

# Jesus on Death & Taxes (17:22-27)

Good morning stuff (intros, turn to the passage, etc.)

If you've been following things happening in the world right now, you'll probably know about Russia invading and attacking parts of Ukraine. Now, there's a whole lot that could be talked about relating to it, but I want to focus quickly on President Zelensky. A lot of people have been really drawn to his leadership and his posture during everything that's going on. You may have heard this, but the US military offered to evacuate Zelensky, and in response he said, "the fight is here, I don't need a ride, I need ammunition." He has every reason and right to get out of there, but he's choosing to be present and lead and do whatever needs to be done for the sake of his people and his country. And that's something that *many* people are inspired by. And this morning we're going to talk about the reason *why* many people are so taken by it and by other things like this.

So we're at a really interesting point in the book of Matthew now. To catch you up, the previous chapter, chapter 16, marked a turning point in Jesus' ministry. Peter *correctly* identifies Jesus' identity, which is great! Shout out to Peter for putting one on the scoreboard! And after that happens, Jesus starts telling his disciples they need to head towards Jerusalem where he will have to suffer, be killed, then be raised from the dead. Which, to put it mildly, is a huge buzzkill for the disciples. And a couple weeks ago, Jesus' identity was really solidified for three of the disciples, Peter, James, and John on the mountain where the *literal* voice of God the Father says to "listen to Jesus."

So we're picking up today after the transfiguration as it's called, and after the story of Jesus healing the boy with epilepsy. Jesus and his disciples are reconvening all together. Let's take a look at Matthew 17 starting in verse 22:

*22 When they came together in Galilee, he said to them, "The Son of Man is going to be delivered into the hands of men. 23 They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." And the disciples were filled with grief.*

This isn't the main focus today but I want to talk about it really quickly. Right here we see Jesus repeat what he said to his disciples in the previous chapter. He tells them that he, the Son of Man (one of his preferred titles for himself), is going to be killed and raised to life. Now, remember how they responded the last time he said this? Peter tried to rebuke him. He basically said, "absolutely not on my watch!" Then Jesus called him Satan. Pretty interesting interaction there. But here, we see them respond in a different way. They don't have any outbursts as far as we can tell, but they are "filled with grief." There's a few reasons they would have responded this way. He was obviously their close

friend, and hearing that such a friend is going to be killed is certainly a way to harsh the mellow a little. But like we said earlier, the disciples are now more convinced than ever that Jesus is the Messiah, the new king, the *conquering* king in their minds. He's finally here! And for the second time he's just told them he won't be violently overthrowing the establishment, but will be violently *killed* by the very ones he has come to save. And they are filled with grief.

And while the disciples do have a better understanding of who Jesus is, I feel like this is another version of what we might call a "dense disciple moment." **They know Jesus is the Messiah, but they still don't fully grasp what it means.** He's told them what needs to happen and said he's going to be raised back to life. But because of their expectations for what they think he *should be* doing, they are "filled with grief" at the notion that he won't be doing exactly what they expect or want. Keep reading in verse 24 and we'll dive into what we're focusing on today:

*24 After Jesus and his disciples arrived in Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma temple tax came to Peter and asked, "Doesn't your teacher pay the temple tax?" 25 "Yes, he does," he replied.*

Capernaum is their "home base" of sorts. It's where Peter is from, so they are most likely at Peter's house or the house of one of his close relatives. And we see some people show up to collect a "temple tax." This tax is not a civil tax due to the Roman empire. Not a government tax. This is a *religious* tax. It's to fund the temple which is the religious hub of this region for Jews. And since the temple was so large and was such a big deal at the time, it required a lot of money to function. Think of it kind of as a religious version of an HOA fee. Paying the tax was a way of recognizing the importance and necessity of the temple for Jewish religious life. So these temple employees, not religious leaders, come to Peter and ask if Jesus pays the tax.

