

PRAYING RESPONSIBLY

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Scripture: Matthew 17:24-27

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?" 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?" When Peter said, "From strangers." Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are exempt. 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."

Will you pray with me? Almighty God, would You, under the inspiration of Your Spirit, amplify and illumine for us this episode with Your Son, that we may glean from it nuggets of truth which we may apply in our own hearts and our lives. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

This is a familiar passage of scripture for most of you. The Jews had a two-drachma tax that was used for the upkeep of the temple. Every male Jew above the age of eighteen had to pay this tax. As Peter is walking along with Jesus, he feels a tap on his shoulder (if I can take a bit of poetic license) and he is asked, "Hey, does your teacher pay the two-drachma tax?" And Peter, being Peter, immediately says, "Yes, of course!" But he is troubled by this question, and I think it has to do with him not really knowing whether it has been paid or not.

But Jesus sees that, and preempts what he is going through, and says, "Peter, let me ask you a question. From whom do the kings of the earth collect customs or poll tax, from their sons or from strangers?" From whom do kings collect taxes – from their people or from their children? And it's a no-brainer for Peter, and so he says, "Of course, from the people." And Jesus says, "You are right! Therefore, the sons are exempt." Jesus then takes this a little further, and I believe that, in this particular conversation, a kingdom principle is thrown up for us. Jesus says, "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."

What is Jesus saying? He is saying, "Peter, here's the thing. I don't need to pay the temple tax. Why? Because the temple is for the worship of My Father. And I'm the Son of God. Therefore, I am exempt. But lest it offend them, go and pay the tax." And Jesus gives Peter a very unique way of paying taxes. He says, "Go fishing. The first fish that you get, open its mouth. You'll find a shekel inside. Go and pay it for you and for Me."

Wait a minute! Pay for Peter as well? so obviously Peter hadn't paid that tax till that time. And Jesus was saying, "Go ahead Peter, and pay this tax. Even though I don't need to pay it, you do. Jesus is saying, "Lest it offend them, go and pay it."

What is the principle? Jesus, by right, didn't need to pay that temple tax. As the Son of God, He didn't; but as a responsibility towards the things that He had come to do on the earth, He said, "I don't want them to be offended lest they lose the bigger picture for this small

incident.” Jesus was saying, “This is my right, but I will be responsible to make sure that my right doesn’t get in the way of my responsibility. Go and pay the tax, Peter.”

Why am I talking about responsibility? Because I think that we have a huge responsibility today. We have a responsibility to what is happening in the world. Even though we may be limited in our mobility, the ability to do things, still God has placed us here for this time, in this season, for a particular reason. We have a responsibility to be able to find out what that reason is, and then be able to accomplish it.

Paul did. In Philippians 1:21-26 (remember that Paul is writing this particular epistle from prison) – *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain. But if I am to live on in the flesh, this will mean fruitful labor for me; and I do not know which to choose. But I am hard-pressed from both directions, having the desire to depart and be with Christ, for that is very much better; yet to remain on in the flesh is more necessary for your sake. Convinced of this, I know that I will remain and continue with you all for your progress and joy in the faith, so that your proud confidence in me may abound in Christ Jesus through my coming to you again.*

What is Paul saying? He says, “Here I am. I’m in prison. I’m tired, I’ve gone through so much. I just want to be with Jesus, and how wonderful that will be. On the other hand, to be with you will mean that I can continue to labor for you.” It seems like he is weighing two options in his mind. He says, “But convinced of this, I know that I will stay on.” Not that Paul had any ability to determine the length of his days. No, he didn’t. But it was the attitude that he had, that he felt that this would be the more responsible thing. While it could be my right – that I have done enough, I want to go home, I want to be with Jesus. My responsibility in this place far outweighs my rights.

Remember, Paul was in prison when he wrote this epistle. He was in prison when he wrote Colossians, Ephesians, and Philemon. Four of the letters that we read today come out of isolation. Paul by himself – just writing. That brings so much encouragement and hope to each one of us, because in his mind, he chose the more responsible thing to do.

So, this morning, again I would say to you – What is the responsible thing that you and I ought to be doing? What is it that you and I are here during this period with the COVID-19 virus becoming a pandemic? Why has God chosen us to be in this century, in this age, in this year, in this day? What is the role and what is the purpose that we have today?

