

Introduction

Today stands out on our calendars as Palm Sunday. Two millennia ago crowds lined the street into Jerusalem and the multitudes hailed the entrance of Jesus. "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" they shouted. They were hailing him as Messiah. By the end of the week, they were crying, "Crucify!" Their rejection resulted in part from disillusionment. The people were disillusioned because they had mistaken notions of what the Messiah would be like. The problem, as they saw it, was that Jesus was not as majestic as they had thought Messiah would be. He was weak. He was opposed by the Jewish rulers. The problem with the people's viewpoint was not that their expectations were too high, however. The problem was in fact that their expectations were not high enough. As Matthew unfolds the events of the life of Jesus the Messiah, he leads us to behold the glory of Jesus that was missed by the masses. It is especially the case in our text this morning.

[Read Scripture and Pray]

Matthew's narrative concerning payment of the temple tax is subtle and yet stunning. It takes a fine tooth comb, but when we sweep the teeth through the details of the text, we are treated to a jaw-dropping presentation of the majesty and meekness of Jesus. On the surface, this narrative recounts how Jewish tax-collectors approached Peter to collect.

The tax began as a provision in the law recorded back in Exodus. The requirement was that whenever a census was taken, every man over 20 who was numbered was to pay the tax. The monies supported the service of the tabernacle. In the days of Jesus, the tabernacle no longer existed but had been replaced by the Temple. What had been initiated to support the tabernacle continued now on an annual basis to support the upkeep and service of the temple.

Jesus asserts that as the Son of God, he is free from the obligation to pay the tax. Nevertheless, he will do so in order not to give offense to the collectors. He makes provision not only for himself but also for Peter through a miracle of mind-boggling providence.

Matthew is the only gospel writer to include this particular event. No doubt it was of interest to him since he himself was a tax-collector before Jesus called him to be his disciple. But Matthew's main concern in providing the details he chose by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit is to present Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah, the King. He is showing us that Jesus IS the king and what kind of king he is. The Jews expected the Messiah to DOMINATE their enemies. He would take charge with a rod of iron and rule. They did not expect Messiah to suffer and die. Their idea of Messianic glory was not of one of a humble king who would step down for anyone or anything, but who would step on anyone who would not submit to his authority.

Matthew's inclusion of this event provides a corrective to this mistaken notion of Messiah. He presents a stunningly different, and in fact MORE glorious portrait. We see power and authority for sure, but here is an amazing display of meekness as well. As we comb through this text, we observe unmistakable marks of Christ's majesty as well as marvelous marks of his meekness.

So notice with me first . . .

I. Unmistakable Marks of Majesty.

A. The first mark of Christ's majesty is also a mark of his deity. The Messiah is not merely a mighty man. He is God. And the evidence that first leaps out of this text is that he is omniscient. He knows all things. The tax collectors had approached Peter while he and Jesus were not together. But when Peter entered the house where Jesus was, it was Jesus who addressed Peter first. The matter was on the mind of Peter, but Jesus already knew it because he knows all things. His speaking to Peter first underlines his omniscience.

Omniscience is an attribute that belongs alone to God. He knows all things—past, present, future. He knows what is and he knows what could be. He knows the secrets of men's hearts. John 2:25 bears witness to this attribute as belonging to Jesus. For it says that there were certain people who claimed to believe in Jesus but to whom Jesus would not commit himself because he knew them and knew what was in them. God knows the secrets of the hearts of men as well as what they do openly.

How different would you live, how differently would you think if you would just bear in mind that you cannot hide from Christ. He hears our mutterings and he knows our thoughts. It is reassuring that He will never leave his people, but it should also be a helpful factor in our pursuit of holiness that we know that he is always an observer and always a hearer of everything we say and do. This is a mark of his divine majesty. When Jesus emptied himself, it was not of his deity. His essence did not lose its "Godness." He is God and he knows all things.

B. The second mark of Jesus' majesty is his own testimony that he is the Son of God. He asserts his sonship through a question. "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" The answer was obvious and Peter answered correctly: "From others." Consequently, said Jesus, "the sons are free." They are not under obligation. Jesus is asserting that he, as the Son of God, is not under obligation to pay this tax. The temple is his Father's house, after all.

C. The third mark of Jesus' majesty derives from the fact that this tax was exacted for the sake of the temple. The temple was the heart of Jewish worship. This was where the presence of God was manifest. But the temple was just a shadow of the real meeting place between God and his people. And that meeting place is Jesus himself. There is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus. The temple and I that went on there pointed to something greater, SOMEONE greater, the temple pointed to Jesus. It served the greater interest of Jesus! He is greater than the temple. The tax collectors see the apex of worship when they look at the temple, but the true apex of worship is Jesus! He is worthy of worship. He is the one through whom we come to honor and exalt the almighty and everlasting God!

