

Pastor Jacob Hanson

“You Are Not Far From the Kingdom”

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Good morning, and welcome to Kasson/Pleasant Corners UMC. It is a blessing to be here with you today on this communion Sunday. In case you wandered in late I am Pastor Jacob Hanson, and I am honored to be the serving minister here. Today we begin a new phase in our service themes. For the past couple of months we have looked at a couple of books in tandem. In September we looked at James and Mark simultaneously, and we talked about some of the more straightforward teachings in scripture. In October we looked at Hebrews and Job, which offered a deeper understanding of the Lord’s glory in the midst of struggle, although it takes a little more effort to sift through those scriptures. This month we will be looking at a variety of subjects based on what is in the lectionary leading up to the Christmas season. For today, we will be talking about how if we do what the Lord commands then we are not far from the kingdom of God.

Our primary reading for today is out of Mark 12:28-34. Now if you have been around you may know a little bit about this book, but just in case let me give you the backstory that frames this Gospel. It is thought to be written by Mark, a disciple of Paul, and many think that it actually is an account of the life of Jesus from Peter. The Gospel of Mark is unique in a few different respects in that it is the shortest of the four, is the most action oriented of the Gospels, and generally has almost a newspaper like feel to it. If you read through this Gospel or if you have before, you may also notice that there are a lot of “immediately this happened” statements throughout. Jesus is always on the move, and so when He stops to teach after a miracle or when He is questioned about something, it is especially important in Mark. That

is one thing that marks our reading for today as pretty important, Jesus is spending a lot of time conversing. Another thing that is important for us to know is that by the time we get to our reading for today Jesus has already been questioned numerous times by the religious officials, most notably the Pharisees. This is all in a lead up to Jesus's eventual crucifixion for our sins, which will happen only a few chapters after what we read today.

But what we are concerned with this morning is that questioning that the religious leaders try to ensnare Jesus with. We are already getting close to the end of Jesus's ministry. At this point Jesus is no longer a curiosity to much of the religious elite, but He is actually a thorn in their side. People are questioning whether He is the Messiah en-masse, and a lot have come and followed Him. This is not in the Pharisee's favor, as Jesus is always upsetting the status quo, and they genuinely do not think that Jesus is the Christ, the savior. What they do to try and curb Jesus's teachings and popularity is that they try to trick Christ into answering difficult questions poorly. This is all in lead up to our central reading today. They ask things like "should we pay tax to Caeser?" and "if a woman has a husband and he dies, then she remarries, who will be her husband in the resurrection?" These religious leaders don't actually want a real answer to their question, they want to get Jesus to say something that will get Himself into trouble. Our question for today is no different. In verse 28 a scribe (religious writer) asks Jesus "what is the greatest commandment?" It is in response to this guy's question that we hear Jesus talk about him not being far from the kingdom of God... and it is a clue for us about how to live closer to the kingdom in our daily lives.

The question about what is the greatest commandment may sound benign and harmless on its face, and perhaps easily answerable. But if we looked at it in another context maybe it becomes a bit more sinister. Imagine if you were to ask a police officer what the most important law was, and you had some malicious intent to tear the guy down after he did answer. Say the police officer says that the law against murdering is the most important, you could counter then that obviously he doesn't care enough about the other laws on the books since he thought only that law was important. (Obviously a false pretense.) Or lets say that the officer takes the easier route and says that all the laws are important, you could argue that he doesn't care enough about the most important laws like not murdering or stealing. (Again, a false pretense.) Another example might be the kid who asks their parent which sibling is the worse kid. The issue is in the question itself, a potential landmine for any parent to answer. Depending on who is asking the question and what their response is going to (especially if they have bad intentions) a question like these becomes very difficult to answer without giving someone a false assumption to stand on. This is what makes Jesus's reply so fantastic that even the guy who asked it has to respond in affirmation. Jesus's reply is one that we have heard before: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength. The second is this, you shall love your neighbor as yourself. There is no commandment greater than these."

Why is this a great answer? Because it covers every commandment given by the Lord while also capturing the intent. These answers are also directly quoted from the book of Deuteronomy and the book of Leviticus respectively, two books from the Torah. (The Torah is the first five books of the Bible.) Now the religious leaders of

the day (and even the religious Jews of our day) valued the Torah above all other scriptures. They would know these two pieces of scripture inside and out, and so there is no way for them to question Jesus's words here. Jesus is in effect quoting God, and doing a marvelous job of it as you would expect. Going back to our Police Officer example, it would be like that cop capturing the entire intent of the law by saying that the most important law for him would be to serve and protect, or something of that nature. Or maybe for that parent the proper answer to their child would be to say that each of their children has their good and bad days, but that they as the parent loved them the same each day. In the case of Mark 12, the scribe who asked the question of Jesus in the first place, to his credit, recognizes what Jesus is quoting. When he does so and answers Jesus well, that is where we get to our point about being near to the kingdom of God.

The religious teacher's reply is to quote back to Jesus from Deuteronomy, acknowledging that putting the Lord first is the essence behind every commandment. Everything comes back to loving the Lord at its core. Every commandment having to do with God, serving no other false gods, not taking the Lord's name in vain, honoring the sabbath, making no graven images, and everything else outlined in regards to sacrifices is summed up in loving the Lord. If we really love the Lord, then of course we aren't going to actively do anything that violates the other commandments. It is exactly the same as if I really love my wife then I am going to do everything I can to be the best husband I can to her. It goes beyond just the simple, it goes to the whole heart of why we follow those commandments in the first place. The same thing is true in regards to our fellow man. If we love our neighbors as ourselves (our neighbors being all people according to Christ in another parable) then we won't do anything to hurt them, and

will actually go above and beyond to do our best to see them succeed. If I love my neighbor then I won't gossip behind his back, try to sleep with his wife, or steal from him... we all understand this. You may recognize this better as the golden rule, to do unto others as you would have them do unto you. Same exact thing, with the same lesson at its heart. Every commandment, every law, and every lesson taught by the Lord all come back to these two points, to love the Lord and to love your neighbor. When the scribe recites this and acknowledges this truth, Jesus then states that he is not far from the kingdom of God. How about you? Are you far from the kingdom of God, or are you close?

Our memory verse for today is very important in regards to our conversation here. Hosea 6:6 again reads "For I delight in loyalty rather than sacrifice, and in the knowledge of God rather than burnt offerings." It is easy for us to get legalistic with each other, or for us to focus in on one specific thing rather than the big picture. Loving the Lord your God is based in loyalty to Him. It isn't simply about doing what God wants you to do, it is about the state of your heart. Oftentimes when I am working with kids I'll get questions like "how many times per day should I pray?" or "how far is too far in relationship outside of marriage?" Really, these are the wrong questions to ask... it isn't about what you can get away with, it is about the spirit at the heart of the action. The kingdom of God is not a physical one, it is a spiritual one. The better question that leads you closer is "is what I am doing bringing glory to God and to my fellow man?" If the answer is yes (backed up by the Bible of course!) then by all means keep doing it! But if the answer is no it isn't bringing glory to God or my fellow man, then that is your answer.

How do you get near to the kingdom of God? How do you get close to the Lord's will here in a sinful and evil world? By loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, body, and strength, and by loving your neighbor as yourself. All the commandments are summed up in these. Of course there are a million other things we could talk about in regards to these scriptures, but today as you leave this place and go back into the real world, ask yourself if you are in fact living close to the kingdom of God. Are you doing well in loving your neighbor? Are you doing a good job in loving the Lord fully? If there are areas where you struggle, what are your plans going forward? Those are the questions you should be asking yourself. Let us pray.