



Missed It by That Much

TEXT
Mark 12:28–34

March 26, 2017 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

This is a remarkable moment. Usually when scribes came to Jesus, they came to test him. When the scribes came to Jesus, it was like the politician showing up on the wrong news channel; the environment was hostile.

But not this guy! This scribe is searching for something, and he thinks Jesus might have the answer. He reminds me of the rich man. Do you remember that text from two weeks ago? He was searching also. The rich man comes to Jesus and wonders, “What must I do to inherit eternal life?” It’s a real question.

The scribe has a real question too: “What is the greatest commandment?” His question is more mature than the rich man’s question. The rich man’s question is just concerned about himself. This scribe, however, is concerned about God. Ask his question a different way: What does God want from me? What is the greatest commandment? What should I do with my life? That is this scribe’s question.

Jesus said, “Love God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength; and love your neighbor as yourself. You do that, and God will be pleased.”

The scribe says, “Yes, that’s right. That’s exactly right.”

And Jesus said, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

So, not far? Is that good? Is that “not far” as in “really close”? Or “not far” as in “you missed it by a mile”? The scholars disagree on how to interpret this moment. Is this scribe getting it? Or is there something about this scribe that causes him to completely miss the point?

Those who think this scribe misses it notice something. The scribe asks a question. Jesus gives an answer. The scribe repeats the answer, but he changes it.

Jesus says, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind and strength.” But when the scribe repeats this, he leaves a word out. He leaves out *soul*, a word sometimes translated “life.” Is that omission poetic or substantive?

Some notice this and wonder if our scribe thinks the important thing is to know the most important commandment, but not worry about where it shows up in your life. Well, that would be a problem: knowing what your life is for doesn’t matter if you don’t live it.

I remember one Saturday ... years ago. I needed to cut the grass. I was finishing my coffee, and I started flipping through the channels on TV. One of those home repair shows was on. You know the kind. They show you how to remodel a bathroom or hang a window or repair a masonry wall. I think they were putting on a roof, and I was learning all about that.

Carol walked through the room, probably with her work shoes on and heading to the garden. She asked, “You coming to cut the grass?”

I said, “Sure, in a minute.”

She looked at the TV. “What’s that?”

“Oh, they’re putting on a roof; I’m learning all about it.”

“You planning on roofing anything anytime soon?” she asked.

“Of course not.”

“Then go cut the grass.”

But I was learning. That’s called “recreational education.” I wasn’t planning on actually using this knowledge; just knowing it was enough.

I have noticed that Rodger Nishioka doesn’t speak of “education” ministry in the church; he speaks of “formation.” The difference is that

education is about what we know; formation is about how we live. It may sound simple, but Christian faith is not just about what we know; it's about how we live.

"You are not far from the kingdom," Jesus said. Is that good? Or is that an indictment? Some say we should not be too harsh on this scribe. He is on the road.

I wish I knew what prompted our scribe's question. I wonder if this scribe is a young man, stepping out on his own, wanting to get things right. *What is the greatest commandment?* I wonder if he comes to Jesus because he is thinking it through in his youth. Or perhaps it's just the opposite. Maybe this scribe is an old man, and he looks back on a life of beauty and brokenness; a life of joys, but also of missteps; a life where he gave himself away, but wonders if he gave it to the right things. Maybe he is wondering, "Did I live my life the way I was supposed to?"

Or maybe he's somewhere along the way. He's made commitments. He made choices. But those choices haven't born the fruit he expected. He doesn't need Jesus to tell him that he lacks something. He knows this already. That is why he comes to Jesus for wisdom: *What is the greatest commandment?*

This scribe reminds me of Rob Kolodjay. I've told you about him before. He was on the plane that Captain Chesley Sullenberger landed in the

Hudson River. Rob Kolodjay told reporters after he was rescued that as that plane descended in silence, he kept thinking, "I hope I did what I was supposed to do with my life."

That's a religious question. Another way to ask it: What does God want from me? What is my life for?

