

“You Are Not Far from the Kingdom of God”

The Thirty-Sixth in a Series on the Gospel of Mark

Texts: Mark 12:18-34; Deuteronomy 6:1-19

The conflict between Jesus and the Sanhedrin is now fully out in the open. Whenever Jesus entered the Jerusalem temple, he was confronted by various members of the Sanhedrin—the Jewish religious ruling body. Although the Sanhedrin was composed of men from various Jewish groups who agreed upon little if anything, the Sanhedrin was clearly united in its opposition to Jesus. Jesus had entered Jerusalem to messianic acclaim the previous Sunday and had driven a group of merchants from the outer court of the temple on Monday. But every time these men confronted Jesus, Jesus turned the tables upon them. Although the members of the Sanhedrin were biblical scholars and known for their great wisdom and learning, Jesus repeatedly confounded them with their own words. Meanwhile, the crowds who watched the confrontation between Jesus and Sanhedrin play out in the temple precincts, were amazed by Jesus’ teaching. But while the Sanhedrin was trying to trip Jesus up before the eyes of the people (and perhaps the Romans), behind the scenes they were already plotting to have Jesus arrested and put to death.

As we continue our series on Mark’s Gospel, we are in the final section of Mark (chapters 11-16) which deals with our Lord’s Passion, the final week of Jesus’ messianic mission. Recall that Jesus entered Jerusalem on Palm Sunday to the cheers of the pilgrims entering the city. He then went to the temple, where he observed that the outer-courtyard had been taken over by merchants who had turned that part of the temple from a house of prayer, into a den of thieves. After cursing the fig tree—a graphic sign of what was ahead for Israel—Jesus returned to the temple the next day and cast out the merchants, much to the chagrin of the Sanhedrin, who tolerated, if not officially sanctioned this despicable practice.

But when he cast out the merchants, Jesus’ fate was sealed. As we read in Mark 11:18, *“The chief priests and the teachers of the law heard this and began looking for a way to kill him, for they feared him, because the whole crowd was amazed at his teaching.”* Therefore, by Monday afternoon, a plan was already afoot to have Jesus killed because it was obvious that the people revered him just as they had John the Baptist. And if the people revered Jesus, it was at the expense of the authority and prestige of the Sanhedrin. The Sanhedrin would never stand for this. They would never accept Jesus’ messianic claims. Thus a final showdown was inevitable. Jesus must be stopped.

We read that when Jesus returned to the temple on Tuesday, he was confronted by a group of chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders—no doubt, acting on behalf of the Sanhedrin. These men demanded to know by what authority Jesus was doing these things. Jesus’ response was to ask them a very simple and direct question about whether John’s baptism was from men or from God. If they said that John’s baptism was from men, they would be rejecting both John and Jesus. If they said that John’s baptism was from God, then the obvious follow-up question would be “why did the Sanhedrin reject John and Jesus?” After Jesus asked the question, the chief priests, teachers of the law, and the elders, were befuddled, consulted among themselves and then backed down. They answered Jesus’ question by not answering it. “We don’t know whether John’s Baptism was from men or from God.” With that, Jesus refused to tell them by what authority he had cast the merchants out of the temple. While the verbal conflict was only beginning, we must not see this as a game of Bible trivia, or a politically-motivated popularity contest between Jesus and the Sanhedrin. No, Jesus is exposing these men to be faithless unbelievers. He’s slowly but surely applying to them the covenant curses threatened throughout

the Old Testament prophets. And they want none of it. The conflict itself is the sign that Israel is rejecting their own Messiah.

After this encounter, Jesus went on to tell what has come to be known as the Parable of the Tenants in which Jesus, in effect, retells the “Song of the Vineyard” from Isaiah 5:1-7. In this parable, the vineyard is Israel, the landowner is YHWH, and the unjust tenants are the Sanhedrin. The key to understanding this parable is to see that Jesus is retelling the story of Israel, not speaking of a moral to the story, or giving us a timeless truth to live by. When the landowner (YHWH) sends his servants (the prophets), they are killed and abused by the tenants (the leaders of Israel). Finally the landowner sends his beloved son (the Messiah). But instead of respecting him and paying the rent they own the land-owner (repentance), the tenants kill the land-owner’s son who is unceremoniously thrown over the wall outside the vineyard. With these words, Jesus is foretelling what will happen to him on Good Friday when he is crucified outside the city. Jesus goes on to issue a very powerful warning. Should the son be killed, the land-owner will come with his men, kill the unjust tenants, and then give the land to someone else (the Gentiles). Jesus has now foretold what will happen to Jerusalem and the temple in A. D. 70, when the city was sacked by Rome and the temple destroyed by the armies of Titus.

