

HOW FAR IS FAR?

Mark 12:28-34 Text vs. 34 *When 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.*

Our lesson today is one of many conversations Jesus had with various religious leaders in Jerusalem. The discussion in verse 28 follows a *"dispute"* Jesus was having with the Sadducees in the Temple over their belief in the resurrection when one of the teachers of the law came and heard them debating. He obviously shared Jesus' position on the subject, so he must have been a Pharisee. (cf. Acts 23:7-8) And what that teacher of the law requested of Jesus was, *"Of all the commandments, which is the most important?"* (Mk.12:28) Jesus answered by quoting the *Shema* from Deuteronomy 6:4-5 — *"Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength."*

The **Shema** is a central declaration of faith in Judaism affirming the oneness of God. It is traditionally recited twice daily, during the morning (Shacharit) and evening (Arvit or Ma'ariv) prayer services. And it shows Jesus clearly understood, because love for neighbor explains most clearly one's love for God. *"Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people but love your neighbor as yourself. I am the Lord."* (Leviticus 19:18)

This teacher of the law agreed with Jesus! And his response to Jesus' answer about the *Greatest Commandment* shows his question was not hostile. Or to trap Jesus, as had previous religious leaders. He agreed that what Jesus said was true, as the answer Jesus gave was in such a way that claimed there are no gods other than God. And this was far more important than all the burnt offerings and sacrifices made right there in the Temple. This wasn't an attack on Judaism. Or to make Christian Jews feel morally superior to Jews who performed those sacrifices. Burnt offerings might be a lesser way of honoring God, even though Jewish law demanded them. And it had long been discussed in Judaism. It's found in Hosea: *"For I desired mercy, and not sacrifice; and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings."* (6:6) God, through the prophet Hosea, emphasizes the importance of mercy, faithfulness, and knowledge of God over ritualistic sacrifices and offerings.

Throughout Mark's Gospel teachers of the law were always judging Jesus' actions. They judged Him theologically. When He forgave someone's sins, they charged Him with "blasphemy." (2:7) They judged Jesus' eating with sinners. (2:16) Jesus was often criticized by the religious leaders for associating with tax collectors and sinners. One notable instance is found in the Gospel of Matthew: *"While Jesus was having dinner at Matthew's house, many tax collectors and sinners came and ate with him and his disciples. When the Pharisees saw this, they asked his disciples, 'Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?' On hearing this, Jesus said, 'It is not the healthy who need a doctor, but the sick. But go and learn what this means: 'I desire mercy, not sacrifice.' For I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.'"* (Matthew 9:10-13) Some claimed He was "Beelzebul," a high-ranking demon equal to Satan, because He was able to stop demonic activities. (3:22) They even questioned Jesus' disciples' hand-washing practices (7:1, 5) which was a point of conflict with the Pharisees.

According to the Gospels, Pharisees criticized Jesus' disciples for not following the traditional ritual of handwashing before meals, which was *part of the "tradition of the elder."* A collection of oral laws and customs had developed over time to help Jews maintain ritual purity. These traditions were not written in the Hebrew Bible, the *Torah*, but were passed down orally by the Pharisees. In Jewish tradition, the ritual of handwashing before meals, known as *netilat yadayim*, is observed *before* eating bread. Here's how it's done! A special two-handled cup is often used. But any vessel can be used. Water is poured over both hands up to the wrists. Typically, it's first poured twice on the right hand and then twice on the left hand. For left-handed individuals, this order is reversed. Then after washing, this blessing is repeated: *"Blessed are You, Lord our God, King of the universe, who has sanctified us with Your commandments, and commanded us concerning the washing of the hands"*. Silence is required. It's customary *not* to speak between the handwashing and the blessing over the bread. This practice is rooted in the rituals of the Temple in Jerusalem where priests would wash their hands before performing sacred duties. After the Temple's destruction, the rabbis extended this handwashing practice to all Jews to maintain a sense of ritual purity and to emphasize spiritual cleanliness and the blessedness of meals by making the act of eating into a moment of remembering and connecting to tradition.

Tradition!

That was the background for the 1964 musical **"Fiddler on the Roof."** This masterpiece of a Broadway musical was set in a village of Imperial Russia around 1905. It tells the story of a milkman who tries to maintain his Jewish religious and cultural traditions because outside influences are creeping into his family's lives. The song "Tradition" is sung by the character **Tevye (TEH-vyeh)**, who is the main character. In the original 1964 Broadway production, Tevye was portrayed by **Zero Mostel**. In the 1971 film adaptation, Tevye was played by **Chaim Topol**. Both actors brought their unique styles to the role, making "Tradition" a memorable opening number in the musical that explains the roles of each social class in the village. Fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters, and how the traditional roles of people like the matchmaker, the beggar, and the rabbi contribute to the village. Overall, the song sets up the major theme of the villagers trying to continue their

traditions and keep their society running as the world around them changes. In our lesson today, Jesus pointed out --- traditions were human-made. Not commanded by God. He said the traditions of the elders, particularly those upheld by the Pharisees and scribes, should not minimize or contradict God's commandments. He pointed out that true cleanliness comes from *within*. It's about the purity of one's heart and actions, rather than merely following external rituals of handwashing.

