



## THE BORDERLAND

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Good morning and welcome. It's good to be with you today. Our study this week highlights one of the greatest tragedies there is. A story is recorded from right at the end of Jesus' earthly ministry about a man who impressed the Lord with his answer to a scriptural question. The man's astute answer spoke good things of him. And the Lord's reaction was, on one hand, an encouraging compliment of the man's heart and character. At the same time, it serves as a warning of what can be the most dangerous place a person can spiritually occupy.

Let's read now from the twelfth chapter of Mark, beginning in verse 28. It says: ***"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? And Jesus answered him, The first of all the commandments is, Hear, O Israel; The Lord our God is one Lord: 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 is like, namely this, Thou shalt love thy neighbour as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these. 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. And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him any question."***

This conversation took place on the Tuesday before the crucifixion of Christ. That day has been called "The Day of Controversy". Most of what is recorded from Matthew chapter 21 through 26 occurred that day. The effort to oppose and condemn Jesus was gaining steam that week, and this scribe's question, which we read a few moments ago, was intended to test Jesus. After the deceitful questions they asked Him about paying tribute to Caesar, and about the resurrection, this scribe was put forth by the group to ask the Lord this question about what the greatest commandment of the Law is. They wanted him to ask

this question because they thought that it would give them some ground on which they could wrangle with Jesus and catch Him in some condemning statement.

In all, Moses' commandments numbered more than six hundred, and so surely, they would find plenty of room for argument with the Lord's answer. Given the priorities of the Pharisees and scribes, some might say it was one of the laws concerning sacrifice, or purification, or keeping the feasts. But Jesus, Who knew the law better than all of them put together, rightly quoted the great commandment upon which all others rested, spoken by Moses to the children of Israel in Deuteronomy 6:4-5. It says, "Hear, O Israel: The LORD our God is one LORD: And thou shalt love the LORD thy God with all thine heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy might." This was, of course, the correct answer. And the scribe, already impressed by Jesus' answers to the earlier questions put to Him, acknowledged the accuracy of Jesus' reply and affirmed this truth by adding the prophet Hosea's words in Hosea 6:6, that obeying these great commandments comes before all the other aspects of the law, including sacrifices and offerings. Moses, Hosea, or Jesus was not saying that the rest of the law was unimportant or unnecessary. They were all saying that all the other commandments rest on the foundation of these two, or else the law has not been rightly interpreted and applied. The Jewish leaders of Christ's day were focusing on other things without first getting their hearts in the right place, and this resulted in a hypocritical outward display of piety while their hearts were far from God. This scribe, however, was different than the others. He understood this great truth, and that set him apart. The bible says that Jesus saw that he answered discreetly (or wisely) and Jesus commended him by saying, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God."

When Jesus spoke of this man's proximity to the kingdom, He did not mean geographically or chronologically, even though the kingdom would come in just a matter of weeks from then on, the Day of Pentecost and though it would first appear there in the city of Jerusalem where the Holy Spirit filled the apostles as evidence of the kingdom's establishment. He is, instead, referring to this man's spiritual nearness to the kingdom. This scribe had an honesty and a keen understanding that indicated he was able to understand the great principles that would lead one into the kingdom of Christ, once established, and the gospel was finally revealed. We don't know if this man ever became a disciple of Jesus and if he ever entered the kingdom, but if he didn't, this compliment later became a curse, because one of the saddest conditions one can be in, is to be close to the kingdom of light and to salvation but remain outside. It is bad enough to die of thirst in the desert, but how much worse is it for a person to die of thirst just feet away from an oasis? Yet, many are in the same place spiritually as this scribe was long who. Some who are near soon enter the kingdom, but others live their lives in the borderland. They are 'almost' disciples. They are curious followers who keep a safe distance, or they are content to live on the outskirts of the kingdom but never commit to entering. They bear many of the same characteristics of this ancient scribe.

First, this man was different from most of the other scribes. He was religious, but so were the others. Merely being religious doesn't mean much if it's not pure religion. Being religious, in fact, can be one of the most dangerous things if one doesn't follow the right religion. It does matter what religion we follow. It matters what we believe, what we practice, and how we live. But there were at least a few differences when it came to this scribe's practice of religion.

