

Not Far from the Kingdom
The Gospel of Mark 11-16: #5
Mark 12:28-34, ESV

For God so loved the world that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever shall believe in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send His Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him.

There is a tremendous difference between the words “almost” and “there.” I made the decision last week to cook for my family. That’s a rare and dreaded sight in the West Household. I wanted to make a first-class gourmet meal, so I went to Sam’s, bought a 12-dollar fillet of white cod fish, 1 bag of crinkle cut fries, and 1 box of Italian Breadcrumbs, and got to cooking. To everyone’s surprise, the food was edible. My son even felt lead to say: “Dad, you could almost pass for a chef.” In Derrick’s English, that translates to “you can almost pass as a chef, but you are not there yet.”

“Almost” is not the same as “there.” “Almost” is not the same as “arrived.” “Almost” is not the same as “finished.” And “not far from the kingdom” is not the same as “part of the kingdom.” First, the chief priests questioned Jesus about His authority on this Tuesday of Passion Week. We smiled when our Lord Jesus refused to fall for their trap. Next came the Pharisees and Herodians, who tried to do their part to nail him to Calvary before it was time by questioning him about politics. When our Lord Jesus answered, “Render to Caesar what is Caesar’s and to God what is God’s,” we said in our hearts “all wisdom belongs to him, glory to his name.” Then came the Sadducees, who said there is no resurrection. When Jesus told them that they were badly mistaken, we quietly celebrated, saying to ourselves “that’s what you get when you think you are smarter than God himself.”

But church, I want to tell you today that there is a reason that I believe God, in His manifold wisdom, inspired John Mark to include the dialogue between an inquisitive scribe and our Lord last on this Tuesday Inquisition. It is this: the scribe is the one person in this whole narrative sequence that applies to us the most. This one scribe believed the words of the Scriptures from cover to cover. Unlike the Pharisees, he even understood the spirit behind the Scriptures. He knew the two most important commands in the Bible were to love God and to love neighbor. So much so that he expected Jesus to tell him: “you are there” or “you have arrived at the reason I have come unto the world.” Instead, he got, “you are not far from the Kingdom of God.”

Friend, it is possible to know the Scriptures from cover to cover and be near the kingdom, but not part of it. It is even possible to be a preacher of those Scriptures and lead many into the kingdom but not be a part of it yourself. For Jesus did not come into this world just to make you better at loving God, loving neighbor, and the Scriptures, as important as they may be. He came into this world to give himself as a propitiation for your sins, so that by trusting in Him with all your heart, you can have a relationship with him that’s just as real in private as it is in public. Otherwise, friend, you will continue living exactly as this scribe: not far from the Kingdom of God. Consequently, I want to tell you this scribe’s story today not so you can see what it means to be “not far from the Kingdom of God.” But so you can see what it means to be “a part of the Kingdom of God.” To do that, please turn with me to Mark 12:25-34. Today, I’ll be from the English Standard Version because it captures the original Greek the best.

²⁸ And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, “Which commandment is the most important of all?” ²⁹ Jesus answered, “The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.’ ³⁰ 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. ³¹ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” ³² And the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him.” ³³ 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.” ³⁴ And when Jesus saw 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.

This Scribe:

1. Had a Similar World View (28a)

- **The Man on the Corner:** (1) There is a man who stands on the corner of 58th and Route 60 by Wells Fargo who looks like he comes straight out of the biblical wilderness. (2) He’s armed with only three things: (a) a sign in one hand that says “Repent;” (b) A sign in the other that says “Jesus is coming,” and (c) A Megaphone around his shoulder. (3) He’s been faithful there so long that he’s started to earn a lot of horn beeps and thumbs up. (4) This scribe in this passage is a lot like some of those passersby. He beeped his horn and gave Jesus a thumbs up.
- **The Scribes in Ancient Israel:** (1) Had one job to do: to copy, by hand, the oracles of the Lord as given from Genesis to Malachi. (3) They took their job of preserving the Word of God so seriously that if they made one single mistake on a scroll, they would throw the whole scroll away and start again, saying to their other fellow scribes “this scroll now defiles the hands.” That’s an amazing conviction when you consider that unrolling the scrolls to Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Psalms would require more than a football field.
- **This Particular Scribe Had Been Listening to All of Jesus Inquisitors:** (1) We know that from v28: “seeing that he answered them well.” (2) It’s a statement indicating he agrees with Jesus assessment of those who came before him. (2) (a) The priests and chief priests controlled the religion and were threatened by Jesus. That’s why he chose not to answer them. The scribe agreed. (b) The Herodian’s theological convictions were influenced only by what they could gain. This scribe agreed with Jesus’ answer about Caesar and God. (c) The Pharisees took their

religious devotion to love God so seriously that they didn't see the need for love of neighbor. The scribe agreed. (d) The Sadducees didn't take the Bible seriously enough to believe in the miraculous. This scribe agreed with Jesus that these individuals were badly mistaken.

