



Hazelbank Presbyterian Church



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Today's reading sees an end to the questions from those who have been trying to catch Jesus out. They have basically been embarrassed as they came to him in their supposed cleverness and left in their shame. From the Pharisees and the Herodians to the Sadducees we thought about last week to today's questioner who follows a similar pattern with perhaps a slightly different agenda. We read:

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 neighbour 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 neighbour 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.

The Scribes were Pharisees and so this teacher of the law, this scribe, comes to Jesus after he has watched the rest of them have a go at catching him out and he too asks a question: "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"

Now we need to understand where this question is coming from. Wiersbe tells us: The Scribes had determined that the Jews were obligated to obey 613 precepts in the Law, 365 negative precepts and 248 positive ones. One of their favourite exercises was discussing which one of these divine commandments was the greatest." Jesus answers in a way that is very familiar to Jews but not so to non-messianic Christians. In other words unless we have been raised with a Jewish background to our faith, the beginning of Jesus answer will mean little to us. Jesus quotes Deut. 6:4-5: 4Hear, O Israel:

The LORD our God, the LORD is one. ⁵ Love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.

These verses are called the Shema and are part of the great confession of faith that all Jews profess usually morning and evening. What Jesus was basically saying was you shouldn't have to ask me what it is since you state it at least twice a day! But Jesus doesn't stop here, oh no, he goes on into Leviticus where he states from the verse that tells us:

'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against one of your people, but love your neighbour as yourself. I am the LORD.'

What Jesus was saying was that love was the most important thing in life. Love for God first and foremost and then secondly love for our neighbour. Now this is where it would be tempting to deliver a sermon on Love since Jesus was the one who brought it up.

If you are here this morning and this is what you had in mind when you were looking at this reading at home in preparation for this morning (there's a novel thought!) if you saw this passage coming and believed that we were going to be looking at this topic of Love – I'm sorry – not today. It is an obvious strand within the passage but we will be leaving it to the last Sunday in the month where at our evening service we will be taking a look at "love" as the first of our focus services on the fruit of the spirit.

So, if we are not looking at love then what is there here that we can study? You'd be amazed at what God wants to say from this passage! The answer is almost like a light-bulb being switched on in the scribe's mind. He answers Jesus with I am, sure a smile on his face,:

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 neighbour as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

Imagine telling the Lord Jesus Christ that he did a good job describing God! Jesus spoke as God's Word and the word burrowed deep into this man's heart and the son began to rise in his soul. A soul that has been imprisoned in the law and religion for so long now was beginning to be set free. Before hand he thought he understood his faith but as he stood in the presence of Jesus he started to understand in a whole new way. Perhaps a way that finally made sense.

Jesus looks at him and says the words of eternity that, depending who you are should either fill you with immense hope and joy or terrify you to the core of your soul:

"You are not far from the kingdom of God."

There are three sorts of people here in this church this morning. There are those who have decided that it doesn't matter what anyone will say to them, there are not prepared to come to Jesus and get their life sorted out. Those who we might be tempted to refer to as agnostic – those who don't really care what they believe – Jesus might have been the saviour of the world but that is really of no relevance to them today.

Then there are those who have taken time to come to Jesus, to ask God to forgive their sins and who through faith are working at becoming a disciple of Jesus'. They have a certainty and an assurance that comes only through surrender and faith. But listen there is also a third group here today and you are the folk who are so close to the kingdom of God it is as if you are standing outside Heaven and you can hear God breathing behind the door... but somehow you have satisfied yourself with that telling yourself your alright you needn't do any more.

"You are not far from the kingdom of God." – but you are not there – yet. And if you are near, you may think that I am talking about you . . . and I am. Let's have a look at this man's problem and see what we might be able to learn about ourselves.

First – This man was brought near by his intellectual sincerity. Vs. 34. Being a “scribe” of the law, he was a man more acquainted with the Word of God than most men, and he appears as one who was an anxious inquirer for more knowledge. There are many here today like him, and in this respect are like Apollos in Acts 18:24-26:

²⁴ Meanwhile a Jew named Apollos, a native of Alexandria, came to Ephesus. He was a learned man, with a thorough knowledge of the Scriptures. ²⁵ He had been instructed in the way of the Lord, and he spoke with great fervour and taught about Jesus accurately, though he knew only the baptism of John. ²⁶ He began to speak boldly in the synagogue. When Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately.

