

**Mark 12:34 [Jesus] said to [the expert in the law], “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”**

Have you ever thought about it that way...being *close* to the kingdom of God? You know how the saying goes, close, but no cigar? Or close only counts with horseshoes and hand grenades? (By the way, the etymology of “close but no cigar” goes back to the 1800’s when cigars were given out as prizes at carnivals.)

Basically, *close* is meant to give a little encouragement, yet at the same time, leave no doubt that, at least with most things, *close* isn’t *it*. So, if Jesus comes along and says to you, you’re *close* to the Kingdom of God, but not quite there, that’s not exactly reassuring, is it?

When this account from the Gospel of Mark takes place, it is Tuesday of Holy Week. Jesus is in the temple courts getting peppered by questions from just about everyone, but especially by the religious sects of the Saducees and Pharisees. In fact, the questioning is so intense, that the two religious groups are trying to pit Jesus against the other, all while trying to bring Jesus down, too.

Just before this expert in the law asks his question, Jesus has just left the Saducees speechless with his profound theology. Now the pharisees put their expert out there trying to prove that Jesus could not do to them what he just did to the Saducees. Conveniently forgetting that Jesus had repeatedly left the Pharisees speechless over the previous three years, they threw out their question through their expert in the law, **“Which commandment is the greatest of all?”**

At first this may seem like a relatively softball question. But if Jesus says something like, “They’re all the greatest,” then he comes across as weak (kind of like a

politician playing games). But if he picks just one of the ten commandments, then there is room for argument, not just among the religious leaders, but among the people themselves. The first answer diminishes Jesus’ authority. The second answer divides his followers. Cue the hand rubbing, wicked smile, and evil laugh.

Of course, we know how this usually goes when this kind of thing happens: Jesus leaves the Pharisees speechless as usual and they hate him all the more. But this time is different. There is one aspect to this account that makes it unique among the interactions Jesus had with the Pharisees. As always, Jesus fully knew and understood what was in the hearts of the Pharisees. But here’s the difference: this time, the expert in the law who asked the question, seems, at least on some level, to have been drawn to Jesus.

Take a look. In his answer, Jesus first quotes words from Deuteronomy 6: ***The most important 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, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength.”*** These are not only words that you and I heard just a few moments ago in our first reading today, they are also words that, if the Pharisees had been as devout as they claimed, they are words that the Pharisees would have been praying three times every day. In the Hebrew: אָחַד שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל יְהוָה יְהוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְהוָה (Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.)

Jesus is right, as usual: Definitely God is first. He is first over all. But just like the commandments, Jesus didn’t leave things at just our relationship with God. He continues by taking it further and quoting words from Leviticus (19:18) about our relationship with our neighbors, too: ***You shall love your neighbor as yourself.*** Then he puts them both together by saying, ***There is no other commandment greater than these.***

You see, the Pharisees were all about their relationship with God. So much so, in fact, that they felt that God owed them salvation because they were so good about their relationship with God. Just as ask them! And so Jesus hits them where it hurt: their relationship with their neighbors.

But here's the difference I mentioned earlier. Look at the expert's response to Jesus' answer. He wasn't left silent like so many of his peers. In fact, he joined in. Not only did he agree with Jesus, but he also demonstrated that he knew what Jesus was getting at – love for God and love neighbor are more important than any sacrifice or offering. He was sooo close...but no cigar. You see, he didn't see Jesus as his savior.

And so, in his grace, Jesus offers the expert in the law both a challenge and an invitation: **You are not far from the Kingdom of God.** Come on, my friend, just a little closer. Take the next step. Leave the doubt and fear and self-righteousness behind. **Come to me**, Jesus says, **and you will find rest for your souls.** (Matthew 11:28,29)

How close do *you* feel to the kingdom of God? Close...but no cigar? Far away...but you can see it from there? On the edge...but headed out of town? Right in the middle...but feeling lost in the crowd? As we face a chaotic election, an uncontrollable pandemic, deepening isolation, and uncertain futures, sometimes it feels like we *are* on the outside of God's Kingdom looking in...or maybe we are in his Kingdom, but at best, lost to him in the crowd.

And we get this way when we become focused on our own circumstances, rather than on the needs of others. We get this way when our spirituality is about checking spiritual boxes rather than actually connecting with the Word. We get this way when serve ourselves rather than serve our neighbors. We get this way when we're more concerned about our bodies than our hearts.

