

**“NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM”**

Mark 12:28-34

**Intro:** For those of you who have not been with us in the present series of messages that I have been bringing on Sunday mornings, let me say for your benefit, that we have been going through the Gospel according to Mark. We are in chapter 12 as you perhaps have noticed in the Tableau.

At this point in Mark’s Gospel the Lord was in Jerusalem and He was approaching His arrest and crucifixion. We were told in chapter 11 how the Lord, greatly displeased with the Jewish religious leader because of what was going on in the Temple, overturned the tables of the men who were selling animals for sacrifice and drove them all out of the Temple, saying as we read in Mark 11:17,

Is it not written, My house shall be called of all nations the house of prayer? but ye have made it a den of thieves.

This understandably did not make the Jewish leaders very happy. In fact, it made them more intent on doing away with him than they had been before, if such a thing were possible. Verse 18 of chapter 11 confirms what I have just said to you.

This was followed by a series of times when various groups of Jewish religious leaders confronted the Lord over various issues, hoping to get Him to say something that they could take as the basis of some charge that they could bring against Him.

And so in Mark 11, verse 27, we read that a group of “the chief priests, and the scribes, and the elders, came to Him, certain that they could trap Him in His response. They wanted to do by what authority He had done what He had done. This takes us into the first twelve verses of chapter 12.

Next, in verse 13 of chapter 12, we read that a group of Pharisees and Herodians came, and they tried to trap the Lord with a question about paying taxes to Caesar. But the Lord left them marveling at His answer.

Last Sunday we considered verses 18 to 27. This time it was the Sadducees who came. They were a group of Jews who denied that there was any future life, and they denied the existence of angels, and they tried to get the best of our Lord by telling Him a hypothetical story, using as a

basis what Moses wrote in Deuteronomy 25 about what should happen to a woman if her husband died before they were able to have a child. The Lord put a stop to their foolishness with the words we find in Mark 12, verses 24 through 27.

In our text for today, verses 28 through 34 of chapter 12, we find that a lone scribe, who had been listening to how the Lord answered the other Jews, ventured to ask the Lord a question of his own. His attitude seems to have been quite different from the men who came before him. We do not know if he was one of the scribes who came in the first group (see 11:27), but if he was, and had been listening to the conversations that the different groups had with the Lord, we can say at least that he had been impressed with the Lord's answers, and so felt free to ask the Lord a question of his own.

Before we consider His question, and the Lord's answer, let me help you to understand:

## **I. WHO THE SCRIBES WERE.**

The history of the scribes goes back into the Old Testament, but our concern with this passage in Mark has to do with what the scribes did when our Lord was here on earth.

Their name suggests that they had something to do with writing, and they did. They wrote out copies of the Law for the synagogues. But along with their writing, they were also teachers. They may not have been the only teachers, but teaching the Law, especially to children, was one of their main responsibilities. If issues came up regarding the interpretation of the Law, the people would consult the scribes. Matthew called this scribe, a lawyer.

Therefore, they were a very important group, and a very powerful and influential group. But, as is so often the case, they became a very proud group of men, and they really demanded the chief seats in the synagogues. And so their pride produced corruption in their hearts.

Let your eye run down to verses 38 through 40 in this twelfth chapter of Mark, and you will see how the Lord described the scribes. (Read.)

Their training began when they were about thirteen, but it was not until

they reached the age of thirty that they were inducted fully into the office of a scribe. Some became doctors of the Law. In trials regarding litigations of any kind, the scribes were consulted. Scribes might become the head of a school, and possibly even a member of the powerful group known as the Sanhedrin.

But now we come to:

## **II. THIS PARTICULAR SCRIBE AND HIS QUESTION (Mark 12:28).**

Now this man who came to the Lord was a full-fledged scribe. He was therefore as old as the Lord, who was in His thirties, or quite possibly he was older. But he was a man who had much exposure to the Law, which we know was God's Word which had been revealed to Moses. In copying the Law, and teaching the Law, he had been exposed year after year to the Word of God. And it seems quite obviously that this scribe had been profoundly affected by this branch of the Old Testament. In his own studies he had probably asked himself many, many times, What is the most important of all of the Laws which Moses gave to Israel? We don't know if he looked upon the Law as the Word of God, or not. But there have been countless numbers of people down through human history whose hearts have been captivated by the Scriptures, and then they became convinced gradually that there was something very unique about the Scriptures which set them apart from all other writings. This is where I believe that this scribe was in his thinking when he heard the Lord Jesus talking to his fellow-Jews. Notice in verse 28 of our text that Mark introduced this particular scribe with the words,

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that He [that is, the Lord] had answered them well, asked Him, Which is the first commandment of all?  
(Mark 12:28).

