

Title: Not Far But Not In
Text: Mk 12: 28-34
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Three different denominations—with opposing doctrine—united together, attempting to entangle our Lord Jesus in his words. “And one of the scribes came...” (Mk 12: 28) What is a scribe? Think of the word “transcribe.” Under the old covenant, the chief duty of the scribe was to transcribe the word of God. But by the time of our text, though the scribes had great power given to them by men, they had little or no Holy Spirit revelation. Most gave false interpretations of scripture for personal gain. Most did not know and believe God. But this scribe appears somewhat different than most.

Mark 12: 28: And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all? 29: And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: 30: And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. 31: And the second is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. 32: And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: 33: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love his neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices. 34: And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.

Our subject is “Not Far but Not In.” Every time we come together, as the Lord enables me, I try to keep the charge Christ has given me, “Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD’S hand double for all her sins.” (Isa 40:1-2) But we are not to comfort anyone who does not yet believe on the Lord Jesus Christ. The worst thing in the world would be to go to hell calling God our Father when we have not bowed the knee to Christ! This scribe was very near. Christ said, “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.” But Christ told him the truth. He did not say, “Thou art in the kingdom of God” but “Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.”

Perhaps, some here are not far from the kingdom of God. That is good. But not far is not in. May God comfort us in the assurance of faith if we truly believe on Christ or may God make us see our need of truly believing on Christ and make us willing to rest in Christ, if we do not.

It is not enough to meet Christ standing as near as the threshold of faith. We must enter Christ the Door through faith in him. We must believe on the Lord Jesus Christ and thereby enter the kingdom of God.

For our divisions, first we will consider this statement from its positive side. This scribe was “not far” so we will look at the positives this scribe possessed. But this statement also has a negative side. “Not far” is not in the kingdom of God. So secondly, we will see the thing that kept this scribe from entering the kingdom of God. Lastly, we will apply this personally to each of us here.

THE POSITIVES—COME AND HEAR

First, this scribe was willing to come and hear, “And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together...” (Mk 12: 28) Out of all the scribes only one came to where Christ was speaking and sat silently and heard attentively. It is very rare to find a sinner willing to come to the place where Christ is preached. Most people think they have more important things to do.

Whatever you do never forsake assembling together where Christ is preached in truth, according to the scriptures. The father of believers is Abraham. God saved Abraham by preaching the gospel to him. In his wisdom, God proved man's total ruin in sin—in the garden, in Noah's day, at Babel. So scripture says, "After that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe." (1 Cor 1: 21) This is why it is so important to consistently attend the preaching of the gospel wherever the gospel is preached according to the scriptures.

It is even rarer to find a sinner who will not only come, but will hear, "one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together..." (Mk 12: 28) It is not enough to come to the house of God, we must come to the house of God to listen, rather than quickly voicing our opinion. This scribe listened as Christ reasoned with the Pharisees then with the Herodians then with the Sadducees. The whole time he listened rather than speaking. God says through the apostle James, "Of his own will begat he us with the word of truth...Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath." (Jas 1:18)

Often, God's preacher studies a passage for weeks before preaching from it. It takes hours of prayer, hours in searching the scriptures, hours preparing to speak as simply and clearly as possible. So we should at least listen attentively for the 30-45 minutes that the preacher speaks. After the message, before being quick to refute what was said, we should go home and spend as many hours as the preacher spent, prayerfully searching the scriptures, to see if what we heard is according to the word of God.

So it was a good thing that this scribe came to Christ and that he came more ready to hear than to speak.

TEST WHAT YOU HEAR BY THE WORD OF GOD

Another positive is that this scribe studied the word of God. We read that the scribe "perceiving that he had answered them well..." (Mk 12: 28) He knew Christ answered those men according to the scriptures because he studied the word of God. Remember those in Berea? Luke writes, "These were more noble than those in Thessalonica, in that they received the word with all readiness of mind, and searched the scriptures daily, whether those things were so. Therefore many of them believed; also of honourable women which were Greeks, and of men, not a few. (Ac 17:11-12)

As the word was preached they received it with a ready mind. But then they searched the scriptures daily. Not now and then but daily they searched the scriptures to see that the word they heard was according to the scriptures.

Some of our members came out of Roman Catholicism. You know that the priests tell the people not to study God's word. But scriptures show that God's preachers encourage everyone to search what they preach. It is needful for you to see what we preach in God's word as you hear it preached. Then it is good to search the word at home so you see that these things are really so. If a person will not test what is preached by God's word then he has no right to oppose anything God's preacher declares.

