

**Mark:
The Greatest Commandment**

Mark 12:28-34

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Turn with me now again to the Gospel of Mark, and we're in chapter 12. We have been following our Lord as He has been making these daily incursions, we might say...that's what they are, assaults on the kingdom of darkness...into Jerusalem on this the final week of His earthly life. He has, with His disciples, been spending the evening in Bethany, a few miles outside of Jerusalem, and then each day coming into Jerusalem. And in the last couple of weeks we have been on this one day, on Tuesday, of the final week, where Jesus has encountered the Pharisees, and the Herodians and the Sadducees in verses 13-27; and yet another encounter now takes place beginning at verse 28. We'll be reading through to verse 34. Before we read the passage together, let's once again come before God in prayer.

Our Father in heaven, we thank You for the precious gift of the Bible. We are very conscious that we have never been as grateful for the Bible as we should have been, and we pray that we might treasure it and hide its contents within our hearts and lives. And grant now the blessing of the Holy Spirit as we study it together. Grant illumination, we pray, that we might read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest for Jesus' sake. Amen.

We pick up the reading, then, at verse 28 of Mark 12.

And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that He answered them well, asked Him [that is, Jesus], 'Which commandment is the most important of all?' Jesus answered, 'The most important is, 'Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God is one; and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength.' The second is this, 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these.' And the scribe said to Him, 'You are right, Teacher, You have truly said that there is One; and there is no other beside Him; and to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.' And

when Jesus say that he answered wisely, He said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.' And after that, no one dared to ask Him any more questions.

Amen. And may God add His blessing to the reading of His holy and inerrant word.

John Wesley was born in 1703. He was the fifteenth son of Samuel Wesley, the rector of Epworth, and his wife Susanna. John Wesley attended Lincoln College in Oxford, and was ordained a priest in 1728. He was 25 years old. He would go back to Oxford and join a group of undergraduate students. Among them, and the leader of this group, was Charles Wesley, John's brother, and in the company of this group was also George Whitefield — somewhat unknown, of course, at this point in time, but all three of them would become greatly known within the space of about a dozen years. And they joined what was called the Holy Club. They would meet together to study the Bible. They engaged in covenanted forms of spirituality, including fasting twice a week and engaging in set times of prayer every day, and attending communion once a week. John Wesley, of course, even though he was an ordained priest of the Church of England, was not converted.

In 1735, and he was just over 30 years of age at this point...he was 32, I think He accepted this invitation by the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel to become a missionary to Indians in Georgia...in the state of Georgia. It was a disaster. It was a fiasco! And he says, "I went to America to convert Indians, but, oh! who shall convert me?"

On his way back, on board ship he encounters some Moravian missionaries and was greatly influenced by them; and then, when he gets to London, seeks out the fellowship of the Moravians. And then on the morning of May 24, 1738, he opened his Bible, apparently at random, and his eyes fell on the text Mark 12:34: "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Jesus is speaking here to the scribe who has overheard the conversations and the encounters that Jesus has had with the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees, and He says to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

I. First of all, there is a kingdom of God.

The first words out of Jesus' mouth in the gospels are "The kingdom of God is near; repent and believe the gospel." Later in one of the other gospels Jesus says that the purpose of His coming is this: "That I must preach the good news of the kingdom of God, for this is why I have come." At the very pinnacle of the Sermon on the Mount He says, "Seek ye first the kingdom of God and the righteousness that belongs to it."

It's a theme, then, of Jesus' preaching after the resurrection. We're told in the opening chapter of Acts: "To them He presented Himself alive after His suffering by many proofs, appearing to them during forty days and speaking about the kingdom of God." The preaching of Jesus in that forty-day ministry from the resurrection to the ascension and the Day of Pentecost was all about the kingdom of God.

In the early church, when trouble broke out in Jerusalem, and the Christians, you remember, scattered, and Philip went to a city in Samaria preaching "the good news of the kingdom of God." And the very last verse in the Book of Acts is about Paul: "He lived there two whole years at his own expense and welcomed all who came to him, proclaiming the kingdom of God and teaching about the Lord Jesus Christ with all boldness and without hindrance."