And along with the priests and elders, the Pharisees questioned the source of Jesus' authority. (11:27-28) Along with the Jerusalem priests, the Pharisees wanted to kill Jesus. They were afraid of His popularity. (11:18, 32; 14:1). That's what led to their working with Judas to capture Jesus. (14:43) They had put on before the high priest a rigged "trial," a "kangaroo court." (14:53) And the next morning, consulted with others to "hand" Jesus over to Pilate for crucifixion. (15:1) Mark said they "*mocked*" Jesus on the cross by saying "*He saved others; He cannot save himself.*" (15:31) Some of the scribes, along with other Jerusalem leaders, were also responsible for Jesus' conviction and death. (cf. 10:33) And the shock of our lesson is, that Jerusalem teacher of the law agreed with Jesus. So, Jesus' words to him had enormous influence.

But the circumstances of this story have often been forgotten. It's a story about an agreement between Jesus and a teacher of the law, a member of Jesus' leading group of enemies. And at the moment of agreement, these two arrived at a common ground. A sincere teacher of the law, and Jesus, had agreed! Then Jesus said, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God.*" Stories like this are rare in the Bible. And it shows that we must be willing to open up to faithful people within our own religious beliefs, as well as those without, and be able to admit that those people of faith are also "*not far from the kingdom.*" Can we find people "in" the "kingdom" who have religious commitments that allow them to share God's love for the world?

For many of us, love for our neighbor lets us respect our neighbor's belief system, or lack of one. And by having respect for our neighbor, we carry out the mission of human dignity which, in turn, represents a love for God. We shouldn't be shocked that that Jewish leader believed in the relation between loving God and loving neighbor. In fact, he was like many Jewish leaders who did welcome Jesus' teaching. There are hints of this elsewhere in the Gospel narratives. (cf. Luke 7:3-5) Jesus definitely acknowledged that when He said, "*you are not far from the kingdom.*" It was a rare moment for Jesus.

The man's wise response, however, was not good enough for joining Jesus' group. It wasn't about being wise. Something more was needed. It may have had something to do with acts of justice. Jesus criticized the Pharisees for their pride and unjust ways shortly after this. (cf. Mark 12:38-40) Throughout the pages of the Bible, justice emerges as a theme that shows how divine righteousness overlaps human morality. From the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, individuals considered the forefathers of the Israelites who play crucial roles in the prophetic cries for equity and fairness, these sacred texts are filled with examples of justice in action—offering timeless lessons on responsibility, mercy, and redemption.

The importance of understanding justice in a biblical sense cannot be overstated. It not only gives you a view God's actions and commands, but it also gives you a framework for human behavior. In this way, Justice is a call to action. A declaration for believers to stand for God's fairness, mercy, and righteousness in every expression of their lives. It challenges individuals to weigh not only their actions, but their motives, and the consequences of their behavior on others, as well as their relationship with God. Jesus has just laid down the foundation for the Christian life. Love and serve God with all that you are. Love your neighbor. And love yourself. Jesus plainly said that the basis for all Christian life is founded in love. Love God in good times. Love God in bad times. Love God in service. Love God in silence. Love strangers. Love children. Love those who hate you. And love yourself. All because of that discussion between the teacher of the law and Jesus. They found their common ground.

Look past traditions which were designed to give the Israelites a separate identity from their neighbors. The laws about cooking. About clean and unclean. About burnt offerings. Base your life on love. Love of God. Love of neighbor. Love of self. And know as a result, as Jesus commended that teacher of the law and said, "*You are not far from the kingdom of God*" Jesus Christ broke down barriers between 'us' and 'them.' He gave us common ground upon which to walk.

So, **HOW FAR IS FAR?** He says, echoing the words of Moses and the words spoken by countless others across time, "*Love your neighbor.*" And when you do, you have moved closer to the kingdom of God.

Let us pray. We come seeking Your guidance and grace, Father. Help us to draw nearer to Your Kingdom each day, living in accordance with Your will and reflecting Your love in all we do. Grant us the wisdom to know Your path and the courage to follow it, even when it is difficult. Fill our hearts with love and compassion. Kindness, and humility. So that we may serve others as Jesus taught us. Strengthen our faith Lord and help us to trust in Your promises. And may we find joy in Your presence. And peace in Your word. Guide us to be instruments of Your justice and mercy, bringing hope and light to those around us. We ask this in the name of Your Son, Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever and ever. **Amen.**