



BELIEVERS CHAPEL

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The Sermons of S. Lewis Johnson

Gospel of Matthew

“Elijah’s Second Coming, Impotent Disciples and the Miracle of the Tribute Money,”

Matthew 17:9-27

TRANSCRIPT

The exposition of the word of God today is the exposition of Matthew 17 verse 9 through verse 27. This is a little lengthier portion than that which we usually take, but I do want to, as I said at the 8:30 class, I want to try to finish this before the Second Coming. [Laughter] So, not that I know when the Second Coming is, you understand, but uh I do want to hurry along at least occasionally. Verse 9 of Matthew chapter 17,

“And as they came down from the mountain, Jesus charged them, saying, ‘Tell the vision to no man, until the Son of man is raised again from the dead.’ And his disciples asked him, saying, ‘Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?’ And Jesus answered and said unto them’, Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elijah is come already, and that they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they desired. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.’ Then the disciples understood that he spoke unto them of John the Baptist. And when they were come to the multitude,

“Elijah’s Second Coming, Impotent Disciples and the Miracle of the Tribute Money”

by S. Lewis Johnson

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there came to him a certain man, kneeling down to him, and saying, ‘Lord, have mercy on my son: for he is epileptic, and greatly vexed: for often he falleth into the fire, and often into the water. And I brought him to thy disciples, and they could not cure him.’ Then Jesus answered and said, ‘O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? how long shall I bear with you? bring him here to me.’ And Jesus rebuked the demon; and he departed out of him: and the child was cured from that very hour. Then came the disciples to Jesus privately, and said, ‘Why could not we cast him out?’ And Jesus said unto them, ‘Because of your unbelief: for verily I say unto you, If ye have faith as a grain of mustard seed, ye shall say unto this mountain, Move from here to yonder place; and it shall move; and nothing shall be impossible unto you. Howbeit this kind goeth not out but by prayer and fasting.’”

If you have a Bible with a modern translation, you probably have noticed as I read that that verse 21 is not in your text, because in the earliest manuscripts of the New Testament, verse 21 is not found at this place in the Gospel of Matthew. However, if you turn over to the Gospel of Mark you will find it in the Gospel of Mark, so it is a statement our Lord made at this particular time. Some scribe writing Matthew, familiar with Mark, inserted the passage here thinking that it belonged here. Now it is, I say, in Mark, so we will expound this passage as if it belongs to the incident, though this particular text in Matthew is not there. But it’s in Mark.

“And while they abode in Galilee, Jesus said unto them, ‘The Son of man shall be betrayed into the hands of men: And they shall kill him,

and the third day he shall be raised again.’ And they were exceedingly sorry. And when they were come to Capernaum, they that received tribute money came to Peter, and said, ‘Doth not your master pay tribute?’ He saith, ‘Yes.’ And when he was come into the house, Jesus spoke first to him, saying, ‘What thinkest thou, Simon? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own sons, or of strangers?’ Peter saith unto him, ‘Of strangers’. Jesus saith unto him, ‘Then are the sons free. Notwithstanding, lest we should offend them, go thou to the sea, and cast an hook, and take up the fish that first cometh up; and when thou hast opened his mouth, thou shalt find a piece of money: (literally a stater, that was a Roman coin equivalent to tax for two people) that take, and give unto them for me and thee.’”

May the Lord’s blessing abide upon his word.

Our subject for this morning in the exposition of Matthew chapter 17 is “Elijah’s Second Coming, the Impotent Disciples and the Miracle of the Tribute Money.” The passage that we are to study for today is an uncommon one for several reasons. How often do we come upon so intriguing a topic as the second coming of Elijah? How often do we have an apostle condemning the other apostles, as we have in suggested by the 19th verse of the passage? And is there in anywhere in the word of God a more beautiful picture of Christ’s sovereignty over the natural world than we have in his sovereignty over the fishes of the sea?