What is the kingdom of God? It's evidently important. It's evidently central to the preaching of Jesus and the preaching of the early church. When John the Baptist appears on the pages of history, we're told "he came preaching that the kingdom of God was near." But he makes no attempt to explain what the kingdom of God is. It was evidently a familiar concept to those who heard him preach. To Jews emerging out of the inter-testamental period, the Jews who lived at the time of John the Baptist, the idea and concept of the kingdom of God was evidently something that at least on the surface they understood; and that's surprising, because the term doesn't appear in the Old Testament. There is no such expression in the Old Testament as "the kingdom of God."

In the Gospels, it occurs 117 times. John comes out of nowhere preaching that the kingdom of God is near, and yet the concept, the idea — the words, rather — of "the kingdom of God" do not appear in the Old Testament.

Of course the idea of the kingdom of God is everywhere in the Old Testament. It's on every page of the Old Testament that God is king, that God rules and reigns, that God exercises authority and sovereignty. The opening page of the Bible and the story of creation, of God speaking and acting and making, and supremely sovereign...and He makes man to rule over the world.

And then comes rebellion, and the kingdom is damaged. And Satan has persuaded Adam to join a rebel kingdom and a rebel force, and you have two kingdoms with two representative cities, Babel and Jerusalem. And, you remember, you could now rush to the very closing chapters of the Bible and what you see is the downfall of Babel and the coming of the new Jerusalem, the city of God.

In a sense, the whole story of the Bible from Genesis to Revelation is the story of the kingdom of God, that kingdom inaugurated by the promise that God gives to Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden in Genesis 3:15 — the first gospel promise that the seed of the woman will crush the head of Satan, that one divine Messiah

will come to thwart the purposes of Satan and put down that rebel kingdom and establish the kingdom of God, where God's rule and God's reign and God's sovereignty is pre-eminent.

As the Old Testament closes in the Book of Malachi, it ends with the promise that the Day of the Lord is coming, and then there's 400 years of silence. And then John comes, saying that the kingdom of God is near, and Jesus comes and says the kingdom of God is here. There is a kingdom of God.

II. Secondly, this man, this scribe, is described as being “not far from the kingdom of God.”

This scribe is not far from the kingdom of God. Jesus is saying that this man is not as yet under the rule and under the reign of the sovereignty of God, he has not become a servant of the Lord. He has not become a disciple in the school of God. He is near...he is not far from the kingdom, but he's not in the kingdom of God.

This scribe has recognized Jesus as a great teacher. The words that Jesus had used with the Pharisees and the Herodians and the Sadducees had impressed him. He was a scribe, he was a teacher of the Law. The wisdom, the alacrity, the way in which the competence with which Jesus had put down these know-it-alls with their clever questions, particularly the Sadducees, had impressed him greatly.

I have some vivid memories of great teachers, one in particular - my high school physics teacher. He was the son of the principal of the school, and he introduced me at the age of about 13 or 14 to Sebelius, and he introduced me to the theory of relativity, handing books and books and books to read about something that was only on the fringes of my intelligence to understand. He had a considerable impression on me. I think about him quite often. I don't even know where he is now. But I didn't give my life to him. I didn't end up saying I will serve you for the rest of my days. I'm fond of him; if I could meet him, I would be grateful. I would speak to him and thank him for introducing me to Sebelius! But this man has only seen that: he's seen and heard a great teacher. There's a step that this man has not made. He's very close; he's not far; but he's not in the kingdom of God. And there's all the difference in the world about being close and being on the inside.

