



## **“Not Far from the Kingdom”**

**Kevin Presley**

When Jesus came to earth 2,000 years ago, He came heralding the soon-to-come kingdom. It was not far away when Jesus began His ministry, and in light of that, Jesus had an interesting exchange with one of the religious leaders of His time. It is recorded in Mark’s gospel and it will serve as our text today.

**Mark 12: 28-34 “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 man came to Jesus with an important question: what is the foundational commandment of all? What is the first commandment? Jesus responded with what is known as *the Great Shema of Israel*: that a man is to love God with all that he is and all that he has.

When the scribe acknowledged the answer of Jesus and how He had correctly answered the question, he responded to Him in such a way that Jesus was able to see a keen perception in this man which caused Jesus to tell him that he was *not far from the kingdom of God*. Well, what did He mean by that? What kind of distance did Jesus have in mind? Could it be that there are those perhaps listening to the program today who are not very far from the kingdom of God?

This scribe was impressed with Jesus and how well He had answered the questions that had thus far been put to Him. Don't mistake the point of his question to the Lord; he wasn't implying that one commandment was more important to keep to the neglect of others, rather which commandment was the *most* fundamental and broad in its scope. In other words, everything that was within the law was built upon what they called *the Great Shema of Israel*, the first commandment. If you didn't get the first commandment down, anything else wasn't going to profit you very much. One wouldn't be very successful at keeping the law if he didn't first love the Lord with all that he is and all that he has. Jesus answered him thus:

**Mark 12:29-32** "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."

The scribe then acknowledged that Jesus had correctly answered the question, adding that to do this "*is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.*" It would do no good to try to keep the remainder of the law if you didn't love God supremely, and secondly, love your neighbor as yourself.

Well, when Jesus saw that the scribe answered so discreetly, He told him this:

**Mark 12:34** "...Thou art not far from the kingdom of God..."

This man was perceptive enough to understand the great philosophy behind a life of service to the Lord. When a person loves God supremely and loves his fellow man, his life will be lived accordingly. It is the foundational principle upon which ALL of God's teachings rests. In recognizing this, the scribe already had a keen understanding of what it would take to identify and enter the kingdom of Christ when it was established. I think it's more than that this scribe had merely memorized this Shema of Israel; it was more than just a rote knowledge of what the law said. This man had an honest perception of what it *meant*. That's why Jesus said that he was *not far from the kingdom*.

Even though the time of the kingdom's establishment was not far away, Jesus wasn't talking about a chronological or geographical distance. It was true that it wasn't going to be a long time until the kingdom came; it came on the Day of Pentecost at the end of the Lord's ministry. So, yes, chronologically he wasn't far from the kingdom. It would be established in Jerusalem, geographically in that part of the world. So, in that way, he wasn't far from the kingdom either. But that's not what the Lord has in mind. He was talking about a *spiritual distance* from the kingdom. This man was well on his way to discovering the great truth that Jesus brought to the world.

With that in mind, there are a lot of people today who come close to the kingdom, but they never enter. That's the real tragedy. They stand outside the kingdom. You might say that they dwell in the border country around the kingdom. Could it be that YOU are very near the kingdom but are still outside of it? Maybe you are a morally upright person, maybe even a very religious person, yet in reality, you stand outside of the kingdom of Christ, and that is the greatest tragedy of all.

Many people allow pride or prejudice to keep them outside of the kingdom. They may draw very near so far as their knowledge is concerned. They may have many commendable things about their lives, that were you to observe them and how they think, talk and behave, you might assume that they ARE a part

of the kingdom of the Lord. But they've never entered the kingdom. Perhaps it's because of pride and/or prejudice. The fact is, the door of the kingdom is a very low and humble portal that proud men find it too difficult to stoop and enter. They are unwilling to deny themselves and bear the cross that the Lord asks them to bear. They're too proud to crucify their pride and to humble themselves in the eyes of the Lord and hear what He has to say.

