

Mark 12:28-44 (PM)

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[0 : 00] About five years ago, my now wife and I were dating. We had reached the point in our relationship where we were having conversations about marriage and engagement.

And I was wondering, well, when should I propose? My wife, as a gesture of what I can only describe as humorous encouragement, said on June 1st, Willie, by the end of this month, I no longer want to be your girlfriend.

You can decide how that goes. True to my word, I proposed on June 30th. It was an encouragement.

I'm ready. You're almost there. But it was also a warning. I'm not waiting around forever, and there's something you need to do. And in our text this morning, we encounter a similar dynamic.

A scribe asks Jesus a question, and Jesus responds with a word of encouragement. Verse 34, the kingdom is not far off. You're close. And yet we also see a warning in the text.

[1 : 14] You're not there yet. And so what I want to do is unpack this statement with you, this encouragement and this warning of what it means for us. What does it mean to be close to the kingdom of heaven?

And so I'm going to break down our passage into two headings. First, I want to look at the question itself. I want to look at the scribe's question and Jesus' answer, because in the law, God shows us what God has always intended for us and for our life.

And then I want to look at the questioner. You see, Mark in this passage does something that Matthew doesn't do in his parallel account. Matthew is concerned with the scribe's question. Mark is concerned with the questioner. And so in this exchange between Jesus and the scribe, we learn something about how God works in this life.

So I want to look at these two things. But before I step into our text, would you please join me in a word of prayer? Heavenly Father, would you give us fresh eyes this evening?

[2 : 18] May we see the lengths your son Jesus went in order that we may be redeemed. Father, give us soft hearts. May we know the power of your love and the majesty of your grace in our lives and give us the strength to respond to your graciousness and to your mercy with thanksgiving, praise, and love.

Amen. So if you've joined us the last couple weeks, you'll know that Jesus has now arrived officially in Jerusalem, and it's the week of Passover. Jesus is among literally thousands of pilgrims that have descended onto the city, and Jesus himself is the main attraction.

Crowds celebrate him, religious authorities confront him, and all are asking, Who is this guy? Just who does he think he is?

By what authority is he doing this? And so in last week's passage, Jesus takes the field. We see religious leader after religious leader challenge Jesus' authority.

Question, answer. Question, answer. Answer. Jesus can't be beat. And so now we see a scribe, and he enters the field and asks this question.

[3 : 32] Jesus, what's the greatest commandment? What's above all the commandments? And by itself, it's not an unusual question, actually. The Old Testament contains about 613 laws.

So if you're going to dedicate your life to following God, then you're going to have to figure out how to organize these different laws. Are they all the same weight, or some more important than others, or some lesser?

It's not an unusual question, but notice how Jesus answers. He takes over 600 laws, and he boils them down into two. Love for God, love for neighbor.

And he quotes two different laws, and what he does is he fuses them together. First, he quotes the Shema, which is an ancient Jewish prayer from Deuteronomy 6.4.

And in that passage, Moses, if you remember, he says to the Israelites, Remember what God has done for you. He rescued you out of Egypt because he loves you. Now, Israel, love him back with all you got, and teach your children to do the same.

[4 : 37] In essence, it's a command to worship. But then Jesus quotes Leviticus 19.18. That's an interesting section.

I'm not sure how many of us are up to speed on our Levitical law, but Leviticus 19 starts with this quote, Be holy, because I, the Lord, your God, am holy.

The next 18 verses unpack how to be holy. And holiness isn't about enlightened attachment.

Holiness is loving God, or loving others, as God loves us.

Let me just give one quick example from Leviticus 19.9. There it says, quote, When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field, or gather the gleanings of your harvest.

Do not go over your vineyard a second time, or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them.

Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the Lord your God.

[5 : 40] So here we learn, what does it mean to be holy? To be like God? It means not maximizing profit in Leviticus. Instead, take care of the poor and destitute. That's holy love.

In other words, and listen, loving your neighbor means habitually and imaginatively putting yourself in other people's shoes and sacrificing your wealth, your time, and your gifts for the sake of another's well-being.

Love your neighbor as yourself. Habitually and imaginatively put yourself in their shoes. Love of God, love of neighbor, fused.

They can never be separated. You see, when you understand this, you'll see that this fusion shines throughout all of scriptures. It has always been what God has wanted.

Genesis 12, God's promise to Abraham, I will bless you, vertical, and you will bless all nations, horizontal. Exodus 20, Ten Commandments, two tablets, one vertical, no other gods before me, one horizontal.

