

How Far is Not Far?
Mark 12: 28-34

The healing of blind Bartimaeus marked the beginning of the end of Jesus' earthly ministry. Shortly after Jesus gave Bartimaeus his sight, He rode into Jerusalem on a donkey to a fanfare of people shouting hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord. Mark 11:11 tells us the very first thing Jesus did after entering the city was go into the temple. It was no surprise that Jesus would spend so much of His last week on earth in the temple. It was fitting that His earthly ministry would end much like it began, with a cleansing of the temple in the holy city of Jerusalem. Not only was it His Father's house, but it was also His house, and He had every right to make it clean. He didn't wash the windows or vacuum the carpets but swept out the moneychangers and the merchants who were taking advantage of those who had come to worship.

Shortly after Jesus drove them out, He went on to deal with another group of people defiling their house. Surprisingly enough it was those who in charge of keeping it holy, the scribes and chief priests. He began by teaching from the scrolls of Isaiah chapter 56

"everyone who keeps the Sabbath and does not profane it,
and holds fast my covenant—
⁷ these I will bring to **my holy mountain**,
and make them joyful in **my house of prayer**;
their burnt offerings and their sacrifices
will be accepted on **my altar**;
for **my house** shall be called a house of prayer
for **all peoples.**"

That was a radical concept, and something the temple leaders refused to even consider possible. Jesus was not only claiming ownership of the temple, He was also opening up its doors to Gentiles, to outsiders. And then He added fuel to the fire. He turned to Jeremiah 7.

⁹ Will you steal, murder, commit adultery, swear falsely, make offerings to Baal, and go after other gods that you have not known, ¹⁰ and then come and stand before me in this house, which is called by my name, and say, 'We are delivered!'—only to go on doing all these abominations? ¹¹ Has this house, which is called by my name, become a den of robbers in your eyes? Behold, I myself have seen it, declares the LORD. And I will cast you out of my sight, as I cast out all your kinsmen, all the offspring of Ephraim.

Those verses were directed to the chief priests, the scribes, and other false religious teachers of the day. The moneychangers were robbing God's people and the priests were robbing God of His glory and honor by leading God's people astray. God's house was no longer holy, and Jesus was holding them personally responsible for it. In essence, Jesus was casting them from His sight, evicting them from His house. His house is also His church, and the scribes and chief priests were clearly not going to be a part of it.

Is it any wonder that Mark records in verse 12 that they wanted to arrest Him? Later in 14:1, we find these words: the chief priests and the scribes were seeking how to arrest him by stealth and kill him. A few days later, His three years of confrontations with the religious leaders of the day would end in violence. The greatest healer in the universe and of the universe would be beaten within an inch of His life and then crucified on a Roman cross for the sins of humanity.

The Psalmist puts it this way in 69:7-9:

For it is for your sake (His Father) that I have borne reproach, that dishonor has covered my face. I have become a stranger to my brothers, an alien to my mother's sons.⁹ For zeal for your house has consumed me, and the reproaches of those who reproach you have fallen on me.

The essence of that verse is that Jesus willingly suffered and died to bring glory back to His Father. It was a mission He took personally. The perfect love He has for His Father, the perfect love He has for His Scriptures, and the perfect love He has for His house, His church literally cost Jesus His life.

I share all of that with you in the hope that we will come to a greater understanding of the text we heard earlier. It began with what appears to be a reasonable question from one of the temple scribes. The Scribes were the religious snobs of the day, part of the bourgeoisie. They were not religious lawyers but lawyers practicing religion and one of their primary roles was interpreting and applying the Scriptures. So, on the surface the question asked of Jesus by the scribe seemed innocent enough. Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest? In those days, the rabbis taught that there were 613 commandments, one for every letter contained in the initial ten. They believed some to be more important than others and split them up into two categories- heavy and light. The catch was that they couldn't agree on which ones should go where. The reality is that his motive for asking was probably not a search for the truth but a way to trap Jesus into saying something that could have him arrested.

The problem was that he literally had no idea who he was dealing with. The co-author of the Scriptures didn't hesitate to answer the question wisely. He quotes it word for word for the scribe. "Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One. And you shall love the Lord with all your heart, and with all your mind and with all your soul."

Those were familiar words to every Jew, just as the Lord's Prayer is to us, and one didn't need a law degree to know it was the greatest commandment. It is found in Deuteronomy 6:5, and it is part of a holy prayer called the Shema, which in Hebrew means "hear". Every devout Jew recites it at least twice a day, immediately upon rising and then again at bedtime. From a very young age parents taught their children that there is one and only one true God, and they were to use every part of their human existence consciously and purposefully- body, mind, soul, and spirit, to love Him. It is universally regarded as the first and greatest commandment, or as some rabbis of Jesus day might say the heaviest commandment.

Though that would have been sufficient to answer the scribe's question, Jesus completes his answer. And a second is like it- "you shall love your neighbor as yourself". The scribe had no choice but to agree with Jesus. Every good lawyer knows you don't argue with the judge. The problem with the scribe is that he was an expert in the law of love, but only in his mind. His heart and soul still had much to learn. He knew the law, but not the gospel. Few verses in the Scriptures are more troubling than 12:34. It is one thing to know what perfect love is, loving God and loving neighbor, but quite another to choose to do it. Mark 14:1

Jesus is the model of perfect love. He loved His Father perfectly; He loved His Scriptures perfectly and He loved His neighbor perfectly. In fact, He loved them so much that he gave His life for them. The greatest symbol of perfect love is not a red heart but a wooden cross. Perhaps the second greatest symbol of perfect love is His church. Jesus gave His life for it. How humbling it is to know that He has entrusted it to folks like you and me.

The words of apostle Paul true and very applicable. 2 Corinthians 5:14 ²For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one has died for all, therefore all have died; ¹⁵ and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.¹⁶ From now on, therefore, we regard no one according to the flesh....

Galatians 3:28- There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

A good working definition of loving God and loving neighbor like ourselves may be found buried in those verses. Those who truly love God and truly love their neighbor no longer live for themselves but for Him who for their sake died and was raised for all. Praise God, they are not far from the kingdom, but part of it. The kingdom is for those who love Jesus, and like the true church, it is a house of prayer for all peoples. Fleshly distinctions such as race, skin color or ethnic heritage do not exist. They were swept away by the blood of Christ some two thousand years ago. Those who still cling to them are like the scribe, not far from the kingdom. How far is not far? That is not for me to say, but it is further than we might hope. Woe to those who would have us believe otherwise. Amen