The attraction to Christianity has never been prestige or its position in society or the wealth that it offers. It's never been because of its popularity with the world. The church has never offered ANY of those things. In fact, true Christianity is portrayed in the scriptures as the opposite of those things. Jesus didn't come with the pomp and circumstance afforded the kings of earth because He didn't come claiming to be such a king. His life was one of abject humility. He was meek and lowly, born in a stable, not a palace. His primary disciples were fishermen—not princes or elite men of society. Jesus didn't really attract those kinds of people. He rode into Jerusalem on the back of a donkey—not a camel or a warhorse. His crown was woven out of sharp thorns—not of glittering gold. He was poor and had no home. Even His grave was not His own, but was borrowed from a friend.

When you observe this humble life of Jesus, the Jewish leaders of that time couldn't imagine such a one as their king and Messiah. They had been under the oppressive rule of Rome for a long time, and their view of a redeemer and savior was not one who would free them from sin, but one who would free them from Caesar. They expected the promised Messiah to come riding in on his white horse and remove the yoke of the Romans and make them great and sovereign again. As time went on, that materialistic and shallow expectation of the Christ became set in their minds like concrete. So that when Jesus—the homeless vagabond from Nazareth—came teaching them to love their enemies, turn the other cheek and so forth, they resented Him. They even hated Him to the point of ultimately putting Him to death. He couldn't possibly be their king! Instead, he was a dangerous heretic and imposter who was stealing the hearts of the common people!

The great tragedy in all of that is that the evidence that Jesus was indeed the Son of God was right before their eyes. THEY, of all people, had the law and the prophets. THEY had the oracles of God committed unto them. THEY had the prophecies that drew the picture of the Christ who was to come, and now Jesus lived and talked right in their midst, fulfilling every one of their Old Testament prophecies. Yet, they missed Him. Why? Their pride and prejudice blinded them and kept them out of the kingdom.

After they put Jesus to death, He of course rose again and went back to heaven. He established His kingdom there and then in the hearts of men. The preaching of the gospel with all of its power on display was the last chance that the people of the ancient Jewish nation had to change their hearts and reap blessings that Christ came to bring in the establishment of the church. Yes, there was a remnant that was converted, but the nation as a whole was not. They hated and persecuted the apostles, just like that had their leader, the Lord Jesus. And when the gospel had been preached to the entire known world at that time, their last chance ran out, and the Jewish nation was destroyed. Why? destroyed because of pride. It kept them from realizing the kingdom that was right before them.

Pride is still a problem with men today. There are those who have a very materialistic view of Christianity. They want something exciting, showy. Something that the world sees as impressive and powerful. Something that will meet the approval and maybe even gain the applause of the world. Churches today race to see who can build the largest, most expensive buildings, campuses and

sanctuaries. They boast of how many people they have, how many doctors, lawyers and people of business attend their congregations. They point to their many programs and attractions.

But when you open the New Testament, you find that the early church really doesn't fit that picture. It was a lowly thing in the eyes of the surrounding world. The power they possessed didn't come from any position in society or from material wealth, but from God and the simple message they preached to the lost. Yet, some are too proud to lay aside the doctrines and practices that are popular today that are designed to please men, draw a crowd and entertain the masses, and lay hold on the simple teachings of the Bible. Primitive Christianity is just that—primitive, as far as they're concerned. The world has grown beyond that. Pride is the problem and the denial of everything that Jesus taught. Such a show of religion no more represents the Lord Jesus Christ and His teachings than light represents darkness. Pride leads the procession of sins that will keep any man from entering in at the narrow gate.

Secondly, some linger outside the border of the kingdom because of procrastination. They have every intention of entering, but there are too many things outside that make them linger at the portal. Their name is Legion who planned to obey the gospel but simply put it off until time ran out. Maybe you've known for a long time now that you need to be saved, that you need to be baptized. That you're not in a saved position in the eyes of God. You're a sinner and you know what you need to do about it. Maybe you have all of the good intentions in the world, saying, *One of these days, I'm gonna do what I know I need to do.* But you procrastinate.

Throughout the years that I've been preaching the gospel, I've spoken to a lot of people who had some reason, a good reason in their minds, to wait. They'd say, *I will. I know it's what I ought to do. I hope and plan to do it one day. I'm not ready just now, but I will—soon. I'm going to be baptized, but there are some things I've got to take care of, some issues I have to settle.* Friend, let me warn you: it's just as easy to put off salvation for thirty years as it is for thirty days.

