Not Far From The Kingdom

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[0:00] We're going to seek to understand how we can move from being near the kingdom to actually being in the kingdom. We're going to talk about all those things. But we'll waste our time if we view this text as mostly a distant event that has no real bearing on our lives today.

And it will do us no good to treat this passage as just another intellectual exercise. Because the truth is that you too might be near the kingdom without actually being in it.

And my prayer is that by the end of this study together, you'll either be encouraged by the grace of Jesus that you have already received, or else you will be prepared to receive him by faith just now.

And so I'm going to lay all my cards out for you right there from the beginning. If you're here today and you're somewhat of a skeptic, not necessarily against Jesus, just not really sure exactly what to do with him, my goal is to persuade you today to follow Christ.

And I hope that you will do that today. First thing I want you to see is the scribe's inquiry. The scribe's inquiry in verse 28 or the scribe's question.

[1:22] Look with me at verse 28. 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?

Now this interaction between Jesus and the scribe comes at the end, as you well know, of a series of confrontations through which the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem were attempting to destroy the Lord and his influence.

The Pharisees, the Herodians, the Sadducees had all taken their turns to trap Jesus, but each of them have, in Mark's gospel, failed to do so. And what turns out to be their final attempt at getting to Jesus, the ruling body of the Jews, we know them as the Sanhedrin, sent this scribe to Jesus.

Matthew 22 tells us that he was a Pharisee and that they sent him to trap Jesus in some kind of issue relating to the law.

Well, scribes were lawyers, so it's not very surprising that that would be the thing that they sent him to Jesus to discuss. However, what's interesting about this particular interaction is that as the man got close enough to hear the way that Jesus was responding to these other groups that were challenging him, he discovered very quickly that he actually appreciated, even agreed with the Lord.

And that surely must have come as such a surprise to him. He has been sent by his buddies to go and trap the Lord, but as he gets close enough to actually hear the things that he was saying and the way that he was saying them, he actually found himself inwardly applauding Jesus, not actually wanting to destroy him.

So though he belonged to a group that outright rejected Jesus, he seems to be somewhat personally conflicted about him. And I think this man is similar to the people that we often refer to as searching.

Maybe you've used that term before and referring to people who aren't yet Christians, but aren't necessarily closed off to it, at least in their minds. They don't yet believe and follow Jesus, but they aren't exactly sure what to do with him either.

Do you find that to be a fair description of where you are in relation to Christ? You wouldn't say that you're against Christ. You think it's pretty amazing, the things that he did, and especially the example that he laid forth.

And you're not prepared at least to outright deny who he is and what he might can do, but you're just not really sure exactly what you're supposed to do with him either.

[4:11] How you're supposed to take him. And I want to tell you, if that's you today, you're close. You're close. You're not in, though.

Salvation doesn't come to those who are friendly toward Jesus, but those who wholeheartedly follow him. There's a difference.

It's no real surprise that a scribe would ask Jesus a question concerning the law, really. Pharisees in particular remained in constant debate over the various nuances of God's law, but then also this enormous list of regulations and traditions that they had added to it.

And just as when we're kids, we divide our thoughts of wrongdoing into categories of big sins and little sins. Did you do that when you were a kid? We used to do that.

We'd say, well, the big sins are things like murder, and the little sin is just the thing that I do. Right? That's how we weigh them out.

[5:19] Well, the Pharisees weren't really actually very different than that. They had divided the law and their traditions into two different categories. They had the things that they felt were weightier laws, and they had things that they felt were less laws, lesser laws, things that they felt were strictly binding that they would not waver on, and then they had things that they felt like were less binding.

Maybe there's a little gray area. Maybe we can find some ways to get around it. And Jesus did that too. Jesus had times where he weighed out the weightiness.

He told the Pharisees, at one point you tithe with dill and cumin, but you ignore the weightier things of the law. Now, Jesus wasn't saying that some sins are less important than other sins.