From the way the Lord had answered those Jews who had been trying to trap the Lord, this scribe, this teacher, this man who doubtless had spent hours writing out the Scriptures, had come to the conclusion that the Lord was probably the One Who could answer this question which had been bothering him for some time.

Personally I believe that what we have here is a man whose heart the Lord was opening so that he had realized that there was more to know than he knew, and he believed that the Lord might be able to answer his question.

And this was a great question, wasn't it? Maybe you have asked yourself the same question. A person just starting read the Bible may very well ask, What is the starting place? What is really the primary message of this book that is called, the Holy Bible?

I'm glad that this scribe asked this question, and I am especially glad that he directed his question to the Lord.

Now there are hundreds of commandments in the Law, and many more in the rest of the Bible. Which is the most important? Was it one of the ten? Most of the Jews in that day would probably have said that the fourth commandment of the ten, was the most important: "Remember the Sabbath Day, to keep it holy." But now that we have the Lord's answer to this scribe's question, we know beyond any doubt what the most important commandment in the Law is, in fact, that which is the most important in all of the Bible!

This event, like so many that we have found in Mark's Gospel, is found also in Matthew's Gospel (22:34-40). A similar event took place earlier in our Lord's ministry which is recorded in Luke 10, but while it was a lawyer who asked the Lord a question according to Luke's account, the question was different.

But now we come to the Lord's answer.

### **III. THE LORD'S ANSWER TO THE SCRIBE'S QUESTION (Mark 12:29-31).**

There was perhaps no passage of Scripture with which this scribe would have been more familiar than these words. It was the Jewish call to worship which was heard in the Temple every morning and every night. The people of Israel were led to believe that even repeating these verses during the day, would bring special blessing. So we can be sure this scribe knew these verses well. He would have repeated them continually to young Jews whom he was catechizing. Perhaps this was one of the main influences which caused him to ask the Lord that question that he asked Him. "The first commandment" was the one upon which all of the others were based, the commandment which gave meaning and blessing to all of the other commandments.

The "commandments" have to do with the expression, the revelation, of

God's will. They have to do with the way we live. They mean that we are to put pleasing God as the primary objective in every detail of our lives. The revelation was made first to Israel, but it is the responsibility of all people everywhere to recognize that there is only one God, and that humanity is under a divine obligation to do God's will. But it must come from the heart, and so be an expression of our love for God. It must include the "soul," which probably means that it extends to every area of life. Some say that "soul" speaks of character, or personality. Finally, it calls for all of the strength we possess – physically and spiritually. Our love for God is to be seen in all that we are, all that we do, all that we say, and all that we think.

But although the scribe asked the Lord what was the greatest commandment (singular), the Lord went on to give a second because you will never find the one without the other. In Matthew's account he added, "On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets" (Matt. 22:40). The Apostle Paul said in Romans 13:9 that the commandments not to commit adultery, not to steal, not to bear false witness, and not to covet, and all commandments that were similar to them, were all "briefly comprehended in this saying, namely, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." Neighbor originally meant another Jew, but was extended to mean anyone who lives near us, to anyone we may meet during the course of a day who needs our help, and on in the NT to those who share our faith in the Lord Jesus Christ, our brothers and sisters in the body of Christ, the Church. A true relationship with God is always going to affect in a good way our relationship with the people of God. And we need to remember that obedience to God can only be pleasing to Him when it is motivated by our love for Him.

Next we come in our text to:

#### **IV. THE SCRIBE'S RESPONSE (Mark 12:32-33).**

What was it? *He was in total agreement with everything that the Lord had said, and he indicated his agreement by repeating what the Lord had said. He told the Lord that He, the Lord, was speaking the truth. And he even added to what the Lord had said, but he was not adding to what the Scriptures teach.* I am referring to his words that what the Lord had said to him was "more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." See the end of verse 33. Those were amazing words coming from a Jew who originally had thought that bringing offerings and sacrifices was the

foundation of a true relationship with God.