The lessons that the incident sets before us are these. There is, of course, the tragic fact of Israel’s unbelief in rejecting her messengers. Not only does she reject John the Baptist, but she also rejects the Lord Jesus. We have the lesson of the impotence of faithlessness and the omnipotence of Jesus Christ; all our needs, whether they be needs

suggested by the defeat in our spiritual life or disease or death are met in him. And then I think there is one final lesson which I think comes out in that last incident in the miracle of the tribute money: the lesson that we mustn’t always demand our rights. As someone has said, “The Christian should not hesitate to give offense but he should avoid giving needless offense.” The overriding lesson is the lesson of his sovereign omnipotence and the tragedy of rejecting his claims over our lives.

We remember from the context that we have just had our Lord on the Mount of Transfiguration. And now leaving the Mount of Transfiguration with Peter, James, and John, he descends into the valley. But on the way down, as they come down from the mountain, he turns to the apostles who are with him, Peter, James, and John, and he charges them that they are not to tell the vision on the Mount of Transfiguration to any man until the Son of man be raised again from the dead.

The reasons for that we have spoken about before. It was to prevent the excitable crowds from getting the wrong impression about his ministry. They had read the Old Testament enough to know that it had promised that there would be a kingdom of God upon the earth, and that Israel would be returned to the head of the nations from being the tail of the nations. And they were looking forward to the time, for they were under oppression, when they would become the head of the nations again and would rule and reign with the Messiah.

They had overlooked the fact that in the Old Testament it was stated that the Messiah when he came would offer a work of redemption and have to suffer and suffer for sins. They had, in effect, laid stress upon the glories, but they had omitted the sufferings, and consequently they were looking for a political kingdom right in itself, but they were looking for a political kingdom without the cross.

And our Lord knew that if they publicized widely the fact that the kingdom was soon to come in the case of the Lord Jesus and if they publicized the miracles too much,

then that would likely provoke such an opposition too quickly so that the purposes that he had in his first coming would not be accomplished, and there would be too hasty a death rather than that to which he was proceeding very carefully in his ministry. So he warned them not to say anything about what they had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration.

But the apostles were students of the word of God, and they knew that in the Old Testament in the Book of Malachi, the last book of our English [sic. Old] Testament, that it had been said that Elijah the Prophet would be would come again before the great and dreadful day of the Lord, and he would turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the children to the fathers. He would restore all things, as our Lord expounds it.

Well this seems to be patently contrary to that teaching when the Lord Jesus warns them to say nothing about what they had seen on the Mount of Transfiguration. Would it not be wise, they thought, to publicize the Mount of Transfiguration, because then since it was said that Elijah would come before the great and terrible day of the Lord, would not that let the people know that we are near the coming which is to follow the great and terrible day of the Lord? And we’d just seen Elijah on the mountain. Is not that the coming mentioned in the Book of Malachi?

So you can see why they replied as they did in the 10th verse, “Why then say the scribes that Elijah must first come?” What’s the point of the teaching of the scribes, and they could have said the teaching of Malachi— because that’s what the teaching of the scribes was based upon—why did they, why do they say that in the Scripture and why do they teach that then, if we should avoid saying anything about it?

His response is given in verses 11 and 12. “Elijah truly shall first come, (notice that statement carefully) and restore all things. But I say unto you, That Elijah is come already, (notice that statement) and that they knew him not, but have done unto him whatsoever they desired. Likewise shall also the Son of man suffer of them.” Now that

raises the nagging prophetic question, is Elijah to come again before the great and terrible day of the Lord?

Now it would be impossible in an hour such as this to go into all of the details connected with it, because we surely would not finish the Gospel of Matthew before that great and terrible day comes, [laughter] if we went into all of these details. But on Wednesday night when we begin the exposition of Malachi, we’ll have to deal with that, and we will deal with that in more detail later on in that exposition. Let me just briefly put together some texts of Scripture and try to give you an answer to the question, shall Elijah come? And has Elijah already come?

Now remember that when John the Baptist came and words were said concerning his ministry, it was specifically said that he would come and would minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. Luke says that in chapter 1 and verse 17 of his gospel, that John the Baptist will minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. He will have Elijah’s disposition, and he will also have the accompanying enablement of the Holy Spirit in his ministry.