But Jesus was not done speaking about those events which were soon to come to pass. He immediately went on to cite Psalm 118:22—a passage which described how one of the foundation stones of Solomon’s temple was rejected, but later on ended up as the capstone to the temple portico—and then applied it to himself. Jesus will be rejected by Israel, but will be vindicated by his father. He who humbled himself, will be greatly exalted. God will turn the rejection of the Messiah into the means by which we are saved from the wrath which is to come.

The members of the Sanhedrin knew the biblical passages that Jesus cited. They immediately understood that Jesus was speaking this parable against them. But since they were afraid of the people—who regarded John the Baptist as a prophet, and who had just welcomed Jesus into Jerusalem as the Messiah—they called the Sanhedrin together and concocted yet another plan to trap Jesus. This time they sent out a group of Pharisees and Herodians to ask Jesus to settle a question which had long divided them. These two groups openly disagreed about the legitimacy of paying tribute to Caesar—a tax which the Herodians regarded as a necessity if there was to be peace with the Romans, but which the Pharisees and most of the Jewish people regarded as a belittling sign of Roman oppression. They came to Jesus dripping with deceitful words of praise, all the while they were asking him a trick question. “Did Jesus favor paying tax to Caesar or not?”

If Jesus took the position of the Herodians (who favored the tax), he would lose the support of the people who hated paying tribute to a pagan emperor. If Jesus opposed paying the tax (and agreed with the Pharisees) he might be arrested by the Romans for causing insurrection. It looked as though Jesus was trapped until he turned the tables on the Pharisees and Herodians by asking them a question of his own. “Whose inscription is on the denarius?” When they answered “Caesar Augustus,” Jesus then said, “give to Caesar what is Caesar, and to God what is God’s.” These words established what is now known as the doctrine of the two kingdoms. Jesus made it quite plain that even though Caesar’s governing authority over Israel was legitimate, Caesar’s authority did not extend to the kingdom of God. There are two divinely ordained kingdoms—the city of man and the kingdom of God. Each has a carefully defined role, and Christians are simultaneously citizens of both. After speaking these words, Mark tells us that the once again people “*were amazed at [Jesus].*” No one had ever spoken with such clarity and power.

But there was still one group who had not yet approached Jesus directly, the Sadducees. All of the other groups have approached Jesus and have been confounded by words, so now it is the Sadducees' turn to attempt to trick Jesus into saying something which will cause him to lose the popular support of the people, or else put him at odds with the Romans.

From Mark's account of the verbal sparring which took place between Jesus and the Sanhedrin, it appears as though very little time has elapsed between the challenge offered to Jesus by the Pharisees and the Herodians, and that of the Sadducees. The Sadducees are thought to be an aristocratic Jewish religious-political party which consisted of some of the leading families from Jerusalem. In other words, these men are "blue-bloods" who sought to appease the Romans as a means of maintaining their high-standing in society. But how wide-spread their influence was remains questionable, since Josephus (the famous Jewish historian) recounts that only one of the high priests serving between the time of Ananel and the destruction of the temple in A.D. 70 (a 107 year span) was a Sadducee.

We do know that like the Herodians, the Sadducees were loosely allied with Herod. As a religious-political party, the Sadducees were militantly opposed to a return to some form of messianic monarchy (or Davidic king). They viewed Herod and his successors as possessing full authority over the Sanhedrin, which had been dominated by the Pharisees and teachers of the law.¹ We do know from Mark's account that the Sadducees denied the resurrection, which was a fundamental doctrine in orthodox Judaism. Very likely, the Sadducees were more politically than theologically oriented, they supported Herod, and in denying the resurrection and the existence of angels, they were theological liberals—questioning the supernatural elements of the biblical faith. They accepted the authority of the Pentateuch, but questioned the authority of the later writings (prophets) and oral traditions.²

