

## Not Far From The Kingdom

A Scribe of the sect of the Pharisees, whom Matthew calls a lawyer, now comes to question the Lord about the law. 'Which', he wonders, 'is the first commandment of all'. His question is more complicated than might first appear. He was not asking about the decalogue, or Moses' ten commandments, but seeking the Lord's view as to which of all the laws contained in the scriptures and Jewish oral traditions took greatest priority. There were literally hundreds of possibilities to choose from, all of which were minutely argued over by these Scribes and Pharisees.

### **Another question to tempt the Lord**

Perhaps the Scribe thought to embarrass the Lord by exposing a lack of knowledge of the breadth of the law. Jesus was, after all, a carpenter with no training in the Jewish schools. Even if the Lord could provide an opinion and choose one law, then the 'lawyer' surely felt able to engage with Him in trading ideas, and arguing the relative merits of one position against another. No doubt he imagined he would better this Galilean 'rabbi' in front of his simple followers.

### **Another elegant reply**

However, without hesitating the Lord Jesus at once answered the question and quoted from a passage in Deuteronomy concerning the unity of God and spiritual worship. The speed and precision of the Lord's reply seems to have taken the Scribe by surprise, and the expertise Christ showed, and the elegance with which he answered clearly impressed the Scribe. Not only did the Lord affirm the greatest commandment but quickly followed up with the second most important, too, leaving the Scribe amazed.

### **A Scribe who agreed**

He could do no more than agree and commend the wisdom and truth of the Lord's answer, even in the presence of the multitude and the other Pharisees. This Scribe seems unable to suppress his admiration for the Lord's reply, he not only approves but, in his own words, affirms the Lord's choice and applauds the doctrine the Saviour taught; rare praise indeed from the Scribes and Pharisees.

### **A lesson learned**

The power and grace of the Lord's words were not lost upon this man. This passage called first for faith in the One true God, then for complete commitment and dedication to Him. It surpassed all the outward trappings of religious observance, it called for and drew forth deeper, inward spiritual worship and wholehearted love to God with heart, soul, mind and strength.

### **Gospel principles applied**

These, of course, were gospel principles, and in the mind of this Scribe they at once threw into sharp contrast the spiritual worship the Lord was advocating, and the type and shadow worship of the rituals and ceremonies of the law which the Scribe represented. To restate this in the Scribes own words, true spiritual worship 'is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices'.

### **Something glorious, something personal**

Remember, this week was the run up to the Feast of Passover. Jerusalem was filled with pilgrims and worshippers from near and far. Suddenly, this Scribe, hitherto intent upon hindering and embarrassing the Lord in the name of his rules, ritual and religious observances, caught a glimpse of what Jesus' ministry was all about. Something clicked, he saw there was something deeper, more glorious, yet more personal hidden in these verses. Furthermore, this Jesus of Nazareth knew it and was preaching it. It was a moment of realisation for the Scribe, an epiphany.

### **Not far from the kingdom**

The Lord noted the Scribe's response and said to him, 'Thou art not far from the kingdom of God'. Whether this dawning light as to the nature of true worship suggests this man was being awakened in his soul and discovering faith, we cannot say. Near the kingdom of God is not in the kingdom of God and all who are not with Christ are against Him. We know some amongst the Pharisees did find faith, and grace never yet has been thwarted in gathering the Lord's elect. Either way, this man's question, whatever the original motivation, again resulted in a blessing for the church.

**Faith to believe**

There is a lesson for us here. The words that caught this Scribe's attention still stand today. True worship is spiritual worship, built on a knowledge of gospel truth and inspired by personal faith in Jesus Christ. May none of us be content merely to be 'near the kingdom of God'. May we rather be like those who listened to the Lord's Sermon on the Mount, and who 'seek ... first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness', 'Even the righteousness of God which is by faith of Jesus Christ unto all and upon all them that believe' (Matthew 6:33; Romans 3:22).

Amen

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