We as modern readers probably don't pick up on it at first glance, but this is a pretty tense moment. Like we just said, the temple was the center of religious culture. And they're asking Peter if his Rabbi, his teacher, the one who has been pretty outspoken against the religious leaders of the time, if *he* contributes to helping it function. So Peter is in an awkward position. And so Peter, my dear, sweet, wildly overconfident Peter, in his **complete** inability to handle conflict speaks up. **"Um, yeah! Of course."** He boldly answers a question he does not in fact know the answer to. Haven't we all? **I used to have a super bad habit of doing stuff like this. I've always had a really hard time saying, "I don't know" to a question, whether it's a definition of a word, or a reason behind a rule, or directions. Anything really. So what I used to do was, without skipping a beat, answer with the utmost confidence. And when people found out that I did *not* in fact know the**

correct answer, it, correctly, infuriated them. Fortunately I think I've grown a lot in it, but it was a real problem for a while. Let's keep reading:

*When Peter came into the house, Jesus was the first to speak. "What do you think, Simon?" he asked. "From whom do the kings of the earth collect duty and taxes—from their own children or from others?" 26 "From others," Peter answered. "Then the children are exempt," Jesus said to him.*

"When Peter came into the house." So Peter wasn't even *with* Jesus a second ago. And when he gets inside, Jesus is the one who initiates the conversation. Now, I don't know if Jesus overheard the whole interaction from inside the house or if he had a moment of divine intuition and he was just aware of what happened, but this is a very comical scene in my mind. I like to think of Peter realizing he may have come across a bit strong and trying to slip quietly back into the house. He walks in from this interaction, probably thinking, "don't look at Jesus, don't look at Jesus, don't be suspicious," and Jesus goes, "whaddya think Pete?" Boom, frozen in his tracks.

Then Jesus takes things for a bit of a turn. Jesus shifts into a teaching illustration and poses a question about rulers collecting taxes from their subjects. He asks Peter a question that would have had a really obvious answer at the time. When kings or rulers collected tax from their subjects, other members of the royal family were considered part of the king's household, not subjects. "Over in the palace, do you think Caesar makes his 12-year-old son pay taxes? Sends a tax collector in, breaks open his piggy bank, and takes his cut?" To which the answer would've been "of course not." *This would be similar to a family business today. I don't know if any of you have been a part of a family who owned a business, but it's basically the equivalent of being able to say, "my dad owns the place."* My wife Sara has very fond memories of a kid in her class growing up whose parents owned a few Domino's Pizza locations. And you better believe that kid helped throw some dope parties for his class with all the pizza you could dream of. And it was just a general understanding that if this kid was at the party, there would be pizza. *And they owned an ice cream place apparently, so basically every kid's dream. But it was just understood that this kid would always have pizza. And it was always covered because his parents owned the place.* So Jesus points out that children of rulers aren't required to pay. He says, "the children are exempt."

So you've got to read between the lines just a little here. Jesus' implication is that he is exempt from paying the temple tax, *because* he is a son of God the Father; and the temple is the Father's house. With our modern lens and understanding of scripture as a whole, this can be easy to gloss over. But I want us to pay close attention to what's actually happening here and just how significant it is. We've heard Jesus talk about his

Father periodically and tend to just accept that it's commonplace. But you need to realize that no other religious teacher or leader has *ever* referred to God as their father. Remember, Jewish tradition puts God at an unbelievably high position, and rightly so! They elevate him to the point where only one individual each year gets to go into the innermost part of the temple, the Holy of holies, the place where God's presence comes down and encounters earth. And even then it's only after following all of the rigorous ceremonial washing practices and sacrifices. It was a big deal. He is the creator of the universe, the King of kings, the Lord of lords. But Jesus has been referring to him as *father*.

So Jesus is saying, "hey, I am the son of the Father. And you are also considered sons of the Father, we're family. **My dad owns the place.**" Now, Jesus could have ended it right there, not paid the guys, and gone on his merry way. He just had a conversation with Peter where that's exactly what he said he could do. He has *every right* not to pay the temple tax. He and his disciples have the *freedom* not to. But that's not where he stops. And this is where the story takes a somewhat bizarre and unexpected turn. Let's finish reading the passage:

27 "But so that we may not cause offense, 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."

