

The Seeking Scribe

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[0 : 00] Well, turn with me, if you will, for a short time this evening to Mark's Gospel and chapter 12. Mark chapter 12 and verse 34 is our text, although we are going to consider the passage under the heading The Great Commandment, verses 28 to 34.

Verse 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.

I'd like us to focus on the said scribe of Mark chapter 12.

And I'd like us to consider three things concerning this somewhat intriguing individual Mark introduces us to here.

We're going to consider a pursuing scribe, his public statement, and a perceptive saviour.

[1 : 24] So let's begin by looking at what Mark has to tell us about this individual. Well, first of all, what is the context in which we meet this pursuing scribe spoken of here?

Well, he's inquisitive. That's one of the first things we notice about this particular scribe Mark speaks of as we are introduced to him in verse 28.

He taps into a very heated discussion here between the religious leaders and the Lord Jesus.

Now it's very apparent as we read part of, the best part of the chapter really, and much of the dialogue as we see here, centers on laws and rules and cumbersome regulations.

The scribes, the Pharisees and the Sadducees made much of protocol and procedures and codes of practice. Their self-styled code of conduct was meticulous.

[2 : 46] You see that if you go through all four Gospels. And the dialogue here becomes, as Mark highlights, more of a dispute. They're arguing here the finer points of major and minor laws, from taxes and tolls and tribute to the more complex matter of marriage and the resurrection.

And in walks this anonymous scribe. And he intervenes and asks Jesus a question that nobody else appears to be able to answer.

And the question is, which commandment is the most important of all? And clearly, the revolving discussion here between the religious leaders is going nowhere.

This is an assembly room of self-elevation. There are conflicting views and opinions, and never the twain shall meet.

But this scribe breaks into this heated dispute. You get the impression that he raises his voice to make himself heard.

[4 : 11] And he looks directly at Jesus and asks him here a decisive question, seeking a definitive answer. And he gets his answer promptly.

Look at verse 29. Jesus quotes directly from Deuteronomy 6.4. It's the passage of scripture that's known as the Shema, which is the Hebrew for here.

And then in addition to that, there's a significant appendix. Not only does he take those around him to the very heart of the Israelites' confession of faith and prayer life, but he adds to the words of Leviticus 19.18.

So the answer that Jesus gives is twofold, and it's comprehensive. What does Jesus do here?

Jesus, with remarkable clarity and precision, sheds light on this weighty, pressing question that the scribe asks.

And he focuses on two key commandments. And in doing so, Jesus conveys the twofold central code of true, genuine, practical Christianity.

[5 : 42] Love for God, as verse 29 onwards highlights, must be heartfelt and must flow out of the heart if a person is to reach out to others with love in spirit and in truth.

And these two commandments summarize God's law in its entirety. And Jesus is saying, He has my commandments and keeps them.

He it is who loves me. Now back to the scribe. There is something at least commendable about this scribe's conduct and his approach to the Lord Jesus.

He's a man who has questions to ask. And he appears to be looking for answers to the questions he has.

He turns to Jesus with his questions. He could have asked his fellow scribes. He could have asked a Pharisee.

[7 : 23] He could have asked a Sadducee. But he doesn't. He comes to the Lord Jesus. But I want us to notice too that Mark is emphasizing here in chapter 12 that the discussion or the dispute that's been taking place has up until this point achieved little by way of clarity.

Confusion prevails. Confusion prevails. And this seeking scribe, what does he do? He cuts to the chase and he directs his inquiry directly at the Lord Jesus Christ.

Now I believe that this has much to teach you and I. Now maybe, perhaps there is something of the seeking scribe in you this evening.

Why are you here? Have you come with questions and you're seeking answers to your questions? Perhaps you have deep, soul-searching, personal questions about your own spiritual welfare this evening.

[8 : 37] You are seeking clarity. Perhaps some of us are seeking assurance. We're not where we would like to be. And you're looking perhaps for someone to shed light on your questions.

To give you the definitive answers that you crave. Perhaps you're just like this scribe. You are seeking. Maybe you've exhausted other avenues.

