

So Near Yet So Far

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[0 : 0 0] But if we could, with the Lord's help and the Lord's enabling, if we could turn back to that portion of scripture that we read, the gospel according to Mark, in chapter 12.

The gospel according to Mark, chapter 12. And if we just take as our text the words of verse 34. Mark 12, and verse 34.

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God.

You are not far from the kingdom of God. On a day like today, a day which is known throughout our nation as Remembrance Day or Armistice Day.

Many people, as you know, throughout our nation, they're gathering in places of worship to remember and to honour those who lost their lives in the horrors of war, both past and present.

[1 : 0 8] And as you know, Remembrance Day or Armistice Day, as it was formally called, it was the day on which the Armistice Treaty was signed to bring an end to the First World War.

And the Armistice Treaty, as you know, it was signed between these war-torn nations on the 11th day of the 11th month in 1918.

And now, 100 years on, we're still gathering to remember the fallen. And you know, it's good for us to remember them. It's good for us to remember the millions of people who innocently suffered at the hands of the enemy.

It's good for us to remember the men who were wounded and died on the battlefield in order to bring peace between our nations. It's good for us to remember and to thank the Lord for bringing us through one of the darkest centuries of our history.

And now a century on, we should continue to pray for those who are still serving, who are still serving in our armed forces, still experiencing the effects of war.

[2 : 1 3] And even those we're to pray for who are still suffering, either physically or mentally. It's good for us to remember them. And I'm sure that many of us, if not all of us here today, we gathered at a war memorial, either in Borv or Barvis or in Braggar.

And I'm sure that we all recited Robert Lawrence Binion's Ode to Remembrance. We all said, It's good for us to remember them, lest we forget.

But we not only remember those from our nation who lost their lives, we particularly remember those from our villages, who left the shores of our island, never to return again.

And as you know, a lot has been said recently about those who left our shores and very nearly made it home again. They were so near, and yet so far.

We're all familiar with the tragedy of the Iolaire, where many servicemen who were so close to home, but never made it home. They were so near, and yet so far.

[3 : 3 5] And as you know, special commemorative badges have been made at the local museum in Stornomey, at the Castle. It has a particular focus upon remembering the Iolaire. But you know, in this past week, I came across an article about the Iolaire.

Maybe some of you came across it too. It was an article that was written in the Scotsman newspaper in 2006. And it describes so vividly what happened that night on the Beasts of Hollum.

And I just want to read some of that article to you, so that we can understand that those who were lost were so near, and yet so far. The article, it reads, The Isle of Lewis had had a hard war.

Some 6,200 men joined up, and nearly 1,000 men died. Every family on the island had lost fathers, sons, brothers, or uncles. So the night of the 31st of December, 1918, was tense with expectation.

The war was finally over. The world was at peace. And after four long years, the men who had served king and country were on their way home. The kyle of Lochalsh was alive.

[4 : 44] Hundreds of laughing, boisterous servicemen were crowding onto the quay. The regular steam ferry, the SS Sheila, was soon packed. So the Royal Navy ordered the lolaire across the Munch from her berth in Stornoway to carry the extra men who were left behind.

The lolaire, he writes, had been a luxury yacht before the war, sailing under the name of Amalthea. She was used by the Navy in anti-submarine and patrol work when she was renamed the lolaire, Gaelic for Sea Eagle.

When she arrived in Kyle, there was some discussion between Commander Mason and Commander Walsh. Commander Mason was worried about the lack of life-saving equipment on board. She was kitted out with only two lifeboats and life jackets for 80.

Even more worrying, she had never sailed into Stornoway Harbour at night, which was a tricky manoeuvre even in the daylight. Discussions were brought up short when two more trains arrived at the pier, spilling out more demobbed men.

The master ordered the 284 servicemen, predominantly Navy reserves. He ordered them up the gangplank and onto the ship. She left at 9.30pm, sailing out of the darkness of the new year.

[6 : 02] But 12 miles out of Stornoway Harbour, the weather turned. As a gale took hold, the crew of the local fishing boat, they watched in confusion as the lolaire failed to change course and make for harbour.