He's just categorizing the backwardness in the Pharisees' thinking in that moment. But the Pharisees took that a little different. They were trying to find these lesser things, and the problem is that the debate was so subjective because they would often point to the weightier things as the things that they felt easier to follow, and then the lesser things, of course, would be the things that maybe they struggled with personally.

So this is a common question. The one that the man asked Jesus is a common question among the scribes, but what's really behind the question is what lies at the heart of every system of works-based salvation and religion.

[6:43] In asking Jesus to summarize the entire law in one single command, here's what the scribe was asking the Lord. Sincerely granted, I really truly believe that he was asking this sincerely at this point.

He's asking Jesus, Lord, what is one great command that I can follow and that in obedience to that command, I can satisfy God?

That's really what he's asking here. Jesus, rabbi, teacher, if you could just summarize it into one thing that I can do, just one thing that I can do, and if in doing that thing, I will be able to satisfy the wrath of God against my sin.

So knowing that he couldn't possibly achieve perfection, the perfection that's required by God's standards, he was determined to get as close as he possibly could, hoping that God would then reward his effort.

Now let's go back and revisit our opening illustration. Here's what this scribe was trying to do. He was aiming for the one yard line. He's not aiming for the end zone here.

[8:03] He's aiming for the one yard line, hoping that if he can at least make it that far, that God will just help him out and just kind of carry him the rest of the way. He's close.

He's close. But he's not there. And of course, we all know people who live with that same mindset. I'm not perfect, they may say, but I'm sure God will give me some credit for trying my best.

I mean, what else can I do but my best? And for these people, Jesus is a moral example to be followed, but he's not a savior to which they must cast all their faith and hope.

They become their own savior. Jesus is the example, but if I can just do my best to be like him, then God will accept me.

And they've missed the whole point. They're close. They're not in. But Jesus can be your savior today because he did indeed perfectly fulfill the law of God that each and every one of us continually violate.

[9:16] So salvation does not come to those who do their best, but to those who trust only in the righteousness of Christ on their behalf.

That's what Paul was on about in Romans chapter three. Many of you have read this in preparation for our Lakeside Connect. Here's what he says, And he continues, for there's no distinction.

All have sinned. All fall short of the glory of God. But anyone who is justified is justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption that's in Christ Jesus, whom God put forth as a propitiation by his blood to be received by faith.

Substitute. A satisfaction for God's wrath does not come by any righteousness that we have because as Isaiah said, our righteousness compared to God's is like a filthy rag, but not Jesus because Jesus perfectly fulfilled that law.

He perfectly fulfilled the law. So he is truly righteous. And by faith in him, God then grants us the righteousness of Christ. Number two, the Lord's insight.

[10:54] The Lord's insight. So the scribe asked the Lord for one great law. Jesus gave him two. Now Jesus didn't provide this answer just to teach that, or to agree in any way that it's possible to earn salvation.

He gives this answer here to actually expose the impossibility of earning salvation. We read it a moment ago.

Who could ever keep these demands? No one. There are two parts to it. The first one is this. Jesus says you got to love God.

You got to love God. Verse 29. Jesus answered, 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, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.

This first part of Jesus's answer is a direct quote from Deuteronomy chapter six, verses four and five. It is known as the Shema. The Hebrew word to hear is what that means, which begins the statement, hear, O Israel.

[12:07] Devout Jews, recite the Shema in the morning and in the evening of every day. Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. You shall love him with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength.

And of course, in Deuteronomy six, this is what they were commanded by Moses to teach to their children and to talk about all day. This was an important command. Everybody knew it. And the command begins with the affirmation that there is only one God to love and worship and it rejects any form of idolatry that might be present in our lives.

So think about this. To fulfill this command is to live a life that never seeks personal will over the will of God.

Now let me ask you something. Have you ever pursued your will with a complete disregard to whatever God might desire instead? Because if you've ever done that, you've broken this command.

You've already fallen short. It is to wholly pursue the Creator and His purpose in creating you rather than pursuing self-identity or self-glory or self-pleasure.

[13:25] this is the demand of God's law. We love and glorify Him as our only one and Savior God.

Even when it comes to denying ourselves to do so. Now we don't really have to go any further. We already know we broke that. Who could keep that law? Who could keep that command?