As I was coming home from Richmond at the weekend and got bumped off my flight in Atlanta — the woes of travel! — and as I was outside...and those of you who know the outside of the Atlanta airport...most of you know the inside of it, but the outside of it is worse! When you get outside the door, it's just bedlam, and especially at 11:30 at night. And I'm trying to find a bus that's going to take me to a hotel (as are 300 other people), and as I get on the bus when it finally arrives, I'm the last one who can get on it. And there are people behind me, and the

driver is saying, “No more!” and he closes the door. And words were spoken that I cannot repeat here! They were not far from getting on that bus, but they were not on the bus! (I was on the bus, and I wasn't going to get off the bus!)

This man is not far from the kingdom of God; he's impressed by the teaching of Jesus. What had caused Jesus to make this remark?

Well, the scribe had been listening to what Jesus had been saying in the previous encounters with the Pharisees and the Herodians, and especially, I think, the Sadducees. The Sadducees, you remember, had raised that old chestnut Levirate law from the Old Testament: a man who dies childless, the brother is then obligated to marry that wife and raise up a seed, and the firstborn would be the dead man's child and maintain the honor, the name of that man in Israel. And here's the conundrum. You remember, we were thinking about it last week: this woman has married seven times, seven brothers, and all seven brothers have died, and then she dies (and afterwards somebody said to me, “No wonder she died, after marrying seven brothers!”). And here's the question: Whose wife will she be in the resurrection? You know, you can just see them then, standing back and saying, ‘Now we've got Him! We've foxed Him now!’ You know, ‘Who did Cain marry?’ was the kind of question it was.

And you remember Jesus' extraordinary response, taking them to the very Torah that the Sadducees believed in, taking them to the heart of their religious documents that they prize so much and showing that there is indeed a doctrine of resurrection (because they only asked the question to mock the doctrine of the resurrection), and showing that the Torah really did believe and teach the doctrine of the resurrection, that God is the God of Abraham and of Isaac, and of Jacob. Not that He was the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, but that He is.

And it so impressed this man...it so impressed this man, and so he asked a question of his own: ‘Of all the commandments...’ [This is a scribe, remember; this is a lawyer. He deals in all the legal intricacies of the code of the Old Testament. That's his meat and drink. That's what he thinks and talks about all day long.] So here's the great question that consumes this man: Of all the commandments, which is the most important?

And Jesus cites the *shemah* of Israel from Deuteronomy 6 that every Jew knows: “Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is One” — that great, profound statement of monotheism that was at the heart of Judaism: the unity of God and the oneness of God — “The Lord is One, and you shall love the Lord with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might and with all your strength. And the second [quoting now from Leviticus 19:18], love your neighbor as yourself.” Every Jew knew the *shemah* of Israel, Deuteronomy 6. Some Jews every time they prayed would have the *shemah* on a leather kind of wallet that would wrap around their arms, and wrap around their foreheads — phylacteries. Some would have a copy of the *shemah* on a tiny, tiny piece of parchment in a little box on the

lintel of the doorposts of their homes, a *mezuzah*. They knew it well, and Jesus draws two texts, one from Deuteronomy 6 and one from Leviticus 19 that we were thinking about just a few months ago — “love your neighbor as yourself.”

And this man is so impressed by that, that He can weave two texts together and say ‘This is the greatest commandment: loving God and loving our neighbor’— summarizing, perhaps, the first four tables of the Law...the first four commandments of the Law, The Ten Commandments... and summarizing the last six commandments of the Law. According to Cranfield, verse 32 should be rendered, “The response of the scribe, ‘Beautifully said, Teacher, what a beautiful answer.’ And he goes on to say, ‘You have truly said that He is One and there is no other besides Him. And to love Him with all the heart and with all the understanding, with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’ And that’s when Jesus says, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.””

III. Let me suggest why Jesus said that about him. This man understood what the Law demands: that what the Law demands is love for God, that’s the first thing.