I repeat what I said earlier. I believe that God had been working in that scribe's heart. His eyes, the eyes of his heart, had been opened to see, to understand what most Jews in that day did not understand. It must have been very refreshing to the Lord to talk to this scribe after all that He had been through with the other scribes, the chief priest, and elders, the Pharisees, the Herodians, and the Sadducees. The Lord had not had such a response from any of the others.

But let us go on to the last verse of our text where we have some very thought-provoking words from the Lord Jesus Christ. Verse 34 gives us:

#### **V. THE LORD'S RESPONSE TO THE SCRIBE (Mark 12:34).**

Will you notice how the Lord felt about the scribe's response, and what the Lord said to him?

The Lord "saw" that the scribe "answered discreetly." We don't usually *see* words, do we? We hear words. But the Lord "saw that he answered discreetly." This means that the Lord recognized that this scribe understood truth that most people, even most religious people don't understand. The word which is translated "discreetly" (*νοῦνεχῶς*) is only used here, just this once, in all of the NT. It is an adverb, as the word "discreetly" is an adverb, and it indicates that he answered the Lord wisely, prudently, showing that he had some understanding of the truth. He recognized that what the Lord was telling him was "the truth." He had more understanding of the truth of God than any of the other religious leaders who had come to the Lord to try to trap Him. And yet the Lord said this: "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." What did the Lord mean by this?

He meant, "You understand a lot of truth, but still you are not saved." To state it another way the Lord was indicating that he appeared to be on the way to salvation, but he had not yet arrived. Let me examine with you where this scribe was spiritually.

He was a man who had read and even taught the Bible, as much as they had of it in those days. He could repeat almost verbatim the words which the Lord had quoted to him. And I can even think that he was trying to do what the commandments of Scripture told him to do. But no one is saved just because they can quote Scripture verses. It is good to memorize

Scripture, but we are not saved because we know Bible verses from memory.

Nor are we saved because we love the God. A true Christian will love God, but that is not the way he was saved. And we can go even farther than that and say that regardless of how diligent this scribe may have been in trying to obey the commandments of Scripture, that is not the way to be saved either. In fact, it doesn't make any difference how hard we may try to serve God, or to live for Him, nobody has ever been saved by the good things that they have done. This scribe had spent his life teaching the Bible, seeking to help children and adults understand the Bible, but neither he nor they could ever be saved by good works.

But the biggest mistake that this scribe was making with all of the knowledge that he had about the Bible, and all the good works that he had done as a religious leader, with all of the knowledge he had, he had not yet come to the place in his understanding of the Bible where he recognized Who the Person was to whom he was speaking. He had not yet come to an understanding of the relationship between Jesus and the Scripture. He did not yet understand that in just a matter of days this Teacher Whom he had come to admire so much, and from Whom he had learned so much, was going to die. You see, they talked about the commandments of God, but this scribe did not know that Jesus was the Son of God. He did not know that Jesus was the Christ Who had come to die for sinners that they might be forgiven of their sins and have eternal life. He did not yet understand that we are not saved by what we do for God, but it is through what God does for us through Christ. He was not far from the kingdom of God, but what He needed was a Savior. And just as there is only one God, so there is only one Savior. When we know Christ by faith in His atoning death, then we have both the desire and the God-given power to obey the commandments. When Christ is our Savior, then we can love God with all of our heart and soul and strength and mind, but not until we know the Lord Jesus Christ as our Savior.

**Concl:** We are not told the end of this story, but I am not going to be surprised if some day when I am in heaven, I get acquainted with this scribe, and learn from his own mouth how God continued to work in his heart until he understood that salvation is through trusting in what Christ did for sinners on the Cross. We love Him because He first loved us and gave His life as a sacrifice for our sins. And we keep His commandments not in order to be saved, but because we are saved.

Mark 12:28-34 (8)

You know, as I prepared my message for this morning, I realized that in every generation there are people like this scribe, and perhaps not as good as this scribe may have been, but people who are depending upon verses that they have memorized, upon truth that they know, but they have never understood that there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that we can do that will please God until we come to Christ and trust Him to save us from our sins. We all need a Savior. We all need Christ. When Christ is our Savior, we are not just close to the kingdom of God; we are in! If you do not know Christ as your Savior, I trust that the Spirit of God will draw you to Christ to be saved today.