The scribes and Pharisees were some of the most unscrupulous people of Jesus' time and drew out some of Christ's most fiery rebukes during His ministry. The chief priests and other religious leaders were, after all, the ringleaders of the mob trying to discredit and destroy Jesus! But there is something different about this scribe. He appears different from the Pharisees with their empty ritual,

inconsistencies, and hypocrisies, which Jesus so plainly exposed and denounced in the twenty-third chapter of Matthew. This scribe was different from the average Sadducee with his arrogance, skepticism, and liberalism. There was a sincerity and honesty about this scribe. He was different from the publicans with their extortion, and the sinners with their vice, and the multitudes with their indifference. He seems genuinely intrigued by the Lord. While the others were just looking to ensnare Jesus in His words, this man admitted that Jesus spoke the truth. He didn't misunderstand and try to twist Christ's words. He didn't just walk away in embarrassed silence and go back to plotting some other way to catch the Lord. He was impressed with Lord's reply and readily confessed the truth of what the Lord said. That sets him apart from the vast majority of Jesus' detractors.

Second, this man had a better and more honest knowledge of the scriptures than the others. Now, the scribes, by virtue of their work, knew what the law said better than anyone else. As the name 'scribe' suggests, they were copyists of the law. They didn't have printing presses and copy machines, and bible software. Any copy of holy writ had to be made painstakingly by hand, and there would be no better way of committing to memory what the law of God said than by carefully and meticulously writing it down over and over. So, why didn't all the scribes recognize Jesus as the Christ since He went through His life of thirty-three years fulfilling prophecy after prophecy of the scriptures? Because most of them were biased. They faced the same temptation that we all do, and that is to read into the scriptures our own interpretations and desires instead of honestly letting the bible speak and rightly dividing and applying it.

The Sadducees arrogantly challenged the Lord about the bodily resurrection (which they denied) and how Christ reply to them? Remember how they asked the Lord that convoluted question about the seven brothers who each died, passing the wife off to the next until she finally died too, and they asked the silly question in an effort to mock the resurrection of the dead, asking, "whose wife will she be in the resurrection?" "Jesus shot back in Matthew 22:29, "Ye do err, not knowing the scriptures, nor the power of God." Of all people, the leaders of Israel should have known the scriptures. And many of them did have a functional knowledge of the scriptures, but they didn't rightly apply them. They didn't mix hearing with faith and obedience.

The knowledge of God's word is necessary to enter the kingdom. You must have faith to please God (Hebrews 11:6) and faith comes by hearing and hearing by the Word of God (Romans 10:17), but hearing and even knowing the word of God doesn't necessarily amount to believing and following the word of God! Jesus said in John 6:44-45, "No man can come to me, except the Father which hath sent me draw him: and I will raise him up at the last day." So, how does the Father draw people to Himself? It's not a feeling or an abstract phenomenon, it's through the hearing of the gospel. Look at verse 45. "It is written in the prophets, And they shall be all taught of God. Every man therefore that hath heard, and hath learned of the Father, cometh unto me." But many people hear the word of God at one time or another. Why aren't they in the kingdom? The writer of Hebrews says in Hebrews 4:2, "For unto us was the gospel preached, as well as unto them: but the word preached did not profit them, not being mixed with faith in them that heard it." Hearing and knowing, even being able to quote and even preach the word of God is a commendable thing and it may bring one near the kingdom, but it doesn't put one inside. Only obedient faith in that word takes a person from outside the kingdom and places him inside of it.