He understood that. He was impressed by it — that God-centered, whole-hearted devotion is what it’s all about — with all of my heart...that my hearts beats in love for God. “Take my life, and let it be consecrated, Lord, to Thee.” And with the understanding...yes, and with the understanding with my mind that there are consequences about the way that we think and what we think, and the shape of our thinking, and that the pattern of our thoughts and the structure of our thoughts are to be shaped by what God says and who God is, and I’ll give myself to the study of God’s thoughts and try to think God’s thoughts after Him. And with your soul...yes! the scribe says, yes! I agree with that with my soul — and I think he means in the sense of ‘with our affections.’ Sometimes that’s what ‘with the soul’ means in the Bible, ‘with your affections’—the idea of giving to God in an animated way: not empty, lifeless, but aflame and burning for God, and with all of my strength, with energy and commitment and zeal and enthusiasm, I delight to do Thy will. ‘Yes!’ The scribe says, ‘Beautifully said, Master...Teacher.’

And to love one’s neighbor as we love ourselves, because when we see ourselves as the creation of God, bearing the image of God, in loving ourselves we are merely reflecting the fact that we are made by God and we bear the stamp “Made by God” even within our brokenness and fallenness, so that in the gospel we find that true identity and true integration that comes in meaningfulness, and purposefulness that comes from knowing God. And he’s so impressed by that, and he says, ‘That’s it, and it’s more important than whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.’

Now, this is a Jew speaking — at Passover! In the temple precincts he’s saying

this, that he's seen through to the spirituality of the Law, to the very heart of what it means to know God and to serve God and to have a relationship with God, and it's more than the scruples and the legalism so often surrounding the tiny codes of whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. And he's understood something.

And Jesus says, 'You're so very near...you're so very, very near to the kingdom of God.' But he's still outside the kingdom of God. He's still outside the kingdom of God. He may be near, but he's not a member of the kingdom. He hasn't yielded to the King's rule. He had shown a perceptiveness about the true meaning of the Law, but he had never asked what are the consequences of breaking that Law? Of coming short of that Law?

He was fascinated with this theoretically; he loved to talk theology. He was the kind of person who loved to talk about religious things, but he hadn't come to the point where he saw the Law as something which first of all condemns us, and drives us to an end of ourselves so that as Paul can say, "I had not known sin except the Law had said 'Thou shalt not covet.'" He hadn't come to see Christ as the end of the Law for righteousness. He hadn't seen the Law as a schoolmaster to drive us to Jesus Christ. He hadn't said, you see,

Not the labors of my hands can fulfill Thy Law's demands;
Could my zeal no respite know, could my tears forever flow,
All for sin could not atone.
Thou must save, and Thou alone.

Nothing in my hands I bring, simply to Thy cross I cling.
Naked, come to Thee for dress; helpless, look to Thee for grace.
Foul, I to the fountain fly. Wash me, Savior, or I die.

You were three seconds from a victory on Saturday. Three seconds...but it was an eternity. You were so near, but you were so far away at the end. And you may be that close to the kingdom of God, you may move in the circles of those who are in the kingdom of God, and you can almost smell and taste the kingdom of God, but you're not in the kingdom of God, because you haven't yielded to the Kingship and rule and sway of Jesus in your life and in your soul, and in your family, and in your affections, and in your motives and desires.

I began by telling you about John Wesley. That same evening when his eye fell on this particular text, he tells us that something remarkable happened to him:

In the evening I went unwillingly to a society in Aldersgate Street, where one was reading Luther's *Preface to the Epistle to the Romans*. About a quarter to nine, while he was describing the change which God worked in the heart through faith in Christ, I felt my heart strangely warmed. I felt I did trust in Christ, Christ alone; and an assurance was given me that He had taken away my sins, even mine, and saved me from the Law, and sin

and death.

How did John Wesley enter the kingdom of God? "I felt I did trust Christ, Christ alone." My friends, I want to ask you sincerely tonight, are you just near the kingdom or are you in the kingdom of God? Let's pray together.

Our Father, once again Your word searches out our hearts, and we pray that You would have Your way with us. And even now, Lord, by Your Spirit, to anyone in our midst who may be very near to the kingdom but still outside of it, draw them by irresistible grace right into the very heart of the kingdom, for Jesus' sake. Amen.

Please stand and receive the Lord's benediction.

Grace, mercy, and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.

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