

Immanuel Lutheran Mail Ministry



Mark 12:28-34 *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.'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.*

In the year 282 BC, Pyrrhus the king of the region of Epirus in Greece, set sail across the Adriatic Sea to the southern portion of Italy, where he hoped to carve out a new kingdom for himself. He was one of the great military leaders of his day, and he brought with him a seasoned army of 25,000 soldiers and a corps of elephants. In Italy, he engaged an army of 20,000 Roman troops, and he defeated them. In fact, he was so successful, that he continued his military advance northward through the Italian peninsula to within 50 miles of Rome itself. And he won a number of battles along the way, but he suffered such severe losses to his own troops—almost as great as the losses he inflicted on the enemy—that he won the battles, but he lost the war. He won by such a small margin that his victories were almost the same as defeats. He is recorded as saying, "If we win another such battle against the Romans, we will be completely lost." Eventually, he was forced to end his campaign and flee back to Greece, where he died in the year 272 BC. He's been called one of the greatest of all unsuccessful generals in history. And his name is remembered today in the expression, a "Pyrrhic Victory."

A "Pyrrhic Victory" means winning by such a small margin that victory isn't much different from defeat. A Pyrrhic Victory may take place in a football game where the individual contest is won, but the star quarterback is injured so subsequent games are likely to be lost. A Pyrrhic Victory may take place in the courtroom, where the plaintiff wins the case and a monetary award, but the money won doesn't even cover the exorbitant legal fees that were accrued in the process of winning the case. I was thinking of this little bit of history when I read the Gospel lesson for today, especially Jesus' words in verse 34, ***"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."*** From all appearances in this account, the man had given a successful answer to Jesus. This scribe had first posed a question to Jesus, He gave a satisfactory answer in return, and the man responded with a reply that even Jesus recognized as very wise. Victory for this scribe! Yet perhaps we could call it a Pyrrhic Victory, for what does Jesus say? ***"You are not far from the Kingdom of God."*** Would that be a great comfort if Jesus were to direct those words to you? "Not far" means "still outside," doesn't it? What if you were to stand before God on Judgment Day, and God looked at you and said, "You were not far from entering heaven." Close, but not close enough. That's a scary thought. We'll consider that possibility as we ask the question:

Am I "Not Far" from the Kingdom of God?

- I. Yes, according to Jesus, the "right" teacher
- II. No, according to Jesus, the "right" Savior

We might find the opening question of the scribe as rather odd. ***“Which commandment is the most important of all?”*** A very odd question indeed because, of course, we understand that every one of God’s commandments is His holy law, and that breaking any one of them is sin—sin deserving death. So, we wouldn’t say that any commandment is the “greatest of all.” But, that’s not how the scribes thought, though. The rabbis of the day found in God’s Law 613 different commandments, which they separated into two different categories. And the question about which of those 613 commandments was greatest was regarded as one of the great philosophical questions of the day!

Of course, the problem with separating God’s Law out like this, is that it tends to be done in order to make God’s Law easier to follow, and thereby attain salvation by living a life according to the Law. It’s much easier to paint God’s will into black and white, with perhaps a few gray areas, so that as long as you abide by that long list of laws, then you could be declared “inside” of the Kingdom of God. And we know that’s how the Pharisees and the Sadducees and the Scribes all thought. They figured that they were the good churchgoing people, that they enumerated the list of commandments in order to keep them, and therefore would certainly have a place reserved for them in God’s kingdom.

Jesus doesn’t present the law this way. Rather than taking the bait and listing off one of the 613 laws as the most important, what does Jesus do? He summarizes the ENTIRE law in basically one word. Here’s what Jesus said: ***“The most important is, ‘Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. 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.’ The second is this: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.”*** Every one of God’s commandments, all of God’s holy will for our lives can be summed up in one word: Love. Namely, love God and love your neighbor.

“Good teacher! You are correct,” the man exclaimed. ***“You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other besides him. 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.”*** A wise response from the Scribe. But again, ***“You are not far from the Kingdom of God,”*** Jesus said.