Now in the 1st chapter of the Gospel of John, John, when asked the question, are you Elijah?, specifically denies it. He says, no I am not Elijah. So we have here then John saying he is not Elijah but Luke telling us he shall minister in the spirit and power of Elijah. When we come over the 10th to the 11th chapter and the 10th verse of the Gospel of Matthew, we have the Lord Jesus saying in the midst of his words concerning John the Baptist, for this is he of whom it is written, behold I send my messenger before thee who shall prepare thy way before thee, and he cites Malachi chapter 3 and verse 1, and he identifies John the Baptist with the messenger who shall come before him.

But notice, he does not identify him with Elijah at that point. Then in chapter 17 and verse 12 here in Matthew, the Lord Jesus says, Elijah truly shall come first and restore all things but I say unto you that Elijah is come already. Now here then we have a conflict. We have the Lord saying, Elijah is come already, but then if you look in verse 11

you read he says, Elijah truly shall first come. So here is our Lord saying using the future tense, Elijah truly shall come and he shall restore all things, and then adding, Elijah has already come. A patent contradiction it would seem.

Now when we put this together with the passage in chapter 11 verse 13 through verse 15 we can, I think, come to a conclusion. There we read, in the midst of the later message which the Lord gave, from the days of John the Baptist until now the kingdom of heaven suffereth violence, and the violent take it by force. For all the prophets and the law prophesied until John (and then he adds) and if ye will receive it, (notice that, if ye will receive it) this is Elijah, which was to come. He that hath ears to hear, let him hear.

Now putting this all together it appears then that Elijah was a kind of—I’m sorry, John the Baptist—was a kind of typical figure, or perhaps a contingent or provisional figure. In other words, John the Baptist came in the spirit and power of Elijah and sought with the prophetic ministry given to him to call Israel back to the fundamental principles for which they were to stand—the principles of the word of God. If Israel had responded to the ministry of the forerunner, the messenger, John the Baptist, then there would have been initiated a program that would lead to the death of the Son, the crucifixion of the Son by the Gentiles, perhaps a few of the Jews, immediately there would have followed after the resurrection, the coming of the Holy Spirit and the period of the Great Tribulation in which there would be at the conclusion of it the great and terrible day of the Lord, and the second advent of the Lord Jesus and the Messianic kingdom—if they should have responded to the ministry of John the Baptist.

Now in this way John became a kind of contingent provisional figure. Not as if to suggest that the kingdom would or would not come, but John’s ministry determined the time of the coming of the kingdom, just as our Lord’s ministry determined that time—their response to him. If they had responded, he would still have been crucified, redemption

would have been accomplished, but there would have been no word going out to the Gentiles as it is in this age in which we are living.

But as we know, of course, Israel did not respond. They rejected the messenger. They rejected the Lord Jesus. And so what, as we look back at John and Elijah and the relationship between them, we can see this: that John came in the spirit and power of Elijah; he called Israel to faith as Elijah would have done. He had Elijah’s spirit. He had Elijah’s power. But he was rejected. That was a rejection of a provisional or a contingent figure.

Is Elijah still to come? Yes, the Lord Jesus says in the 11th verse, Elijah truly shall first come. So Elijah and John are alike in every way except one: in personal identity. John is Elijah in that he is in the spirit and power of that great figure, but John is not Elijah in the sense of personal identity. In this way, Israel has its message of the kingdom, they respond, they fail to respond, and in this way the prophecies of the Old Testament are still to be fulfilled.

What can we say in support of this? Well, of course we know that the rabbis taught this. We learn that from this passage. We know that the early church fathers also agreed with this interpretation; they expected Elijah to come again at before the second advent of the Lord Jesus. The future tense in verse 11 certainly seems to suggest that. Elijah truly shall first come. The transfiguration account agrees with it because that account we have seen was a foreshadowing of the Messianic kingdom in which our Lord appeared in glory and there are Moses and Elijah with him testifying of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem. Evidently they were witnesses of his sufferings and the significance of them.