But Jesus continues and He gives four categories of our being in which God is to be the object of our total love and devotion.

He says we're to love the Lord with all our heart which is setting all of our affection on Him and tuning our emotions to His person and His will.

He says we're to love the Lord with all of our soul. That is to place God and His glory at the center of your whole being. That when you think who am I you have no other thought than a creature of the living God for whom I live in everything that I do.

[14:31] That is to love the Lord with all your soul. It is to put Him first in all your ambition. It is to live your life in total service to Him. And then He says even beyond that that's hard enough, right?

All your heart and all your soul. Then He says you gotta do it with all your mind as well. You have to think with pure thoughts. Discipline and surrender your thoughts to align with the truths of God as He has given them in the Scriptures.

Not as you wish He had given them in the Scriptures but as He has given them. It is to trust His ways are best even when you don't understand them.

And then He says you love the Lord with all your strength. That's to put all of your work and energy toward obeying and following Him.

When it comes to loving the Lord in this way there's no such thing as retirement. There's never a time in your life where you set aside all of your energy and all of your ambition and all of your things and you direct them away from what God's desire is for your life in order to pursue self-identity and self-glory and self-pleasure.

[15:46] It just isn't. You can't love God and self. It doesn't work. It doesn't work. Kent Hughes said heart, soul, mind and strength were not intended as a breakdown or a psychological analysis of human personality.

They simply meant that everything was to be devoted to loving God. Everything. I'm all yours, Lord. Have you ever done that perfectly?

I haven't. I don't know that I've done that perfectly even today. So we've already fallen short. So this man's looking for one great command he can follow that would satisfy God and the first thing that Jesus leads off with is an impossibility.

But he doesn't stop there. He also says we're to love others. Verse 31. The second is this, Jesus said, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. This is a quote from Leviticus 19 verse 18.

And it makes perfect sense, right? That Jesus would attach this command directly to the command to love God because love for others flows directly out of our love for God.

[17:02] Right? Listen, to love God is to love what he loves. What does he love? Us.

To truly love God means that the natural reflex of our hearts is going to be to extend our love and affection and kindness to the others in which God has created not because we line up with him and everything and that our personalities perfectly mesh and that we necessarily want to be kind but because we love him we will by nature love them.

Think about this. His grace in some measure is extended to every human being every single day. Even the ones who utterly reject him and hate him.

They still enjoy the rising of the sun. They enjoy the blessings of the food that he provides in the earth that he's given. He provides them with air to breathe and life to live and beauty to behold.

All of that to the very people who reject and hate him. Is that not the way that the scripture continually teaches us that we're to love our enemies? Not because we're just good at it but because that's exactly what God does and as we love God it makes sense that Jesus would say then the next thing right behind that is that you're going to love others the same way.

[18:28] first because of God's love. The inerrant dignity of human life is wrapped up in this command. Because God has imprinted his very image on every human we are to treat one another with love and respect.

But notice how Jesus commanded for us to love. Love others the way you love yourself. love others the way you love yourself.

I don't know about you but I'm pretty good at loving myself. It's pretty easy for me to tell Jared yes even when Jared hasn't been real good to Jared because I love Jared. He's my favorite.

Jesus says love others the way you love yourself. Love others the way you love yourself. It's interesting he doesn't say love others the way you love God because he knows we love ourselves more than we love God.

He says you need to love others that way. In every situation we're to treat other people the way we would hope to be treated given that the circumstances were in reverse.

[19:43] James Edwards said love for God releases the love of God. Love for God releases the love of God. You love him you won't be able to help it but show his love for others.

This is what John was on about in 1 John chapter 4. Beloved let us not love one another or let us love one another for love is from God and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God.

Anyone who does not love does not know God because God is love. but notice how Jesus ends the statement verse 31.

He says love God love others. There is no other commandment greater than these. No other commandment greater than these Jesus says. And this is so important.

This statement might be the most important of all of them because it it corrects the errant perspective of the scribe's question. In Matthew 22 Matthew writes that Jesus added this statement.

