

Jason Upchurch - Mark 12:28-34 - The Good News of Responding Wisely

I know this probably feels a little bit like Groundhog Day - we've read this same section 3 times. But this morning we're actually back in the narrative of **Mark 12**. We took a couple weeks to dive in deeper on the issues of how we love God and how we love our neighbor which is the heart of this question that the scribe asks.

This morning we're actually going to work through the narrative itself. So we're back in the Temple on Tuesday just 3 days before Jesus is crucified. This is the long day of back and forth between Jesus and the religious leaders. It will end that evening with Jesus pronouncing judgement on the whole city of Jerusalem and the Temple - promising that in one generation the whole place will be leveled to the ground.

Jesus has been battling it out with the religious leaders all morning. In fact, he's really gone toe to toe with almost every faction of religious leaders that were recognized at the time: Pharisees, Sadducees, the chief priests, the scribes, elders. And even some of the Roman sympathizers - the Herodians - have gotten in on the action.

But this is the last battle. After this back and forth about the greatest command the religious leaders realize that they are beat. They can't win against Jesus based on argument. He'll win and the longer they go on the more the crowd loves him and the more he confounds them.

So after this exchange they basically give up and Jesus has free reign in the Temple to teach whatever he wants.

So this is the last back and forth. And of all of the exchanges I think this is the most intriguing and instructive. Now, we've already talked about the heart of the question the scribe is asking: what does it mean to love God and love our neighbor, so I'm not going to cover that ground again.

What I want to do is look at the big picture here. And I think the big picture of this section revolves around what Jesus says in **Vs. 34** to this man. **Read 34**

What do we learn from this? Two things, which I think are the big picture here.

First, this scribe is not saved. He's not actually in the Kingdom of God. He's close, he's not far from the Kingdom. But he's not *in*. He hasn't actually entered in through the narrow gate. That's a big deal.

The second thing we learn here is how Jesus treats this man. Jesus's attitude toward him is different than his attitude toward the other leaders who are openly hostile. This scribe doesn't seem to be outwardly hostile to Jesus or the disciples. He seems to be asking a genuine question and Jesus, the best I can tell, actually is somewhat encouraging to him.

So I want to use those 2 big picture ideas and work through our passage and I think we'll be encouraged this morning.

1) So, again, the first big picture issue here is that being close to the Kingdom is not being in the Kingdom. This is something I think we need to consider soberly whether it's we who claim to be believers, but also those who are clearly not believers.

Someone can be close to the Kingdom and not in it. Or put another way, they can appear to be Christian or even religious, but they are not actually born again.

I was talking to someone just last week about what we say when someone dies who didn't know the Lord or maybe we don't know if they knew the Lord. And I think as Christians we need to be very intentional here. We don't want to give false hope to people that this person is just wicked away into glory for no other reason than they died.

We also don't want to rule out the possibility of an 11th hour conversion - although I will say I think those are highly unlikely in most cases and I think most of us know that.

But I think many of us have been put in odd spots where it feels as though we almost have to consent when someone says an unbeliever who died is in heaven or "in a better place now." As a pastor I get stuck in a hard spot sometimes when I'm asked to do funerals because when you go to a funeral all you hear is the good stuff about a guy, no matter how sinful his life was.

And I think both believers and unbelievers want to console themselves by wishing people into heaven before or after they die.

But if the person isn't a believer, we need to be careful not to wish them into heaven. If they're in hell they're not resting in peace. They're not in a better place. They're not free from the pain they were suffering.

One horrible example of this recently was with the creators of the Babylon Bee. The Babylon Bee is an online Christian satire site that makes fun of all kinds of things.

I have long been a fan of the Babylon Bee, but a couple years ago they interviewed Elon Musk on their podcast. Elon is not a Christian in any form, certainly doesn't claim to be. And at the end of the interview the creators of the Babylon Bee essentially tried to talk to Elon about the gospel. And it was clear he's not a believer and doesn't claim it. And the awkward part was the Babylon Bee guys - who all claim to be believers - essentially tried to tell Elon he was a Christian. That he did believe the gospel. It was very awkward and uncomfortable.

Maybe Elon is close, I don't know. But he's not in. And just like with anyone we shouldn't blur that line. And I think Jesus strikes the perfect balance of wisdom here. So let me make a few observations.

