

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO
MARK

Week 38: When Near is Not Enough

Text: Mark 12:28-34

Last week, we looked at how the Sadducees tried and failed to trap Jesus into saying something that could get him into trouble. Among the crowds listening to their debate was a scribe, one of the most educated and religious men in their culture. He too questioned Jesus, but his question wasn't a trap. He had a genuine desire to know what Jesus viewed as the important law on which to focus. His interaction with Jesus was fascinating and sobering, and should make us evaluate whether or not we, ourselves, are actually part of God's kingdom.

1. Jesus Summarises the Law As a Love and Worship Issue

- Read Mark 12:28-31

By this stage, the Jews had 613 different laws to keep, which was exhausting. And so, in order to make sure that they obeyed the most important laws, they categorised them into two groups. So the question around which laws were the most important would have been a common one, and it was not strange that the scribe wanted Jesus' opinion on the matter. To answer his question, Jesus pointed him to two passages that the Jews would have known by heart, Deuteronomy 6 and Leviticus 19:18. In essence, both these verses together taught how all of the Ten Commandments were summarised and kept by loving God with all one's heart, as well as loving others. If one could not obey the first command to love God properly, then it would be impossible to obey the rest, which was to love others perfectly.

- ❖ Q: Why would Jesus' answer to the scribe been a shock for his listeners?
- ❖ Q: Why is our obedience to the Ten Commandments really an issue of love and worship?
- ❖ Q: Why is it impossible to obey the other 9 commandments, if one cannot obey the first one? (Exodus 20:1-17)
- ❖ Q: Do you think Jesus' listeners would have been encouraged or discouraged to hear his answer? Explain.

2. Jesus Isn't Letting Us Off The Hook, But Putting Us On It

It's a great mistake to read into this passage that Jesus was lowering the standards of the law. This passage shows that he is, in fact, raising the standard, making it impossible to keep perfectly. Being able regularly to keep 9 out of 10 of the commandments would never be enough. We either obey them completely, or we do not obey them at all. Hearing this comes as a shock to morally inclined people, and it would have been a shock to the religious Jews, who prided themselves on keeping the Ten Commandments perfectly. And if we are truly honest with ourselves, we all know that we do not love others perfectly, and we don't love God as much as we should either, and so we are all transgressors/law breakers. The only fitting response for us is to fall on our knees and confess that we have not and cannot keep God's laws.

- ❖ Q: Why is the news that we need to love God and others actually a higher standard to keep than observing and keeping the Ten Commandments?
- ❖ Q: Why is this shocking news to people who pride themselves on keeping the rules, as well as to those of us who love to be "good Christians"?
- ❖ Q: Why is it that the only fitting response, is for us to fall to our knees and confess our total inability to keep God's laws?
- ❖ Q: Do you or have you ever struggled to realise fully at heart-level, that despite your own efforts to be "good", your attempts will never be acceptable to God? Are you willing to admit this to your GC, and allow them to come alongside you and pray for God's revelation to shine into your heart, so that you can respond in repentance and faith?

3. It Is Possible To Be Very Near To The Kingdom Of God And To Not Be In It

- Read Mark 12:32-34

The scribe understood what Jesus was saying at some level, but his heart had not fully comprehended the weight of his own depravity and need for a saviour. Jesus didn't try and force him to understand, he simply responded by warning him that although his heart was leaning towards the right direction, he was still not there yet, and as a result he was not yet part of God's kingdom. He may have been passionate and full of zeal for the things of God, but his heart was not fully open and surrendered to the grace of God. The heart was the issue, not his lack of effort.

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The same is of true of us today. We may know a lot about the scriptures, we may be dedicated to the church and serve God wholeheartedly, we may even do really well at living out the Ten Commandments, but if our hearts do not really grasp our desperate need for a saviour, because we are sinners by nature and unable to keep God's laws, then we are no closer to the kingdom of God than the scribe was. This should get us to stop and consider the true condition of our hearts.

- ❖ Q: Why is it hard for us to hear that the scribe was close to the kingdom of God but not in it?
- ❖ Q: If someone in our congregation is concerned, after hearing this message, that they may be just like the scribe - close to the kingdom of God, but not in it - what should they do?

4. An Opposite Error Is To Be In The Kingdom And To Not Obey God's Law of Love

Jesus didn't leave us to fail at living up to the law perfectly. He came to earth so that he himself could live out the law perfectly. He loved God and loved others the way God required, and in so doing, he fulfilled the requirements of the law. The good news of the gospel is that, because he lived the perfect life, and he paid the price for our transgressions by dying on the cross, we are counted righteous by God, because he has gifted us his own righteousness. So, even though we are unable to live out the law perfectly, God sees Christ's obedience as our own. This does not mean that the law no longer stands, or that we should no longer obey it. The law still remains, it is still God's standard for his people, and we are still called to live lives that in a way that reflects his character him, by the power of the Holy Spirit.

If we are his people, and part of his kingdom, then our calling is twofold:

1. We are called to love GOD

- Read 1 John 4:7, 1 John 4:18-19, Matthew 6:24
 - I. With all of our hearts – from the very root of our beings, with an affection that is not surpassed by any other affection or priority.
 - II. With all of our souls – not lukewarm but full of fire, passion, energy and vitality (Revelation 3:16).
 - III. With all of our minds – keeping focused on the word of God, and taking our thought lives captive and submitting them to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5).
 - IV. With all of our strength – we should not be passive, but actively put sin to death (Colossians 3:5), and display sacrificial love for God and his church (Ephesians 5:1-2). Our love for God is demonstrated in how we obey Christ (John 14:15).

2. We are also called to love PEOPLE

- Read Luke 6:31, Luke 6:35, Romans 12:9, Romans 13:10, 1 Corinthians 13:4-8, 1 Corinthians 13:13, Ephesians 4:2, 1 Peter 4:8, John 15:13, Ephesians 5:25, Colossians 3:14, Proverbs 10:12, Proverbs 17:17

We are to love people to the same degree that we love ourselves. Some of us have a healthy self-esteem; we know how much time and energy we put into caring for ourselves, and therefore we have a reasonable idea of what it would look like for us to love others in the same way. But for those of us who have poor self-esteem, we don't quite realise how our self-focus, self-consciousness, self-loathing and self-obsession are all forms of loving and focussing our attention on ourselves. If we loved others nearly half as much, we would spend a great deal of time loving them.

It is important to remember that when we fail to love God and others perfectly, we are forgiven. And that in itself motivates us to get up and continue to love again.

- ❖ Q: What does it look like for us to love God with all our hearts, souls, minds and strength?
- ❖ Q: In which of the 4 areas mentioned above do you lack in your love for God?
- ❖ Q: Why is our obedience to Christ a sign of our love for him?
- ❖ Q: Why is it not enough to just love God and not love people?
- ❖ Q: Think of one person that comes to mind that do you not love and care for in the way that God expects. What things do you need to change in order to love them the way God wants you to. (Be specific, intentional and accountable).