When we turn over to the Book of Revelation, in the 11th chapter, there we find a very strange chapter. It’s about two witnesses who shall appear on the earth in the tribulation period. Now the commentators who often differ among themselves really have

a field day in Revelation 11, because these two witnesses are not named, and so we have all kinds of suggestions as to their identity. But it is stated in Revelation chapter 11 and about verse 6 that these witnesses shall have power to testify on the earth for three and a half years and they shall perform two specific ministries, among others.

They will have the power, the text of Scripture says, to shut heaven so that it does not rain. Does that remind you of any prophet? Well of course, it reminds us of Elijah who was known as the prophet who shut the heavens so that it would not rain, except according to his word. And then it is stated that they will also have the power to turn water into blood. Does he remind you of any prophetic figure? Well of course it does. It reminds us of Moses. For that was one of the things that he was able to do, and specifically it is stated in Revelation 11 that they would do other forms of plagues as miracles. So many students have concluded that that passage has to do with the second coming of Moses and Elijah during the tribulation period in which they give witness to the significance of the first coming and the second coming in the light of the sufferings of our Lord Jesus Christ. They preach his redemption and also his second advent in judgment.

So we conclude, then, that John is Elijah in the sense that he came in the spirit and power of Elijah, and was a figure to which Israel was responsible to respond. They did not respond. And so Elijah in personal identity shall come again preceding the second advent of the Lord Jesus.

But I want to say this, that contingency in John the Baptist’s coming is a contingency that lies only in the human sphere, not in the divine. God who knows the end from the beginning knew exactly what would happen when John the Baptist came. He knew that Israel would not respond. He knew that the people would not respond to the king himself. He knew that the Son must die. In fact, the Scriptures say he planned it all. It all took place according to his determinate counsel and foreknowledge. So the contingency lies only in the human sphere, not in the divine.

There can never be any offer of a kingdom, incidentally, apart from the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ. The Bible does not teach that there is a kingdom apart from a cross. It doesn’t teach that there is a cross and no kingdom. It proclaims a coming kingdom through the sufferings of the cross and the redemption accomplished thereby. Well now, the disciples, who do not understand yet all that our Lord is saying, understood that he spoke to them about John the Baptist when he spoke about the fact that Elijah is come already and therefore they understood at that point that in some sense Elijah had come then.

Now we drop that and pass on to the next incident in which we have the impotent disciples and the omnipotent Christ. And I must confess, I not only like this incident but I love the the presentation of it given by the Evangelist Matthew. When you think of our Lord Jesus, and you think of him on the Mount of Transfiguration and then in the next incident we find him down in the valley dealing with a little child—an only child incidentally the Scriptures teach us—of a father who was very much disturbed because of his epilepsy and his demonic possession, as well as his other afflictions, because he was both deaf and dumb, the other accounts tell us.

You have a picture of our Lord in the glory of the kingdom and in the magnificence of it. You have him on the mount with shining face and glistening garments. You have the prophetic figures, Moses and Elijah, speaking of his decease which he should accomplish at Jerusalem, and you have the apostles Peter, James, and John, there observing the glory on the mount. And the very next moment we find him down in the despairs and the miseries and the troubles and trials of everyday life.

Now what a beautiful picture, and what a beautiful connection between the two, because it illustrates the fact that the Lord Jesus is not too sublime to grapple with all of the human ills that we are faced with, every single one of us. Rafael has tried to catch this in his glowing conception of the transfiguration in one of his portraits or pictures.

You remember that he has daringly painted two pictures in a single space. In the upper half of the picture we have the picture of the Lord on the mount with the glory shining upon his face, his garments glistening. We have Moses and Elijah there, and we have the disciples on the ground worshipping this glorious royal Messiah.

And then in the lower half of the picture, you have the crowds gathered around discussing some of some things that evidently were being discussed. You have the father of the child. You have the child who is the epileptic. You have the scribes standing by, for they were questioning with the disciples. You have the baffled disciples in the picture, all trying to portray the fact that there are in reality two transfigurations here: the transfiguration of prayer in the mountain when he was praying and then his face was transfigured, and then the transfiguration of service on the earth, in which the same royal king who was on the mountain now ministers in the affairs of men. He’s just trying to tell us the fact that the Son of God is in a kingless state no matter where he is and no matter how he looks. He is the king.