[20:50] He says that all of the law and the prophets that's a single title for the Old Testament. All of the law and the prophets depend on these two commandments.

What does that mean? He meant that all the lesser quote lesser commands are subsumed or absorbed into these two summary statements.

Now an example of that is the Ten Commandments. The first four commandments are all under and underneath and subsumed in this command to love God.

Love God. No graven image. Don't take his name in vain. Remember the Sabbath. Keep it holy. All of that is about our love for God. Subsumed in the one command. The final six subsumed in that second command.

Love others as yourself. Don't kill them. Love them. Don't steal from them. Love them. Don't commit adultery with them or against them. Love them. Don't covet against them. Love them.

[21:51] Don't lie about them. Love them. In other words, to violate a lesser command is the same as violating the greatest commands.

Do you see that? Jesus says all of the law, all the law and the prophets. They depend on these two summary statements. Love God. Love others.

And if you kill somebody, you have also broken the law of love. If you worship someone else, you have also broken the command of loving God.

In other words, to break a lesser command is to break all of the law, which is exactly what James told us. James chapter 2 and verse 10. So the scribe comes to Jesus and he says, just give me one thing, one thing I can do.

And Jesus says, that's not possible. It's not possible. You can't separate the law of God. It is one. To violate in one point is to violate in all points.

[22:58] So Jesus wasn't giving this man a path to follow to earn God's favor. What was he doing? He was leading this man to the truth and the understanding that our best obedience can never gain eternal life.

Who has ever loved God and others this way? No one but Christ. We've all violated God's demands. And it's not possible for us to make it up through our efforts and morality and religion.

The law is not there to save us. God gave it to show us that we need saving. That we need a Savior.

And all we can do in responding to this answer that Jesus gave so profoundly is to say, have mercy on me.

I can't do that. I've never done that. I'll never be able to do that perfectly. Lord, have mercy on me.

[24:14] And fortunately for us, God is full of grace. And mercy. Micah chapter 7 and verse 18, the prophet writes, Who is a God like you?

Pardoning iniquity and passing over transgression for the remnant of his inheritance. He does not retain his anger forever because he delights in steadfast love.

He delights in mercy and grace. Finally, we see the final assessments. The final assessments.

This exchange concludes with two of them. The first is from the scribe. The second is from the Lord. So the scribe assessed the answer.

That's what he did. The scribe assessed the answer. Look with me at verse 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.

[25:20] 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.

That's a pretty incredible answer. It's nearly a perfect answer, actually. This is the only place in Mark's gospel that we ever find a friendly exchange between Jesus and a scribe.

And this man was not only kind to Jesus in this answer, but he gave a glowing review of the Lord's answer. He's clearly impressed by Jesus's intellect and wisdom.

And I want you to notice how truly close he is. He affirmed the truthfulness of Jesus's teaching. He literally said, You're right.

You're right, teacher. That's the right answer. He's affirming that Jesus is true and that his teaching is as well. Secondly, he agreed with Jesus's theology.

[26:25] You have truly said he is one. Now, there were probably certainly things that they didn't line up with. But as far as this text is concerned in this conversation, this man's theology and Jesus's theology are one in the same.

They both believe that the Lord is one. He even viewed the law as primarily spiritual, not external. Notice what he says at the end.

That all of these things, loving God, loving others, is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. There's a lot of Christians that don't understand that.

And here is this scribe saying what God said through Isaiah. That I don't care about your following the law. I don't care about all the sacrifices and all the rituals if I don't have your heart.

And this man recognizes all of those things. Do you see how close he is? So what's the problem? The problem is not what he said.

[27:28] The problem is that he didn't take it far enough. He assessed only Jesus's answer when he should have assessed the Lord himself. He was only intellectually concerned about this conversation.

What he should have done is considered the identity of Jesus and its implications on his faith. He saw Jesus's answer.

He saw Jesus's actions. And he thought, wonderful, fantastic. But he never saw Jesus. He saw all the things Jesus taught, all the things Jesus did, but he looked right past the Lord himself.