D. There is one more mark of the majesty of Jesus that we must consider—how he provided the money for Peter to pay the tax. The way Jesus supplied the coin to pay the tax displays his sovereign dominion over the world to the smallest detail. In his providence, a coin found its way into an unlikely place, the Sea of Galilee. It was not just any coin but a shekel, the very coin needed to pay the temple tax for two men. And he provided a

fish. The fish retrieved the coin in its mouth. And now Jesus says to Peter, "Go to the sea. Throw in a hook. You will find in the mouth of the first fish you catch exactly what is needed to pay the tax for me and for you." Think of the variables involved in bringing about this miracle. It is different from most of Jesus' other miracles. This is an incredible miracle of providence. It is evidence not merely of overruling a disease or a demon, but overruling an untold number of circumstances which included where Peter would go to fish, where a coin would be dropped, how a fish would get that coin in his mouth, how water currents would carry that fish precisely to a particular spot, and where and when Peter would toss a hook into the water.

The providence of God is a marvelous thing. He works in wonderful ways to perform wonders bringing mind-boggling multitudes of circumstances together which if any one of them was not present, the entire situation would work out another way.

By the way, God exercises complete providential control over every leaf that falls. And God exercises complete control over every bacteria, every virus, every breeze, and every detail of the incubation of every disease, of you being where you are, when you are, and so on and so on. The providence of God is an amazing thing. And he weaves the ebbs and flows of life and circumstance together to only do good to those who love him and are called according to his purpose! We behold the majesty of Jesus in a glorious way right here in that he is the God whose providence is so amazing!

He is God's Son. He is greater than the temple. The temple is his father's house. He is omniscient. He exercises meticulous providence over every detail in the world. He is the one who gave the command to collect the tax in the first place. Jesus is not only the majestic king; he is the great and majestic God. And his majesty stands out here.

Now against the backdrop of majesty, I want you to see . . .

II. Marvelous Marks of Meekness

A. That Jesus is there in the flesh is itself an incredible mark of meekness. The one who is here speaking with Peter is God the Son. He is immutable, always the same. He is from eternity. He upholds all creation by the word of his power. He governs the world providentially. Yet here he stands as a

man, in a body, in a house, in Capernaum, about 30 A.D. He came and pitched his tent among us. Paul articulates the wonder of Jesus's incarnation to the Philippians saying, "though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men."

There is no greater instance of humility than this of Jesus. Our greatest attempts to imagine the extent of it will all fall short. A king leaves his throne to be a slave. A tycoon gives up all his wealth and takes residence under a bridge. A dictator surrenders his place and becomes a household servant to another. A lion bows down to become a worm. All these images point in the right direction, but each one falls short. The highest exhibition of meekness there ever was or ever will be occurs in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

B. So we marvel at the meekness of Jesus from the point that he is God incarnate, but that is just the beginning. We also marvel that Jesus pays a tax he did not have to pay. He is the God of the universe. His are all the cattle. His are all the nations. The earthly temple belongs to him. He calls it his father's house. He is the true temple. He is the son of the king who gave the tax. There is absolutely no compelling reason for Jesus to pay it. But he does. He does it willingly. All of the markers of majesty in this text highlight Jesus's supremacy—that by virtue of his identity, he was under no obligation whatsoever to pay the tax. This absence of obligation underscores then the fact that he did so freely. Something other than compulsion was motivating him.

C. The text goes further to magnify the meekness of Christ.

1. Matthew points us to the collectors of the tax. They were clear to distance themselves from Jesus. He was PETER's teacher, not theirs. A haughty attitude rings in their question, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" They not only distanced themselves from Jesus, they downplayed his importance. To them Jesus was no more than a teacher. To Peter Jesus was the Christ and the Son of the Living God, but these collectors would have none of that. And yet Jesus is concerned not to offend them.

2. There is also the matter of what the tax was for. It was to pay for the service of the temple. Jesus paid the tax despite the fact that the temple had been corrupted. It was not the house of prayer it was meant to be. It had become a robbers' den, but Jesus paid the tax anyway.

3. And look at how Jesus paid. He did not pay for the purpose of applause. He did not sound a trumpet so everyone would know he paid. He sent Peter to do it without fanfare. He did what he did to please the heart of his Father.

Each of these aspects call attention to the meekness of Jesus. Jesus Christ is king, but he is a humble king. He rules the universe. But he does so in the interest of others. He urges people to come to him for rest because he is meek and lowly of heart. He is sensitive to and cares about those who come to him. He does not bring us to himself simply because he is a power-hungry commander who desires to put us under his thumb. He brings us to himself in order to serve us for our holiness and for our eternal good. So we can find rest for our souls. That is majestic meekness!

Now lastly, I want you to see . . .

III. Monumental Implications for Me and You.

Matthew's inclusion of this event magnifies both the majesty and the meekness of Jesus. He is God and yet he humbles himself willingly and apart from obligation to live in the interest of other people. And he does it even in the interest of persons who do not even follow him, yet. There are monumental implications for you and for me.