Well the situation is simply this. The disciples no doubt had been saying, the Lord has given us power to cleanse the lepers, to cure the sick. They spoke about the commission that the Son had given them—it’s even possible that they were somewhat proud of it. You go back and read their commission; they had their Messianic commission from him.

And so in the midst of the discussion and debate over the question, Mark tells us that there was a lot of questioning going on. Evidently a father came forward with a child, an only son, in a desperate state. Not only was he deaf and dumb, but he was an epileptic, but not only was he an epileptic but he was demon possessed, and not only was he all of these things but the demons constantly took him and threw him and at times sought to throw him into the fire and at other other times into the water in order to take away his life, and the father adds in one of the other accounts that he’s pining away.

No wonder. A person troubled with all of that would be pining away, all of those physical ills as they touch the mind and heart of an individual. And so the father, when the apostles evidently announced their authority to cure the sick, he brought his only son to the apostles.

I can imagine Peter—not Peter, James and John—they were with the Lord, but the other apostles saying in the name of Jesus of Nazareth, come out, and nothing happens. And another one would say, well now wait, you didn’t pronounce that quite correctly, In the name of Jesus of Capernaum, come out. Nothing happens. And so on. And in the midst of all of this debate the Lord Jesus comes on the scene now from the Mount of Transfiguration, and according to one of the other accounts he says, what are you questioning about, what are you discussing? And they tell him the whole story, the father does, tells him, and then adds the words, Lord have mercy upon us.

Now we have a beautiful picture here, and remember, all of our Lord’s physical miracles are types of his spiritual works. What he does in the physical sphere illustrate what he does in the spiritual sphere. And incidentally, all sin is the evidence that we are under the authority of Satan and his influence, because it is Satan, who as an instrument, uses sin under the overall sovereignty of God, that which he allows within his plan and program.

Now we have these figures. We have the only begotten son, for in the Lukan account that’s what the father says about his son. He says, not only is he my only son, but he uses the precise term used of the Lord Jesus. He is my *monogenes* son. He is my only begotten son. And so here is a beautiful picture of a man who is under the influence of Satan by virtue of sin, and after all that’s what we all were before we were lost. That’s what Paul says in Ephesians chapter 2, when he says concerning Satan that he is the spirit who works in the children of disobedience. So we all are under the influence of Satan by

virtue of our sin. It is by means of sin that he has gained control of our lives. So the only begotten son illustrates us.

And then there are the helpless disciples. I must say I, I tend to look at the disciples as illustrative of the power of the church. We often think when we think about a church, well now, we’ll judge a church by its ministry, by the men who minister the word of God – It’s a great church if it has a great preacher. It’s not necessarily a great church at all. As a matter of fact, we shouldn’t ever estimate the power of a church by its ministers. We shouldn’t estimate the power of a church by the ordinance that it observes. We shouldn’t estimate the power of a church by its members. The power of a church is ultimately dependent upon the Lord Jesus and Holy Spirit. We estimate the power of a church by the degree to which that church is under the control of the Holy Spirit and the Son of God who is the head of the church.

And in Believers Chapel, we shall have a powerful church, and we shall have an effective ministry, and we shall have a real impact not only Dallas but to the four corners of the earth through the ministry that we have, only to the degree to which we are under in true submission the head of the church, the Lord Jesus – and not submission to me or any other minister or gifted men of the word that we may have here, nor even the elders, but the Lord Jesus.

A church is powerful and successful and fruitful only in so far as it knows the mind of its Lord and follows that mind in the power of Holy Spirit. The helpless disciples. What a beautiful picture of the fact that we cannot do anything of ourselves. We cannot produce works of ourselves. One of the greatest tendencies of evangelicalism today is to lean upon methods and to lean upon systems, to lean upon ideas, to lean upon human wisdom, rather than that fundamental relationship to the Lord Jesus and the power of the Holy Spirit. It is a fact of Christian history that if a group of people are in touch with the

Lord and in touch with the Holy Spirit, they will be effective no matter what their methods may be.

