. We can know things.

We can understand things and yet we do not act on them or stand on them or make an issue of them because for people who don't have our understanding, who don't have our level of knowledge, it will offend. It will cause a scandalon, which is a stumbling spot. We can take the stairs two at a time.

If we're fit and motivated, take the stairs two at a time. If you've got a one and a half year old by the hand, you don't take the stairs two at a time. You can, but why would you not? I will cause this little one to stumble.

Little one can't do what I can do and we're joined at this moment. I've got him by the hand. Lest we cause them to stumble.

Jesus knows when it is appropriate to make an issue of something and when not. In order that you may know that the Son of Man has power on earth to forgive sins, I say to you so that you may know I'm going to make an issue out of this healing. Jesus says, these guys aren't going to understand.

I can't say, no, I'm not going to pay it because I'm the Son of God. Well, how am I going to give that to the boss? You know, there's a master tax collector that sends these lackey tax collectors out and they've got to give a report. I contacted 57 guys and here I've got 114 drachmas.

No. So what's the deal? Lest we offend them, go to the sea, cast in a hook, and take the fish that comes up first. Of all of the possible things, why a fish? Well, let me ask you this.

What is Peter's profession? What is he? He's a fisherman. What does he do in the normal course of his life? He fishes. So Jesus says, go do what you normally do.

Sometimes you go out in a boat, sometimes you cast a net, sometimes you just cast in a hook. Depends on how many fish you want. Are you fishing for business or are you fishing for personal provision? Well, when you cast in a net, it's for business.

When you cast in a hook, it's for a meal, right? So that is the nature of the kind of fishing that Jesus tells him to go do. Go cast in a hook. This is what you do to provide for yourself.

So, cast in a hook and take the fish that comes up first. In other words, you say, well, how many fish are going to be coming up? He doesn't say, catch six fish and then find the third one. He says, you're going to catch a fish and that fish is going to be it.

When you have opened its mouth, you will find a piece of money. Take that and give it to them for me and you. It is a personal question because only Peter had the conversation with the tax collectors.

It is a personal provision because only Peter goes out to fish. He catches one fish, which has one coin, which is enough for me and you. You can pay it for me and, by the way, you can pay it for you.

This will satisfy the question without really answering the question. Does your teacher not pay the tax? Well, did he have to dig into his pocket and pay it? It has been paid to satisfy others, but Jesus has not actually paid the tax, has he? Jesus did not have to go out and hoe a row of wheat somewhere and earn the money and then say, okay, here's my tax. It has been provided, essentially, by God in the course of doing normal things.

Provision is made in doing what you know how to do, what you normally do, what is not extraordinary in any way. Nobody is going to raise an eyebrow when they see Peter going out and throwing a line in the water. Nobody is going to raise an eyebrow when they see him pull out a fish.

And nobody is going to be able to see that he's going to pull a coin out of that fish's mouth and then he's done fishing for the day. He goes back, he finds the guys and says, here's the tax. Doesn't make an issue.

Doesn't try to get them to agree that Jesus is the Son of God and doesn't owe the tax. So, why a fish? Well, this also speaks larger things. What's the most famous fish in history? There's one fish, one fish, that is the most famous fish in all the Word of God.

Which fish is it? The fish that swallowed Jonah. What is the theme of the book of Jonah? What's the whole reason that that book is in the Bible? We've done the book of Jonah. We've got a series on it out there.

What did we conclude? What is the theme and the purpose of that book? What does Yonah mean? Jonah's very name. It means the dove, right? And it is a picture of Israel.

Jonah embodies the flightiness, the, what do you say when a gal can't make up her mind? Fickle.

They're fickle. I'm sorry, that was very sexist of me. When a man can't make up his mind, you can say he's fickle also.

Fickleness. Israel can't commit. They're this and they're that.

Or they decide they want to go a different direction. God says, go to Nineveh. Jonah says, no, I'm going the other way.

He gets thrown in the drink. He comes out of the fish. And he says, well, maybe I will go after all.

