



Still Too Far Away

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Mark 12:28-34

“Are we almost there yet?” How often have we heard that question on a trip? Perhaps the question comes out differently: “How much longer?” Standing in line for early voting this week, we heard the question asked more than once. How long is this going to take? When do we finish and get to walk out the back door with a sticker that proclaims we are finished?! We like things to be settled. We like finish lines. We yearn for the end of the race, yet so often there is still more that lies ahead.

The scribes had a different question for Jesus. It had nothing to do with finishing. It had nothing to do with arriving at a specific destination. It was a question about priorities and importance. It was a values question. “Which is the greatest of all the commandments?”

It was a loaded question, to be sure. He was not trying to ask a simple question, but to pull Jesus into a debate. He wanted to see if Jesus would side with him on a hot debate about the commandments. He wasn't really prepared for Jesus' answer, but was hoping to find backup in this popular teacher. It might have been intended as a trap, like the questions of the Pharisees and Sadducees, but Mark does not seem to paint the picture quite that way.

The Jews had enumerated all God's commands in the Pentateuch. They listed 613 commands. They had pretty much decided that one needed to keep a minimum of half without fail. That was the only way many could picture God judging them in a positive light. On the commandments they chose to obey, they would not be able to slip up even once. There was a lot of pressure behind that way of thinking.

Jesus did not seem bothered at all by the question. “Love Yahweh your God with all being, then go on to love your neighbor as yourself. These are the two greatest commandments.” Jesus' answer was simple. It was a combination of two quotes from the Pentateuch. Together, they became a summary statement of all the 613 command. To love God with all of one's being and then to love others on a par with oneself one fulfilled all the rest of the commands. It was not a question of ignoring some and keeping others. It was understanding and fulfilling God's purpose in the words of these two.

With this summary, Jesus sets aside considerations of keeping only a portion of God's commands. If all the other commandments depend on these two as primary, it is only these two that really matter in the long run. The rest become explanations of how these two commandments should find application in our lives. We don't kill because we love. We don't lie because we love. We do not covet, cheat, and steal because we consider others as having our same needs and worth. Which of God's commands do we like to ignore? We can only really set them aside insofar as we choose not to love God or others.

In Mark's account, the scribe was satisfied with Jesus' answer. He recognized that Jesus presented given him a summary statement encompassing the whole of God's commands. He saw that these two commands fulfilled what sacrifice and offerings could never accomplish. He recognized that in Jesus' summary lay an understanding that went to the heart of God's will and purpose for the nation of Israel, a people called by God's name and into God's service.

What remained unclear is how his life reflected the understanding he had just recognized. Knowing God's will is one thing. Placing the whole of our lives under God's will is a wholly different thing. It is altogether more than learning, studying, memorizing, or quoting commandments. It is fully

different from teaching others about God. It implies allowing God to transform our beings from the inside out, molding us after the character of God's love.

From the scribe's perspective, the important part was perhaps knowing God's priorities. Then again, perhaps it wasn't. He lived with a system of thought and interpretation to protect. The scribes were the Biblicists of the day. It was not enough, however, to have knowledge. That knowledge needed application into relationship with others. It needed to be conveyed into words, actions, and character. It needed to mold attitudes. It needed to transform relationships. It needed to shift the service of God into first place in one's life.

The scribe claimed service to God, yet Jesus said there was something more. "You have a good understanding, but you aren't there yet. You are not far from God's reign, but you have not yet entered it." He had more to do and be before he found his place within God's reign.

At the end of the day, God's reign is not about commandments, traditions, and sacrifices. It is not about protecting cultural norms. It is not about struggling against change. It is not about power and control. It is not about feeding our agendas, calling the shots, and establishing standards for the actions of others. Jesus answered that great commandments were about increasing our love, dedication, and commitment to God and in service to others.

At the heart of the scribe's question was a testing of Jesus. He sought to measure Jesus against his own understanding, norms, and priorities. He sought to see how Jesus fit within the traditional views about God and the ways one served God. Likely, he was looking to use Jesus' answer to help him wage battle against the influences of Pharisees and Sadducees, pushing his own agenda forward.

He did not come seeking to know what Jesus had to teach. While he might not have been as antagonistic as the questioners before him, he was still coming to use Jesus, not to learn from him. It was still a form of violence, for he placed himself in a position of superiority to pass judgment upon Jesus. Jesus turned the tables.

He wasn't seeking to love Jesus on a par with himself. He did not place himself in the proper position of a servant of God. He was rather testing Jesus against his own values, priorities, and concerns. Rather than keeping God at the center of his life, he was keeping God within the parameters of his doctrinal constructs. He did not approach Jesus because of God's centrality in his life. He approached him because of a focus on his own importance and the importance of his ideas. How often do we do that?

There was nothing in his question that displayed God as primary in all his words, actions, and character. There was nothing in his response that denoted love toward others. He had the answers at the tip of his tongue. They needed to shift into the character of his attitudes and actions. These answers needed to change how he interacted and treated his wife, children, neighbors, friends, acquaintances, and even the strangers on the street.

Do we consider how we treat and think of others as central to serving God? The scribe didn't. He wanted to earn position in God's reign through his importance. He was still too far away. Not there yet. His actions needed transformation, even as our own. His self-importance needed submission to the acceptance of others having the same worth before God. As long as we hang onto attitudes of superiority, there is still far to go. God demands a love that is complete. God demands commitment that outstrips what we tend to give. What is it that keeps us from giving our all? Are we there yet?

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