

#62 “WHO IS THE GREATEST?”

MATTHEW 17:24-27; 18:1-6; MARK 9:33-37, 42; LUKE 9:46-48

Peter, James and John had just witnessed the transfiguration of Jesus (Matt. 17:1-13); and got to see Elijah and Moses. Afterwards, they went through the region of Caesarea Philippi, then through Galilee (Mk. 9:30), and then back to Capernaum where Jesus deals with a few matters pertaining to taxes (Matt. 17:24-27), pride (Matt. 18:1-6), and issues of sin and church discipline (Matt. 18:7-35).

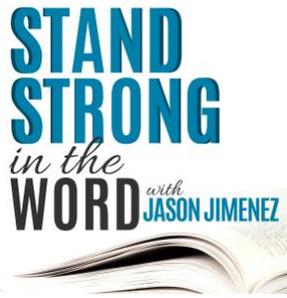
FIRST EVENT: PETER FINDS A COIN IN A FISH’S MOUTH

MATTHEW 17:24-27

²⁴ When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” ²⁵ He said, “Yes.” And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?” ²⁶ And when he said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free. ²⁷ However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast 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 me and for yourself.”

1. **When they came to Capernaum (v. 24a)**—Capernaum acted as the headquarters of much of Jesus’ earthly ministry.
2. **The collectors of the two-drachma (denarius) tax went up to Peter and said, “Does your teacher not pay the tax?” (v. 24b)**—This temple tax comes from Exodus 30:11-17. Every Jewish man 20 years and older was required to pay this tax (half a shekel or two drachma) for temple upkeep. The Jewish leaders in charge of administering the annual tax are attempting to prove Jesus a lawbreaker since He had yet paid the tax.
 - A. **Temple tax** - “Until the revolt against Rome, all Jewish adult males in the Roman Empire paid an annual two-drachma tax for the support of the Jerusalem temple. This tax yielded so much revenue that the temple authorities simply began constructing a golden vine, to which they added annually. Some Jewish sects refused to contribute to this tax, so the collectors asked Peter what Jesus’ response would be. (After the temple’s destruction in AD 70, Rome required Jewish people to continue to pay this tax— now to Rome.)”¹

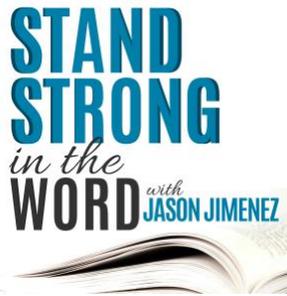
¹ HarperCollins Christian Publishing. NIV, Cultural Backgrounds Study Bible, eBook: Bringing to Life the Ancient World of Scripture (Kindle Locations 220254-220258). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.



3. **He said, “Yes.”** (“To be sure He does”). **And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first** (prevented him to speak), **saying, “What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?”** (v. 25)—Peter came to Jesus’ defense by stating that He does support the tax and will pay. Perhaps Peter should have taken the matter up with Jesus before answering for Him. But that was typical of Peter. **What do you think Simon**—Before Peter could say anything, Jesus poses a question to him. The purpose of the question was for Peter to understand that Jesus (a King) and His disciples (sons of the kingdom) are exempt from paying the tax. Jesus being sinless, and a King—had no need to pay the temple tax on or before the Day of Atonement.
4. **Then the sons are free** (v. 26)—The temple belonged to God and Jesus was going to pay the price for sin and free His sons and daughters.
5. **However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast 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 me and for yourself.**” (v. 27)—To not offend, Jesus sent Peter to fish (a duty he was sure to enjoy), and out of the mouth of a fish he would find the exact amount needed to pay for them both. This account shows Jesus’ willingness to submit to the laws and authority.