So he assesses the answers, but he doesn't assess the Lord. So he never understood. James tells us again in chapter 2 and verse 19, he says, you believe that God is one.

You do well. This man, that's the whole conversation. We agree, Jesus. God is one. James says, you believe God is one. Great. You do well. But think about this.

[28:37] James says, even the demons believe. And they shudder. They tremble. So what's the difference between the theology of the demons and a theology of someone in the kingdom, a true believer?

Demons intellectually assent to the truths of God. They recognize that they are true. They do not deny the factual existence of Jesus's identity and his purpose and all that he was going to do.

The difference is theirs is purely intellectual. Disciples surrender themselves in faith and obedience to Jesus Christ. Jesus. And just like this scribe, there are many people who will be friendly to Jesus.

They'll even intellectually agree with his general theology. Yet they will fail to receive him as Lord and Savior. And that's where the scribe is.

He's close. Real close. Close enough to think that he's in. But he's not. Well, that gets to Jesus's assessment. Jesus assessed the scribe.

[29:41] He assesses the scribe. Look at verse 34. And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

This must have come as a stunning statement to this man. Because they haven't been talking about the kingdom of God.

Surely he thinks this is coming out of left field a little bit, right? They were in this debate about the law. Why all of a sudden this statement about the kingdom of God and eternal life?

Where is that coming from? And why in the world is he saying that I'm close to it? Because by saying that he's close to it, he's basically saying you're not in it. You're on the outside. Again, we see Jesus making this distinction in Mark's gospel between insiders and outsiders.

His assessment, you're close to the kingdom, but you're not in the kingdom. And by the way, this statement, I believe, comes from the depths of Jesus's compassion for that man.

[30:50] His heart was not as hard as the Pharisees. And Herodians and Sadducees before him. Jesus left them in their darkness. He doesn't do that with this scribe.

He compassionately leads this man to truth. And some would look at this passage and say, Jesus was being really rude. They would think Jesus was kind of mean to this man.

Here's this man doing everything that he can. And it seems like he's really, he seems like he's on Jesus's side here. And yet Jesus doesn't actually give him the peace of knowing that he has eternal life. He actually tells him that he's not quite there yet.

That's actually kind of rude and judgmental. But that's not what Jesus is doing. We actually find that Jesus's true love is seen here for this man.

And it's seen in the fact that he told the man the truth. How much must you hate someone to let them continue thinking that they know Christ when they don't?

[31:56] How much must you hate them to let them claim to be a Christian when you know that they're not a Christian? How much must you hate them to let them continue in error and even capitulate to that error knowing full well that they do not know the Lord Jesus?

This wasn't Jesus being rude. This is Jesus showing his love. He's loving this man. And this passage reveals so many things that can get you close to salvation without ever receiving it.

This man was fervently religious. His whole life, his whole career was wrapped up in studying and interpreting the Old Testament. That's what he did for his life.

He's fervently religious, but his religion could only get him close. He's zealous of good works. That was the point of his question.

What's one thing I can do? How can I be better so that I can be accepted? That's his question. He's zealous for good works, but his good works can only get him close.

[33:14] The man agreed with sound doctrine. He might have had more biblical wisdom in this statement about burnt offerings and sacrifices than any other of the scribes that we've read about in the gospels.

But his theological positions could only get him close. And maybe you're very much like the scribe. Maybe your fervency in religious things has gotten you close.

Or maybe you're just a good guy. And that's gotten you close. And you can tell me who Jesus is. And you can tell me all about asking Jesus in your heart and all those kinds of things.

You can tell me all the stuff that you want to tell me. And all those things are only getting you close. And perhaps you're so close that you think you're in and you're not. So we have to ask the question.

How do we move from being close to being in? And to get this answer, I think we'll be helped to go back to chapter one. You can turn there if you'd like. Remember at the very beginning of our study about eight or nine years ago, we began studying the gospel of Mark.

[34:32] Feels that way, doesn't it? Remember when Jesus came on the scene? John was arrested.

