

Freedom in Christ

A sermon preached by Dr. John Clayton at Covenant Presbyterian Church of Fort Smith, Arkansas on February 16, 2020.

As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed. 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?” 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?” And when he said, “From others,” Jesus said to him, “Then the sons are free. 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” (Matthew 17:22–27).¹

The Declaration of Independence states, “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” These unalienable (or inalienable) rights are considered endowed by God and therefore to be enjoyed freely. One of the purposes of government, to our understanding as Americans, is to protect these natural rights. As citizens of this country we are a people with rights. It should not surprise us then that the first ten amendments to our Constitution are referred to as the “Bill of Rights.”

As originally intended, the unalienable rights of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness were to be enjoyed individually but also corporately. American citizens are to collectively enjoy these rights. But what happens when your rights infringe upon my life or liberty or pursuit of happiness? Who wins: You or me? At this point do democratic principles devolve into a Darwinian coexistence? Do the rights of the strongest prevail? Apparently so.

This is no more apparent than in the right of the mother to take the unalienable right of the life of a child in the womb. It appears that our age is far more concerned about our own individual rights with little to no concern for the unalienable rights of others. And, I think this secular notion has crept into the sacred church, leading to battles of selfish preference rather than deference in love and confusion over what freedom the gospel gives. Rights enjoyed in the church can sometimes look more like selfishness rather than selflessness and “submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ” (Eph. 5:21).

Consider the rights of Christ and his enjoyment of them while ministering here on earth. What were his rights as the Son of God and how did he exercise and enjoy them? As a case study, I submit to you the dilemma of the “two-drachma tax.” What do we learn of Jesus’ rights? What do we learn of our own? What does this passage teach us about our rights in Christ? And why is this so important for the Christian and the Church of Christ?

¹ Unless referenced otherwise, all Scripture quotations are from *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2001).

Could it be a confusion about what true freedom is? Could it be that we are so bombarded by the so-called freedom of the world, the flesh, and the devil that we don't recognize true freedom in Christ? To answer this, I want us to consider three perspectives of Christian freedom in this passage: redemptive freedom, heavenly freedom, and eternal freedom.

Redemptive Freedom

As Jesus and his disciples gather in Galilee, he reminds them again that his earthly ministry is almost concluded. Specifically, Jesus tells them that he will be delivered into the hands of men who will kill him, but he will be "raised on the third day." We know that in fact Jesus will proceed to Jerusalem, be illegally tried by the Jews, unjustly condemned by Pilate, and executed upon a Roman cross. Yet, Jesus pursued his redemptive work, as the writer of Hebrews puts it, "for the joy that was set before him" (Heb. 12:2), to redeem God's elect from the bondage of sin and its consequences, giving redemptive freedom through faith in Christ alone.

The word redemption means "to buy back," but it does not describe a transactional purchase from the devil but rather a satisfaction of the righteous judgment of God. Christ accomplished our redemption by becoming our sin substitute, to be justly punished by God, and in exchange giving us his righteousness, that which perfectly pleases God. Therefore, by redemptive freedom I mean that we have been freed from the bondage of sin and the penalty of damnation and become righteous before God. We are truly and eternally free, and "if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

By virtue of this redemptive freedom our eternal freedom is a freedom in Christ, not gained by our initiative or works but given by God's grace through faith in the finished work of Christ. And, it is by this redemptive work that our familial status is secured. We are adopted as sons and daughters for the sake of Christ, and we are given all of the rights and privileges as children of God in Christ. The unalienable rights that we enjoy as American citizens do not compare to the heavenly rights that are ours in Christ for eternity.

How does our redemptive freedom impact the way in which we live as Christians? How do we exercise our heavenly freedom while still on earth? How is our freedom in Christ lived out today through the Spirit of Christ? Let us consider our freedom from a heavenly perspective.

Heavenly Freedom

Back in familiar territory, Jesus and his disciples have likely settled at Peter's home in Capernaum. And, as the owner of the home, Peter is approached about paying the voluntary tax for the Jewish temple, the "two-drachma tax," collected annually during the weeks before Passover. Two Greek drachmas (or one Roman denarii) were the equivalent of two days' wages, so this is not an inconsequential tax. However, this is not a tax of the Roman government, the civil authority, but a temple tax, an allegiance of sorts to the Jewish nation. If you were a patriotic, conservative, Jew (such as the Pharisees and probably not like the Sadducees), you paid the tax.

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Peter apparently pays the tax annually, which is presumed by the collectors. But what about Jesus? Does he pay the tax? Whether this is some form of entrapment or an honest question is unknown. But it's not like Jesus is without controversy regarding the temple. He did publicly declare, "I tell you, something greater than the temple is here" (Matt. 12:6). And, he reserved his harshest public criticism for the Pharisees. So, what about the temple tax? Will this be another radical departure from the norm for Jesus? Regardless, Peter obligates Jesus immediately, as if there is no question about it; yes, Jesus pays the tax. Why does Peter do this? Is it social pressure? Does he want Jesus to be seen as the kind of person who pays this tax? We don't know why, but we do know that Jesus doesn't ignore it.