Mark is encouraging us all to direct our questions at the Lord Jesus Christ.

You might be saying, where will I find him so that I can put my questions to him? You will find him in the Gospels. You will discover the Christ of Deuteronomy 6.4 and the Christ of Leviticus 19.18 who came to fulfill the law and the prophets here before us.

The discipleship directives of Deuteronomy and Leviticus back in the Old Testament, Jesus kept, lived out, and fulfilled.

[9 : 55] The same directives he commends to his disciples for keeping. Indeed, he commands that we do so.

So I want to encourage you to open your Bible over these days of communion. I want to encourage you tonight to engage with the Word of God. Believe the scripture that says, seek and you will find. Maybe some of us tonight are burdened and weary with our unanswered question. Again, the Gospel writer Matthew encourages us to come to the feet of Jesus.

Jesus says to each and every one of us, come to me and I will give you rest. He promises rest to the restless. And what does he say in relation to the questions we might have?

Learn of me. Jesus is saying, I will give you clarity. The Bible is encouraging us to follow in the footsteps of Mary.

[11 : 08] Remember how Mary sat at the feet of Jesus as she listened to the teaching of her Master. And her questions are answered at the feet of the Lord Jesus.

Remember how Jesus spoke of Martha. By contrast, Martha is anxious and troubled about many things. Mary, on the other hand, has chosen to bring her anxiety and her troubled heart to me.

And what I give her in response will not be taken from her. What does Jesus give Mary? He gives her the definitive answer to life's questions.

And maybe some of us have fundamental, deep, soul-searching questions tonight. Bring them to the feet of Jesus.

The Jesus of Mark, of Mark's gospel. The Jesus of John's gospel who says in chapter 14, I am the way, I am the truth, I am the life.

[12 : 20] And without the life, there is no going. And without the truth, there is no knowing. And without the life, there is no living.

Remember the words of Paul in Ephesians 1, 23, Jesus fills all in all. If we go back to the Old Testament, to 1 Kings 9, that wonderful narrative that speaks of when the Queen of Sheba came to Solomon.

And we're told that she told him all that was on her mind. And the Bible tells us that Solomon answered all her questions. There was nothing hidden from the king that he could not explain to her.

But what's Mark's point? It is surely this, that there is a greater than Solomon here. He will answer and explain your deepest, most personal, complex questions tonight. The psalmist points us to the Lord Jesus when he says in Psalm 36, 9, For with you is the source of light.

[13 : 33] In your light we see light. Jesus, the true light which enlightens everyone.

The late Billy Graham once said, When I received Jesus Christ as my Lord and Savior, I found the secret of life.

Is this what the seeking scribe is looking for? Is it what some of us may be looking for tonight? Well let's follow in the footsteps of this pursuing scribe as he pursues Jesus, as he asks searching questions.

How does he respond with respect to the answer that Jesus gives to his question? Well look at verse 32.

This brings us on to our second point, which is very much a public statement on the part of this scribe. What does he say? You are right, teacher.

[14 : 48] 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.

So how do we unpack this response? Well again, this man is intriguing, not least because he goes very public at this point, doesn't he?

He very openly gives his personal endorsement to the response of the Lord Jesus to his question. And his words are audible.

He speaks in a very public, open manner, as if to say, You are absolutely right, teacher. It's not unlike a eureka moment for this seeking, this pursuing scribe.

As if to say, I get it. I see. He's given light. As if to say, That's it. That's it.

[16 : 05] Everything that the Sadducees and the Scribes and the Pharisees couldn't convey with any degree of clarity Jesus has answered his question.

And Jesus opens his eyes further here. Jesus has allowed the seeking scribe to, if you like, decode this disputed point.

And he's given the ultimate clarification. Jesus has spelt out two fundamental components of discipleship. The need for a commitment to God with every fiber of one's being.

Notice the key components. The heart, the soul, the mind. With strength of conviction. What's required on the part of this scribe is sincerity, not hypocrisy.