Now methods may help us. There’s one way to do a thing, and there’s another way, and one method may be a little bit better than another, and we should not avoid using good methods. But if for one moment we think that methods determine fruit, we’re sadly mistaken. And it is a happy thing that we can be sure that God is with us when we are in touch with him, even if we don’t know the right method to use. That’s very important. These faithless, fruitless disciples so illustrate us and the church when we are out of touch with him.

Then there is the believing father, and incidentally he doesn’t have a whole lot of faith, he has about as much faith as I have upon occasion. The Lord Jesus said to him, why if you have faith as a grain of mustard seed you can say to this mountain, move from here to there, and it will be moved. And he said to him, why there’s only one thing necessary, only believe. All things are possible to him that believeth. And then he cried out a prayer that I often use for myself. “Lord, I believe! Help Thou my unbelief. He had the faith to bring that boy of his to the Lord Jesus. He had little other faith. And really, not a whole lot more is needed for effective action. Maybe there is more to come with more faith. But if we have enough faith to come to him, we can be sure that he will respond. And he had that faith.

And then of course there is the only begotten Son, capital S, the fourth figure in this little story, and he is the eternal Son, and the power of God and the love of God meet in him.

Now the text in Matthew says that the Lord Jesus rebuked the spirit. I gather from that that this was an attempt on the part of Satan to affect his work. And so he rebuked the spirit, the spirit came out of the boy, and he was healed. Well after the healing was over the disciples had a few questions they wanted to ask the Lord. So they came up to

him and said, now why couldn’t we do that? And the Lord Jesus, of course said, because of your unbelief. He had just before that said, O faithless and perverse generation, how long shall I be with you? How long shall I bear with you? Why all they needed faith as a mustard seed. Incidentally, a mustard seed is smaller than a grain of sand. Just that much faith, because faith brings us into touch with the Lord, who is the power.

God works through faith. He doesn’t work through discussion. He works through faith. And he doesn’t work through the professionalism that so often intrudes itself into Christian work. So the jaws of hell and the jaws of despair yield to the words of our Lord. Bring him here to me. What a beautiful statement that is. Bring him here to me.

So the lesson that we are to learn, one of the lessons that we are to learn from this is that despair, the deepest despair, cannot baffle the power of the Lord Jesus. If you were between, if you were between the very jaws of hell and you plead for forgiveness of sins to the Lord Jesus, you would be delivered. If you were at the very gates of hell, just about to pass in, and you were to lift a prayer in faith to the Son of God, you should be delivered. If your sins had brought you right down to the depths of the worst form and sense of guilt and condemnation, and you were to lift a simple prayer of thanksgiving to God for redemption that prayer should be heard. Faith as a grain of mustard seed brings deliverance from the Lord.

Satan has great impudence to make men despair. It’s a piece of his infernal impertinence, someone has said, that he dares to do it. Think of it. Men despairing when we have an omnipotent God. Think of it, despairing not only when we have an omnipotent eternal Son and God, but one who has shed his precious blood for our sins. Think of it, despairing, when we have a God who delights in mercy. I never think of God as a God who doesn’t delight in mercy. The God of those who believe in the sovereignty of God is a God who delights in mercy, and we know and rejoice in this just because he is a sovereign God and can do what he delights in doing. Think of it, men

despairing when the Son of God, the omnipotent Son of God, has shed his precious blood, desires and delights in mercy, desires to bring men to him and offers the beautiful promise, “Come unto me all ye that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest.” I tell you, we are a people blessed by God, to have a Savior such as this.

Well, I don’t want to get too involved because I have one more little incident to say a word about here, the miracle of the tribute money. There are times when we must not press our rights, and how beautiful it is for Matthew to tell us this story, because it is true that the king himself exercises self-abnegation. Evidently this was a matter of curiosity on the part of the tax collectors when they came to Peter and asked him this, because it says that they were, the plurality of them, when they were come to Capernaum they that received tribute money. Notice, it’s plural.