Instead, she carried on full steam ahead into the pitch-black night. The beasts of Holomé writes are a rocky outcrop just short of the harbour entrance. A small light attached to the rock warns mariners of the approaching danger.

When the lolaire failed to turn, the flickering light seemed useless. The momentum of the ship kept pushing her forward. Visibility was poor, sleet was falling, and the seas were wild.

When the ship collided with the beasts, she went over almost immediately. No one on board knew where they were. The boat was lying only about 20 feet from land.

But between the ship and the rocks was a boiling, raging sea. Fifty men jumped into the water and made for shore. They all drowned in the freezing water.

[7 : 08] The two lifeboats were launched, but they were swamped immediately as too many men battled for too few seats. At three o'clock in the morning, the ship's back broke and she went under.

As the men on board slowly drowned, one man, John MacLeod, swam for his life, hauling a rope behind him. When he reached the shore, he set up another, stronger rope, and 25 men escaped along the safety line.

As New Year's Day broke across the island, families waiting for the arrival of their loved ones heard rumours of a terrible disaster. Men walked miles from villages to Stornoway, searching for news.

What they found was devastating. The Scotsman newspaper on the 6th of January reported the tragedy, soberly noting, The villages of Lewis are like places of the dead.

The homes of the island are full of lamentation, grief that cannot be comforted. Scarcely a family has escaped the loss of a near-blood relative. Many have had sorrow heaped upon sorrow.

[8 : 18] Friends, the tragedy of the lolaire was an awful disaster, because those who were lost were so near and yet so far.

Those who were lost were so near and yet so far. And you know, my unconverted friend, sitting here today, the tragedy of the lolaire is a solemn reminder that you need to be saved.

Because those who were lost, they were 20 feet from the shores of our island. They were so near and yet so far. And my unconverted friend, I want to apply this to you today.

Because if you die in the spiritual condition you are in today, it will be said of you, you were lost. You were so near and yet so far.

You were so near because you were in church often. You were under the sound of the gospel. You were brought up in a Christian home. Some of you with Christian parents.

[9 : 27] You had the witness of local Christians living and walking around you. You had the witness of your local church. You had the witness of your local community.

You had all the privileges that could possibly be given to you to ensure that you would earnestly seek the Lord with all your heart. And yet, if you die in the spiritual condition that you're in today, it will be said of you, you were lost.

You were so near and yet so far. My unconverted friend, you can be close to the kingdom of God and still be lost. You can be so near and yet so far.

And you know, that's what Jesus warned this man who came to him. Jesus warned this man about the danger of being so near to the kingdom of God and yet so far away that he would be lost.

And in order to stress the importance of this, Jesus speaks to this man about two things. And in the time we have left, I want us just to look at these two things. Wholehearted commands and wholehearted commitment.

[10 : 40] Wholehearted commands and wholehearted commitment. So first of all, wholehearted commands. Look at verse 28. It says, And one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, Which commandment is the most important of all?

Jesus answered, The most important is, Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength.

The second is this, You shall love your neighbour as yourself. There is no other commandment. This chapter of Mark's Gospel is full of questions.

Because many of the religious elite, they are coming to Jesus with questions. And you know, it's good to ask questions. It's good to ask questions about God, about Christianity, about Jesus Christ.

It's good to ask questions about why we are here at all, what the point to life is. It's good to ask questions, and you should never be afraid to ask questions.

[11 : 45] But the religious elite, they all came to Jesus to ask him questions, not because they thought that Jesus could answer their questions. No, they came to Jesus because they already knew the answers to their questions, or so they thought.

And they wanted to test Jesus. They wanted to try and catch Jesus out. And so by this point in the chapter of chapter 12, Jesus has been answering questions all day.

But as they're all disputing with one another and with Jesus, we're told in verse 28, that one of the scribes came up and heard them disputing with one another, and seeing that he answered them well, asked him, which commandment is the most important of all?

Which commandment is the most important of all? And for this scribe, this teacher of the law, he knew all the commandments, like the back of his hand. He even invented some himself.