And as grace develops and deepens an inner love for God, so this grace-infused love is transmitted to others.

[17 : 13] So one begins to love those around him. Someone has put it like this. Love for one's neighbor is a natural and logical development of one's love for God.

Again, it was Billy Graham who once said, when Christ's love fills our hearts, it puts selfishness on the run.

Are we beginning to see that in this scribe? He appears to be teachable, doesn't he? He begins to understand. There is clarity.

There is transparency. He begins to appreciate that through obedience comes from the heart. As if to say, I get it. And isn't it the case that with an open Bible, we too can come to appreciate the truth, as this man does.

Faith comes by hearing. Your ears open your eyes. Isn't that the case? As you come under the gospel, as you listen to God's word, so your ears begin to open your eyes, as is the case with this scribe.

[18 : 41] And maybe for some of us tonight, we're not unlike this man. Maybe we're beginning to go public, as it were, not unlike him.

Maybe you remember when the word of God first spoke to you. That moment, perhaps, when you saw the beauty and splendor and majesty for the first time, of Jesus for the first time.

That moment when you understood the love of God in Christ Jesus for the first time. That moment when you saw the light. That moment when you began to understand grace, mercy, and peace through Jesus Christ, our Lord.

That moment when you could say, I get it. I see it. I know it. A moment when you effectively said, to God's word, perhaps, over a period of time, resisting it, maybe even resenting it.

And then as you begin to embrace it, by the grace of God, you begin to understand it. And you're given light, and you're given more light.

[20 : 07] And just like this Pharisee, you too, can say, you are right. You have truly spoken. We say that, don't we, when we come to the scriptures.

We say that, when we hear the voice of God speaking into our lives and circumstances. The God who does all things well. And just like this scribe, we too, can respond by saying, you are right. You have truly spoken. Will you make a public profession of your faith in Jesus Christ? Will you follow in the footsteps of this scribe?

Notice how he understood the weighty words of Jesus. He understood that the words of the Lord Jesus far outweigh all burnt offerings and sacrifices.

This is verse 33. Now this is significant. Where is the scribe standing at this point? Probably in the temple courtyard.

[21 : 17] Burnt offerings and sacrifices. All of these things matter greatly if you're a scribe or a Pharisee. But he begins to appreciate, doesn't he, that sacrifice without sincerity is null and void.

David says so in Psalm 51 from verses 15 to 19. We sang these stanzas together earlier.

A burnt offering. The scribe begins to recognize. A burnt offering without a heart burning with love for God equates to no more than, well as the Apostle Paul puts it, a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal.

Paul goes as far as to say, should I even give all I possess to the poor and surrender my body to the flames but have not love, I gain nothing.

This scribe has come a long way, hasn't he? And maybe you have too. And it's all about taking the next step.

[22 : 34] So let's go on to the third element of this narrative from verse 34. And it's back to the Lord Jesus.

And what a perceptive Savior we have. Jesus immediately here discerns that his words have registered registered in a particular way with this seeking scribe.

What does Jesus say to him? You are not far from the kingdom of God. The words of Jesus spark an interest in this pursuing, seeking scribe.

Jesus makes this very telling observation. He says about the scribe that he is not far from the kingdom. His seeking heart is now significantly closer to the Savior he engages with than it was a moment ago.

He himself, this scribe, is not far from the path of discipleship. Will he subscribe to the school of discipleship?

[23 : 57] He appears to be just a step away. And Jesus encourages him here to take the next step. Subscribe, subscribe, Jesus, is saying to him.

Jesus encourages him to pursue his interest further. Remember, every kingdom has its king.

And this scribe is not far from bowing in submission to the king of kings. He has all but surrendered his life to Jesus Christ.

You are not far from the kingdom. Is that true of you this evening? I recently read of a number of climbers who were attempting to climb Mount Everest.

And they're being led by a Sherpa. They've reached camp number four. They're not far from the summit.

[25 : 09] They're some 26,000 feet up. They're in what is known as the death zone. There's not a lot of oxygen up there. It's not for the faint-hearted.

