



# ***The Westminster Pulpit***

Sermons Preached at Westminster Presbyterian Church  
3900 West End Avenue Nashville, Tennessee 37205-1899

## ***“God’s questions answered?”*** **Sermon on Mark 12:28-34**

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Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost  
October 31, 2021

Jesus has let his disciples know that his way is the way to the cross. His way has taken him from Galilee, down to Jericho, and up the mountain into Jerusalem. There have been large crowds and palm branches to greet him. Jesus made his way to the temple, toppling over tables and accusing the leaders of making God’s house a safe place for thieves and robbers. Such a way and word did not sit well with the chief priests and the scribes as Mark writes, “they kept looking for a way to kill him; for they were afraid of him, because the whole crowd was spellbound at his teaching.”

So it is that they are trying to trap him and take his authority away. They want to set him up for some blunder, some trip of the tongue. They question him. They question his authority. They question him about paying taxes. They question him about the resurrection. Killing him with questions.

Hear now from one of those scribes. Hear now the Word of God.

### *Mark 12:28-34*

<sup>28</sup> One of the scribes came near and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, he asked him, “Which commandment is the first of all?” <sup>29</sup> Jesus answered, “The first is, ‘Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; <sup>30</sup> 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.’ <sup>31</sup> The second is this, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ There is no other commandment greater than these.” <sup>32</sup> Then the scribe said to him, “You are right, Teacher; you have truly said that ‘he is one, and besides him there is no other’; <sup>33</sup> and ‘to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the strength,’ and ‘to love one’s neighbor as oneself,’—this is much more important than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.” <sup>34</sup> When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” After that no one dared to ask him any question.

Before I get to the point, I was wondering if any of you know a nine-letter word for brownish purple? It's "aubergine."

Before I get to the point, does anyone know the highest point in Iowa? It's Hawkeye Point, just over four miles outside of Sibley. On a clear day, you can see a lot of corn.

Now, here's the point. Do any of you know what can give someone an air of superiority? Asking a question to which you already know the answer. It's great!

A scribe asks Jesus a question, a question to which the scribe already knows the answer. "Teacher, do you know how many commandments there are in the Torah? There are 613!" "Teacher, of all the 613 commandments there are in the Torah, which commandment is the first of all?"

He knew the answer! Do you know the answer? What's the answer? "Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is one; 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 other commandment greater than these."

"You are right!" I'm not quite sure of the scribe's intonation. Because I can't decide what the feeling is when someone else knows the answer you know. Does it take the wind out of your sails having to share superiority with another?

Or, is the feeling one of comfort in a connection? "Here's someone that knows what I know. And, in this case, believes what I believe." When you believe the same thing about God, well, that certainly helps a relationship.

When Beth and I met for the first time, we soon discovered we were the only two Presbyterians on our college campus, and about a half hour later, we were married. We weren't like the rest of you - having to spend late nights ironing out our doctrines - no, we were of the same mind.

The scribe and Jesus agreed. Now remember, Mark told us that "The Pharisees and the scribes were out to kill Jesus." That's the reasoning behind the questions. The Pharisees and the scribes had all the answers. Superiority on full display in Jerusalem. "Teacher, which commandment is first of all?"

"You're right!" I can't tell if they made a connection. I can't tell if the relationship changed. Here's someone who believes what I believe. Is it, "Yippee!"? Or is it, "Darn it! He knew the answer."? "I thought maybe I could show this crowd who's following him that this fella doesn't know what he's talking about! Back to the drawing board. I was hoping we could put this dude to rest."

If that's what he was thinking, then what do you call it when a person who knows the right answer to a question, but his life leads in a different direction? "The scribes were looking for a way to kill." What do you call that? Irony. It's called irony. Word and deed going in opposite directions. It can be quite enjoyable catching someone in irony.

The mask advocate getting caught without a mask.  
The antivaxxer heading to the hospital.  
The follower of Christ not being a follower of Christ.

I thought you were supposed to be about loving your neighbor and not enjoying their downfall.

This scribe had to look Jesus in the eye and say, "You're right! We believe the same thing. We are to love God and love our neighbors, and this is everything. All the sacrifices and burnt offerings in the world don't add up to that. The Lord doesn't require 1,000 offerings. No, what does the Lord require of you? The Lord requires you to do justice, love, and kindness, and walk humbly with your Lord."

The scribe looked at Jesus. Jesus looked at the scribe. Their words agree. Do their lives agree with their words?

Jesus says, "You're not far from the kingdom of God." Not far? Not far.

Imagine sitting in a Sunday school class and Guy is teaching, and he asks the question, "What's the greatest commandment?" And like a Baptist at a sword drill convention, you raise your hand. You know it, chapter and verse, Mark 12: 30-31. "Teacher! It is, "Love the Lord your God and love your neighbor as yourself."

And Guy looks at you and says, "You're not far from the Kingdom of God." Imagine that!

On Monday, I imagine, I will receive an email from you that says, "Sorry to bother you on your day off, but why can't Guy just say that I answered the question correctly in class? Why did he have to say, "I'm not far from the kingdom of God."? As if he knows how far away I am from the Kingdom of God? Like he knows the kingdom of God and I don't?

And now, how do I respond? Do I support Guy? "I know Guy and I know you, and we both agree you're not far from the kingdom of God."

Do I go into Guy's office and say, "Did you tell someone in your class that they're not far from the kingdom of God? I know it's true, but we can't be telling our members that during our fall pledge drive!

Or do I respond, "Yeah, I don't know why he said that. He says that same thing to me." I just pray that he comes off his mountain top and knows how the rest of us feel. "You're not far from the kingdom of God." Receiving that as answer from anyone might give you something to stew about.

But, in Mark's Gospel, remember, the point is all about identity. Jesus isn't just some teacher; he is the Son of God!

The scribe is coming before almighty God with a question to which he already knows the answer.

Usually when people think about coming before almighty God...well, I heard it this week. "When I get to heaven, I'm going to ask God a few questions." That's what you bring to God. Your unanswered questions.

"Tell, me God, why did my daughter have to suffer?"

"Tell me, O Lord, do you answer prayers all the time?"

"Tell me, Lord, why did you make the mosquito?"

God's questions are questions that need answers. You don't blow your God question on something you already know. "Hey, God, what's my favorite food?" "Lasagna!" "You're right God, you know everything."

"God what's the greatest commandment?" "You're right God. You know everything."

What the Lord knows is that we're not far from the kingdom every time we know the answer and choose not to live it out.

Loving God and neighbor. It's about letting go of our selves. Letting go of our wants and our desires for the wants and desires of others. It's like not getting heard. Jesus had a hard time getting heard, but that didn't keep him from listening.

It's like being hated and despised, and yet having mercy on those who hate and despise you. Loving your enemy.

It's like being the first commandment, "Love your God," and having to show that love on a cross.

If one day there is a moment to stand before the throne of God and answer the question, "What's life all about?", wouldn't it be great if we lived the answer?

Lord, I'm grateful. I found that in loving you, I was loving my neighbor. I found that when I was loving my neighbor, I was loving you. I found the kingdom of God and when I failed, when I knew the answer but failed to live it out, I found your amazing grace. Lord, I am grateful that I found your amazing grace.

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