A. Religious Interest Doesn't Save You. I want to put 2 verses together so we see. **Read 28, 34**

So to be clear, this man asking the questions does not appear to be exceedingly hostile. Matthew's version does say he was trying to test Jesus and Matthew adds that he was a Pharisee as well as a scribe. But Mark's gospel definitely puts a positive spin on the interaction. It's not nearly as rowdy as the previous confrontations.

Side: That to me is impressive. Jesus has had one hostile confrontation after another and I don't know about you but when that happens to me, even if the next person is completely fine I'm ready for battle and they probably get a little bit of the shrapnel the last person deserved. But Jesus isn't like that.

He treats everyone as they deserve - one at a time. He's calm and patient even as he's calling out hypocrisy and sin. This guy doesn't get blasted for the sins of the last guys.

Now, remember, the Jewish religious groups often battled with each other. The conservative Pharisees usually hated the liberal Sadducee's. Remember the big verbal brawl that happened in **Acts 23** when Paul got the Pharisees riled up against the Sadducees over the resurrection.

So imagine this Pharisee scribe watching as Jesus just single-handedly destroyed the Sadducees who would normally be his rival too.

So I think there's a sense in which this scribe was likely impressed by Jesus's quick takedown of the Sadducees. Mark says he says that Jesus answered well. Even though they are something of adversaries, there is a respect for Jesus and so he asks Jesus his own question about the greatest commandment.

And Jesus does answer and the scribe agrees with the answer.

So what I want to point out here is that just because someone is inquiring about Christianity, the Bible, the morals and ethics, they're not in the Kingdom. Even if they agree with us on many things - upholding creation, uphold marriage, uphold that there's only 2 genders, so on - it doesn't mean that they are believers.

Just having religious interest doesn't save a person. It's good. It's good for someone to want to look into the things of God. It's good for them to inquire and ask questions.

But we need to have a clear understanding of what conversion is. It's not simple agreement on some moral issues or interest in Christian things.

Conversion is a complete transformation of someone from darkness into light because they wholeheartedly trust in Jesus alone for their salvation. It's a total unashamed dedication to him as the Lord and Savior who laid down his life for us.

It's not interest, it's complete devotion to Jesus as Lord.

B. Respect for Jesus Doesn't Save You. Read

One thing that distinguishes this scribe from the other groups that Jesus has confronted is that he is respectful to Jesus. We see this in several ways. First, as we saw before, he does acknowledge that Jesus answered the Sadducees well.

Second, he actually acknowledges that Jesus answered the question about the greatest commandment correctly. Now, Jesus doesn't need any validation. He's God in the flesh so of course he's right. But the fact that the Scribe acknowledges this publicly is a big deal. And it's especially a big deal because he's on the Temple Mount surrounded by all kinds of people who absolutely want to put Jesus to death. Most of the people aren't giving Jesus any ground at all. And here this guy acknowledges that Jesus answered correctly. That's quite a difference. But - and this is important - it's not salvation.

I've talked to a handful of people over the years who completely reject the gospel. They don't believe Jesus is the only way to be saved or some don't even really believe there is a God at all. But interestingly, they appreciate Jesus and they appreciate Christians and the church as mostly a good thing. They have a respect for Jesus and Christianity.

Which, if we're honest is really kind of weird. It's sort of a breakdown in their thinking. Especially if someone doesn't believe there is a God at all, it's weird to me that they would think it's noble for all of us to gather every week to celebrate nothingness. How was your Sunday morning delusion time?

If I knew a group of people were gathering every week to worship the Tooth Fairy and they believed anyone who didn't worship only the Tooth Fairy was going to suffer forever in in a big tank of toothpaste, I'd think they're crazy. They're would be very little respect for that person.

But for better or worse, people do respect Jesus. And they often respect those who follow him. Think about Nicodemus coming to Jesus at night because he knows that Jesus is sent from God. Nicodemus calls Jesus Rabbi and respects him. But he wasn't a believer - at least not til later.

Think of Pilate; he showed respect for Jesus, and even seemed to acknowledge him as some kind of king and tried over and over to free Jesus. But respecting Jesus didn't save him. It was Pilate who ordered Jesus to be put to death.

