

YOU ARE NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM

Right after I graduated from college, I did what a lot of young, unemployed people do. I migrated to Atlanta. While I was there, I worked for Enterprise Rent-a- Car. I worked in the Decatur branch. One day I was asked by the branch manager to go to the Downtown branch, pick up a car from that branch, and drive it back to the Decatur branch. So, the manager had the branch porter drive me down to the Marta station, and I hopped on the train. I rode down to the Georgia State train station and was picked up there at the station by the downtown branch's porter.

When I got to the Downtown branch, I was given a car and was set loose on the streets of downtown Atlanta. I don't know how many of you have ever tried to drive in downtown Atlanta, but it's the easiest place I have ever seen to get lost. It's the only place I have ever been where one can take four consecutive right-hand turns and not be anywhere near where one started. Remember that this was in the days before the invention of GPS.

Well, you know where this story is going, right? I got lost. I was so lost that I'm not quite sure how I got out of there. I know I backtracked at least once trying to find my way, but that's all I remember. I'm pretty sure that at one point I went through some kind of dimensional gate. Because I wound up in the most surreal place. I wound up in a rundown neighborhood. Obviously, it was a poverty- stricken area. The area consisted of a number of dilapidated, one- story buildings. What was so strange about it was that I could look in any direction and see skyscrapers. I was literally surrounded by downtown Atlanta, and yet, I had no idea how to get to downtown Atlanta. Every direction I went, seemed to be the wrong direction.

Like I said before I'm still not sure how I got out of there. I must have found that dimensional gate one more time. Somehow, some way, I found myself back in downtown Atlanta.

One of the book series that I loved is kid was Douglas Adams's Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy series. I don't know if any of you are familiar with the series, but it's a satirical look at modern society told through the lens of a science fiction story. The plot is, in a word, ridiculous. In the third book of the trilogy, one of the major characters learns how to fly like a bird. He describes learning to fly as the art of throwing yourself at the ground and missing it. I guess I sort of assume that is how I returned to downtown Atlanta from the neighborhood. Once I gave up and stopped looking for it, I found myself there. However, I did get something from the experience in retrospect- a great sermon illustration.

See, I think our Christian journey is often like that. We are so close to the kingdom. We are so close to the Kingdom that we can almost reach out and touch it. It may appear to be all around us, just like those skyscrapers were all around me. However, we're just not quite there, and we can't seem to get there from here.

In our story today one of the scribes came near and heard Jesus arguing with some Sadducees. The Scripture says that the scribe saw that Jesus answered them well. Sometimes, I wish that the Bible gave us more detail. For example, how did the scribe *feel* about the fact that Jesus answered well? Was he happy about how Jesus answered? Was he impressed with Jesus' answer? Was he annoyed? The bible doesn't say. It just says that the scribe saw that Jesus answered well.

The question about how the scribe feels is important because it colors the interpretation of the question that the scribe asks Jesus. Was he seeking to learn from this wise teacher? Was he seeking to trap Jesus? What was his motive?

Again, the scripture doesn't say. It just says that the scribe asked him, "Which commandment is the first of all?"

Jesus answered, "The first is, 'Hear, O Israel! The Lord our God, the Lord is one; and you shall love the Lord you 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."

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; 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 burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

Now, I have to tell you that this is one passage creates a dilemma for us. Our theology tells us that we are always close to the Kingdom, and yet always far away. Try this when you get home. Take a simple, clean, sheet of paper. Then take a magic marker and draw a dot on the piece of paper. Then simply turn it over and draw a dot on the other side. Then try to draw a line connecting the two dots without turning the paper over. In one sense the two dots are very close, separated only by the thickness of a single piece of paper. However, if we allow ourselves to work in only the two dimensions offered by a flat piece of paper they are infinitely far apart. Two micrometers or two million light years are the same. You can't get there from here.

Our theology teaches us that God is close by, always present, always near, and yet unreachable. God is beyond our comprehension, our vision and our grasp. Only Christ can bring us near to the Kingdom. Christ is the only bridge to link us with God, in the same way that paper is the only bridge between the two points that you drew.

And yet here it is. Whether we like it or not, whether our theology can deal with it or not. Christ said it. It's right there in black and white. This guy is not far from the Kingdom

So, what are we to make of this passage? Well, let's look at what happens here. Jesus is approached by a scribe, and is asked which commandment is the first of all. He answers that the first commandment is to love the Lord with all his heart and all his soul and all his strength and all his mind. Now, this makes sense. When we do this, we are close to God. The proverb says the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom. When we live our lives placing God at the center, when we begin with the love of the Lord, then we stand our best chance of being in alignment with God's will. We will be close to experiencing God's Kingdom when we do that.

Secondly, we are close to the Kingdom when we love our neighbors as ourselves. When we live our lives to serve others, we are close to God's Kingdom. When we concern ourselves with the well-being of others, we come close to experiencing God's Kingdom. The truth is that that is what God's Kingdom looks like- God's people living in communion with God and neighbor.

But the truth is that even doing those two things are not quite enough. This is as close as we can get, but it isn't close enough. It's kind of like being in that neighborhood I talked about earlier. You can see the Kingdom of God from there. You're not far from it. It's all around you, but you just can't quite get to it from here. To get there you need one more thing. You need the grace of Christ.

Only that grace can get you there from here. You could drive around for hours- you might see a glimpse of it, but the grace of Christ is the only thing that will allow you to enter the Kingdom. That's the only thing that will let you enter the Kingdom of God. We must realize that entering God's Kingdom comes with a price. Thanks be to God it's a price that's already been paid. It was paid for by the blood of Christ.

When you Love the Lord with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your understanding, and all your strength, and when you love your neighbor as yourself, you are not far from the kingdom. The grace of Christ will take you the rest of the way, and the good news is that Christ gives that grace freely because he loves us.

So, Take heart! Christ loves you! Christ died for you! Soon you will see the Kingdom of God! If you love the Lord your God with all your heart, and all your soul, and all your understanding, and all your might, and if you love your neighbor as yourself, you are not far from there as it stands.