As Mark described what happened next, we read in verse 18 that *"Then the Sadducees, who say there is no resurrection, came to him with a question."* We must assume that their question is the same as all the other questions which Jesus has been asked—it is a trick designed to trip Jesus up before the people. The details of the question are spelled out in verses 19- *"Teacher,' they said, 'Moses wrote for us that if a man's brother dies and leaves a wife but no children, the man must marry the widow and have children for his brother. Now there were seven brothers. The first one married and died without leaving any children. The second one married the widow, but he also died, leaving no child. It was the same with the third. In fact, none of the seven left any children. Last of all, the woman died too. At the resurrection whose wife will she be, since the seven were married to her?'"* The question is based upon Deuteronomy 25:5 and following, a passage which deals with the custom of a widow marrying her late husband's brother—a custom designed to keep property and estate matters within a family. The obvious intention behind this question is to expose and ridicule what they believe to be the problem with the resurrection—*"whose wife will this woman be?"*³

Once again, Jesus sees right through the intent of the question and traps these men with their own words. Jesus has two questions for them, designed to expose the fact that they don't understand the Scriptures, nor trust in the God who authored them. We read in verse 24 that *"Jesus replied, 'Are you not in error*

¹ See the background given in; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 426-427.

² France, The Gospel of Mark, 470.

³ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 427-428.

because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God?" According to Jesus, these men are not as competent in their knowledge of Scripture as they think. As anti-supernatural theological liberals, neither do these men trust in the power of God. Jesus' answer is designed to prove that God can raise the dead (and will on the last day), but Jesus also points out that earthly relationships do not continue on in the eternal state as these men mistakenly suppose. As Jesus puts it in verse 25, *"when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven."*

Here, Jesus affirms as clearly as human speech will allow, the natural relationships we now enjoy on earth do not continue in heaven. This includes marriage and procreation—a bit of a problem for our Mormon and Islamic friends, who see the afterlife as a life of sex and procreation. According to Jesus, the resurrection involves our glorification, and therefore, the complete transformation of earthly life as we presently know it. To put it simply, life in heaven is not the same as life on earth. Everything is transformed. Now, it is not as though we are being deprived of something in heaven which we love on earth—our spouses, family and sexuality. Jesus' point is that what we experience here on earth will be adapted to the eternal state so that we can exist in the presence of God, hence the mention of the angels. In other words, in the resurrection, God transforms human nature, not only glorifying it, but removing all hint and trace of sin. In 1 Corinthians 15, Paul speaks of the transformation from the natural to the heavenly. In 2 Peter 3, Peter speaks of a new heaven and earth, the home of righteousness.

Here, in his encounter with the Sadducees, in verses 26-27, Jesus goes on to say, *"Now about the dead rising—have you not read in the book of Moses, in the account of the bush, how God said to him, 'I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob'? He is not the God of the dead, but of the living. You are badly mistaken!"* To expose how badly the Sadducees misinterpreted the Scripture, Jesus quotes a passage from Exodus 3:6—*"I am the God of your father, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob"*—which the Sadducees would have regarded as authoritative and which the Jews recited in prayers. These prayers (which the Sadducees would themselves have prayed twice a day) are based upon the assumption that if YHWH is the God of the patriarchs, it must be because the Patriarchs have been redeemed from their sins, and that they are currently in the presence of YHWH. YHWH is not the God of those who believed him and who then died and ceased to exist. No, YHWH is the God of those whom he has redeemed, men who were in the presence of God at the time Moses wrote Exodus, some four-hundred years after they had died. In order for those who were in the presence of YHWH to be fully redeemed, it is implied that they must be raised from the dead at the end of the age.⁴ If Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are alive after they died, then the Sadducees' position completely unravels.

That Jesus' answer was extremely effective can be seen in the fact that nothing whatsoever is said of the Sadducees' response. But others who opposed the Sadducees were listening to this discussion, and they thought that Jesus' answer was quite effective in exposing the Sadducees' error in denying the resurrection.

According to Mark, one of the scribes—a biblical and legal scholar and possibly a member of the Sanhedrin—overheard the discussion and was very impressed by what he heard. Mark recounts this as follows in verse 28. *"One of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. Noticing that Jesus had given them a good answer, he asked him, 'Of all the commandments, which is the most important?'"* Jews of that time spoke of 613 statutes in the law. There were continuing debates among the Rabbis and scholars about which were the weightiest and most important commandments, and they struggled

⁴ Cranfield, *The Gospel According to Mark*, 376.

mightily to keep them in proper proportion and relation to one another.⁵ In fact, Rabbi Hillel was reportedly once challenged by a Gentile, “make me a proselyte on condition that you teach me the whole Law while I stand on one foot.” Hillel replied, “what you hate for yourself, do not do to your neighbor: this is the whole Law, the rest is commentary.”⁶

This particular scribe seems genuinely impressed by Jesus’ answer to the Sadducees supposed irrefutable argument against the resurrection. It is obvious from what follows that the scribe’s question is not one deceitfully crafted to trick Jesus. If Jesus can answer a very tough question put to him by the Sadducees, then maybe Jesus can answer a question with which this man was struggling. The question about which commandment was greatest, or first, seems to be motivated by the man’s desire to get the foundation right, so that everything else could be deduced and worked out from it, as Rabbi Hillel advised the Gentile. Maybe Jesus could come up with answer which would really solve the conundrum. This seems to be a matter with which the scribe was himself struggling.