This is super interesting. What did Jesus just say? "So that we" *what?* May not cause offense? Now that should cause all of us to do a double-take. *So we may not cause offense?* Peter's probably thinking, "I don't know how to tell you this, Jesus, but we have *wildly* offended a lot of people up until this point." When has Jesus ever actively avoided offending people? And people associated religious leaders especially? Just a few chapters later, Jesus is in this very temple flipping tables and cracking a whip to drive out predatory merchants for **changing money for this exact tax!** That feels offensive. So, clearly Jesus has no issue with doing things that seem offensive when the situation warrants his response, but here we see that sometimes he chooses not to when causing offense isn't actually necessary in order to communicate truth. This has huge implications, and we'll get there in just a second, but first let's finish unpacking probably the most odd part of the passage.

Jesus tells Peter to go do something miraculous, or at the least something *very* coincidental. He says to go catch a singular fish, open its mouth, and find a coin that exactly covers his and Peter's tax amount. A few details make this confusing. First, Peter was a fisherman by trade, and no fisherman who has any desire to be productive uses a line to catch a single fish over a net to catch as many as possible. Second, as far as we

can tell, all of the disciples are in Capernaum together. It's not just Peter and Jesus, so money to cover just two people wouldn't cover all the tax. Third, this is where the story ends. Nowhere in the Scripture does it say that Peter *actually did* go catch a fish with money in it, so it would be the only miracle Jesus talks about doing without actually doing it. And fourth, if it was done, this would be the only miracle performed that was both in private and self-serving. It would not have been to display his authority or divine nature, it would just be to cover the cost of this tax.

Many scholars have different opinions on what this means. But several that I read shared the same conclusion, and it is absolutely fantastic in my opinion. It brings so much humanity and realness to the personhood of Jesus. The illustration of finding something valuable inside a fish was actually a pretty common literary tool used at this time. It was often used to serve as a description of how God provided or how things just ended up working out in the end. A close modern equivalent would be the idea of digging through the couch cushions or under the seats in your car to find some change to cover the cost for something. So several scholars conclude it is likely Jesus is referencing a common trope to highlight how he and the disciples don't have much money to speak of, if any at all. So they think he's basically saying to Peter, "we'll pay the tax, but we don't have a lot of cash, so you better go get one of those handy dandy money fish!" Which is hilarious to me. I love these depictions of Jesus being a guy with a sense of humor. In any case, what we come away with is that Jesus and his disciples decide to pay the tax, regardless of where they came up with the money. And the most significant part is what we mentioned earlier, and it's the reason *why* they pay.

So there we have it, Jesus talks about death and taxes. What does that mean for all of us? I can tell you that it *doesn't* mean none of us have to pay taxes. So if that's what you've been waiting for, you've got your answer, and you still have 8 days to file, not just 5 like some of you thought. What I want us to take a closer look at is Jesus' posture and response in this situation. We know without a shadow of a doubt that Jesus has no qualms about causing offense in certain situations. And we also know from this passage that Jesus does not see it as an *obligation* to pay the temple tax. He made it clear that he can claim an exemption from it. He has *every right* not to pay. Complete *freedom* to not pay. But what does he do? He's willing to pay it anyways. And he does it as a means of not causing offense or stirring up drama or making life harder for these people who are here just doing their job.

He is actively and deliberately choosing to lay aside his freedom. He is saying he is willing to lay aside his rights in order to serve others or serve another purpose. And I think Jesus is giving us an example of a way to live that feels incredibly counter-cultural in today's world and has huge implications for many areas of life. Jesus here is modeling

a posture that is absolutely central to how we think about our lives as followers of Jesus: **that there are situations where we lay down our rights and freedoms for the benefit of others.** That there is such a thing as a situation where you have the right or the freedom to *not* do something, but you choose to do it anyway. Jesus makes abundantly clear here that he has every right *not* to pay the temple tax. And yet he chooses to anyway. That attitude is not the norm, especially here in 2022 America.