Third, this scribe has a discerning mind. He was ahead of many of the others in that he understood what he read in the scriptures. He had wisdom and could understand not only the words of the law, but the spirit of the law as well. He understood the great principle that is expressed more than once in the Old

Testament, that God desires true and sincere obedience over all the sacrifices one could lay upon the altar. He seemed to understand that only when the full heart is given over to God, does anything else in the service of God have any meaning or value. As Samuel told the proud and disobedient King Saul in 1 Samuel 15:22 "...Hath the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams." Jesus later said (quoting the prophet Hosea) "I will have mercy and not sacrifice." (Matthew 9:13) This scribe understood that and that set him well apart from the average Jewish leader of Christ's day. Now, that insight and understanding was a great thing if it led to him being honest enough to surrender to Christ and become his disciple. However, it was an especially condemning thing if he remained outside the kingdom. Friend, you can speak with great knowledge, scholarship, and wisdom about the word of God, and if you do, you of all people should be a devout and obedient follower of Jesus Christ. If that knowledge is not demonstrated in your own faith and obedience to Christ, you're merely an educated fool.

Fourth, this scribe had the courage to confess the truth. We recall that some Jewish rulers would not. "Nevertheless among the chief rulers also many believed on him; but because of the Pharisees they did not confess him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue: For they loved the praise of men more than the praise of God." (John 12:42-43) Even if he was convinced, this man could have kept his assessment to himself. He risked the disapproval of his peers by even acknowledging the rightness of Christ's answer to his question. He, however, was courageous and honest enough to say what he thought.

Jesus recognized all these qualities and said to him, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God." But friend, it's not enough to be near the kingdom. It's not enough to draw close to the kingdom but remain outside. In fact, the borderland is one of the most dangerous places to abide. Two-thousand years after this conversation took place and the kingdom of Christ appeared on this earth, there are many today who live in the borderland. There are those who have good habits and commendable qualities. They live by good morals and ethics. They do good unto others. They're kind, they're merciful, they're charitable and benevolent. They would even give you the shirt off their back, and neighbors, coworkers, acquaintances, would all talk about what a "good person" he or she is. It would be wonderful if such virtue led them all the way to obeying the gospel and becoming faithful citizens and workers in the kingdom of God. They won't commit to that, however, and falsely believe that their admirable qualities are enough. They are residents of the borderland, but they are just as much outside as the man who stays a thousand miles away. Are you such a person? Are you content to remain where you are resting on the laurels of your own goodness?

Do you have a good knowledge of the bible? I have met some who know more about their bible than many members of the church. The difference is, the true church member has acted upon what he or she DOES know, whereas the person near but outside has knowledge that doesn't change their relationship to Christ and their eternal state. I personally have known some who would even argue on behalf of the Lord's church for the teaching of the gospel, but they, themselves, had never been baptized. I have a good friend and brother who was in that very position for years. He would argue for the truth with anyone who tried to oppose it, but it took him a long time to obey the gospel and become part of the church. I'm very thankful that he finally did and so is he. He now uses his knowledge and zeal for what is right to try to lead people into the kingdom instead of merely pointing them there. Are you someone who not only acknowledges the truth but intends to obey it one day? Do you salve your conscience with resolutions and good intentions? Why do you remain outside? Perhaps it is for the same reasons many others remain in the borderland. It may be only one thing that hinders you from being baptized and

entering the kingdom. It may be parents and what they believe, or how they will react. It may be the reaction of your friends. It may be the love of some sin or some vice. It may be the attachment to worldly things like money or pleasure. But that one thing will what keeps you out of the kingdom and will cause you to be lost for eternity. That's a tragedy of all tragedies.

In California, Mount Whitney, standing at 14,505 feet, is the highest place in the lower 48 United States. Just a few miles away is Badland Basin in Death Valley at 282 feet below sea level: the lowest place in North America. Only a few miles separate these two extremes. And thus it is with many a soul, and maybe with you today. You're so near, but yet, so far. A plane may fly across the nation or around the world, but if it misses the runway by only a few feet, it means disaster. So it will be with the person who is near but found standing outside the kingdom of God when Christ returns and judgment comes. The old hymn hauntingly says: "Almost Persuaded, now to believe, Almost persuaded, Christ to receive; Seems now some soul to say, 'Go Spirit, go Thy way. Some more convenient day, On Thee I'll call.'" "Almost persuaded, harvest is past. Almost persuaded, doom comes at last. Almost cannot avail. Almost is but to fail! Sad, sad, that bitter wail, 'almost, but lost.'"

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