Jesus answered him as follows. “*The most important [commandment],’ answered Jesus, ‘is this: ‘Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.’*” Jesus cites the famous *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4 (part of our Old Testament lesson), which is a confession of faith that every pious Jew recited at both morning and evening prayer. The confession of YHWH as the one true God of Israel, stands over against all so-called ‘gods’ or pagan “gods” of the Gentiles. This confession is the basis for everything which follows. Since YHWH is the only true God and since he has called Israel to be his own, he claims all of his people as his own.⁷ Therefore, they must obey him, which is why Jesus immediately recites the next verse from Deuteronomy 6:5 as part of his answer. “*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 use of four nouns (heart, soul, mind, and strength) is merely a way of emphasizing that the whole person must love God, in light of Israel’s confession that YHWH is the true and living God.

But just as soon as Jesus answers the scribe’s question about which commandment is first, he immediately ties this to a second commandment, precisely because the two commands are inseparable.⁸ “*The second is this: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no commandment greater than these.*” The apostle John describes this relationship between these commands in 1 John 4:21—“*Whoever loves God must also love his brother.*” Someone who truly loves God, will express that love for God in love for others. Sinners who love themselves, are commanded to love their neighbors, every bit as much as they love themselves. Jesus quotes from Leviticus 19:18 in which a neighbor is defined as “the son of your own people.” But in Luke’s gospel, Jesus extends the boundary from members of the covenant to those outside the covenant, including those whom the Jews considered “unclean” (cf. Luke 10:25-37).⁹

The scribe immediately recognizes the insightful nature of Jesus’s answer. “*Well said, teacher,’ the*

⁵ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 431.

⁶ Cited in; Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 377.

⁷ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 378; Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 432.

⁸ Cranfield, The Gospel According to Mark, 378.

⁹ Lane, The Gospel According to Mark, 433.

man replied. 'You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. 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.'" The scribe demonstrates his ability to correctly handle God's word, when he makes the point that love of God and of neighbor is superior to offering a sacrifice. We know from Jewish literature of that period that offering sacrifices, obeying the law, and demonstrations of love for neighbor were important aspects of Jewish piety. Many Jews believed that since God elected them, they were obligated to obey and do their religious duties to maintain their place in the covenant. This is known as covenantal nomism.

But what Jesus told the man was that if you truly loved the one true God, you would also love your neighbor. This dual manifestation of love was the most important thing, because it was the only proper response to YHWH's revelation of himself to his chosen people. From Jesus' words—connecting love of God with love of neighbor—the scribe correctly deduced that love of God and of neighbor was the basis for sacrifice, not the other way around. We offer sacrifices in seeking forgiveness of sin because we love God and our neighbor. We do not offer sacrifices so as to keep God's love, or earn God's love. But according to the Rabbis, if you obeyed the law, performed the sacrifices, and loved your neighbor, you would keep your place in the covenant. This was the wrong way to see this, says Jesus, and this scribe very quickly figured it out. No, we sacrifice because God has been gracious to us, not so as to get him to be gracious to us by earning his favor.

The question is why did this man see it, when all the others had missed it? As Mark tells us in verse 34, *"When Jesus saw that [the scribe] had answered wisely, he said to him, 'You are not far from the kingdom of God.'*" Jesus' comment is intentionally ambiguous. Obviously, Jesus wants the man to think more about this matter. This man heard what Jesus said, was intrigued by his answer, and was then able to take Jesus' words and follow them through to the point where he was able to see things correctly. This man is not interested in the fine points of debate about the weightier matters of the law. No, he wants to understand what God's word means. And according to Jesus, he was very close to the kingdom. In other words, he was coming to faith. He was beginning to understand that Jesus was the Messiah, because in him, the kingdom of God draws near.