Just respecting Jesus doesn't save anyone.

C. Accurate Bible Knowledge Doesn't Save You. Read 32-34a

So this scribe knows his Bible well. At the time of Jesus this was one of the chief questions that was asked of great religious leaders. And they all answered different ways.

A couple hundred years before Jesus a teacher named Simon the Just said that to have answered: "By three things is the world sustained: by the Law, by the temple-service, and by deeds of loving kindness." (Strauss, Mark. Commentary on Mark 12:28-34).

Rabbi Hillel, just a little before Jesus's time, was asked to summarize the whole Law while a man stood on one foot waiting for the answer. Hillel answered, "Do not do to your neighbor what is hateful to you; this is the whole Torah, the rest is commentary." (Ibid)

Most of the great teachers put love somewhere in equation for what God calls his people to do. Or at least no hate.

But here's what's amazing: Jesus answers the question of the day with Scripture, not conjecture. It's interesting that God himself answered with his own Word what is most important. He quoted two verses and the scribe caught that and affirmed that.

This guy knows his Bible, he knows the Word of God because that's what scribes did: they made copies of the Word of God over and over and over. They were often called lawyers because they knew the OT Law like the back of their hand.

He knows the Law, he knows the commands. He can confidently affirm Jesus's response to the question, which is more than many could.

But that knowledge of the Law and the Bible didn't save him. Just knowing the Bible and verses and teachings - as we've seen all throughout Mark - doesn't save anyone. People can have an airtight factual understanding of the Bible and no real love for Jesus.

Who cares if you're a Calvinist or an Arminian if you aren't actually part of the Kingdom of God?

Who cares if you're a young earth creationist or a day-age theorist if you're not actually in the Kingdom of God?

Who cares if you're Pre-Trib, Post Trib, Amil, Post Mil if you're not even in the Kingdom of God?

Bible knowledge, by itself, doesn't save anyone. You have to know what the Bible says to be saved. Faith comes by hearing - someone has to relay the information of the gospel that's found in the Bible to someone, but just having data isn't enough.

Jesus is not just some math equation to be known, Jesus is God in the flesh to be worshipped! He is to be loved and served!

And even Jesus noticed his thoughtful answer. **Read 32-34**

The guy answered thoughtfully, or some of you have wisely. This response about sacrifices was very insightful.

A lot of people thought that the whole point of the sacrificial system was just that God wanted animals to die as an act of worship. That killing animals as an act of worship was the chief purpose of God in the sacrificial system.

But it wasn't. Sacrifices were for when things went wrong. Sacrifices happened as a result of sin. Now, there were other sacrifices that the Jews offered, but primarily they were given for atonement.

And so what God wanted from his people - and still wants now - is for people to obey him.

1 Samuel 15:22: Does the Lord delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices as much as in obeying the Lord? Answer? No.

To obey is better than to sacrifice, and to heed his commands better than the fat of rams.

We've been reading through Leviticus and I know for some of you that haven't read it before you're wondering, "Why in the world are we reading this?" Part of it is because it's good to read parts of the Bible we often neglect.

But the other part is to be reminded of how intricate and elaborate the sacrificial system was that God instituted to atone for sin. Cutting out the long lobe of the liver and washing this entrail and burning this and removing that from the camp. Waving this offering, bringing that animal.

You know what's easier than doing all that? Obedience to God. Just obey.

And this scribe realizes that. God doesn't want our sacrifices multiplied because what that would mean is that our sins are multiplied.

This carries over into the Christian life as well. Some people think "Well, if I sin then I just ask God for forgiveness and that makes God an even more forgiving God. See, so my sin makes God look better!" No, that's not how it works.

Rom. 6:1: What shall we say, shall we sin all the more that grace may abound? By no means! God forbid. Absolutely not.

What God has always wanted is heartfelt, loving, joyful obedience to his commands. Loving God and loving neighbor has always been better than sacrifice.

This scribe knows that. He knows his Bible and he's even wise in his application of the Bible. But he's not part of the Kingdom. **Read 34**

He's wise, but he's not in the Kingdom.

It's worth repeating: Conversion - coming into the Kingdom - is a complete transformation of someone from darkness into light because they wholeheartedly trust in Jesus alone for their salvation. It's not just interest in Jesus, or the Bible or spiritual things. It's a total unashamed dedication to him as the Lord and Savior who laid down his life for us.