I would suggest two things to you:

1. Pray.

The most important thing that you and I can do within the confines of our homes as all of us are in lockdown, with limited mobility is to pray. That hasn’t been locked down in our lives. The ability to beseech our Heavenly Father and say, “Lord, would You do something in our midst to curb this virus, to contain it, to give people worldwide the ability to find something to eradicate this virus from the face of the earth. Also, reach into isolation rooms and hospitals and places where patients are, and touch them and bring healing to them.” Beloved, think of this: the only one who can do this is God. You and I have direct access to Him and the question for us is – are we using it? Are we crying before Him?

The Bible tells us that it is not God's heart that even one would perish, not one. Yet how many are perishing today? If it is not God's heart that even one should perish, then is it that we have a role that we are not playing today?

1 Kings:17,18

God went to Elijah – Go to Ahab's court and I will send rain. It was not Elijah's idea. God's will, God's timing and God's initiative – everything came from God. Elijah goes and after the wonderful spectacle on Mount Carmel, he goes up to the top of the mountain to pray. What is he doing? He is praying passionately, persistently; he's praying tenaciously. The Bible tells us that he is crouching down and praying. In Mid-Eastern times, that was the position of a woman giving birth. He's crying with that kind of passion for what was God's will, God's timing and God's initiative. And then only the rain came.

I wonder at this time, whether God is saying to His church – I need you to pray even though it is My will that not one should perish. You have a task to do, that you must do at this time. Pray, storm the gates of heaven and cry out to God and pray. Remember when Jesus said, "The harvest is plenty." But He said, "Pray to the Lord of the harvest to send more people." Pray. When Jesus was faced with His most challenging time in the garden of Gethsemane, He prayed. How important it must be that you and I spend these days praying.

In the tenth chapter of the book of Daniel, he is praying. He has realized that the period of exile is coming to an end, and he is praying and he is mourning for 21 days. For 21 days he prays and then the answer comes. And the angel tells him: The first day that you started praying, God heard and I was sent. But I was stopped by the prince of Persia. The evil forces stopped that answer from coming down. But what was Daniel doing in the interim? He was praying for 21 days, and then there was a breakthrough and the answer came down to earth.

I wonder why we have a 21-day isolation period for those of us in India? Do you think maybe that you should be using that time to go to God and say, "Lord, have mercy, have compassion on Your people. Lord God, do something, because only You can. As Your church, we are crying out before You, on our knees. Lord God of heaven, do something here on earth for people who are suffering." We must pray, beloved, we must pray.

The poem by Pastor Martin Niemöller that went like this: First they came for the communists, and I did not speak out.... I was thinking that it fits perfectly for today.

First it came to China, and I did not pray – because I was not in China.
Then it came to Italy, and I did not pray – because I was not in Italy.
Then it came to Spain, and I did not pray – because I was not in Spain.
Then it came to England, and I did not pray – because I was not in England.
Then it came to the United States, and I did not pray – because I was not there.
Then it came to me....

We must imagine that somebody close to us could be infected and pray with that kind of intensity and tenacity. I believe that is the role that we have today. The responsibility that God has given to us as a church is to pray. Storm the gates of heaven and ask Him to intercede, to eradicate this virus from the face of the earth.

2. Encourage.

We have a responsibility towards people around us, and that is to encourage them. There are many isolated in homes today who are fearful and anxious and are struggling. One of the things that we can do is call up people, talk to them. Maybe ones who don't know the Lord, or are not of the same faith. Call up everybody and just say, "Hey, can I pray with you and ask for God's peace to descend into your home?" Write an email to somebody with whom you have not connected for a long time, anywhere in the world and say: Hey! I was thinking of you and praying for you. Beloved, we need to be encouragers as well, during this time. Encourage people, let them know that He is with us even during these times.

As Isaiah says, "When the flood waters come, they will not overwhelm you; the fire will not singe you." Speak those words over them. Ask God to bring to your mind who you need to connect with today and make those calls, write those letters, pray for those people.

Beloved, we have a responsibility. God in His great wisdom, placed you and me in the world at this time, and who knows that it was not for such a time as this, that we are called to be the church. Pray on the one hand, and encourage on the other.

Shall we pray?

Almighty God, use us Lord. show us how to pray, for we are weak. We don't even have the staying power. Help us Lord, to spend time; lead us through your Holy Spirit, to pray and pray and pray. Bring to us pictures of people who we need to be encouraging at a time like this. Lord, I pray for each one who is online watching this. May Your peace descend on them and into their homes, that they would understand that this is the peace that passes human understanding. If you would receive this benediction. And now, unto Him who is able to keep you from falling and to present you faultless before His eternal throne of grace; to Him be all majesty, dominion and power, now and forevermore. Amen.