I once knew a man who was up early each morning checking the stock-market. A preacher asked him why. He said, "My life is invested in these stocks!" Christ said, "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." (Mt 6: 21) Is Christ your life? When Christ is our treasure then we will search God's treasure chest to behold Christ.

Paul said, "Therefore, many believed." There was a time when I heard the gospel preached but let it go in one ear and out the other. It was not until I began to open my Bible in the service, and search the scriptures at home, that God revealed the gospel to me. It was so exciting when God graciously opened my understanding

and gave me faith to believe on Christ! All along it was God by his irresistible grace that drew me to Christ and gave me a heart to read the word and “therefore” God gave me faith to believe. So search the scriptures daily!

COME TO CHRIST FOR WISDOM

The chief thing this scribe had was some understanding that the law is spiritual and not a matter of legal duty. He had some understanding that the law reaches to the heart, that it requires perfect, heart-love and that this is more than all the outward offerings and sacrifices which others major upon. The very best thing he did was ask Christ a sincere question, “Which is the first commandment of all?” (Mk 12: 28) Always seek to understand the word of God by going to Christ. He is the believers Wisdom.

Let’s look at Christ’s answer, not in the letter, but spiritually.

First, Christ declares the necessity of faith, “And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments *is*, “Hear, O Israel.” (Mk 12: 29) The Lord quotes directly from Deuteronomy 6:4. This phrase indicates that faith is the first thing necessary. “Faith cometh by hearing and hearing by the word of God.” (Rom 10: 17) In like manner as God gave the letter of the law to political Israel, God gives this command through the Holy Spirit, not on tables of stone but upon the fleshy tables of the heart of his elect, his spiritual Israel. (2 Cor 3: 3) When God commands his child personally to hear, it is always an effectual command. Then we believe and cannot do otherwise. Faith is the gift of God. It is the first thing needed.

The next phrase declares who it is the Holy Spirit teaches us to believe and who it is that fulfills the law in covenant grace, “The Lord our God is one Lord.” (Mk 12: 29) “The Lord our God” means the Lord is our triune God. The Lord in three persons, in covenant with each other, is our God. “Is one Lord” declares that the three persons of our Godhead are one in Messiah. The Lord, our triune God, is one Messiah. The Lord our triune God is one in one Messiah. When God gives us faith, we believe on the Lord our triune covenant God by believing on Christ, “for in him dwelleth all the fullness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power.” (Col 2: 9-10) Christ declared this when he said, “I and my Father are one.” (Jn 10: 30)

Then Christ used the law lawfully. The law was given to shut our mouths and declare us guilty before God. (Rom 3: 19; 5: 20; Gal 3: 21-22) By declaring what the law requires, Christ declared that we can never fulfill the law because we are sinners. This is the law our triune God upheld himself in Christ Jesus for his people, “And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength: this is the first commandment. And the second like this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.” (Mk 12: 30-31) God requires perfect obedience, by the constraint of perfect love toward the Lord God and our neighbor. It must be inward-love in “heart, soul, mind, and strength.” It must be love for God alone, with no rivals stealing the affection, no sin, because it must be love toward God with “all thy heart, all thy soul, all thy mind, and all thy strength.” And the law also requires one to be willing to lay down his life for his neighbor. But you and I are sinners. Sin is mixed with our very best obedience. Christ is the only one who fulfilled the law in perfection of righteousness and holiness. Made of a woman, made under the law, Christ obeyed God’s law in perfect righteousness from a holy heart by the pure constraint of perfect love for God and his neighbor. Christ alone established his own law, both for himself and for his people.

When we are born again of the Spirit, Christ is formed in us. In the new heart, Christ grants faith and repentance. Then we repent from trying to come to God by our obedience to the law. It is only when God commands, “Hear, O Israel” that we believe and rest in Christ. He teaches us that our triune God, in everlasting covenant honored his own law in Christ.

Through faith, Christ is our Righteousness. By Christ dwelling in us, Christ is our Holiness in the new man. By his Spirit abiding in our new heart, we believe and are constrained by the love of Christ—"faith which worketh by love." (Gal 5: 6) But even then we do not look to ourselves to establish the law but only to Christ.

THE NEGATIVE—NEEDFUL BUT NOT SALVATION

Now, listen to how the scribe replied, "And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he: And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love *his* neighbour as himself, is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices." (Mr 12:32-33)

The scribe understood correctly that there is "one God and there is none other but he." He had some understanding that the law is spiritual, requiring perfect heart love. The scribe even had some understanding that perfect obedience from a heart of love is more than all the outward offerings and sacrifices that religion majors on. "And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." (Mr 12:34) He was not far, but not in. What did the scribe miss

Though it is of utmost importance to come to the Lord's house and attentively hear Christ's gospel, never imagine that this alone is enough to put you in the kingdom of God. By all means come; by all means hear. But something else must accompany this.