How would we know this guy was a believer? Because he wouldn't just acknowledge that Jesus was wise and true and treat him respectfully. He would bow down to Jesus and worship him as the God-man.

So the first thing we learn is being close to the Kingdom is not being in the Kingdom.

2) We learn how Jesus treats this man. And I think this is helpful.

I want to make 3 quick observations about how Jesus treats this man because I think we can learn a lot from the Lord about this situation.

A. Not every unbeliever is equally hostile. I made this point in passing, but I think it's worth teasing out here.

If you think about all the unbelievers in your life I think you'll agree that not everyone is equally opposed to the gospel.

Now, spiritually-speaking, there are only 2 sides. You're either a child of light or a child of darkness. You're either a son of God or a son of Satan. You're either in the Kingdom or you're outside. There's no grey area.

But, some people are just outside the Kingdom are on their way in. Everyone who is now a child of God was a child of Satan 3 minutes before the Holy Spirit gave them new birth. But as the Father drew you to himself you were on your way into the Kingdom.

And that's an important thing to note.

I remember talking to a guy years ago. His mother in law lived with he and his wife and she had started going to church with them, started reading the Bible, started asking questions about God. But he was sure she wasn't a believer yet. And he said, "I don't know if she's an inch away from the Kingdom or a mile away. But I'm just faithful to show her the truth of the gospel."

I love that. We don't know exactly where someone is. God is often in the business of making persecutors worshippers. But not everyone is equally hostile.

B. Related to that, Don't Discourage Those Who Are Outside the Kingdom.

So the guy isn't in the Kingdom, but it seems like he's getting close. We need to understand that that's a positive thing! Jesus could have condemned him and crushed him. "Repent you son of Satan! You're no better than these people trying to kill me!"

But he doesn't say that. If anything, his words are actually encouraging. His response of "You are not far from the Kingdom of God" comes as a result of the man answering wisely. Wisdom in the Bible is a good thing. It's often synonymous with righteousness. So whatever his tone is, I think it's safe to say that it's encouraging.

And I think this is an important reminder for us whether we're talking to children who might be asking questions about the Bible or God. Or if we're talking to our neighbor or a customer or whoever. We never want to discourage someone who is genuinely inquiring into the Kingdom.

I mean if they're asking questions or willing to engage, do everything you can to keep that going. We speak the truth in love. The truth might be hard to swallow, but we want to do our best to present it in a way that is kind and welcoming.

Peter says we're giving them a reason for the hope we have. Hope is positive, it's encouraging. Remember what we believe is **good** news. Not bad news, not bumme news, not angry news. Good news - and when they hear us it should seem like we think it's good.

C. Be Honest with Those who are outside the Kingdom.

This is what I love about Jesus. He knows perfectly how to engage every single person. So on the one hand he's gentle and patient and encouraging with this guy. But on the other hand he is 100% honest. He makes it clear that the man is not in the Kingdom. He's not far, but he's not in.

And it's okay to tell people that. It's good. It's good to tell you're Mormon friend they're not in the Kingdom. They've got some similar beliefs, but they're not in.

It's okay to tell your Catholic uncle he's not in the Kingdom. He's close. We probably share the doctrine of the Trinity and resurrection. But the Bible is clear that salvation is by grace alone through faith alone, not of any works at all.

And here's the deal: I think if done in a respectful way toward someone who isn't openly hostile, it will often strengthen the relationship because it's honest. I've had some really great conversations with people about our differences. We can just speak honestly about them.

Now, just so we're clear, for some people it might cause a rift. They don't like being told they're close but not in. "That sounds judgmental and harsh and who are we to judge anyone?!"

That's okay because their eternal destiny isn't really up to us, it's up to God. Our goal is to speak the truth in love. We don't want to discourage them, but we don't want to give them false assurance either. We have to be honest.

You guys, we are often called to engage of all stripes. Those who are hostile, as well as those who are polite - or somewhere in between. And I think Jesus gives us a great example of how to balance our attitude toward them. We don't give them false hope, but we don't discourage them either.

For all we know, God in his grace might be working through us to draw them to himself. And may he do so through our humble efforts.

Pray