But they're not far from the summit. The Sherpa's role is crucial. He motivates them. He exhorts them not to give up.

Because in a sense, every fiber of your being is craving to get back down this cruel, challenging mountain and its terrain.

You're at 26,000 feet. You're not far from 29,000. Don't be discouraged, the Sherpa says. Hang on in there.

Dig deeper. But it's at this point that many climbers fall away and turn back. It's not uncommon.

[26 : 13] It happens. The Sherpa says, you're not far from the summit. But some choose not to go on.

It's too much. And they begin their retreat. Not unlike the scribe.

Not far from the kingdom. That's why James says in his letter, it is one thing to hear what the word says.

It's another matter to do what the word says. And because all Old Testament commands lead to Christ and are fulfilled in him and crystallize in Jesus Christ, this seeking scribe's next step is what? To trust unreservedly in Jesus Christ himself. Faith in Jesus Christ is all that separates this scribe from the path of discipleship.

[27 : 29] It's as if Jesus is saying to him, you believe in God, believe also in me. You are not far from the kingdom.

You've come a long way. Now will you take this next step of faith? Will you trust and obey? And there are, as we close, words of encouragement here for us tonight.

I wonder if some of us here, we may be close to the kingdom, not far from the kingdom, not far from nailing our colors to the mass of discipleship, not far from making a more public, audible commitment for Jesus Christ, not far from submitting to Jesus once and for all, not far from making a confession of our faith in Jesus Christ.

Maybe there's a silent acknowledgement there of these things. But it needs to become more vocal. It needs to become more audible.

Is it not time tonight to lift the lid and to stop hiding one's light under a bushel? You're not far from the kingdom.

[28 : 54] You've come a long way. Why stop now? And maybe some of us have stalled over the years. But this passage is for your encouragement, for our encouragement tonight.

Why stand out with the bounds of the kingdom when we are given every encouragement to come within? And all that's required is a step of faith.

John Wesley once went to see a poor man who was considered to be lacking in intellect.

And sitting down by his side, Wesley asked this poor man, what do you know of the way to heaven?

This was his response.

It seems to me, replied the man after a moment's thought, that there are three steps on that road. The first, out of self.

[30 : 00] The second, into Christ. The third, into heaven. John Wesley went on to say that he learned more from that man than he had from many, many volumes of theology.

And Wesley went on to write in song, out of my sin and into thyself, Jesus, I come to thee.

Jesus is exhorting us through the gospel tonight to deny ourselves, to take up the cross, to do so daily, to do so in the here and now, and to follow him.

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. But of course, there is the question that we cannot possibly ignore as we conclude.

Did the scribe come? Did he enter the kingdom? Did he take that next step? Well, we are, we aren't told that this scribe did.

[31 : 25] So close to the kingdom, he is here. Did he ever enter it? Mark doesn't tell us. Mark is silent. I would like to conclude that he did.

That's just my own personal view. You can perhaps discuss it amongst yourselves. It's a bit of a cliffhanger, isn't it? What happened next?

We don't know. But the question for us tonight is a greater question than the question of the scribe. You and I are coming under scrutiny. You and I are being challenged with respect to our faith, conviction. Are we prepared to take this next necessary step to follow Jesus, to make a public, audible confession of our faith?

Are we minded to bow the knee and confess that Jesus Christ is Lord? That is the great exhortation of scripture to do just that.

[32 : 44] We are given every encouragement to come to be kingdom participants. In no way are we encouraged to stay on the periphery.

Come with us and we will do you good. Come into the body of the kirk Jesus is saying and fellowship with me and dine if you will with my people.

It's a banqueting house and to see the banner of his steadfast love with greater clarity we are exhorted to come in and sup with him.

And may God grant each and every one of us to do just that. You believe in God believe also in me.

Well may God grant us to follow in the footsteps of this pursuing scribe. May we be encouraged to make a public profession or statement of our faith and may we always look to this perceptive

wonderful saviour who bids us to come and follow him.
[34 : 02] Amen. Let us pray.