Well, I know from personal experience that if the tax collectors want to get in touch with you it’s usually not a committee. It’s usually one person. And you pick up the telephone and he says, is this S. Lewis Johnson, Jr.? Do you live at 9408 Dartcrest?—you notice I speak out of experience [laughter]—Do you live at 9408 Dartcrest Drive? Yes. Uh, well this is so-and-so of the Internal Revenue Service. We have a little question about your tax return and would like for you to come down and clear it up.

Or, even better, the call may be something like this—and some of you are smiling, I know, because you have had that experience—it may be something like this: you have been chosen. Now what a doctrine of election that is. [Sudden, loud laughter] You have been chosen to have your return audited. Now there are four gray hairs on my head as a result of that. You have been chosen. You see, it is always an individual. But here, evidently there was a a group of them and they were, they were gathering together to have a cup of coffee and have a few laughs probably along in May and June after they had looked over a few of the returns together. And anyway that’s not in the text incidentally [laughter], but evidently they came out of curiosity and asked Peter, does does

your master Jesus pay the temple tax? It was about forty cents, about the equivalent of two days’ wages.

And the Lord, and Peter answers very quickly without thinking, saying, why yes, he does, he’s no tax dodger. And thinking no more about it he went home where the Lord Jesus was, and the Lord Jesus spoke first. I think that’s very interesting in verse 25. When he was come into the house Jesus spoke first unto him. So the Lord is disturbed over this thing that Peter has done. He has stepped out of the will of God again and he makes the point that no king taxes his own sons does he? No, kings exact tribute and taxes from others, strangers. So the Lord asks the question, Peter, what thinketh thou? of whom do the kings of the earth take custom or tribute? of their own sons, or strangers? And Peter answers, knowing of course, strangers. Then the Lord Jesus said, then are the sons free.

Now the point that he wants to make is that he is the eternal Son of God, and they are adoptive sons of God, and since they he is the eternal Son and they are adoptive sons they belong to the family of the king. And really from the standpoint of his spiritual relationship, he doesn’t come under these taxing laws. But then he adds, nevertheless, in order that we do not throw up any stumbling block before them, I want you to go down to the Sea of Galilee and get your hook and line out, and I want you to throw it in and the first fish you catch, take it out. Don’t bother with any more. We don’t have to search to find the one that has the stater in its mouth. The very first one, take it out, take the hook out, look in, take the stater out, that’s enough tax for both of us, and take it and pay it.

See, he identifies himself with the nation, pays the taxes as a member of the nation to prevent stumbling over truth, which they did not understand, and what a kingly way to pay taxes. How’d you like to be able to do this, [laughter] to go over to White Rock Lake

and throw in a hook and pull all necessary to pay Form 1040 or whatever it is by which you pay.

The liberals have had a great deal of fun over this. One of the older liberals said, why what this means is when you’ve opened its mouth Peter you shall find a stater there, and when you’ve taken out the hook then sell the fish and get for it a stater and pay the tax for the fish. Now I didn’t think that fishes drew that much by way of return in those days, and William Barclay, a modern day liberal, he has a different explanation. It’s related to the explanation of this old liberal interpreter Paulus, he says now what this means is Jesus said to Peter, yes Peter you’re right, we too must pay our just and lawful debts. Well you know how to do it, back you go to fishing for a day. You’ll get plenty of money in the fish’s mouth to pay our dues. A day at fishing will will soon produce all you need. And then he says, back to your job, Peter, that’s the way to pay your debts, and so he goes on to make the application.

So the typist will find a new coat in the keys of her typewriter, a mechanic a motor mechanic, will find food for himself and his wife and family in the cylinder of the motor car, and the teacher will find all of the necessary support to pay his way in the blackboard and the chalk, and the clerk will find enough to support himself and his dear ones in the ledger and in the account sheets. You know, it takes faith greater than a grain of mustard seed to believe the interpretations of the liberals. [Laughter] Read the account and one comes to the inevitable conclusion that it is much simpler to believe the Scriptures than to believe the interpretations of the critics.