This question assumes that life has purpose — not a purpose we create on our own, but a purpose that is given. He said, "I hope I did what I was supposed to. Not what I wanted to do. That's the bucket list."

There are times of reflection in our lives when simply checking off the bucket list isn't fulfilling. The irony is that the bucket list is about *me*. This scribe's question is about *God*. He is realizing that God doesn't exist to serve him, but rather he exists to serve God.

What does God expect of me in my life? Jesus said, *Love God with all that you are and love your neighbor in a way you would want your neighbor to love you.*

It sounds so simple, but I think it's easy to miss. We get busy with the stuff of our lives, and we can miss what matters most. We can get busy with the schedules of our lives, and all of a sudden, we look around and wonder if we missed what the day was for. Am I making any sense to you?

We moved to Jacksonville when our kids were young. Our new neighborhood had an ice cream truck. You know the kind. They are old, run-

down panel trucks. They have stickers plastered on them of ice cream cones and popsicles of every color. On top is a speaker that blares out some monotonous tune like *It's a Small World*. The music rings out over the neighborhood and causes every child to stop everything and run to mom pleading for \$3.50 before the truck gets away.

When my son first heard the music, he asked, "Dad, what is that?"

He was 4 years old. I don't know why I said what I said, really I don't. I don't think it was the daily \$3.50 or even the premonition of supper ruined for the summer. But I heard myself say, "Nathan, that's a music truck, son."

"Really?" It's true. The truck never comes without the music. Nathan asked, "Why do they do that?"

"I guess they just know how much children like music."

A few days later, the truck stopped right in front of our house. A gaggle of kids made trades for snow cones and double-dipper delights. Nathan spotted the activity, investigated and returned to report. "Dad, I've got great news. You won't believe it, but the music truck has ice cream."

"Really?"

"Yeah, Dad, I think it's been there all along, and we missed it."

Do you ever worry that you missed something? That you come in here and forget that God came to meet you? That God came again this Sunday

to remind you what you are for? Sometimes, even though it's been there all along, we just miss it.

I have a friend named Spencer. He is not part of this church family. I have known him a long time. Spencer has a son named Trey. Spencer spent hours and hours, days and weeks, volunteering as a coach of every team Trey played on. Spencer was not an athlete himself, so he had to study baseball and soccer and basketball. Oh, it wasn't so bad when Trey was little — most anyone could coach the little ones. But the games get complicated quickly. Spencer worked hard, late nights, special camps; and he became a very good coach, actually. They shared that journey for years.

One day, however, Trey told his dad, "I'm not playing baseball this year. I just don't want to."

Spencer said, "I don't understand. You are at the top of your game; this will be your year. All this time we put into the game, and you are just walking away? Son, after all these years, you can't just walk away from baseball!"

"But Dad, I don't like baseball."

Spencer said that as he spoke those words and looked at his son, he realized that somewhere along the way, he had forgotten why he started all of this. He volunteered at first knowing nothing about coaching; he was just a dad being there for his son. But somewhere along the way, he

got confused about what mattered. He said, "Tom, I don't know when it happened, but at some point, I traded being a dad for being a coach. It was a bad trade."

Maybe what prompts our scribe to come to Jesus is that life confused him along the way. He forgot that paying attention to what matters most is a discipline. It doesn't just happen by accident. It requires intentionality.

Our scribe shows us that when it comes to knowing what people are for, knowing what God desires of us, we should look to Jesus. Jesus shows us what it looks like to live the greatest commandment.

So tomorrow morning, I will sit down at my computer, and I will make my plan for the week. But this week, I am going to remember that I am not the most important one who has a plan for my week. I don't mean God has decided what meetings I need to attend on Wednesday afternoon. I mean God wants love to be on my schedule, and in my plans, and in my practice.

The same is true for you. So let's try that this week. Let's put love in our schedule and in our practice. And then maybe next Sunday when we meet again, maybe in the hymns or during the prayers, we might hear God say, "Village, you are not far. Keep coming, you are not far now."

That would be really good.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.