What was it that characterized Jesus' ministry? Was this preaching? What was the message that he preached? Verse 14. After John was arrested, Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the gospel of God, saying, The time is fulfilled.

The kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel. This question of how can I move from being close to being in?

That's the question Jesus had been answering for three years. His preaching about the kingdom. This was the answer. Jesus himself is the answer.

He is the representative of the kingdom of God that he says is near. He's not talking about the kingdom is near as far as timing. He's speaking spatially.

[35:40] He himself is the representative of the kingdom. He is there. He is at hand. His purposes are about to be fulfilled. Jesus is the answer.

Because of his identity as the son of God and Messiah, he fulfilled God's demands perfectly. That's why his death on the cross is a sufficient substitute for sinners.

If he had sinned, he couldn't die for our sins. He'd have to die for his own. But because he is the son of God and the Messiah, he fulfilled God's law perfectly.

Therefore, his death was not to pay for his own sins, but to pay for the sins of those who would follow and believe him. And in the sacrifice of Christ, as we mentioned last week, God takes, God the Father puts our sin on Jesus in order that he might put Jesus's righteousness on us.

And then his resurrection guarantees that his sacrifice on the cross is sufficient. It proves that he has power and authority over life and death.

[36:49] Therefore, he is the one that can either grant us eternal life or judge us to eternal death. And how was it that Jesus said in Mark 1 as he preached this gospel of the kingdom?

How is it that he said we are to respond to these things? This is the answer to how you get in. Jesus said, repent and believe the good news.

What good news? Repent and believe Jesus. Trust him. Turn away from your sin. Turn away from your morality. Turn away from your religious fervency.

Turn away from your orthodoxy. Turn away from all these other things you're trusting to gain you some kind of favor with God. And Jesus says, turn away from those things and believe the good news.

The good news that you can't get salvation, only I can give it to you. And if you will just come to me and believe and follow me, I will give it to you freely.

[37:49] We forsake all else and we follow him. You cannot earn eternal life. You can only trust that Jesus Christ has secured it on your behalf.

And if you can come to a point where you wholeheartedly agree and cast yourself on the mercy and love of Jesus Christ, that is the moment that you move from being near the kingdom to being in the kingdom.

And I want to close with the end of verse 34. Look how Jesus finishes the conversation back in chapter 12. Or excuse me, that's how Mark closes the conversation.

Mark says, after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. Now, why do you think they stopped asking him questions?

Why do you think they stopped asking him questions? Certainly part of this is that they came to the realization that they weren't going to be able to trap him the way that they thought they could.

[38:54] So they stopped trying perhaps. I think there's another part to it. I actually think this is the dominant reason. I think there was nothing left to ask.

There's nothing left to ask. For three years, these men have watched him. They have scrutinized everything that he did. They have witnessed his miracles.

They have seen his power. They have heard his teaching. They have asked every question they can ask. They have exhausted every intellectual means of refuting and disproving his identity and message.

But they failed every time. There's only one action left for them to take. And it's not a question. It's a decision. The only thing left for them is whether or not they're going to receive him, believe him, and follow him.

Or are they going to reject him and deny him outright? And can I ask you, are you in that place today? Have you exhausted every question in your attempt to discern the person and work of Jesus?

You've been asking maybe good questions and right questions, and you've asked everything you can ask, and it seems like every time you get in a conversation with somebody about the Bible or Christianity or life or whatever it is, yet now you're at the point where you're just circling around to the same things over and over again.

There's really nothing left to ask. Are you friendly toward him, but still unsure? Perhaps what you need to do is stop fiddling around with the questions and just decide whether or not you're going to believe him or you're going to walk away from him.

Please don't wait another moment. You can come to him today.

There's no perfect time. Now is the time. You're not going to come up with a question to stump him.

You're not going to find a way, no matter how hard you try, to disprove him. It's time to just decide, am I going to follow him or am I going to walk away?

[41:32] And I want to leave you with Jesus' words and then we'll close. Matthew 11. Jesus himself said, and I believe he says this to you today, come to me.

Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you.

Learn from me. For I am gentle and lowly in heart and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.

for you, for you,