As soon as Peter walks through the door, Jesus confronts him with a question. It is not a question about whether the tax is fair or not. It is not a question about whether the tax is worthy or not. It is not a question about the use of the tax, or its collection, or administration. Jesus simply asks, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?"

What kind of question is this? Isn't it the Jews who are imposing and collecting the tax? Who are these kings? And what is meant by "their sons"? The theoretical question is teaching, isn't it? In a monarchy, the king taxes not his children but the subjects. Family has its privileges: "the sons are free."

To understand what Jesus means by this theoretical question and answer, consider Jesus' relation to the temple. For example, even as a boy Jesus considered the temple in Jerusalem to be not the property of the people but his Father's house, telling his mother and Joseph, who thought that he was lost, "Why were you looking for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" (Luke 2:49). As an adult, he marched into the temple court with a whip of cords driving out the merchants and money changers, commanding, "Take these things away; do not make my Father's house a house of trade" (John 2:16). So, Jesus loved the temple in Jerusalem as his Father's house, a place for God's covenant people to come and worship him.

Which brings me back to the issue of rights. If the "two-drachma tax" is a tax specifically for the temple, and if Jesus is the Son of God and the temple is his Father's house, and if the sons of earthly kings are free from taxes, should Jesus pay the temple tax? The answer is an emphatic no! It is his right as the Son of God not to pay the tax for his Father's temple.

But look at Jesus' inclusive language. He includes Peter and all of Christ's disciples through faith as having the same right. By God's grace, we are God's children and brothers and sisters of, with, and through Christ. Our rights are bound up in the rights of Christ, assuring us of a heavenly freedom here, now, and forever.

Whether it be the temple tax then or some other obligation today, we are free as children of God. As Paul explained to the Galatians, "you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God" (Gal. 4:7). As children of God we enjoy all the rights and privileges of the heavenly kingdom, for our citizenship exists at this moment in heaven. The question then becomes: How do we exercise our heavenly freedom here on earth? How do we live as heavenly citizens while living in this earthly kingdom?

Eternal Freedom

How does Jesus exercise his rights as the Son of God? He pays the tax for himself and Peter, withdrawn from his Father's sovereign account through the mouth of a fish. Why does he do this? As you consider this, remember that he has just reminded his disciples of his pending death and resurrection. Why pay a temporal tax when he has weightier matters to accomplish? Why pay a temporal tax when he will ascend into heaven after his resurrection. He won't be in Capernaum next year or visit the temple at the next Passover. It makes no sense for Jesus to pay this tax.

Jesus says that there is one reason he and Peter will pay the tax: "not to give offense to them." Not to give "offense"? Hasn't Jesus offended the Jewish leaders enough already? What does he mean? Simply this: There are rights and privileges as children of God that we consciously deny ourselves for the sake of the gospel. Jesus is days away from the greatest work in human history in his atoning death upon the cross. Why would he let an earthly tax distract him and others from eternal freedom? Taxes come and taxes go, but eternal freedom is known only through faith in the One who died for our sin and arose from the dead securing our freedom.

Have you allowed your rights and privileges to distract you from what is most important? Have you considered your rights as a Christian as superior to your neighbor's? To your brother's? To your sister's? Have you cared little for the offense that you give, protecting your liberty as your spiritual right? Are you free in Christ, holding the rights and privileges of a child of God? Absolutely. As Paul clarifies in the fifth chapter of Galatians, "For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal. 5:13). What does this look like? Therefore, "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count 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. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross" (Phil. 2:5-8).

Jesus chose to deny his heavenly freedom temporarily that we might have eternal freedom. He knew that though he had the right as the Son of God to call down angels from heaven at his bidding, he denied his right and sacrificed himself for your redemption and mine. It's time for us as Christians to change the way we think and talk about our rights and privileges. What the world needs to see and hear from us is that true freedom is in Christ. And that our lives sing loud and clear:

All for Jesus! All for Jesus!
All my being's ransomed pow'rs:
all my thoughts and words and doings,
all my days and all my hours.

Worldlings prize their gems of beauty,
cling to gilded toys of dust,

Freedom in Christ

boast of wealth and fame and pleasure;
only Jesus will I trust.

Since my eyes were fixed on Jesus,
I've lost sight of all beside;
so enchained my spirit's vision,
looking at the Crucified.

O what wonder! how amazing!
Jesus, glorious King of kings,
deigns to call me his beloved,
lets me rest beneath His wings.²

² "All for Jesus!" in *Trinity Hymnal* (Suwanee, GA: Great Commission Publications, 1990), 565.