**SECOND EVENT:
THE DISCIPLES ARGUE OVER WHO IS THE GREATEST**

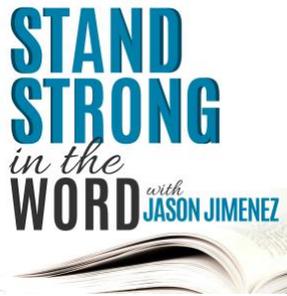
MATTHEW 18:1-6	MARK 9:33-37, 42	LUKE 9:46-48
<p>At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?”² And calling to him a child, he put him in the midst of them³ and said, “Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.⁵ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me,⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened around his neck and to</p>	<p>³³ And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you discussing on the way?”³⁴ But they kept silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.³⁵ And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all.”³⁶ And he took a child and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them,³⁷ “Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me.”⁴² “Whoever causes one of</p>	<p>⁴⁶ An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest.⁴⁷ But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side⁴⁸ and said to them, “Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.”</p>



<p>be drowned in the depth of the sea.</p>	<p>these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him if a great millstone were hung around his neck and he were thrown into the sea.</p>	
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1. **And they came to Capernaum. And when he was in the house he asked (enquired) them, “What were you discussing on the way?” (Mk. 9:33)**—After several months, the disciples returned to Capernaum with Jesus. On the way, the disciples got into a heated debate over who was the greatest (see Mk. 9:34; Lk. 9:46). Either the inner circle was making themselves a big deal, or those not in the inner circle were attempting to frame their own peaking order. Or perhaps, Peter’s taxes being paid by Jesus stirred up jealousy among the rest. Either way, Jesus breaches the subject upon arrival by asking His disciples what they were arguing about. The disciples were embarrassed and said nothing (Mk. 9:34).
2. **At that time (in that hour; simultaneously) the disciples came to Jesus, saying, “Who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?” (Matt. 18:1)**—After a period of awkward silence, the disciples finally respond to Jesus’ question in Mark 9:33, and ask the primary question that was causing so much turmoil: *who is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven?* Several interesting things to note. One, notice the disciples were still dead set on finding out who was the greatest among them. Two, they assumed Jesus had a ranking among them. Three, they completely ignored that prior to them arguing, Jesus had predicted (for a second time) His death and resurrection. Yet, all they cared about was themselves.
 - A. Rankings and position of authority were very important to Jews:

“7 Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, 9 and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. 11 For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Lk. 14:7-11)
3. **[Lk. 9:47] But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts**—Jesus didn’t ask the question because He didn’t know what they were arguing about. He asked it because He knew and used the opportunity to teach them (once again) about humility. **[Mk. 9:35] And he sat down (recognized position of a Jewish teacher) and called the twelve. And he said to them, “If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and**



servant (one who ministers) **of all.**”—That is, be prepared to take the lowest place. The one who serves is the greatest. [Mk. 9:36] **And he took a child** (with no rights) **and put him in the midst of them, and taking him in his arms, he said to them—** Notice the love and compassion shown by Jesus to the child, and the dramatic effect used to get the disciples to understand the greatness of childlike faith. The disciples were sure that Jesus (calling them together) would settle this matter once and for all. What they didn't know was Jesus would point to a child as an example of true greatness. Talk about a humbling moment for the disciples! [Matt. 18:3-4] **“Truly, I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. ⁴ Whoever humbles himself like this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven—** Either they would continue to act like immature children and keep debating who's the greatest; or they would take on a childlike faith and seek to serve with humility.

- A. “Since the words “child” and “servant” are the same in the Aramaic language, it is easy to see why Jesus connected the two. If we have the heart of a child, we will have little difficulty being servants; and if we have the attitude of servants, we will welcome the children as the representatives of Jesus Christ and the Father.”²
 - B. “So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, ² complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. ³ Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.” (Phil. 2:1-4)
4. ⁵“Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me, ⁶ but whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone (heavy stone pulled by a donkey) fastened around his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea (Matt. 18:5-6; Mk. 9:42)—Jesus not only uses a child as an example of how to live, but also points out the responsibility to be an example to children. Receiving people of humility, is to receive the nature of Jesus. However, to cause one of God's children to sin carries with it a far greater consequence.

² Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Bible Exposition Commentary*, vol. 1 (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1996), 142.