

PICK YOUR BATTLES WISELY

Matthew 17:22-27; Mark 9:30-32; Luke 9:43-45
Yeshua §91-92

When raising our children, we realized there were limits to what we could expect from them, particularly in their teen years. We had to pick and choose our battles. One battle we chose not to fight when our son reached high school age was keeping his room clean. It was a battle we sensed we weren't going to win without nuclear fallout. And so we set some general parameters – your mess stays in your room and cannot pass your door. If we find a new species of fungus growing in your room, there will be an intervention etc.

I'm not advocating this for any other family. We felt like, given the circumstances, this was not a battle worth fighting. It's satisfying today to have a son who is very neat and tidy, but it took the Marine Corp to make that happen!

As we continue our series, Yeshua Messiah King, Jesus was presented a situation where He needed to pick and choose whether or not to go to battle.

After many weeks away in the north, Jesus and His disciples made their way south and entered Galilee once again. Along the way, Jesus revealed His death and resurrection a second time to His disciples.

JESUS REVEALED HIS DEATH AND RESURRECTION A SECOND TIME

MATTHEW 17:22-23 (ESV)

²² As they were gathering in Galilee, Jesus said to them, “The Son of Man is about to be delivered into the hands of men, ²³ and they will kill him, and he will be raised on the third day.” And they were greatly distressed.

Jesus left the region of Caesarea Philippi and returned to Galilee. Mark tells us, “And he did not want anyone to know, for he was teaching his disciples...” (Mark 9:30-31). As they walked along, Jesus again revealed His death and resurrection.

Matthew tells us the disciples “...were greatly distressed” at hearing this. Mark records that “...they did not understand the saying and were afraid to ask him.”

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(Mark 9:32). And Luke adds, "But they did not understand this saying and it was concealed from them, so that they might not perceive it." (Luke 9:45).

Jesus' statement was very clear; why didn't the disciples understand? The disciples were prevented from understanding because of their strongly held Messianic expectations taught them by their rabbis. Jews at the time of Christ were confused about the Old Testament prophecies concerning Messiah. They recognized on the one hand that Messiah was to suffer (Isa. 53), and on the other that Messiah would rule in power and glory (Dan. 7:13-14). These two lines of revelation seemed to be contradictory. To resolve the dilemma, the rabbis theorized two Messiahs would come: one to suffer and die (Messiah ben Joseph), and the other to reign in power and glory (Messiah ben David). It's possible the disciples held to this theory. Peter, John and James had just experienced a revelation of the kingdom and of Jesus' glory in it; their focus was on Jesus' reign in the Kingdom. They could not conceive that Jesus had to suffer and die. Jesus was beginning to teach them that it was not two Messiahs, but two comings of the Messiahs. Jesus was revealing that He must first die for the sins of the nation and be resurrected before He is crowned King and establishes the Kingdom. In His first coming, Jesus came as the Lamb Who takes away the sin of the world. At His second coming He will come as the Lion of Judah Who reigns in power and glory.

Because of their strongly held belief that Jesus was the conquering Messiah, they could not accept what Jesus revealed to them. It will not be until after Jesus' resurrection that the disciples begin to understand these truths.

Eventually Jesus and the disciples returned to Capernaum, Peter's hometown and Jesus' base of operations. Upon their arrival, Peter was confronted by the IRS.

JESUS CHOSE TO NOT MAKE AN ISSUE OF THE TEMPLE TAX

MATTHEW 17:24-27 (ESV)

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.”

This tax was probably the tax implemented by Nehemiah to provide for the Temple (Neh. 10:32-33).¹

NEHEMIAH 10:32-33 (ESV)

³² “We also take on ourselves the obligation to give yearly a third part of a shekel for the service of the house of our God: ³³ for the showbread, the regular grain offering, the regular burnt offering, the Sabbaths, the new moons, the appointed feasts, the holy things, and the sin offerings to make atonement for Israel, and for all the work of the house of our God.

By the time of Jesus, the tax had increased from a third shekel to half a shekel; the half-shekel was approximately one day’s wage. The important point to understand is that this Temple tax was not mandated by the Law of Moses. Paying this Temple tax was voluntary.

