

What God Really, Really, Really Wants

Mark 12:28-34

In his book, *Sacred Marriage*, Gary Thomas alleges the following to be a true story:

A businessman moved over slightly as a young man crowded into the airplane seat next to him. They both fastened their seat belts, and the businessman good-naturedly inquired as to whether the young man was traveling on business or pleasure.

“Pleasure,” the young man replied. “I’m on my honeymoon.”

“Your honeymoon?” the businessman asked, mystified. “Where’s your wife?”

“Oh, she’s a few rows back. The plane was full, so we couldn’t get seats together.”

The plane hadn’t started rolling yet, so the businessman said, “I’d be happy to change seats with her so that the two of you can be together.”

“That’s okay,” the young man replied. “I’ve been talking to her all week.”

I can only hope she was enough rows back to be out of earshot. I’ll even go out on a limb and suggest that most newlywed brides would be wounded. They would prefer to be loved with a bit more passion than that. In the final analysis, that is what God really, really, really wants from His people – to be loved authentically and passionately. But, how can we do that? We know that God operates in a realm where love is not solely sentimental. He acts in our behalves. But, we cannot act in His behalf in quite the same way. We cannot bring Him anything that He does not already own. We cannot serve Him in any way that is crucial to His betterment or survival. Still, He has established a way that we can express our love to Him in tangible ways. We can love others.

Jesus has finally reached Jerusalem. On the first day of the week, He entered the city. One crowd acclaimed Him as their long-awaited King. The first part of this final week of His life would be spent teaching in the temple. He would not be left in peace. The event that we are studying today comes toward the end of a series of debates and confrontations with those who His opposed Him.

I. A Sincere Interrogation verse 28

²⁸One 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?”

A. Most Such Encounters Were Facades

Shortly before this encounter, the Pharisees and Herodians had ganged up on Jesus. This was odd, because Herodians and Pharisees didn’t really like each other. The Pharisees saw themselves as national purists. They resented every evidence of the Roman presence in their homeland. The Herodians were political pragmatists who worked with Rome for the restoration of the Herodian dynasty in Jerusalem. Herod the Great, who was half-Jewish, had reigned as “king” in Jerusalem at the pleasure of Rome and had done so effectively. However, the Jews were such a difficult people to govern that upon Herod’s death, Rome divided his domain into four parts, three of which were overseen by sons of Herod. In Jerusalem, however, Rome placed its own governor. When Jesus arrived in Jerusalem at this point in time, Pontius Pilate called all the shots.

To the Herodians, a half-Jewish king was more palatable than a Roman governor. The Pharisees were less realistic. They wanted everyone out. Still, the two groups saw a common threat in Jesus. Together, they came, flattering Him before asking Him if loyal Jews should pay Roman taxes. They wanted to trap Him by His answer. If He said, “Pay the taxes,” the Pharisees could damage His standing among the people, most of who hated to pay taxes to Rome. If He advocated a tax revolt, the Herodians would whisper that in Pilate’s ear. Jesus took the position that whatever government is sufficiently in power to mint coin can also tax for the services and security it provides. The Jews needed to be more concerned with giving God His due.

After that encounter, the Sadducees also approached Jesus. The Sadducees did not believe in a resurrection of the dead but they knew Jesus did and they wanted to make a fool out of Him. Now, the Law taught that if a man died childless, that man’s brother must marry the widow and father children for his deceased brother so that he would have heirs. The Sadducees came up with a scenario of a widow who still had no children after marrying and outliving her husband’s six brothers. “Whose wife will she be when they all get raised back to life?” They must have chuckled amongst themselves. This riddle should make Jesus look like a country rube. The riddle also poked fun at their old adversaries, the Pharisees, who also believed in a resurrection.

Jesus turned the tables on the Sadducees when He accused them of understanding neither the Scriptures nor the nature of resurrection and marriage. A world without death does not require an institution to procreate life. He said we will be like the angels. Whatever that means specifically, it amounted to a dig at these Sadducees who also did not believe in the existence of angels.

B. This Man’s Question Actually Fascinated Thoughtful Jews

In Matthew’s telling of this story, this teacher of the law represents the Pharisees who were giddy over how Jesus put the Sadducees in their places. Still, as a group, they too wished to bring Jesus down so they picked a representative to question Him. However, Mark leads us to believe that this particular representative was a bit of a maverick. He did not follow the pack mentality of the Pharisees by appealing to anti-Roman jingoistic issues like taxation. He clearly was above asking some ludicrous riddle like the one the Sadducees had manufactured. This man asked Jesus a question that was actually on the minds of many thoughtful students of the Old Testament law.