A. First, the magnification of the meekness of Christ serves to highlight how glorious he truly is. On the one hand we marvel at what are called God's incommunicable attributes. The incommunicable attributes of God are those characteristics that God alone possesses. They are true of God alone and will never be true of anyone but God alone. These characteristics of God include his omnipotence (almighty power), his omnipresence (that he is everywhere present), his omniscience (his knowledge of all things everywhere), his providential and sovereign rule over his entire creation including the thoughts and intents of all. These characteristics of the being of God call for our worship. They call for us to marvel and ascribe to the

Lord the glory due him. But what Matthew shows us about Jesus is that despite this incomparable greatness, he is willing to lower himself to act in the best interests of others. Here he teaches Peter. He acts so as not to offend non-believers. And he pays the temple tax for Peter. And all of this not grudgingly but willingly.

Because of this willing emptying of himself, because he did not resist taking the form of one of his creatures and becoming a servant, God has highly exalted him and given him a name above every name. And we should fall down at that name and submit ourselves to his Lordship the same way he embraced the role of a servant. You and I need to check ourselves as to our willingness and enthusiasm to worship and obey our Lord. He is good and he does good, and his commands are not burdensome. How could we look at his willingness to be humbled for us and be unwilling to humble ourselves to serve and honor him?

B. A second implication is that the meekness of Jesus serves as a model for our own. As we observe Christ Jesus himself behaving with humility, we are shown what our humility should look like.

For one thing he was sensitive to people who did not even follow him. Here was not a matter of right or wrong. Had it been a matter of righteousness, his concern would not have been with the sensitivities of another. Love does not rejoice with unrighteousness. It certainly was not wrong for Jesus to pay the temple tax, but as the Son, he was not obligated to do so. He did it so as not to offend these outsiders to the kingdom. The principle underlying his action is one of sensitivity in MATTER OF PREFERENCE. In matters of freedom meekness looks beyond how our actions affect ourselves to how they affect others. Jesus himself did this. He curbed his freedom for the sake of not offending unbelievers. You and I follow the pattern of Jesus when we behave with a sensitivity toward how others are affected by what we say and do.

People will be offended by the gospel. People will be offended by righteousness. We must not retreat from either of these. However, let us be careful that others are not unnecessarily offended. The bottom line is that such behavior is self-less. We have a self-less Savior who understood

the sensitivities of others and lived in that light, and we should to, both unbelievers and fellow-believers.

Paul followed this pattern when he preached the gospel. He wrote, "Though I am free from all, I have made myself a servant to all, that I might win more of them. . . . I have become all things to all people, that by all means I might save some. I do it all for the sake of the gospel, that I may share with them in its blessings." This demeanor is not only for those outside of Christ but also for those inside as well. It comes out as Paul instructs the strong in faith to act so as not to offend the weak in faith. The basic principle is that we curb our freedoms for the sensitivities of others. When we behave that way, we magnify the majestic meekness of Jesus.

3. I have a third implication this morning of the majestic meekness of Christ. The meekness of Jesus expressively illustrates the gospel. Peter would find a shekel in the mouth of the fish. Jesus instructed him, "Give it to [the collectors] for me and for you."

Jesus miraculously provided the payment that was owed. And in providing his own, albeit unnecessary, payment, he included Peter. Peter's share of the tax was paid when Jesus paid his. It was not necessary for Jesus to pay, but he did. And in doing so, he took care of Peter as well. Here is an interesting detail. The amount of the tax was a half shekel. But no such coinage existed. You could only pay the tax with a one shekel coin. There was not a single coin that was available to pay for just one person. For this very reason Jewish men generally joined together in pairs to pay the tax. So you see the coin that was needed was provided by Jesus, and in paying a tax he did not owe, he paid for Peter as well.

Brothers and sisters, Matthew has given us a beautiful illustration of the gospel. On the cross, Jesus paid a debt he did not owe. His death on the cross was not a requirement for the Son of God to be the Son of God. He never sinned. A king does not exact payment from his son. That is like exacting payment from himself since the son and the king are one! But this son of the king paid anyway. He paid because he wanted to, not because he had to! And in doing so he provided the necessary payment needed to satisfy the demand for others.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God. We have incurred a debt we cannot pay. If the debt is not paid, we are eternally separated from God; we must bear up under God's eternal and holy wrath for our sin. The only hope of rescue is for the price demanded to be paid. And the only way for our price to be paid is if we are in union with Jesus Christ. I owed a debt I could not pay. He paid a debt he did not owe. And if I through faith am in union with him, his payment suffices for me. This is the good news! This is the gospel! For you to be joined with Christ in his payment, you must be his disciple. He must be your teacher, your savior, and your Lord. You are united to him in this way through faith. You must believe on Jesus. You must turn from sin and trust in him. This faith is a faith that obeys. That is what Peter did. He trusted and he obeyed.

Conclusion

Matthew stops short of telling us, but we know what happened. Peter went to the sea and cast in a hook. He pulled the very first fish he caught out of the water and found a shekel in its mouth. He then went and gave it to the collectors for Jesus and for him. What he owed was paid by Jesus. He was connected with what Jesus paid by his faith. He believed, and he obeyed. Do not fool yourself that you believe in Jesus if you are unwilling to obey him. But if yours is a faith that obeys, rejoice that in Christ your sin debt has been paid.

Jesus paid it all!

All to Him I owe.

Sin had left a crimson stain;
he washed it white as snow.