

Mark 12:28-34

Close, but No Cigar

In 2025, the Kansas City Chiefs failed to win their third straight Super Bowl. Although winning two in a row was a rare achievement, a three-peat would have been historic. They would have gone down as one of the greatest sports dynasties in history. Yet before them there was another team with similar success. Between 1991 and 1994, the Buffalo Bills played and lost in four straight Super Bowls. This is a different kind of dynasty. They were near, but still too far. This passage is about falling short of the end zone. It's about drawing near but never entering the Kingdom of God.

The passage opens with **The Principle of Love** (vs. 28-31). So far, Jesus has been challenged about authority by the Pharisees, loyalty by the Herodians, and theology by the Sadducees. Now he's being asked about the law by the Scribes. In each instance Jesus is expected to measure up to expectations of others. The Pharisees want him to match their credentials. The Herodians want him to share their politics. The Sadducees want him to have their worldview. The Scribes want a Jesus that agrees with their interpretations. We do the same thing. No one has a problem with Jesus so long as we get to define him. As a result, we miss the real beauty and power of Jesus in our lives.

The question asked by the scribe was a common one at the time. The scribes estimated there were 613 commandments. With so many rules, they debated the hierarchical structure of the Old Testament Law. Some argued one could accurately rank all the laws in order of priority. We do this too. We all agree that some crimes are worse than others. So called "white lies," may be immoral, but when compared to more "serious" crimes, we tend to ignore them. In sports, there is a debate between the "letter of the law" and "spirit of the law." When a referee makes a call because that is what the rules tell him to say, fans will often complain that it violates the spirit of the game. There is something similar going on here.

Jesus answers first by quoting the Shema as recorded in Deuteronomy 6:5-6. We are familiar with the command to "love God," but I suspect we are reading it incorrectly because of our soft definition of "love." Love is largely tied to self-interest and sentimentally. The Shema describes a life lived in worship. What does it mean to love something with your entire being? Your heart? Your soul? Your mind? Your strength? When our entire being is directed toward another, that is the very definition of worship. Worship is not just what we do, it is who we are. To love the Lord like this is to worship him faithfully.

Jesus then adds a 2nd law suggesting each is inseparable (vs. 31). Although true worship lies at the center of life's purpose. Life lived in worship is incomplete without its horizontal aspect. In fact, the genuineness of one's worship is easily measured by our love of neighbor.

This leads to **The Person of Love** (vs. 32-34). The story now takes a surprising turn. Previously, confrontations concluded in disagreement. This time, however, the two men agree. The scribe verbally reaffirms everything Jesus had said adding that God desires wholehearted love, more than mere religion (1 Samuel 15:22; Psalm 51:16-17; Hosea 6:6). Notice that what the scribe adds demonstrates the connection between love and worship. To love God with our entire being is to worship him and no one else. Therefore, God desires our whole selves in worship more than religious ritual.

No one wants a romantic relationship whereby both parties just go through the motions. Rather, we want a marriage that is vibrant and dedicated whereby both parties express their love as part of their being. So too, worship that is only a ritual, is not genuine worship. It is not genuine love for God.

Despite this, Jesus suggests the man is only *near* the Kingdom of God. In the late 19th century, cigars were common prizes for carnival games. When a contestant failed to win, the operator would shout, “close but no cigar.” This man was close, but he gets no cigar. He is near the proverbial goal line, not over it. He is at the door, not through it. He is so close, yet so far away. How is that possible?

Despite having the right answers, he still lacks the right relationship. He was orthodox but lacked genuine love. He loved the law but failed to love the Lord. He loved the rules, but not the Redeemer. He loved the system, but not the Savior. The fulfillment of the law is worship-driven love. Love, then, in both its vertical and horizontal expressions is not just a Principle, it is a Person. The man *knew* that faith was deeper than religion, yet he lacked a deep relationship with the Lord. He was, therefore, in violation of the greatest commandment.

We can conclude, first of all, that *Love Runs Deeper Than Knowledge*. I took a class on marriage and relationships in college. I foolishly told myself that the professor must have the perfect marriage. After all, he could diagnose every conversation (or lack thereof) and correct he and his wife toward greater godliness. I now realize that such a person I imagined would make for a terrible spouse. Love is deeper than knowledge.

One of the worse things I ever did for my own spiritual growth was attend seminary. It’s easy to turn the Bible into an academic project. It’s easy to study theologians and still miss the Lord. Knowledge is good, but knowledge apart from love is empty. How many know what is right but choose the wrong? How many know about our Creator-Redeemer, but lack a deep relationship with him?

Secondly, *Love Requires Knowledge*. For all his knowledge about the Law, the scribe is rather ignorant when it comes to the Lord. The God he is called to surrender to is standing right in front of him and he is blinded by his ignorance. This scribe’s problem is that he neither knows the Lord nor does he *know* the Lord. He was close, but not close enough.

Are we any different?