He thought that Jesus would never be able to answer his question, because to say that any command is more important than any other command would be sinful. But Jesus, he very quickly reminds this expert on the law that the Lord said, the Lord said the greatest commandment is to love the Lord.

[13 : 03] That's why he says in verse 29, Jesus answers, the most important is, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, with all your strength.

And with his answer, Jesus reminded this scribe of his own confession of faith. Because the confession of faith of the scribes and all the Orthodox Jews, their confession of faith is verse 29, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

And this confession of faith, it's taken from Deuteronomy chapter 6, and it's known to us as the Shema, meaning to hear. And the Shema, it's understood to be the heart of the law.

It's the key to keeping the law of God. Because the Jews, they insisted that the way to keep the law of God is to confess openly that there is no other God except the Lord.

And this confession, it's still recited every morning and every evening by devout Jews all over the world. They all begin their day by saying, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one.

[14 : 12] And this confession, it's considered to be so important that they are to be the first words that a Jewish boy would speak. And they're also to be the last words that a Jew would say before they die.

Hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. But this statement, that's what distinguished the Jews from all the other nations. Because the other nations, they worshipped false gods.

They served carved idols. But this confession, this confession, this confession, this confession, this confession, this confession, this confession was not only a proclamation, that the Lord is their God. It was also a promise.

A promise that they would remain faithful to the Lord and serve Him all their life. It was a confession of faith. And this confession of faith, it was to characterize them. Because they were to respond to what they're hearing.

That's why the confession begins with, hear, Shema, hear, O Israel, the Lord our God, the Lord is one. And the command to hear was to be met with a response of obedience.

[15 : 17] And obedience to the command was to be an act of love, not duty. That's why Jesus goes on to quote the second half of the greatest commandment in verse 30.

He says, You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. Jesus emphasizes that the command to hear was to be met by a response of obedience.

And obedience to the command was to be an act of wholehearted love for the Lord. It wasn't to be an act of duty.

It was to be an act of wholehearted love for the Lord. And with this, Jesus teaches that we are to wholeheartedly love the Lord. And we're to live in obedience to his commands because of who he is.

And as Jesus has said here, he is one. He is unique. He is the living and true God. And there is no other like him.

[16 : 21] He is not a God amongst a host of other deities that we can pick and choose from. No. As Jesus says, there is but one only, the living and true God.

God. That's what we were singing in our opening item of praise. All the other gods are but idols dumb which blinded nations fear. But our God is the Lord by whom the heavens created where.

So our confession is the Lord is the creator of heaven and earth. He has created the seas, the lands, the hills, the mountains. He created the sun. He calls it to rise each morning.

He tells it to set down each night. He tells the moon to shine in the night sky. He tells the stars and he knows them and he's named them each and every one. He has made the animals, the birds, the mammals, the insects.

He's made all things that man's eye can see and all things that man's eye cannot see. But best of all, my friend, he's made you. He has made you.

[17 : 26] And my friend, the Lord created you. You were the apex of his creation. You were the last thing to be created on the sixth day. He created man in his own image and his own likeness.

He formed man and fashioned him. He knit us together in our mother's womb. And even before anyone else saw us, he knew us. And this is the thing, he knows everything about you.

He knows when you were born. He knows where you live. He knows where you work. He knows what you do. He knows what you think. He knows how you feel. He knows what you're going through, whatever it may be today.

He knows everything there is to know about you because he loves you as his creation. My friend, you have been uniquely and personally and individually made and shaped and formed by the Lord.

And it's the Lord who gave you a beginning. It's the Lord who gave you an existence. It's the Lord who made you a living soul. It's the Lord who created you for eternity. And this is the wonder of it.

[18 : 34] He has made you with so much dignity and he thinks so highly of the life that he has given to you that one day he will ask you what you did with it.

He will ask you what you did with the life that he gave to you. He's not going to ask the animals to give an account but he thinks so highly of you that he will ask you to give an account of your life.

My friend, Jesus is teaching us that you need to respond to him and you need to respond in wholehearted love and obedience to his command. You must respond.

That's what the gospel says to us. You must respond because whether you want to admit it or not today, the Lord is your God.