[6 : 48] Don't covet your neighbor. 1 John 4, 19, We love because he first loved us. And listen, friends, whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar.

Whoever does not love their brother and sister whom they have seen cannot love God whom they have not seen. So by fusing these two laws, Jesus proclaims the law's purpose.

And the purpose of every single law is love. And the loving life requires the law. We need the law to teach us right loving action.

You see, love without law is saccharine sentimentality. It's mere feel-good. Law without love is a rigid self-righteousness.

It's a cold checklist. You can never separate law from love, and you can never separate these two laws of love. For if we can't separate them, then this also follows.

[7 : 53] Refusal to love anyone. Refusal to love anyone is a refusal to love God. And refusal to love God is a refusal to love the other. And we see this truth on full display in the contrast between the scribes and the widows.

Jump down with me in your text if you follow along to verses 38 to 44. This is Jesus' last public word, and it's a word of condemnation. Verse 38 says, Watch out for the teachers of the law.

They'd like to walk around in flowing robes and be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and have the most important seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at banquets. You hear what the scribes loved?

Praise. Performance. Prestige. Pomp. Power. The scribes care more about how they are perceived in public than what they give to God in private.

It's a sharp warning to us. It's not just a warning to beware leaders like that, but we need to be aware of this in our own hearts as well. The scribes love attention and their own status more than God.

[9 : 11] And notice how when the vertical command to love God is superseded by love of self. You see, God becomes something they use. Verse 40, they make a pretense of prayers.

And when they use God, they abuse people. Verse 40 again, they devour widows' homes. Scribes required patronage. And historians tell cases of scribes actually manipulating widows so that they could earn their living.

And this is especially egregious because scribes should know their scripture. It's what they've studied, after all. And again and again, God says, take care of the widow, the orphan, the stranger. Without love for God, the scribes use the people they're supposed to take care of. We need to ask ourselves, are we using people in our lives to fulfill our unmet needs, financial, emotional? For when we use people, it's a quick line, from use to abuse. But contrast that posture with the widow.

[10:17] You see, Mark tells us that now it's the end of the day and Jesus is sitting across from where the offerings are put. After going toe-to-toe with the scribes, with the Pharisees, with the Sadducees, you'd expect, at least I'd expect, Jesus to want to sit down and have maybe just a breather.

But he's not taking a breather. Watching. He's hours from his death and he's watching to see if anybody gets it.

If anybody gets it, the point of the law is to love God with everything. And there he sees a widow give two small copper coins, all that she has.

To put that in today's kind of economy, it'd be the equivalent of a cup of coffee. It wouldn't make a dent in the temple accounts. But here we see Jesus commend her to the disciples.

Her giving is a gift of undivided, costly, and total love. And I can say this because what we love and what we give to are also fused.

[11:20] We see it in the Bible, John 3, 16, For God so loved the world, what? Gave. His only Son. You see it all the time when you talk to a person who's newly in love.

All their time and talent and treasure is given to their beloved. So here, this widow's gift is shown to be an example of loving God because her gift is undivided.

She's not doing it for attention. There's no one to cheer for her. This is the opposite of the scribes. Her gift is costly. The text tells us it's all she has to live on.

And her gift is total. She had two coins. She could have kept one and gone above and beyond any giving requirement, but instead, she gives both.

That's a gift that though it doesn't make a dent in the temple book of accounts, in Jesus' divine economy, it's immortalized in the book of life. Though hidden from human eyes, it is a gift that God sees and says is more than all the others.

[12:27] It's an example of what it means to live a life wholeheartedly loving God, undivided, costly, and total. But return with me now back to the first section.

The scribe responds to Jesus and his teaching and he says, you're right, teacher, and in verse 33 he says, to love him with all your heart, with all your understanding, with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself, listen, is much more than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices. And it's a staggering claim because here in the middle of the temple, in the middle of the largest and most decorated sacrificial system in Jerusalem, the scribe gets it. He gets that relationship was always the point of ritual.

The rituals of the temple were always meant to restore relationship with God. They were never an end in and of themselves. So the scribe gets it.

He gets the purpose of the law. And then Jesus gives him this encouragement in verse 34. You're not far off from the kingdom. He's close. He's not there yet.

[13:39] Why? Well, let me try and answer this by way of two illustrations for you. If you leave here tonight thinking, I've got it. I heard the sermon. I've got it. I've just got to go love God and give like the widow.