Now, there are two kinds of people who *are far* from the kingdom of God. The first is the kind who says, “I’m the greatest.” These kinds of people know the 613 statutes in God’s law and obey them. They look down on others, they criticize, expecting things of others they don’t even expect of themselves. They figure that if God were grading on a curve, they’d be well ahead of the rest of the pack, and therefore should easily slip inside of God’s throne room. That kind of person is *far* from the Kingdom of God. And then there’s another kind of person who is far from the kingdom of God. That’s the kind of person who thinks, “I’m the worst. The worst person who ever lived! Everyone else is so good, and I wish I could be like them. I’m worthless. My case is hopeless.” The teacher of the law who gives the good answer was in neither camp. He was not far! He was not far because He knew Jesus to be a “right” teacher, a teacher who was factually correct on the matters of God’s law. But he didn’t yet know Jesus as the Savior. And “not far” is still not “close enough.”

What about you? Are you “not far”? Or are you perhaps “far” from the Kingdom of God? According to Jesus the “right” teacher, you are, or at least you ought to be on the outside looking in. Consider that law of love that Jesus proclaims as the greatest commandment. ***“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.”*** Of course, how could we possibly claim to love God in that way? Do I love God with ALL my heart? Clearly not, when there are a lot of things that I love and hold very dear, many even dearer than my God. What about with all my mind? Clearly not, when there are many times when my mind wanders

from the Word of God, easily drawn away by even the slightest insignificant distraction. With all of my strength perhaps? Do I love God with all of my strength, with all of my energy, with all of my time and effort? Not even close, when I consider how many things I prioritize with my time and energy outside of the work of God's Kingdom. I stand convicted! I stand far outside the Kingdom of God!

Then closely connected to this principle of loving God before everything else is loving my neighbor as myself. For if we really loved God, then we would naturally also love others. But again, I clearly love myself more than I do most other people. Sure, I love my wife and my children maybe more than I love myself, but what does God's Law call for? He calls for us to love *everyone* as we love ourselves, those very same people that we quickly look down upon, and criticize, and measure ourselves against and figure that in God's courtroom we're obviously doing better than them! Who I really love is myself. This is a frightening realization when you consider the very first part of Jesus' response. **"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one."** There is only one God. But who's my god? When I don't love God *above* everything with *my* everything, and when I don't love my neighbor as myself, I show that *my* God is really me. But I won't be standing before myself on Judgment Day. So according to this "right" teacher of the Law, Jesus of Nazareth, I really should be not "close enough" to God's Kingdom.

But how is that fair? How can God rightly demand that type of all-encompassing love from us? All of our heart, soul, mind, and strength. How can He demand that we love all of our neighbors as ourselves? That just doesn't seem right! We don't even that type of love from those people closest to us! If you're married, you demand love from your spouse, but you also expect there to be those times when they don't love you with all of their being. You don't stand at the altar and assume your spouse will always love you more than everything else and always put you first. You don't expect that from them because you would never give that type of love *to* them! So how could God demand this type of love from you and me?

This is the level of love that God demands *from* you because this is exactly the type of love that God has *for* you. That all-encompassing, energy consuming, all-sacrificing love is the love that God has for sinners like us.

You know, I'm a big list guy, perhaps you are too. When you have a lot of things to accomplish, it feels good to put them all down on a list, so that you can see your progress as you check those items off. I'll often write a list down of everything I need to get accomplished, and then I'll re-write the list on the basis of priorities. It's an effective way for me to be certain I'm getting everything done that I need to and in their order of importance. Well, if God had a list of His priorities, do you know what would rank as number one on that list? It's you. And it's me.