And then he goes and he preaches his message. They all repent. It accomplishes its purpose.

And now he's unhappy about that. And Israel is unhappy in the sense that when the gospel is spread to the Gentiles, they say, well, what about me? Where's my specialness? And they try to get the Gentiles to come into Israel. And you've got Galatians and you've got the legalism and you've got Thessalonica.

And you've got them not understanding that God has chosen to deliver people other than just Israel. They just don't get it. All of that's embodied in that fish.

So when Jesus says, look, Israel does not understand the plan and purpose of God. But their misunderstanding, you know, in other words, for this tax, God prepared a fish. The first time, God prepared a fish that spits up a prophet.

The second time, God prepares a fish that spits up a gold coin. The prophet in the first case goes and ministers to Gentiles who repent. In the second case, this coin is going to be given to people who have no concept of what it actually means.

They're going to get that coin. Can you imagine what a relic this coin would be in the Catholic world? Oh, you've got a finger bone of John the Baptist? I've got the coin that came out of the fish's mouth. But Peter pays the tax with this coin, and it goes into circulation, and it's long since disappeared from any knowledge.

They didn't know what it meant. They were given something valuable. They were given something that is a result of one of the most amazing miracles Jesus ever did.

It's unrecognizable because they don't have the eyes to see. Peter is the only one who saw that coin, and he has to give it away. He gives it to pay the tax.

Jesus doesn't say, you know, you can keep that as a souvenir. Find another coin to pay the tax. That's what I'd be tempted to do.

This is a miracle coin. I touch things with this coin, and they'll be healed or whatever. It's a miracle coin.

Not at all. But here's the point. There is an outward-looking aspect to our lives.

The Lord Jesus Christ is the atonement, and it isn't recognized by the people for whom he is making atonement. They don't get it. They don't understand it.

He makes this point. They reject it, and he does not press it. You don't understand now, but you will later.

And there is a time, and there has to be a foundation underneath knowledge that people will gain. We learn things. There may be believers that we love, that we have fellowship with, but we would cause them to stumble if we said, oh, by the way, let me tell you something really cool that I learned.

Well, we have a foundation that's been built up over time, and they don't. These tax collectors have no foundation for Peter saying, sorry, we're not going to pay the tax because you're trying to tax the Son of God. You're trying to tax the lamb that takes away the sin of the world.

How ridiculous is that? Well, these guys have no foundation. So Jesus says we're not going to cause them to stumble. So this is a call to sensitivity to where people are.

Don't confuse the issue. This is what Jesus did when he took Peter, James, and John only up the Mount of Transfiguration. Jesus knew where his disciples were.

He took the three who had the ability to comprehend that. He didn't take the other nine. And we need to be sensitive and be careful, full of care, full of concern, full of love, in the sense that we don't make an issue out of the wrong things.

Secondly, God can and will make extraordinary provision for our ordinary needs, and it will come in the ordinary course of what we do. God will make extraordinary provision for ordinary needs, and it will come in the ordinary ways that we operate. Do what you do, Peter.

Go do some fishing. And God will provide, and we won't cause anybody to stumble, not even the other disciples. As far as I know, the other disciples had no knowledge of any of this.

So as a corollary to that, often the answer to a challenge or a problem or an issue or a need, often the answer is, what do you think? The reason this occasion has come up, it's an opportunity to think. Why did this come up in Peter's life? So that Jesus could stimulate his thinking in the realm of larger things. Think about atonement.

Isn't it interesting that they're asking the atoning one to pay an atonement that other

people are paying because the atonement that he's going to make hasn't been made yet? I mean, isn't that interesting? Can you not see the theological warp and woof of this? It's an interesting situation. And Jesus forces Peter to stop and think about spiritual things in the context of what seems to be a quick mundane need. And as I said, often the answer to situations like this, once we do that thinking, once it accomplishes its purpose in stimulating our doctrinal thinking, our spiritual thinking, our recognition of higher and grander things, once that circumstance accomplishes that purpose, then it's resolved.