You leave thinking that. Well, then you've missed it, actually. You see, if you went and tried your hardest to fulfill this command, you paradoxically failed to love God.

You might be buying God's love. You might be trying to earn it. You might even be meriting it. But you're not loving God. You're buying.

The very law itself is impossible to fulfill. Let me illustrate this from a slightly different angle. There's an implication of this law. And it's quite staggering when you stop and think about it.

If this is the greatest commandment, then what is the greatest sin? What is the greatest trespass? Not something I do. It's something I don't do.

[14:40] My greatest sin, my greatest trespass is that I don't love God with all my strength, with all my heart, with all my soul, with all my mind.

That I don't love my neighbor, oftentimes especially those that are in my care, as myself. So every time I fail to do that, I commit the greatest sin.

Friends, I cannot love like Jesus is commanding here. I cannot do what God requires. I need more. That is what Jesus unveils next.

You see, when Jesus says, you're close, you're right, you're close, he's saying you get the point, but you haven't yet seen who I really am. So after a day of questions, Jesus turns to the crowd and asks the question of the day, how is Christ, the son of David?

Jesus confronts the religious elite with a question about his identity. What he has asked privately of the disciples in chapter 8, he now asks publicly of the religious leaders.

[15:46] And he quotes Psalm 110. And that psalm would have been as familiar to them as Psalm 23 is to us. It's a psalm written by David, it's about the future Messiah, and it's about his eventual victory.

Verse 1, it says, it says, it says, it's a psalm of victory. And so everyone, of course, had assumed that the Messiah would be David's son, his eventual heir, and that this heir would come to restore Israel's glory through victory.

But Jesus, though, asked the riddle. If the Messiah is David's son, a product of his lineage, why does David call him Lord? That's a bit confusing for us here in English.

You see, if you look at your Bible and at Psalm 10, you'll see that one Lord is in all caps and one is not. One Lord is signifying God's name, Yahweh, and the other is signifying his title, Master, Adonai.

So in the Hebrew, it would say, Yahweh says to my Adonai. My God, Yahweh, says to my Master. How can David's son be his master?

[17:02] Well, friends, we know the answer. Mark 1, 11. A voice came from heaven. You are my beloved son. With you, I am well pleased. Or Mark 9, 7. And a cloud overshadowed them, and a voice came out of the cloud.

This is my beloved son. Listen to him. Jesus, the son of God. By the way, did you notice, the scribe asked Jesus about legal clarification, and Jesus ends with kingdom location.

If Jesus were just a mere son of David, he could have given the same answer about the law. His answer reflects his wisdom, and a man can be wise. But if Jesus were just a son of David, he would have no authority to speak on matters of the kingdom.

Jesus can declare that the scribe is close because Jesus is the son of God, and he has, what's more, the authority of God. And he uses that authority not to come down in divine splendor, but to become David's son.

With that authority, he achieves victory. He fulfills the victory of Psalm 110, but he secures the victory not through military might, but by giving his life and love.

[18:25] It's through love that he fulfills those two laws that we cannot. He doesn't have to imagine how to love his neighbor. He becomes his neighbor. He takes on his neighbor's sin so that we could receive grace.

He takes on his neighbor's death so that we could receive life. And he takes on his neighbor's hell so that we could experience God's heaven. Friends, do you see how much he gave?

His giving is undivided. He resolutely goes to the cross and does not waver. His giving is costly. On that cross, he will endure not just physical, excruciating pain, but he will also experience more than we can ever bear.

Separation from God whom he loves with his whole being. His giving is total. It's his life. It's his total sacrifice that he could fulfill this law that we could not so that he could give to you and give to me what he already had.

Relationship. Eternal life with God, our Father. When you start to recognize that, then you're there.

[19:39] Then you're at the threshold of the kingdom. And when you recognize that it is this authority and his sacrifice that makes him not just David's master, but my master, that every action we do is simply a response to his love.

Well, friends, I'd venture to say you're living in the kingdom at that point. Friends, let me conclude again by quoting John 4.19. We love because he first loved us.

The scribe didn't know who Jesus was or what he was about to do. We know who Jesus is. We know what he's about to do. So if you're feeling far off from the kingdom, come to Jesus.

His grace is generous. If you're feeling close but struggling, come. His yoke is easy and his burden is light.
Come experience his love. Amen.