

# You're Getting Warmer

Jesus' Last Days (Mark): Part 13  
Mark 12:32-34 3/30/2021

If Jesus tells you you're not far from the kingdom of God, is that good news or bad news?

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**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 neighbor 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.**

## Surprising Favor

If Jesus tells you you're not far from the kingdom of God, is that good news or bad news? Every time Jesus has a confrontation with the Jewish authorities in Mark, the way Mark tells the story, immediately after Jesus says or does some marvelous thing, they respond by doing something horrible.

**Mark 3:5 ... He said to the man, "Stretch out your hand." He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. 6 Then the Pharisees went out and began to plot with the Herodians how they might kill Jesus.**

It's such a jolt. You expect them to fall down and worship him but instead, it's, “You're going to show kindness to a man on the Sabbath? We're going to kill you.” The demons respond with fear, the crowds respond with amazement, but whenever it's the Scribes, Pharisees, Sadducees, or Chief Priests, they respond like this.<sup>1</sup> When Jesus drives out demons with a word, the scribes conclude he must be satanic (Mark 3:22).

**Mark 12:10 ... 'The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone; 11 the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes' 12 Then they looked for a way to arrest him.**

That's the kind of response we've seen over and over all through the book. So this scribe's response couldn't be more shocking. Jesus gives his answer and they guys says, “**Well said, teacher.**” (v.32) If he was a Brit he would have said, “Hear hear!” He loved Jesus' answer—again. Remember, this whole thing

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<sup>1</sup> The confrontations throughout ch.2 led up to this. When the accused him of blasphemy in 2:7, questioned his eating with tax collectors and sinners in 2:16, and violating the Sabbath in 2:24.

started when he liked Jesus' answer to the Sadducees. Now he's all excited about this answer, in fact, he doubles down on it.

**Mark 12:32** "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 neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices."

## More Important than Sacrifices

That's quite the statement given where they are. They are standing right in the middle of the Temple, where there were thousands of sacrifices being made. And this is Passover week, where the normal activity is cranked up to 11. Right in the middle of all that, this scribe admits, "Yeah, all this sacrificial stuff isn't really the main thing. Loving God and neighbor is more important than all this."

He was right, and it really didn't take a Bible scholar to figure that out from the Old Testament. God had made it very clear that there is a difference between symbolic laws, like the sacrificial system, and laws that spoke to things that were inherently moral like love or humility or contrition over sin.

**1 Samuel 15:22** ... "Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the voice of the Lord? To obey is better than sacrifice.

**Psalms 51:16** You do not delight in sacrifice, or I would bring it; you do not take pleasure in burnt offerings. <sup>17</sup> The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart....<sup>2</sup>

**Psalms 40:6** Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but my ears you have pierced; burnt offerings and sin offerings you did not require.

**Isaiah 1:11** "The multitude of your sacrifices-- what are they to me?" says the Lord. ... "I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats. <sup>12</sup> ... who has asked this of you, this trampling of my courts? ... <sup>17</sup> learn to do right! Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

**Hosea 6:6** I desire mercy, not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings.

**Micah 6:6** ... Shall I come before him with burnt offerings ... <sup>7</sup> Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams ... <sup>8</sup> what does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.<sup>3</sup>

God made it clear, but so many of the Jewish teachers of Jesus' day missed it. Even today there are Bible teachers who object to the idea that there are different elements of the OT law: civil, ceremonial, and moral. They say, "The Bible never makes those distinctions. You can't divide up the law like that." But the Old Testament is as clear as it can be—there is a distinction between the moral laws and the sacrificial laws. And the New Testament also makes the distinction. Jesus' called the moral laws "the weightier matters of the law" (Mt.23:23). And in passages like Galatians 5, Paul says things like, "If you get circumcised, Christ is of no value to you at all!" Then he turns right around and tells them to fulfill the law of love (Galatians 5:2,14). The Bible draws a very clear line between sacrificial and ceremonial laws and the law of love. And this scribe sees it.

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<sup>2</sup> When David says God did not desire sacrifice, he meant mere sacrifice. God did indeed desire sacrifice made with the right heart attitude. We know this because in the very next verse David asks God to restore Jerusalem so that there will be sacrifices and whole burnt offerings "to delight you."

<sup>3</sup> See also Jeremiah 7:22-23.

## Jesus' Superior Position

And Jesus' response to him is something Jesus never said to anyone else.

**34 When Jesus saw that he had answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."**

You're not far from the kingdom.