Probably with Rome in mind, Jesus pointed out that kings don’t tax their own citizens (their sons), but the people they’ve conquered (others). The “sons” of the king, then, are “free” from paying the tax. Jesus’ point was that He and the disciples are sons of God the Father, the “King” of the Temple. As the King’s sons, they are “free” from paying the tax; they are not obligated to pay the temple tax.

Then notice Jesus chose to pay the temple tax anyway. For the sake of peace between Himself and the Jews, Jesus decided not to make an issue out of the temple tax. He could pay it for Peter and Himself without compromising His mission or His message.

Perhaps to reinforce His sonship, Jesus miraculously provided the shekel that paid for both He and Peter.

That Jesus revealed His death and resurrection well before their occurrence should convince us that Jesus was not a hapless victim of circumstance. He knew exactly Who He was and what was required of Him in His sufferings and death. This makes Jesus’ sufferings and crucifixion all the more extraordinary. Knowing full well what lay before Him, Jesus did not flinch, but endured it all until He could cry, “Tetelestai!”, “It is finished!”

¹ Some connect this tax to the census tax in Exodus 30:11-16 but this tax seems to have been a one-time tax to provide funds for the construction of the Tabernacle. The census tax may have served as the model for a Temple tax both in the days of Joash (2 Chron. 24:6) and Nehemiah (Neh. 10:32-33).

The inability of the disciples to understand Jesus' plain statements about His impending sufferings, death and resurrection should frighten us into humility and a teachable spirit. They held so tightly to their Messianic expectation their minds were closed to receive truth from the Messiah Himself! Are there beliefs we hold so tightly that we are not able to receive the truth of God's Word? One possibility is our belief in rugged individualism. This belief prevents most of us from embracing the truth that we are part of a family under the protection and guidance of our church Elders (1 Peter 5:1-5). Most all of us, because of our belief in self-reliance, forfeit the blessing of counseling with the Elders for wisdom, guidance and encouragement. Most of us interpret such talk as the Elders want to control our lives rather than understanding that the Elders are given to us for our good and to be a blessing. Cathy and I know from first-hand experience the blessing that comes from embracing the authority of the Elders in our personal lives.

What other beliefs or expectations are preventing you from embracing the clear Word of God?

In paying the temple tax, Jesus affirmed that He and Peter were sons of God. We, too, become sons and daughters of God the moment we trust in Jesus as our Savior.

In paying the temple tax to which He was not obligated, Jesus models that at times, we need to pick and choose our battles. Matthew tells us that Jesus chose to not make the temple tax an issue so as not to give offense to the Jews. Jesus was not compromising. Jesus was not afraid to confront His opponents. But over this issue, Jesus saw no value in opposing the Jews' assumption that Jesus should pay the tax. Jesus paid it to keep peace.

In choosing our battles wisely we need to keep first order things first and second order things second. First order things are the Word of God and people. Second order things are pretty much everything else.

Years ago a group of pastors here in Ramona were all up in arms over something Texaco and the other large oil companies were doing. At our ministerial meeting they insisted all of us should lead our congregations to join them at a protest rally where we would all cut up our Texaco and Mobil cards. We didn't participate because that's not a battle we're called to fight. The mandate of the Church is to teach the Word of God and to preach the Gospel. If individual believers desire to engage in social issues, that's great, but that's not the mandate of the Church.

Years ago we also went through the worship wars. At the time, we had a team of extremely talented musicians who were leading us to sing exclusively contemporary worship songs. That was a battle we had to fight because it struck at our unity and love for one another. We had people who's worship language was hymns and people who's worship language was contemporary. Out of love for one another we wanted to worship in both languages. But in meeting with our worship leaders we found they had no interest in incorporating hymns and refused to play hymns. At that point we had to let them go. Loving one another is more important than a certain style of music. That was a battle we had to fight.

In picking our battles wisely we not only need to keep first order things first and second order things second, but we need to be principle driven, not preference driven. In the examples I gave you we could clearly articulate the principle guiding our decision: in the first case, the mandate of the Church is to teach the Word and in the second case, above all things, we are to love one another.

In picking our battles wisely we need to keep priorities clear and we need to clearly identify the principle(s) guiding our decision. It would be very wise to seek counsel when we find ourselves facing a major issue. Seek out the wisdom of members of your Home Group or the Deacons or the Elders of Grace. This is one of the significant ways in which we can love one another in the Grace Family.