- **App:** It is possible to see the world from the Christian perspective and be outside of the kingdom. Jesus didn't come into this world just to make you see things as he saw them. He came into this world to die for you and have a relationship with you. That's what being in the kingdom is all about.

2. Had a Similar Word View (28b-32)

- **A Great Statement about the Scriptures:** (1) "The Bible is the book of my life. It's the book I live with, the book I live by, and the book I want to die by" (N.T. Wright). (2) Jesus would agree. And this scribe would have too.
- **The Scribe Asked a Sincere Question:** (1) "Which commandment is the most important" (28b). (2) In the Law of Moses (Gen-Deut.), there are 613 laws, 248 say "Do this," 365 say "Don't do this." That's a lot of laws and he wants to know which one is the most important.
- **The Scribe Received a Sincere Answer:** (1) Jesus answers by quoting two commands: (a) one was the most familiar to the Jews then and now. It's called the Shema and is found in Deut 6: "Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." Jesus, though, adds "with all of your strength." (2) Then he adds another from Leviticus 19:18 "You shall love your neighbor as yourself." (3) But then he says something unexpected: "There is no commandment (singular) greater than these. Jesus has just taken the Shema and added (a) strength and (b) love of neighbor to it. He can do that because he is the Word of God Incarnate.
- **The Scribe Gave an Misguided Reply:** (1) In v32, "you are right teacher." The scribe thinks He has the power to validate Jesus. But it's Jesus who has the power to validate what the Bible is all about: love of God and neighbor, something the Shema alone couldn't do.
- **App:** This scribe got the sum total of Biblical revelation right: the love of God and neighbor. Why was He on the outside looking in? Because even loving God and loving neighbor isn't enough to be included in the Kingdom. You have to have a relationship with King.

3. Had a Similar Re View (33)

- **The Synopsis on the Back of Books:** (1) On the back of books, there is a message we go straight to in order to see what the book is about. It's called the synopsis. (2) I admire those individuals because to be able to take all of the written material and put it into a concise statement like that is a difficult thing to do. (3) Like Jesus, the scribe also read the biblical material and came up with a similar synopsis.
- **Is Much More:** (1) The reason we know this scribe was able to review the Scriptures and draw a similar conclusion to Jesus is the phrase "is much more" in v33. (2) We don't think about taking two things, both of which are good, and putting them in the correct order. But the ancients did. And the phrase by which they measured was "is much more." (3) He takes two good concepts "love of God and neighbor" and making "burnt offerings and sacrifices" and ranks them...love of God and neighbor is much more than burnt offerings and sacrifices. (4) That's something that all who questioned Jesus before him did not understand. But this man did.
- **App:** He even got the main idea of the Bible right; but that still left him on the outside of the kingdom because he had no relationship with Jesus.

4. But What He Did Not Have Was a Relationship with Jesus (34)

- **The Book I'm Qualified to Write About Marriage:** (1) I could write a book about things you are not supposed to say and how you are not supposed to react when your spouse does something for you that's meant to surprise you. My wife would write the forward. (2) When your spouse cleans and organizes your desk, you are not supposed to say: "where did you put my stack of memorization cards?" Do that and I'll assure you that things won't go well for you. (3) This scribe expected to hear "well done." But it didn't go as well as he had hoped.
- **Jesus Tells Him Something Instead Very Significant:** (1) So much so that it shut down any more questions from the crowd: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." To everyone in the crowd, this was the guy who got it. This was the guy who understood. And if his observations didn't qualify him for the kingdom, they knew theirs would not. That's why Mark says: "after that no one dared to ask him any more questions."
- **The End of the Passage is Mark's Way of Dropping Us Off Where We Need to Be in Our Hearts and Minds:** (1) It is possible for all of us to hear messages about salvation and never be saved. It's possible hear messages about missions and never be moved to be missional. It's possible to know the Scriptures and never be touched by them. And it's possible to be "not far from the kingdom" but not "in the kingdom." (2) Jesus didn't come into this world to make bad people good and ok lovers of God and neighbors better to lovers of God and neighbor. (3) He came into this world so that you can be a part of the kingdom. Being a part of the kingdom comes when we repent, turn from our sin, and accept by faith that Jesus died and rose again. And the best way we know that we are a part of that kingdom is if the fruits of how that Kingdom operates are manifested in our lives right now. They are love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, and self-control. That's what Jesus meant when he prayed "thy kingdom come, thy will be done. On earth as it is in heaven.
- **App:** Don't leave here today as this scribe left this conversation. You don't have to be someone not far from the Kingdom of God. You can be a part of it. And the reason you can has everything to do with what Jesus did for you that you can't do for yourself.