Though it is of utmost importance that you study your Bible, never imagine that studying your Bible is enough to make God receive you into the kingdom of God. By all means turn to the scriptures as the gospel is preached then at home, study what you heard. But something else must accompany this.

Though a sincere, correct knowledge of the truth is needful, never imagine that this is enough to put you in the kingdom of God. The Holy Spirit says through the apostle James, "Thou believest that there is one God; thou doest well: the devils also believe, and tremble." (Jas 2:19) Hell will be full of sincere five-point Calvinists, some of which may have had a better knowledge of the truth while on earth than many of God's saints. But something else is vital!

BELIEVE ON THE LORD JESUS CHRIST

Do you see what this scribe missed? Look back at Christ's word in verse 29, "And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments *is*, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord." Now, look at the scribes reply in verse 32, "And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he."

The scribe missed the very first thing Christ declared, "Hear, O Israel." He missed faith. He misunderstood "the Lord our God is one Lord." He missed that Christ is the Lord our God in one Messiah. He missed faith in Christ!

So Christ told him that he was not far from the one thing needful, "He said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." (Mk 12: 34) Christ is not only the Door, Christ is, himself, the Kingdom of God. Christ told the Pharisee's, "If I with the finger of God cast out devils, no doubt the kingdom of God is come upon you." (Lu 11:20) Nicodemus came telling Christ that he knew who the Lord Jesus is. "Jesus answered and said unto him, Verily, verily, I say unto thee, Except a man be born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God." (Joh 3:3)

Knowledge alone will never save. This scribe had the knowledge that the triune God is one God. But without faith, he did not understand and believe that he stood not far from Messiah, the GodMan, in whom the everlasting covenant of the triune God is yes and amen to the believer. (2 Cor 1: 20)

He had the knowledge that the law was given to teach us that God requires love from the heart toward the LORD our God and our neighbor. But without faith, he did not understand and believe that he stood not far from the one who is both the LORD our God and our Neighbor. The GodMan is the believer's Sabbath rest in whom the table of the law toward God and the table of the law toward Man are fulfilled. Therefore, Christ is end of the law for righteousness to everyone that believes. (Rom 10: 4)

Christ said to him, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." But without faith, he did not understand and believe on Christ, the kingdom of God!

HEARING HE HEARD

After, Christ made this statement, what would have been an exceptional question for the scribe to have asked? The blind man asked, "Who is he Lord that I might believe?" Christ answered, "Thou hast both seen him and it is he that speaketh with thee." (Jn 9: 36-37) If the scribe would have asked, "Who is the kingdom of God? Who is the Door so I can enter?" Christ would have answered, "Thou hast both seen him and it is he that speaketh with thee." But what a sad word! "And no man", including this scribe, "after that durst ask him any question." (Mk 12: 34)

"Hearing he heard but did not understand." (Mt 13: 13-15) By thinking he had acquired the correct doctrine, this scribe thought his knowledge was enough to save him. When the Lord saved the blind man the proud Pharisee's said, "Are we blind also? Jesus saith unto them, If ye were blind, ye should have no sin: but now ye say, We see; therefore your sin remaineth." (Jn 9: 40-41) If the scribe would have said, "I am ignorant Lord, save me!" the Lord Jesus would have revealed himself and caused him to enter the kingdom of God through faith. But by the scribe proudly thinking he heard and understood, as far as we can tell, he proved he was not an elect child of God and Christ left him in his ignorance.

THE PERSONAL—NOT FAR OR IN?

This is the question for each of us to answer personally, "Am I not far from the kingdom of God or am I in the kingdom of God?" There is but one Way into the kingdom of God, Christ the Way. Believe on Christ and you shall be saved. (Acts 16: 31)

What is true God-given faith? True faith does include a true, spiritual knowledge of the triune God in Christ. But it is not knowledge alone. True faith knows as well as believes on Christ. Further, true faith is persuaded that Christ alone is able to save me—not Christ plus my works—Christ alone! Therefore, true faith commits our all to Christ. As the apostle Paul said, "I know whom I have believed, and am persuaded that he is able to keep that which I have committed unto him against that day." (2 Tim 1: 12) "But without faith *it is* impossible to please *him*: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and *that* he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him. (Heb 11:6)

May God give us faith to believe on Christ, and continue believing on Christ, to the end.

Amen!