D.L.Moody said “Many persons flatter themselves that they are going to be saved because they know a great deal about Jesus Christ. Mere knowledge will not save. Noah’s carpenters may have known as much - even more - than Noah about the ark. They knew it was strong and that it would float for they had helped to build it - yet they were just as helpless as the others when the flood came.”

Second – He was brought near by his moral integrity. The question he raised of Jesus was not to arouse a controversy. He wasn’t doing it for the purpose of arguing or starting a religious quarrel. He wanted to know just what Jesus himself would say about this matter. He regarded Jesus as a Wise Teacher and he wanted to know what He would say. Theologians have come to regard this scribe as one who is deeply sincere, a man of integrity. But to be sincere, we know, is not enough. Paul was sincere while he was putting Christians to death. Acts 7:58 as they were stoning Stephen to death we read:

they all rushed at him, ⁵⁸ dragged him out of the city and began to stone him. Meanwhile, the witnesses laid their clothes at the feet of a young man named Saul.

But listen this is where there is great danger - Just being conscientious doesn’t guarantee one is right with the Lord. Matthew 7:21-23:

²¹ “Not everyone who says to me, ‘Lord, Lord,’ will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, ‘Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?’ ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’

Third – This man was brought near by his ceremonial faithfulness. By that, I mean that it appears that this scribe was faithful in loving God and his neighbour, in observing the burnt offerings and sacrifices, and keeping the Sabbath. And his sincere faithfulness to these things brought him near the door of the kingdom.

There are some today who never miss a Lord’s day worship, never miss being in church on a Sunday. In many cases, such are not far from the kingdom. But looking again at Jesus’ statement to the man, prompts us to ask the question, “Well, what was it that separated him from entering into the kingdom of God?” We’ve said, we believe its better to be near the kingdom than a long way from it . . . and yet on judgment day, in as far as salvation is concerned, a man missing it by a foot, has missed it! A man that drowns a few feet from the shore, is just as dead as the man who drowns in the middle of the ocean.

You remember what occurred when Paul stood before Agrippa in Acts 26:28:

When Paul had finished his powerful message, the ruler and those sitting with him were greatly affected by what Paul had said, and it is recorded that Agrippa said, “Do you think that in such a short time you can persuade me to be a Christian?”

At that moment, it appears that Agrippa was “not far from the kingdom.” Earlier in Acts, Felix, the Roman governor heard Paul’s persuasive appeal for Felix to save his soul. He trembled, he quivered, but he replied, Acts 24:25:

“That’s enough for now! You may leave. When I find it convenient, I will send for you.”

These two men reveal to us the sad truth that it is possible to come so close to the kingdom of God and still remain outside it.

But what was it that separated this scribe in Mark 12 from the kingdom? It was obvious that he admired Jesus – v. 28:

“Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer” and again in verse 32, “Well said, teacher”

But admiration for Jesus is not enough. His admiration came short of a loyal and obedient faith. He was unready or unwilling at this time to make a complete surrender of himself to Jesus as his personal Saviour. He was not willing to profess himself openly to become a disciple of Christ. We hope that he did eventually.

There are various hindrances today that keep some outside the kingdom, many who are not far away. Such things as: Pride— because it takes true humility to admit that you are a sinner standing in need of the grace of God. Pride hinders you from becoming a part of the kingdom of God, when the kingdom is ridiculed, scorned, and mocked with sarcasm by the world who do not know what they are doing.

Self- righteousness hinders you from coming into the kingdom. Instead of coming to the Great Physician to receive forgiveness of sins, some try to find their own remedies – such as denying that they has sinned, or rationalizing it, excusing it away. Believing that, “I am good enough”, and “God would not hold sin against a good person like me.” Self- righteousness will keep me from coming into the kingdom.

Billy Graham said: “Many people argue, “I do believe in Christ. I believe in the Church, and I believe in the Bible. Isn’t that enough? No! You must RECEIVE Christ. I may go to the airport. I have a reservation. I have a ticket in my pocket. The plane is on the ramp. It is a big, powerful plane. I am certain that it will take me to my destination. They call the flight three times. I neglect to get on board. They close the door. The plane taxis down the runway and takes off. I am not on the plane. Why? I “believed” in the plane, but I neglected to get on board.

That’s just it! You believe in God, Christ, the Bible, and the Church - but you have neglected to actually receive Him in your heart. Your belief has been an impersonal, speculative thing, and you have not entrusted yourself to Him.

“You are not far from the kingdom of God.” – but you are not there yet – and that is a very dangerous place to be.

2 Cor. 6:2:

“I tell you, now is the time of God’s favour, now is the day of salvation.”

LET’S PRAY TOGETHER