The scribes (the NIV calls them teachers of the law) were the Bible scholars, and were considered the highest authorities on Bible interpretation. So to them, everyone they ever talked to was at a lower level than them when it came to Bible knowledge. And this scribe starts out with that kind of posture toward Jesus. He sounds like a teacher speaking to an inferior when he affirms Jesus' answer: "Good job! You got the right answer." I don't think he's being condescending or anything; he's just speaking the way an expert would speak. But Jesus doesn't accept that inferior position. He says, "You're going to tell me, 'Good job'? No, I'm the one who tells you whether you're right or wrong. And by the way, you're right. Good job."

And not only does Jesus take the position of expert, deciding who is right or wrong, but he also makes a judgment that no mere human could make. He tells this man how close he is to entering the kingdom of God.<sup>4</sup>

## Not Far from the Kingdom

And as you're reading through the narrative, you have to ask, "Where did that come from? Who said anything about the kingdom of God? They were talking about commandments—there hasn't been any mention of the kingdom. But Jesus had a one-track mind. For him, everything was about the kingdom of God. And so if that wasn't part of the conversation, he'd make it a part of the conversation.

And, as usual, Jesus isn't content to leave the discussion at the level of theoretical, abstract theology. This command is more important than that command, this is true, that is false—Jesus addressed those things, but then quickly turned to application. What about you? Where is your heart at in this matter? And this scribe's heart was close to the kingdom. He wasn't in the kingdom, but he was close.

## Degrees of Lostness

Did you know that not all lost people are equally lost? Some lost people are closer to the kingdom than others. This is a good check on our Calvinism—specifically the doctrine of total depravity. Sometimes people get a little carried away with that doctrine and imagine there is no difference between unbelievers. Everyone who is lost is as lost as they can be. They are spiritually dead, and no corpse is any more responsive than any other corpse. And they push that corpse analogy so far that they imagine no unbeliever is capable of any kind of responsiveness to God until after they are born again.

But that's not the picture we get in the Bible. Unregenerate man is not capable of pursuing God on his own, but God is capable of drawing an unregenerate man, and enlightening him in degrees prior to the man being born again. When God opens a person's heart to be able to receive the gospel, sometimes it's a process that takes place over months or years. And so Jesus can rightly say to a man who was not in the kingdom, that he was close.

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<sup>44</sup> Sometimes Jesus spoke of the kingdom of God as something you enter in the future, when the only two possibilities will be to enter the kingdom or be thrown into hell (9:47, 14:25, 15:43). Other times entering the kingdom is used to describe becoming a follower of Christ in the present (10:14,15,23-25). That seems to be the way Jesus is speaking here.

## Good News or Bad?

Back to my question—if Jesus says that to you, is that good news or bad news? It’s definitely the best news any scribe or Pharisee ever heard from Jesus, right? It’s way better than what Jesus told most of them (like you make people twice the sons of hell that you are). So it’s good, but it implies some things that may have come as a bit of a shock. The Scribes probably thought they were not only in the kingdom, but near the top. But what does Jesus’ words here imply—“you’re not far from the kingdom”? First, you’re not in it. Second, I am. Third, I’m the one who makes the call of who’s in and who’s out. This guy is feeling around for the kingdom of God and Jesus says, “Warmer, warmer, hot...”

What does that mean? What was it that put this guy in close proximity? Was it just the fact that he knew this information? He understood which things are more important than other things? He got the point that Jesus preached over and over that the other Jewish leaders didn’t get, namely, that internal realities matter far more than the external? That’s a remarkable degree of insight in a culture of Phariseeism.

That was a good sign, but just having knowledge isn’t what puts a person close to the kingdom. What puts you close or far is determined totally by your response to the Lord Jesus Christ. I believe this man was close because of his receptiveness to Jesus’ teaching. We’ve seen this all through the book of Mark. Hearts that reject Jesus’ teaching are far from the kingdom. Hearts that are confused by Jesus’ teaching are far from the kingdom. But hearts that understand and have a receptive attitude—that’s a sign of a heart that’s moving toward God.

This scribe hasn’t left everything to become a follower of Jesus, so he’s not in the kingdom yet. But he’s moving in the right direction. There’s a night and day difference between him and his colleagues.

## No One Dared

And look at the result. This is really interesting.

### **34 ... And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions.**

They didn’t dare. That word translated “**dare**” means to have courage—they were afraid. Continuing to ask Jesus these challenging questions was too dangerous—they didn’t have the courage to keep it up.