Here we are thinking that we're following John's advice from a few moments ago to **walk as Jesus walked** (1 John 2:6) yet in reality, we have been so focused on ourselves, that we've dragged our feet wandered. And when we look up, Jesus seems out of sight. And we stand there going, what happened?!? Jesus, you promised a certain kind of life when you said, **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.** (John 10:10) Close, maybe...but no cigar...at least from where I'm standing.

If you haven't had a chance, I would encourage you to read the October edition of New Life News, our congregation's monthly newsletter. The lead article serves as the introduction to this series *Becoming Complete*. Over the last few years, as a congregation, we have done some self-evaluation, defined our core values, explored our community, identified opportunities for ministry, set priorities, laid plans, and are now in the process of carrying them out. One such plan is to change the culture of our congregation regarding the concept of stewardship here at New Life.

You see, when I say the word stewardship, most of us think about money. And while money certainly is an aspect of stewardship, as many of us know, there is so much more to the concept. But its easy to get into that self-focused mindset that we've been talking about. Stewardship? I give some money to the church. I help clean the church from time to time. I pass a few bucks to the homeless now and again. Yeah, stewardship? I'm good.

But that kind of self-focused, check-a-box, concentrate-on-the-actions approach to stewardship isn't walking **as Jesus walked.** You see, stewardship, like the point Jesus was making with the expert in the law, isn't about knowing the right answers or simply going through the right motions. No, godly stewardship is about the heart, generosity of the heart, love from the heart,

overflowing **abundantly** in a life of faith, for God and for others.

And so today we embark on a five-week journey towards, Lord willing, a better understanding, a deeper appreciation, a stronger commitment, and growing desire for **discipleship**: (as we define it in our congregation vision statement) *Discipleship is nurturing and living out our relationship with Christ through serving, giving, encouraging, and growing with him and one another.*

If we're honest with ourselves, we know that we have lots of room for nurture and growth in our lives of faith. Until we are actually *complete* in the life to come, we will continue be in a state of *becoming*. And as we continue *becoming complete* we **walk as Jesus walked** in thanksgiving for him and what he has done for us: **Jesus Christ, the Righteous One. He is the atoning sacrifice for our sins.** (1 John 2:1,2) When we wander of, when we lose focus, when we feel outside the Kingdom of God, he...is... there to forgive, to redirect, to refocus, to renew our hearts and minds, all through the work of his Spirit. And James wrote, **...because he has given us his Spirit, we know that we live in him and he in us.**

This is what makes all the difference in our daily lives. This is Christ living in you. As Martin Luther explained it *All this he did that I should be his own, and live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in everlasting righteousness, innocence and blessedness.* (explanation to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Article of the Apostles Creed) And when Christ lives in you, he also lives through you. As Paul explained it to the Corinthians, **He [that is, Jesus] died for all, so that those who live would no longer live for themselves but for him, who died in their place and was raised again.** (2 Corinthians 5:15) Grace has been given to you. You are now grace driven as Christ lives in you and through you. *Close to the Kingdom God? Smack dab in the middle of it and the Apple of your heavenly Father's eye.*

Beginning tomorrow, those of you who are New Life in Jesus – NewLiJ - subscribers, will receive what we're calling the *Becoming Complete Daily 3*. Each day you will receive in your email box a daily devotional which included a brief reading from Scripture and 3 exploration questions crafted to help you take the next step in your discipleship journey. Depending on how much thought you give them, they'll take you 5-10 minutes to complete. This week's theme is Running Your Race.

We will also be continuing our Wednesday evening Bible Classes. These are part of the Becoming Complete Series as well. We'll spend about 35 minutes looking at a section of Scripture, and then about 25 minutes breaking out into smaller groups for some application discussion. We'll wrap up at 8:15. This week, we're looking at The Reason Why – Why God the Father chose us for this special relationship with him.

And then next week, as we celebrate Reformation Sunday, we'll begin the weekly cycle again, as we recognize the importance of each other in the unity we share.

To summarize:

- Today – Christ Lives in You
- Daily this week – Encouragement as you Run Your Race
- Wednesday – The Reason Why God chose you to become complete.
- And next Sunday, Rejoicing in Unity.

For now, let's close with prayer:

*Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for the gift of Jesus, who by your grace, lives in each of us. Through the work of your Holy Spirit, you make us into your disciples, blessing us with the power to live lives of faith in righteousness, innocence, and blessedness. Bring us through our challenges, lift our spirits, direct our focus, and keep us ever mindful that your Kingdom has come to us and to many others; through Jesus Christ, Our Lord, who lives and reigns in us, that we may live for you. Amen.*