

Brother of the Son

After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum [by the Sea of Galilee], the collectors of the two-drachma tax [about two days' wages] came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?"

"Yes he does," he replied.

When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon [Jesus had renamed Simon as Peter]? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?"

"From others," Peter answered.

"Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we may not offend them, go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch; open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it to them for my tax and yours." Matthew 17:24-27 (NIV with my bracketted comments)

This passage in Matthew is headed 'The Temple Tax' but there is a far deeper message in it than the importance of paying taxes or even the supernatural provision of the money in the mouth of a fish. It is about the relationship between God, Jesus and Peter and therefore between God, Jesus and us.

First the matter of the tax: Tax collectors came to Peter out on the street and challenged him. "Doesn't your teacher pay the [two-drachma] temple tax?" You can almost hear the sneer in '*your* teacher'. They clearly reckoned that Jesus didn't pay his tax or they wouldn't have been asking Peter. But why ask Peter rather than Jesus himself? It's easier to pick on a lesser figure and maybe they were scared that Jesus would use their own question against them as he had already done with the religious leaders, the Pharisees.

When Peter stepped inside the house a short conversation began between Jesus and Simon Peter:

"What do you think, Simon? From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own sons or from others?"

"From others," Peter answered.

"Then the sons are exempt," Jesus said to him. "But so that we do not offend them [the tax-collectors] go to the lake and throw out your line. Take the first fish you catch, open its mouth and you will find a four-drachma coin. Take it and give it to them for my tax and yours."

Jesus was talking to Simon Peter as his brother, not just as his teacher and Lord. He was effectively saying, "We are both sons of the ultimate King, God himself, the one the temple was built for. So neither of us need to pay this tax. Neither of us have the money anyway so I'll show you how to get enough to answer their question. I'll pay my tax and, more than that, I'll pay yours too." I imagine Jesus could have produced a coin where he sat, but he was inclusive. He connected with Peter straight away by asking him "What do you think?" He chose to involve Peter. "We'll do this together brother. I'll tell you how to get the money and you use your skills to catch a fish. Then you can have the satisfaction of seeing their faces when you hand over the coin. Twice what they are expecting."

Jesus could have let Peter use a net to make the job easier, though that could have led to catching several fish. The fact that it would be a single fish eliminated any accusations of chance. The line and hook method guaranteed catching only one fish at a time and Jesus knew it would be *the* fish. Peter obeyed. This is an illustration of the ministry of the gospel: Jesus instructs us to cooperate with what God is already doing. The scene is companionable. It's about togetherness and relationship. One-to-one. There is no mention of other disciples turning up and joining in. It's Jesus and Peter—two brothers. The whole thing is supernatural: You can't be a brother to the Son of God without the work of the Holy Spirit. You can't know there will be a coin in a fish's mouth without the Holy Spirit revealing it. [And not just any coin: the exact four drachma needed].

Jesus is the firstborn among many brothers. (See Romans 8:29). He used the challenge about taxes to draw Peter deeper into the knowledge and understanding of his relationship. Jesus' simple question and its obvious answer is a parable about the sons of God. Without actually stating that Peter is a son of God, the implication is unmistakable, especially with Jesus saying 'we'. "The sons are exempt but so that we don't offend them ..." Peter could not have missed the link: 'we', 'sons'. He may have been an unschooled fisherman but he was not stupid. Jesus was using the parable to tell Peter that he too was a son of God [though not *the* Son of God]. Jesus and Peter now shared the same Father and so do we when we are born-again believers in Jesus. That is the stupendous message at the heart of the story.

Through faith in Jesus, Peter became a son of God. Through faith in Jesus we become sons of God. Paul tells the Galatians:

You are all sons of God through faith in Christ Jesus, for all of you who were baptised into Christ have clothed yourselves with Christ. Galatians 3:26-27

Matthew's account, the only gospel to describe this event, does not record what happens next; it was taken for granted. Of course Peter caught a fish; of course it was the right fish; of course the coin was exactly the amount needed; of course Peter paid the tax collectors.

Can you imagine Peter's satisfaction and joy, clasping the coin in his hand, walking up the street and then handing over the coin to pay the tax. "Here you are. Four drachma. That covers Jesus and me." "Yeah," he might have said to himself. "Jesus and me. Brothers. Yeah."