Isn’t it interesting that it’s after this encounter that they lose their nerve? Jesus just said something really nice. Jesus publicly rebukes them, and they come right back at him. Jesus discredits them and shows them to be ignoramuses, and they come back for more. Jesus exposes the hypocrisy, and they keep coming. Then Jesus finally has a nice, friendly response toward one of them and they say, “Okay, that’s it. We’re done. This is way too dangerous.”

What were they afraid of? Evidently, it was the fact that one of their own was softening toward Jesus. They might have had some sense of losing the battle when he demolished their arguments, but when one of their own was starting to be won over—that’s when it’s time to pull the plug on the whole deal. You’ve got one of the teachers of the law saying, “Hear, hear” and agreeing with Jesus—that’s an emergency. That’s a sign we’re really losing this war. Time to cut their losses and retreat.

## Winning the Argument

We learn something here about what it looks like to win an argument. The first group tried to discredit Jesus, but he discredited them. Then they tried to trap him, but he trapped them. The Sadducees tried to make him look foolish, but he made them look foolish. But none of those were really victories. Those weren’t examples of Jesus winning the argument. But this guy is. You win an argument when you win the person’s heart. That’s a good lesson for married couples to learn. If you get into a dispute, you haven’t won the argument until you have drawn that person closer to Christ.

## Does Anyone Love God Like This?

Well, this scribe was not far from the kingdom—what about you? Where are you in relationship to the kingdom of God? Do you love God with all your heart? Maybe you're kind of discouraged after studying this passage. Any study of the greatest commandment can be discouraging. Nothing makes us more painfully aware of how far short we fall of God's standard than find out that the command that sounds the most impossible of all of them happens to be the most important one. I listened to R.C. Sproul's sermon on this passage and at one point he said, "I have never loved God with all my mind a single hour of my life." Is that true? Some people have said the only purpose of this command is to help us understand how sinful we are so we can appreciate grace. Is that true, or did Jesus mean for us to actually obey this command?

I believe not only is it possible, but there is a sense in which every true Christian obeys this command. We all obey it at one level, though none of us obey it perfectly. And that's true of every command God has given us. None of us obey any command perfectly, but we do obey.

Obeying a command of God is a multi-faceted action because we are multi-faceted beings. It begins with your will of decision—what you resolve to do. The beginning point of obeying a command is, when you hear it, you say, "That is good. I love that, I want to do that, and I'm making a conscious decision right here and now to do it. I'm willing, I'm eager, and I'm going to start right now taking steps toward conforming myself to God's will in this area." That's stage 1 of obeying a command.

And at that point you're on the road of obedience, which is very different from being on the road of disobedience. There's a world of difference between the person who hears this command and says, "Nope—I'm not willing to do that" and someone who says, "Yes! I want to do that and I fully intend to begin doing it right now."

From there, one you're on the road of obedience, you find that there are obstacles that stand in the way of fulfilling your desire to obey the command. The flesh gets in the way. Ignorance about how to do it gets in the way. Temptations lure you in the other direction. Forgetfulness gets in the way—you just get distracted and forget all about it. Apathy gets in the way. We run into all these obstacles. Some of them we overcome right away, others might take years or a lifetime to make progress. But we don't give up—we keep up the fight as long as we live.

That fighting is another stage on the road of obedience. As long as you're fighting to overcome those obstacles, you're still on the road of obedience. And the way Scripture speaks of obedience to God, if you are on that road of obedience, in God's eyes, you're obeying the command. That's why the Bible talks about people who have obeyed God even though no one but Jesus has ever perfectly obeyed any command God ever gave. No one has perfectly obeyed anything, yet millions of people have obeyed, because they got on that road of obedience. And because of Christ's sacrifice, God accepts your decision to set out on that road as obedience, even if you haven't made it to the end of the road yet.

When Sproul said he never loved God with all his heart, soul, mind, and strength, I would agree that he never did it perfectly. But I also believe that he is in heaven right now receiving reward (or maybe he'll have to wait for judgment day to receive it), for loving God with all his heart simply because Sproul embarked and persevered on the road of obedience to that command. And you can look forward to that same reward if you commit right now to love God with every nook and cranny of your being. Get on that road of obedience, repent whenever you stray off of it, and follow the Lord Jesus Christ above all.

## Summary

In stark contrast to all the other encounters with Jewish authorities in Mark, this one is favorable. Based on his receptiveness to Jesus, this scribe is told he is not far from the kingdom (not all the lost are equally lost). No one dared ask any more questions after this because Jesus was starting to win hearts.