Shakespeare once said,  
 "Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,  
 Creeps in this petty pace from day to day  
 To the last syllable of recorded time,  
 And all our yesterdays have lighted fools  
 The way to dusty death."                      --from Macbeth

Procrastination is a very, very dangerous thing.

### **II Corinthians 6:2 "Behold, now is the accepted time; behold, now is the day of salvation."**

No preacher in the Bible ever told anyone to do anything tomorrow because we're not guaranteed a tomorrow. Here's a sobering thought: statistically, more than 100,000 people will make plans today for a tomorrow that will never come for them because they don't realize they are less than 24 hours away from dying. Pick up a newspaper and look at the obituary section today and see what you find. You'll find many people who woke up just a day or two ago and went about their daily business and they thought their day would end and tomorrow would start just like every other day—but look where they are. They had no idea that that day would be their last. They had every reason to believe, just a few days ago, that they would be just as alive as you are right now.

**Proverbs 27:1 “Boast not thyself of to morrow; for thou knowest not what a day may bring forth.”**

That’s so very true. The rich fool of **Luke 12:20** was certainly shocked when God told him that his soul would be required of him *that night*. Hezekiah of old was shocked when God told him to set his house in order because he was about to die. The fact is that none of us know when our last day on this earth will be and many will be caught by surprise and they will die outside the kingdom--near the kingdom, but outside of it, because procrastination kept them from entering in the gate. The poet said,

*The clock of life is wound but once,  
And no man hath the power,  
To tell just when those hands will stop,  
At late or early hour.*

Next, some have never entered the kingdom because they carry some contraband, or that which is forbidden. At the entrance to every country, there is some station where the traveler or immigrant must declare his possessions. Of course, contraband—certain items—are not allowed to pass through that gate. It’s the same way as the gate to heaven’s kingdom. The word *repentance* is a forgotten and unwelcome word in many modern pulpits. Some will tolerate the Jesus who says nice things and who does kind things for others, but they reject the Jesus who came to a sinful world preaching repentance from sin.

**Luke 13:3 “I tell you, Nay: but, except ye repent, ye shall all likewise perish.”**

The apostle Paul did not embrace the “anything goes” theology.

**Galatians 5:19-21 “Now the works of the flesh are manifest, which are these; Adultery, fornication, uncleanness, lasciviousness, Idolatry, witchcraft, hatred, variance, emulations, wrath, strife, seditions, heresies, Envyings, murders, drunkenness, revellings, and such like: of the which I tell you before, as I have also told you in time past, that they which do such things shall not inherit the kingdom of God.”**

You see, friend, the kingdom of heaven is a gated community. The drunkard can’t enter until he decides he is going to leave the bottle behind. The thief can’t go through until he relinquishes that which he stole. The adulterer can’t pass into the kingdom in the arms of another man’s wife. The unforgiving cannot enter without leaving his grudges and vengeful feelings at the door. The false worshipper cannot enter until he leaves false doctrines and innovations behind. It doesn’t mean we have to be perfect when we come to Jesus; none of us is perfect, nor will we ever be perfect by our own works. But I can tell you that the Lord does expect us to leave our contraband at the border. And that very demand of repentance will cause many to never enter the kingdom because they’re simply unwilling to give up that which is wrong and sinful.

Lastly, some will never enter because they think they’re already inside. Friend, don’t take it for granted that you’re already a part of the kingdom. Don’t think that simply because you think you love Jesus that you’re a part of the kingdom. Don’t think that just because you happen to accept and believe the fact that came and lived and died that you’re in the kingdom. It takes more than that.

The Bible teaches that we must obey the gospel in order to be saved and enter the kingdom. Jesus said that we must be *born of water and of the Spirit* to enter into the kingdom of heaven (**John 3:5**).

**Mark 16:16 “He that believeth and is baptized shall be saved; but he that believeth not shall be damned.”**

Yet, imagine living in a country for maybe most of your life only to find that there was an error; you never met the legal requirements of citizenship. You were an illegal alien to the country. In a sense, that’s how many live their lives in relation to the kingdom of God. They’ve decided they have been saved and that they’re alright, regardless of what the law of God says and they see no need for change. They may have a lot of good characteristics about their lives, but they’re living their lives not far from the kingdom. Are you IN the kingdom today or are you dwelling NEAR the kingdom? The difference is one of life and death.

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