Let me give you some quick examples of what I mean. **Imagine with me briefly that you are watching a TV show tonight, and in the middle, it gets interrupted by a breaking news story (This example relies heavily on network TV and not streaming services, but bear with me).** And in this report, the news anchor says there have been several studies done on nutrition and food distribution across TN, and now everyone is being **strongly recommended to get all their groceries exclusively from Food City in order to help everyone out.** I don't know about you, but in this example my first response would be to chuckle all the way to Kroger. Right? You can't tell me where to shop. Besides, I have way more fuel points at Kroger. *And 5x fuel points on gift cards?!* Come on. I have every right to shop wherever I want, and even if it *may be* helpful to others in some way for me to go to Food City, I'm going to at least bristle at the thought of someone telling me I *should* shop there over somewhere else. That's obviously a fictitious example (at least I hope it stays that way), but this kind of thing absolutely happens. Think about mask recommendations over the last couple years and the different responses, think about the debates on public versus private schools, think about arguments surrounding anything to do with guns in America.

The idea of personal rights and freedoms is the framework of our society. Sometimes it feels like it's the only lens we see cultural issues through: "does this give me *more* freedom, or *less* freedom?" And to many people, anything that doesn't fall in line with the "more freedom" side is *at best* a bad idea and *at worst* it's downright evil and un-American. Our society constantly bombards us with the idea that *you* and your preferences, as an individual, take precedence over everything else in your life. But we just read a story about Jesus very clearly saying what his *rights* were in the situation, then immediately saying he was laying those aside for the sake of someone else. And this concept comes up for *us* as followers of Jesus very clearly later on in the New Testament. Look with me at Galatians chapter 5:

*You, my brothers and sisters, were called to be free. But do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh; rather, serve one another humbly in love. For the entire law is fulfilled in keeping this one command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."*

"Do not use your freedom to indulge the flesh." Indulging the flesh could mean all sorts of



things. And I'm sure every single person in this room, myself included, could come up with a pretty convincing argument as to why our preferences wouldn't count as "indulging." But it's so easy to get caught up in distractions and miss entirely what this passage is telling us. It's the part *after* that matters. "Serve one another humbly in love." It's not "what do I have the *right* to do," but more "what can I *lay down* or *lay aside* to serve others." **If at any point we reference "freedom" as a reason to not serve others, we've missed the point.** In fact, if at any point you use the word "freedom" to describe doing something that only benefits you and ignores or neglects the call to serve others, you may be describing **American** freedom, but you are certainly *not* describing **Christian** freedom. Because Christian freedom, according to Galatians 5, is for the purpose of serving others, even to the detriment of our own preferences and desires. Jesus *consistently* put this on display for us.

So what does it look like in our lives? So many of us are in different stages of life, different circumstances, different situations, but every single one of us as a follower of Jesus is called to model this same attitude from Jesus. Married people in the room: you have every *right* to use your home as a private sanctum. An insular place where you can shut the door and shut out the outside world and everything that comes with it. But if you're a follower of Jesus, you can regularly use your home as a means of loving and caring for others. You can open your door to people in your life who may not have family around. **"Family dinner" doesn't have to only apply to the people who live in your house.** Or maybe it can actually look like opening your home for someone to live with you and your family. To be a part of your home, day in and day out. You can use your home as a place to make people feel loved and cared for. A place for people to feel completely welcome with nothing to prove or earn.

Parents, you have every "right" to keep strict bedtime schedules and private routines with your kids. But you can also use your freedom to invite other people into your routines and family time, even when it occasionally interferes with bedtime and routines. **I knew a family back in South Carolina who, when they had people over at their house and it was bedtime for the kids, they'd invite the people to join in. They'd walk through the whole process with them. They'd brush teeth together, sing a song, read a story, pray together, the whole deal. And sure, it might take longer with a couple people who aren't normally a part of it, but to them it was worth it to bring other people into their life and routine. And this is something Sara does sometimes too. Occasionally we'll be over at Kent and Ana's house and she'll ask if she can go through their bedtime routine instead because it's something she enjoys and a way for her to serve them as parents. And sure, sometimes that may disrupt the normal schedule a little bit, but it's worth it to welcome people into your life.**

