

How Far are You from the Kingdom of God?

Mark 12:28-34 (NIV)

²⁸ One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” ²⁹ “The most important one,” answered Jesus, “is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. ³⁰ 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: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” ³² “Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³ To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” ³⁴ When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.

“Pastor, tell me one thing that I can do to bring me closer to God. Simplify it. Make it easy for me.” This is basically what one of the teachers of the law (a Bible expert of the day) asked Jesus: “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?” (verse 28c)

Jesus didn’t disappoint when it came to answering. He didn’t need any debate. No hesitation to think about. He answered, “The most important one is this: ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.” (verses 29-31)

Jesus began by quoting Deuteronomy 6:4-5, a good reminder that his summary is nothing new, a teaching written down from the time of Moses. Jesus declares who God is: “Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one.” (verse 29) The Jews said this statement every morning and every evening. (שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה אֶחָד :) It was a creed of sorts, a brief statement of beliefs, much like our Apostles’ Creed.

At first glance, this seems like a simple statement teaching just one thing: that there is only one God. But there is more here. The name “Lord” is the name by which God revealed himself to Moses, a name that means “I am.” He has always been and he will always be God with no beginning and no end. He is the Lord Almighty who made a covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, who promised that all nations would be blessed through them and their offspring - an offspring who would crush the devil to free us and all people from slavery to Satan. As the Lord, he chose to do all this for us so that we would belong to him. This is why he is “our God,” our personal God, who looks after and cares for us, who is with us always to the very end of the age.

Now that you remember who God is and what he has done for you, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.” (verse 30) Because God has loved you so completely and unchangingly and has always kept his Word to take care of us and save us from sin, death, and Satan, he calls you and me to love him in the same way. Love him with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. This is a total, complete, and unflinching love and commitment to God. He calls us to keep him as our first priority in everything. Nothing else is to ever come before him – and that includes husbands, wives, kids, work, play, all of that. Everything we think, say, and do is to be done for his glory and his praise.

It’s tempting to water this down, to think that God doesn’t really require all of this, this total commitment, that nothing can ever come before him. So sometimes we give just an hour here to God, some money there in the offering plate, some work fixing up, painting, cleaning the church. I read my Bible at home, but not all the time. I don’t have to give him my all; I just have to give him enough, right?

The problem is that enough for God is all and nothing less. Just as the teacher of the law proclaimed, “Well said, teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices.” (verses 32-33) God doesn’t want you occasionally for church or a few things that you do, for the times when work or home life aren’t demanding your attention. God wants all of you - 100% all the time with nothing held back.

If we are giving that total and complete love to God, then it would naturally follow that we would do the same for our neighbor, that we would, as Jesus said for the second commandment: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” (verse 31a) If you are totally loving God

and committed to him, you will love your neighbor in the way that God has loved you. You will care for him, help him, befriend him, watch out for him, not scheme against him, speak bad of him, or be jealous over what he has.

That sounds exhausting. To always love God more than my spouse or kids, never being selfish, never taking a day all to myself, never neglecting any responsibilities, to live for God from the moment I get up until I lay my head on the pillow, and, technically, while I'm sleeping too - that's impossible!

Last week on Sunday night in the Bible Information Class, we took a look at the Ten Commandments in Exodus 20. I didn't need to work through all ten to see if the people there had kept them or not. I just started with the first. Has anything ever come between you and God? Has God ever been anything to you other than your number one priority in life, that he has always come first? How quickly we realize that we are far from the kingdom of God. We know the commandments, but we need to do all of them all the time perfectly in order to earn the kingdom of God. We know the path to his kingdom, but we can't seem to get there.

This is why Jesus said to the teacher of the law, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." (verse 34b) He was close. He knew the how to get there, but he couldn't do it. He had not loved the Lord with all his heart, all his soul, all his mind, and all his strength. He had not always loved his neighbor as himself. Neither have we. We like to think of ourselves as generally good people, that we don't sin a whole lot, just occasionally, just in a moment of weakness or ignorance. But the command is to love God wholly and completely all the time. This we have not done. The kingdom of God might as well be a million miles away with both our arms and legs broken. We know how to get there, but we can't do it.

The solution to being so close yet so far from the kingdom of God is before us today just as Jesus stood before that teacher of the law. We have not given our all to God, but Jesus did. Jesus loved the Lord with all his heart, with all his soul, with all his mind, and with all his strength. He loved his fellow man, his neighbor, as he loved himself and loved his God. This is why God the Father declared of Jesus, "This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased." (Matthew 3:17; Matthew 17:5; 2 Peter 1:17)

Jesus kept these commandments perfectly and completely for us in our place. His gift of perfection is given to us by his Word. He gives the work of these perfectly completed commands to us in our baptisms where he washes away all our sins and clothes us with the robe of his righteousness. He gives us his perfection in his body and blood given and poured out for us for the forgiveness of sins. He is the one who brings us into the kingdom of God by what he has done.

Because God has brought me into his kingdom through Jesus' work that completed these commandments for me, I seek to give my whole life to God - to love him with all my heart, all my understanding, all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. Because God has loved me wholly, I don't just give him a part of me, but I give all of me. I can't walk into his kingdom, but he has brought his kingdom to me by his life and his works.

It's simple, isn't it? "Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength. Love your neighbor as yourself." (verses 30-31) Do this, and you have the kingdom of God. It's within my grasp, but it's also not at the same time. I didn't do it, couldn't do it, but the Lord did it for me. His perfect obedience to God's commands has brought the kingdom of God to me. He lives and rules over my heart by the faith he has given me to believe that he has perfectly completed the commandments for me. With him having done this, I live wholly for him. Amen.

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Pastor Jonathan Klein

pastorklein@lightofthevalley-wels.org