The Pharisees claimed that they could identify 613 distinct laws in the Scriptures; 248 “Do’s” as well as 365 “Don’ts”. But, with all their fascination with the minutiae of the Law, they also liked to explore great summary statements that condensed the whole Law into a single profound thought. Most such summaries of the essence of the Law revolved around sacrifice, service or even treating others nice. Last week, we met a rich man who was a conscientious law-keeper, but who believed Jesus could point him to one great deed that would seal the deal for eternal life.

This man’s fellow scribes and Pharisees may have cringed when he asked Jesus this question. When asked about paying taxes or when challenged to solve some silly riddle about seven brothers and some kiss-of-death widow, Jesus had come off looking quite bright and His enemies had come off looking rather idiotic. Now, this man served up a question that gave Jesus a chance to shine, an opportunity to solidly establish Himself as a profound rabbi, and He knocked it out of the park.

II. A Sublime Elucidation verses 29-31

²⁹"The most important one," answered Jesus, "is this: 'Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.' ³⁰Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' ³¹The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these."

A. The Law's Great Summary Is "Love"

Jesus didn't hesitate one bit. He began with the words stored in their phylacteries, the little leather boxes tied to their foreheads and wrists. "Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one." These words reminded them that God, Who is the only God, had made Himself known to Israel when He called them into a covenant with Himself. He had loved them. It was their duty to love Him with every fiber of their being. We cannot love an abstract concept. We can love Someone Who has revealed Himself and has acted in history in our behalves. This made sense.

Then, Jesus lifted a little social edict from another spot in the Law and placed it on a par with loving God; "Love your neighbor as yourself." They could grasp this as well. After all, God had called all Israelites into His covenant nation, so it made sense that they were obliged to love everyone that God loved. Of course, Jesus wasn't just talking about the man's fellow Israelites. On another occasion, when Jesus extolled the virtue of this same commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself," a man asked, "And who is my neighbor?" (Luke 10:27, 29).

That question gave Jesus the occasion to tell the story of *The Good Samaritan*. A man was assaulted on his journey from Jerusalem to Jericho. A priest and a Levite, both of who were probably either on their way to or on their way back from serving at the temple, demonstrate utter indifference to the injured man. It takes a Samaritan, a man despised by Jews, to model true neighborliness. It seems that in God's kingdom, a neighbor is anyone you are in a position to help. Don't walk past needs that you can meet. This too is the essence of God's Law. Love God, love your neighbor and don't even think about asking which of those two is the most important.

B. What Jesus United, Let No Christian Separate

We cannot love God and fail to love His handiwork. We cannot love God and fail to help those for whom Christ died. People can get wrapped up in worship and praise and ecstatic experiences with spirituality but barely notice the hurting world around them. We can polish up our doctrine and know that we are sound in every detail, but without love of others, we cannot love God. In short, if we convince ourselves that we love God based on something that does not include a heart for those who hurt, we become mere Pharisees and miss the command to love God.

On the flip side of that, some suggest that our whole duty to God is the pursuit of social justice. But, many of the churches that rant and rave the most about Christian duty to the poor, the weak, the sick and the outcast are some of the very same churches that have abandoned biblical teachings on morals and responsibility. Calling certain behaviors "sin" much less suggesting that sin might be at the root of some problems is condemned as hateful and intolerant.

The love we have for God and His Word must steer any authentic love we have for anyone else. We cannot abandon God's truth without ultimately harming those we are professing to assist. I'm a bit bored with the political right AND the political left who try to posture themselves as the "better Christians." We can never love a neighbor well if we don't love God enough to speak His truth and we can never love God well if we are indifferent to those who need a hand.

III. A Satisfied Affirmation verses 32, 33

³²“Well said, teacher,” the man replied. “You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. ³³To 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.”

A. Typically, Jesus Silenced His Inquisitors

One of the first things Jesus did after He entered Jerusalem was drive the money changers and merchants from the temple. Only then did He begin to teach the people on the temple grounds. The chief priests, who ran the place, asked Him by what authority He doing these things. He asked them if they believed that John the Baptist, who had endorsed Him, was a real prophet. If they said, “Yes,” Jesus would ask them why they did not just accept John’s word on the matter. If they said, “No,” they feared the people, who believed John WAS a prophet. So, they said nothing and slithered away.