You see, Jesus, He's described here as the "right" teacher. The scribe said to Him, **"You are right, Teacher."** He meant that Jesus was factually accurate on the subject of God's Law. Jesus was correct. But there's more than one way to be "right." In English, something is "right" if it's true or correct as a fact. But you can also describe something as "right" if it's morally good or justified or acceptable. Think like, "It's the right thing to do." You see, Jesus is much more than just the "right," factually accurate teacher. He's also the "right," morally good and justified Savior. For those very same commands which God laid upon us, namely the law of love which we fail at so miserably—Jesus kept *for* us. In our Epistle lesson from Hebrews, we read about Jesus the great **"high priest, holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens."** (Hebrews 7:26) And we're told, He stands out from the Old Testament priests because He doesn't have to offer repeated sacrifices, no, just one. And earlier in the book of Hebrews, we hear more of the greatness of our High Priest, Jesus. **"We do not have a high priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but one**

who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin.” (Hebrews 4:15) He was tempted to put Himself first, to love Himself more than His neighbor, to place other things before His service to His Father. Yet He did not. He did not do so just to keep *Himself* unstained by sin. He did so to keep *you* unstained by sin! You think about those Scribes and Pharisees who strived with so much energy to keep God’s Law, it was wholly with an inward facing love. They loved themselves and so they sought to save themselves by proving themselves worthy to God. But when Jesus kept the Law, when Jesus loved God with all His heart, soul, mind, and strength and loved you and I as Himself, He did so for our benefit. This is what Paul was talking about in last week’s sermon text, when He said, ***“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.”*** (Galatians 2:20)

It is no longer I who live. Me, the very one who ought to stand “not far” from the Kingdom of God, or perhaps even “far” from the Kingdom of God—I no longer exist. Rather Christ lives in me! He—***“holy, innocent, unstained, separated from sinners, and exalted in the heavens”***—He lives in me. And He lives in you. So that you might be called holy and innocent before God. So that God can say to you, “You are inside of the kingdom of God.”

Let’s hold onto that fact, that it is not *because of who we* are that we will stand inside of God’s Kingdom, but because of Jesus. And because Jesus is standing there, exalted in heaven, we will be too. Let’s hold onto that fact, because it’s so easy to start wandering down that path of thinking that perhaps *we* of our own doing could be declared inside God’s Kingdom. You know, the really wise aspect of the Scribe’s reply, at least in my opinion was when He said that God’s holy law of love is greater than all ***“burnt offerings and sacrifices.”*** That was a really wise thing to say, because it’s natural for us to overrate our own sacrifices. It’s easy to think that because we sacrifice Sunday mornings for God, that because we sacrifice 10% or whatever it may be of our weekly paychecks to the offering plate, that because of those *sacrifices* we are pleasing to God. You know, this is the same line of thought of Catholic Monks, who think that there are those ordinary, every day type of good works that anyone can do, but then there are *real* sacrifices that come when you cloister yourself in a monastery. You shutter yourself off from the world, deny yourself most worldly pleasures, starve yourself, make your clothes uncomfortable, make your dwelling place uncomfortable—the thought is that those *sacrifices* would be great before God.

But none of *our* sacrifices are great at all. None of those *sacrifices* make anyone right before God. But the “right” Savior does make us right before God. None of our sacrifices can negate our service to ourselves, but Jesus’ sacrifice can and does. Jesus’ sacrifice was the one given for all time and for all sin, including all those done in service to yourself as your own god. Now, we can declare without any sort of fear, ***“The Lord OUR God, the Lord is one.”*** He is the one God, and He is *ours!* And He has called *us* His people! He has set you free, apart from all of your sin that stains you, separating anything that might keep you outside of the kingdom of God. And this is no sort of Pyrrhic Victory. This is neither a “close, but not close enough” “not far from the Kingdom of God” situation, nor is this a “you barely got in by the skin of your teeth” type of victory. God declares you justified. 100% innocent on all charges. Because Jesus was, so you are. So dear friends in Christ, we can rejoice today, because when we stand before God, He will look at you, and He will look at me and declare, ***“Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*** You are not “not far” from the Kingdom of God.” You are in it. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Pastor Sam Rodebaugh

“And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” (Philippians 4:7) Amen.

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