But we also learn this was the last time that anyone from the Sanhedrin would approach Jesus and try and trip him up. Mark reports that *"from then on no one dared ask him any more questions."* Jesus had confounded all his enemies and even pointed one scribe in the direction of saving faith. But by now, the Sanhedrin was convinced that more drastic measures were needed, and even now, these more drastic measures were being plotted in private. It was now Tuesday, but by Friday, Jesus would be hanging from a Roman cross and all would seem lost.

What then do we take with us from this passage?

Each of us has asked the question at one time or another, "what is heaven like?" From the verbal sparring between Jesus the Sadducees, we learn something very important about heaven and the after-life. Jesus makes it perfectly clear that life after death is a not only a certainty, but is some type of transformed existence in which we live forever in the presence of God in glorified bodies. In refuting the Sadducees and answering their trick question about who gets the wife in the resurrection, Jesus informs us that after death, there is no more marriage nor giving in marriage. In the parallel passage in Luke (Luke 20:34-36), Jesus gives a bit more information. *"The people of this age marry and are given in marriage. But those who are considered worthy of taking part in that age and in the resurrection from the dead will neither marry nor be given in marriage, and they can no longer die; for they are like the*

angels. They are God's children, since they are children of the resurrection.” Jesus clearly states that one of the most fundamental relationships in natural life does not continue on in heaven—no marriage and no procreation. So the Mormons and the Muslims, who are looking forward to sex in the afterlife, will be very disappointed. There are not seventy-two virgins waiting for the martyrs (as in Islam), nor will men have multiple wives and create countless spirit beings who will repopulate the next earth (as in Mormonism). As one old theologian used to say, one sure sign that a religion is based upon the false teaching of men, is that women remain eternally barefoot and pregnant. How true.

But it is a huge mistake to think of this as though God was taking away marriage and family after death so that heaven is somehow less fulfilling than life on earth. On the contrary, Jesus speaks of this as a transformed existence, and therefore life after death (or heaven, as we commonly speak of it) is something much better than life as we now know it. Although it is difficult to conceive of this and to understand what this fully entails, we do know that we are God’s children, that we will be in God’s presence forever (like the angels) and that we will be bodily raised from the dead so that we live on in a glorified state in what Paul calls a spiritual body. The best we can say is that it will be glorious, and it must be so far beyond our comprehension that Jesus can only speak of it only in these kinds of images.

The other thing which becomes clear is that the confession that YHWH is the one true God, is the basis for the command to love both God and neighbor. In other words, when God reveals himself to us through his word, we must believe that he is, and because this the case, he then becomes the object of our love and adoration. But as Jesus himself makes plain, love for God cannot be separated from love for neighbor. This dual love—love toward both God and neighbor—is the solemn obligation of every Christian. This is the foundation of the Christian life and is that in which our sanctification consists.

But since we are sinners we cannot possible love God as we ought—and the command to love our neighbor carries with it no enabling ability to do it—these commands actually leave us under God’s just condemnation, every bit as much as Jesus’ words condemned Israel. And yet once Christ has fulfilled all righteousness—by perfectly loving both God and his neighbor—and when he then goes to the cross, paying for the guilt of our sins for all those times we failed to love God and neighbor as we ought, he not only provides the means through we can be forgiven and accounted as righteous before God, he also wins for us that sanctifying grace which enables us to do both—love God and neighbor.

The great paradox of the Christian life is this. Once we look to Christ for the forgiveness of sins, and once we look to him as the only ground of our righteousness before God, then all of a sudden, we find ourselves beginning to love God. We start to see our neighbors in a new light. We have both the desire and power to love them. This is what Jesus was getting at when he told the scribe, “you are not far from the kingdom of God.” For when the kingdom comes in power, sinners come to faith, they are forgiven and reckoned righteous before God, and they then begin to love both God and neighbor—never perfectly, of course, but really and truly. Once we look to Jesus as our only Savior and hope of eternal life, he will begin to transform us. We will see his grace and mercy in our lives, we will begin to love the law, and seek to obey it. But if we think that obeying the law is the means by which God will love us, then we are in the same boat as the Sadducees. We are under the just judgment of God.

Beloved, none of us are far from the kingdom of God. It draws near through word and sacrament, and it directs us that Savior who perfectly loved both God and neighbor, who will save us from our sins, and who will transform us into men and women of faith, who do truly begin to love God and others. This was our Lord’s gracious work that day in temple with the scribe, and it is still his gracious work here this morning. Amen.