Once, a crowd dragged a woman caught in adultery to Jesus. The Law called for stoning, but Rome did not allow the locals to impose death sentences. What would Jesus have them do? If He said, “Spare her, He was overruling Moses. If He said, “Kill her,” He was inciting a breach of Roman law. Instead, He said, “If any one of you is without sin, let him be the first to throw a stone at her” (John 8:7). That shut them up, and they too slithered away without saying a word.

When His enemies arrived in Gethsemane to arrest Him, Jesus would remind them that they had blown their chances to take Him. God’s truth had always won out over their manipulations of the Scriptures. They would resort to half-truths and rumor-mongering to bring their schemes to pass, and Jesus pointedly told them that “darkness” was their hour. But He would also inform them that even their apparent victory was a part of the Father’s plan. Peter drew a sword and took off a man’s ear. Jesus put it right back on and reminded everyone that He was still in charge:

... ⁵³Do you think I cannot call on my Father, and he will at once put at my disposal more than twelve legions of angels? ⁵⁴But how then would the Scriptures be fulfilled that say it must happen in this way?” – Matthew 26:53, 54

B. This Man Was Exhilarated by Jesus’ Answer

Here, Jesus had just silenced the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Those intent on accusing Him backed off. The very last sentence of our text says, “And from then on no one dared ask him any more questions” (verse 34). But, this teacher’s response was friendly: “Well said, teacher.”

He then echoes what Jesus said, but in different words *AND* he tacks on how this is “more important” that sacrifices and burnt offerings. This is precisely what the Old Testament taught, but it was not what his contemporaries believed. His unique rhetoric suggests that he had thought through this issue before. He was affirming what Jesus said, but it could also be that he was doing so because Jesus had affirmed his honest study of the Scriptures. Jesus authoritatively affirmed what other rabbis before Him had suggested: true religion that honors God is a matter of the heart, and that the surest proof of the authenticity of the heart is our love of others.

IV. A Strange Commendation verse 34

³⁴When 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.

A. Was this Man Just Complimented or Criticized?

He may have walked away with a smile on His face. "The rabbi just told me that I'm not far from the kingdom of God." It may have taken a few steps for the grin to fade and for him to think, "Hey, what does that mean?" Was it backhanded compliment, something you feel good about until you have a moment to process what you just heard? Some examples might be ...

- "That dress does wonders for your figure."
- "I think it's cool that you're comfortable with how you look."
- "It is so refreshing to have a conversation with someone who does not feel that she has to prove she is smart."
- "You have pretty eyes, especially the big one on the right."
- "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Did Jesus mean that a tiny tweak from where the man was now would secure him the kingdom of God, or did He mean that the man was still on the outside, no matter how close he seemed?

B. How Does One Draw Near to the Kingdom and Still Miss It?

A man can be raised in a devout home and develop the habits and values of godliness. He can develop knowledge of, appreciation for and obedience to God's Word. He can love Jesus. He can conform to the practices of religion. He can be thoughtful enough to sense that character and kindness must mean more to God than any ritual. In fact, all this may describe fairly closely where this teacher of the law was in his spiritual journey. But, apparently, it was not enough.

C. What More Can Possibly Be Required?

There are a few possibilities of what Jesus had in mind precisely when He said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God," but they all boil down to one general reality. Only God can bring a sinner home into His kingdom. A man's religious practice, knowledge and wisdom can actually create a kind of prideful satisfaction that becomes a barrier to kingdom entry. Without poverty of spirit, a grasp of personal sin and of one's desperate need for a Rescuer, there can be no heavenly prize. Without the redemptive work of Jesus as the only Perfect Sacrifice for sin that has ever been made, there can be no hope of the kingdom. And, without faith that Jesus Christ, in fact, accomplished this, there can be nothing but distance between any man and the kingdom of God.

Whatever Jesus meant precisely, we can be certain that it had something to do with the inability of a sinner to save himself and with that sinner's need for Jesus. This man had probably drawn as close to the kingdom of God as any man possibly can, but he may as well have been one-hundred-million light-years away. Jesus did not come to merely teach men about the kingdom of God. He came to seek and save the lost and to usher them into the kingdom. It is only by His work that anyone will ever enter in.