It's resolved in the ordinary way. We work with our hands. Don't get excited, Paul says.

Just work with your own hands. What does Peter do? He goes out and does what he always does with his hands. He goes out and catches a fish and watch for God.

We work with our hands and we watch God to work with his. Do the thinking. We are stimulated.

We are prodded. We are questioned, just as Jesus does verbally here, by our circumstances. They should cause us to question.

And when it raises a question, let's think. Let's see if we can figure out the answer. Let's tackle that extra credit problem at the end of the chapter.

I think I can figure it out. Let me think about the implications of this, the spiritual ideas that are in it. And when we do that and we continue to work with our hands, we watch for God to work with his and to make extraordinary provision for us.

And sometimes foregoing our privileges can be the best way to enjoy them. Peter had a wife. Other apostles, disciples had wives.

Paul says, do I not have the right to lead about a wife? I do, but I don't. Do we not have the right to be supported by the churches? We do, but we don't. Jesus says, do I not have the right to be exempt from the tax? I do, but I don't.

And sometimes the enjoyment of things comes from not claiming them. I could claim this. I could stand on this.

I could press this point, but I won't. I know the truth of it. And whether anybody else recognizes it or not, I enjoy it and appreciate the privilege that it gives me, but I don't have to claim it.

And I don't have to get everybody else to acknowledge it and recognize it and act upon it and honor it. It is enough that I know. Jesus says, it's enough that we know that you, Peter, are a son, that we are in the royal family and don't owe this tax, but for the benefit of others, we'll pay it anyway.

We have a privilege and we won't exercise it. We have a right and we don't make an

issue of it. Finally, God challenges us to think in terms of spiritual realities and to act accordingly.

This is where we began this morning. We're not any old person. We're not just another domino in the line.

We're not another person in uniform in ranks. We are sons of God. We have eternal life.

What remains to us in this life is all carefully calculated and designed to teach us and to bring us to maturity and to get us to think. So when you think of the miracle of the coin, as great as it is, as funny as it is to think about this coin coming up in the fish's mouth to satisfy the tax collectors, it's an in-joke between Peter and the Lord in that sense. They pay the tax, but God provided it in this extraordinary miracle that nobody knows about.

And they didn't even need to pay it in the first place. But can you imagine the look in the Lord's eye and in Peter's eye when Peter came back from paying that tax? And Peter, you know, Well, Lord, it was just as you said. Never seen anything like it.

Threw it in a hook. Up came the fish. There was the coin.

Went and gave it to the guys. They have no knowledge of where that coin came from. Nobody knows how miraculously you provided for this need.

But there is a bond of fellowship that is drawn closer and tighter because of what Jesus says and does with Peter on this very mundane occasion. And that's what God does with us day by day by day. When we're sensitive, when we try to follow this instruction to think.

What do you think? Isn't this an interesting come to pass? Isn't it interesting from the standpoint of eternal things? And when we do that kind of thinking, God will resolve that issue and move us on to other things. And eventually we may get to climb that mountain and see the revealed glory of Jesus Christ as few have ever seen it. We can be in the group of three rather than the group of nine trying to figure out how to get rid of a demon.

We can be up on top of the mountain looking at Moses and Elijah and the revealed glory of Christ. How great is that? Let's close here in a word of prayer. Father, thank you for the truth of your word and how graphically and compellingly you reveal these things to us, especially in the life of the Lord Jesus Christ as it is recorded for us in the pages of these wonderful gospel accounts.

We pray that God the Holy Spirit will impress on our hearts the tremendous opportunity that you have given us, the tremendous potential that we have because we are your children. We have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ and we have been entered into eternal realms and eternal things and given eternal life. We pray that we

will value these for the precious gifts that they are, that we will avail ourselves of the presence of your spirit and the power of your word to redeem and to invest every moment that remains to us in this life in that eternal future and in those kingdoms which are to come.

We know that when we do this we fulfill our calling, we accomplish our purpose, and we reflect the glory of the Lord Jesus Christ. We pray these things in his name. Amen.