Single people in the room: you have every right to go out every night or every weekend late with other people. But you can also use your freedom to spend quality time with people who don't have as much freedom in their schedule to be out of the house in the evening. You can go have a "boring" (at least from your perspective) night with someone in your LifeGroup who can't leave the house at night once their kids are asleep. It could look like joining in with routines of helping prepare a meal in someone else's house or joining in those other family routines. **We had our whole LifeGroup over to our house a few weeks ago for a game night and had single people, married people, and parents with kids and our dog and it was beautifully crowded. Our house isn't tiny, but 17 adults, 4 kids, and a 60 pound lab in one living room can feel like a lot. And the best part was no one was "hands-off." Everyone had the understanding that we're all here together to be with each other, but also to love and serve each other. So if a toddler comes across the room or across the house, you're on duty now. Is that required? No. But you better believe every single person in that room was more than willing to take full responsibility for and love every single one of those kids. And the parents were willing to let that happen. And any of those people had every right to be anywhere else. But they were choosing to lay that aside to be present and be invested in each other's lives, even if it meant disrupting some bedtimes, or being a little crowded, or watching kids when you don't have to.**

All of us, especially according to the world's standards, have every right to use our money and our resources in whatever way we want. We can rest easy at night knowing the number in our savings account, or retirement, or portfolio is going up. *Or* we can look for ways to sacrificially provide for other people's needs. We can serve others, even if it means this month you're not putting as much into savings as you would prefer or you planned. Or maybe it means postponing that vacation to help someone in your LifeGroup or in our church. Or maybe it means taking someone on that vacation with you to love on them because they might not have been able to otherwise.

I've also seen some really cool examples in other ways in some of our LifeGroups over time. I know of groups who have had rhythms of going to local breweries to hang out, or having a couple beers in the backyard. But when anyone in their group who wanted to be more involved shared that they historically had an unhealthy relationship with alcohol, and being around alcohol was difficult for them, the group was more than willing to change their rhythms. They were willing to use their *freedom* to serve someone in their group instead of using it as a means to serve their own convenience or preferences. How beautiful is that?

Here's an interesting example: as hard as it may be for some of you to believe, early on in our church's history, we had almost *no* college students. We literally had *one*. In fact,



we were almost completely one age demographic. But we were consistently praying for the Lord to bring more and more people from all demographics to get more involved. And we had a couple college students say they believed in what we were doing here in Knoxville. And they committed to being some of the first and only students we had around because they had a desire to see those numbers grow and be a part of welcoming more people like them. They could have easily gone to any number of different churches that have plenty of things specifically tailored to attract college students or places with event after event. But they were willing to lay aside their preference for a large contingent of students in order to serve others who would come after by being the first ones. And if you look around the room most weeks, you can see how faithful the Lord has been in using those people to help create a space where students feel welcome and seen and loved.

Some of you who are older than the average age of our church are doing the same exact thing right now. You're setting aside your "freedom" to be a part of a church where more people are in your stage of life, and God is already using it to grow and mature us as a church family. Many of you are doing the same thing as an ethnic minority in our church, and God is using it. It's amazing what God can do when his people decide to lay down their rights and freedoms to serve others.

The list could go on and on. But these are just some examples of what it looks like to lay down your rights and freedoms for the benefit of others. And if we are followers of Jesus, that's precisely what he is calling us to do. And whether we ever see tangible fruit from it or not, it's still how we're called to live.

And the reason we do this isn't just because it's a good thing to do or even just because Jesus told us to do it; it's first and foremost because it is what Jesus himself did. Look back at the beginning of our passage in verses 22 and 23. "The Son of Man [that's Jesus talking about himself] is going to be delivered into the hands of men. They will kill him, and on the third day he will be raised to life." **Do you think Jesus, God in the flesh, had the right, had the freedom, to say no to the cross?** Of course! That's part of the beauty of it. Jesus laid aside more freedom than we could ever dream of for the sake of others. Jesus does not leverage his freedom for his own convenience or at the expense of anyone else.

Paul sums this all up beautifully in Philippians 2, and this is where we'll end today. We'll put it up on the screen for you, starting in verse 3:

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the*

*interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the **same mindset as Christ Jesus**: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death— even death on a cross!*

He is willing to restrict and inconvenience himself for the sake of others. For my sake. For *your* sake. He is our example. And it's my prayer today that we continue to become a group of people who more and more resemble the posture of Jesus in the way we live.

Let's pray.