What are the lessons? Well of course, there is the lesson of his refusal to demand his rights, and there is the lesson of the sovereignty of God here. What we have is a gleam of his glory. He is not only Lord of the sea, but he is Lord of the fishes of the sea. He is Lord even of the little things. I dare say that we could extend it even further and say he is the Lord of everything, don’t you? In the light of what Paul says, he works all

things according to the counsel of his own will. Well the supreme lesson then is the sovereign omnipotence of the Son of God and the tragedy of faithlessness as we have said. And the reverse of the power of faith and power of fair prayer and fasting is also set forth here.

I think it is evident that the disciples were very much like Samson in the Old Testament. That accounted for the fact that they couldn’t cure this man. He had given them authority to cure. He had said heal the lepers, raise the dead, cure the sick. They had the right to do it. They had the authority to do it. But they had lost touch with him. They were just like Samson as he was lying in the lap of Delilah, and she finally has induced him to say wherein the secret of the power lay in his hair. They clipped his locks, and when he was awakened he said, I’ll get up and I’ll shake myself and I’ll go out again as I have in the other times. But the Scripture adds he knew not that the Spirit of God had departed from him.

And the apostles had lost touch with the Lord. In the meantime, as it is so easy to do, not only for professional ministers of the word of God, but it’s easy for us in our Christian life to lose touch with him, and when we lose touch with him, we lose touch with the source of power, for we have none. So they have lost their grasp upon the hem of his garment and when they had they had lost their power. No wonder he adds, this kind goeth not out except by prayer and fasting.

What is prayer? Why prayer is that which attaches us to heaven. What’s fasting? It’s that which cuts us off from the excesses of this worldly life into which we so often plunge. So that prayer links us with him and fasting delivers us from the worldliness and fleshliness into which we so often fall. What’s he saying? Why he’s saying, if you really want to do something right for the Lord to be fruitful in your Christian work, it is necessary for you to spend time in the presence of the Lord and also to be willing to exercise some form of self-denial. There’s nothing wrong with fasting, incidentally. The

apostles practiced it. It is a New Testament practice. There is nothing wrong with prayer. It is the means by which, one of the means by which we maintain our relationship to the Lord.

So I say to you, that in the light of this account let us cast ourselves before the Lord in penitent confession and say to him as Christian believers that we have not wrought our deliverances on the earth as we should have, because we have become entangled in the affairs of this life. We have sought to engage in our Christian living as if it were a professional activity. We have used the words of prayer and petition but only in the sense of words. We have not really been involved. It has not cost us a tear and it has not not cost us a groan. And the kind of Christian living that does not cost us a tear and a groan every now and then is not vital Christian living, you can be sure of that.

Now if you’re an unbeliever in our audience, we remind you that the Son of God came and offered an atonement for sinners, and if by the grace of God you have come to recognize that you are a sinner and under divine condemnation, this salvation’s for you. And if God by the Holy Spirit should bring you under conviction for your sin so that you cry out, O God have mercy upon me like you had mercy upon that only begotten son of that father, he’ll answer you, he’ll deliver you, he’ll send the demons out.

He’ll deliver you from the sin and the bondage of that sin and he’ll give you freedom and new life and the sense of the possession of justification, righteous before him. He’ll make you a new man in Christ and give you a relationship to God that will mean life and health and happiness and some suffering perhaps, but ultimately the presence of God for eternity. May God speak to your heart. Shall we stand for the benediction?

[Prayer] Father, we are so grateful to Thee for these incidents in the life of our Lord which speak so certainly to our own condition. How easy it is for us to become professional in our Christian lives, to say the right things, but to have no real true

“Elijah’s Second Coming, Impotent Disciples and the Miracle of the Tribute Money”

by S. Lewis Johnson

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relationship to Thee. O God, so motivate us that we do give ourselves more than ever before to prayer and fasting, to fellowship and communion with Thee, and then use us for Thy glory that the name of our great Savior may be magnified.

We worship Thee through him. Now go with us as we part.

For Jesus’ sake. Amen.