The Lord is your God. He is your creator. He is the one you have sinned against. He's the one you rebel against day by day. He's the one who has wonderfully provided for you salvation in Jesus Christ.

[19 : 44] And the Lord is commanding you to respond. To respond to the offer of the gospel. How? With wholehearted love and obedience.

And you know, failure to respond to the Lord's command, it's disobedience. It's nothing else but disobedience. And that's what Jesus is reminding us here that we're to respond to the Lord in faith, in love and obedience because he has demonstrated his love towards us.

He has demonstrated his love towards us in the death of his own son, Jesus Christ. We're to love the Lord. Why?

Because he first loved us. My friend, we are to wholeheartedly obey the command of the Lord to love him and to love others. But how are we to do that?

How are we to wholeheartedly obey the Lord's commands? commands? We're to do it with wholehearted commitment. And that's what we say secondly. Wholehearted commitment.

[20 : 53] So wholehearted commands followed by wholehearted commitment. Look at verse 32. It says, And the scribe said to Jesus, You are right, teacher.

You have truly said that he is one and there is no other God besides him. And to love him with all the heart and with all the understanding and with all the strength and to love one's neighbour as oneself is much more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifices.

And when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, You are not far from the kingdom of God. And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions. You know, when Jesus gave his answer to the scribe, the scribe had no real interest in what Jesus had to say.

The scribe just appeases Jesus by agreeing with him. But Jesus knew that the scribe sought to keep the Lord's commands out of duty and not out of love.

And that's because the scribe, this man, this religious man, he was more interested in commands than commitment. He was more concerned about rules than his relationship.

[22 : 01] His thoughts were taken up with God's law, not God's love. He had all the right answers, but not the right motive. He was so near with all his words, but his heart was far from the Lord.

And Jesus knew this. Jesus knows what's in everyone's heart. And Jesus knew that this scribe needed to respond in wholehearted commitment to the Lord. And my unconverted friends sitting here today, Jesus knows that you need to respond in wholehearted commitment to the Lord.

Jesus knows that you need to respond in love and obedience towards the Lord. Jesus knows that you need to love the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength.

Jesus knows that you need to respond in love towards the Lord because he has demonstrated his love towards you through his death.

And you know that love with which you are to love the Lord, it's not only to affect your relationship with the Lord, it's also to affect your relationship with other people.

[23 : 13] Because wholehearted commitment involves loving the Lord your God with all your heart, your mind, your soul, your strength and your neighbour as yourself.

And you know, was it not Jesus who said to his disciples, love one another as I have loved you. Which means that Jesus doesn't just ask us to love our neighbour as ourselves.

Jesus asks us to love our neighbour as Jesus loves us. We're to love the people in our congregation and we're to love the people in our community just like Jesus loves us.

And as we all know, the love of Jesus, it knows no boundaries. It has no restrictions. It has no preferences. The love of Jesus is extended to whosoever.

Everyone is included and no one is excluded. The love of Jesus has been demonstrated to us at the cross of Calvary. Because it was there that Jesus displayed what he had said.

[24 : 22] Greater love hath no man than this, that a man lay down his life for his friends. My friend, wholehearted commitment involves loving the Lord your God with all your heart, mind, soul and strength and your neighbour as yourself.

Wholehearted commitment involves loving one another as Jesus loves you. you know, it's no wonder Jesus said, by this all people will know that you are my disciples if you have love for one another.

Jesus says that the world will know that we belong to Jesus if we love our congregation and if we love our community and if we love our country with the love of Jesus.

Because you know, love is not just a feeling. love is an action. Love is demonstrated. Love is lived out.

Love is made known. And loving the Lord is an action that requires whole hearted commitment. Because when we wholeheartedly love the Lord and when we commit our life to him, that love, that love transforms our attitude.

[25 : 39] That love, it changes our focus. That love, it alters our motives. It affects our relationships. It directs our path and it adjusts our mindset. My friend, loving the Lord, when we love the Lord with wholehearted commitment, it leads us in worship.

It humbles us in service and enables us to commit everything to the Lord. We need to wholeheartedly commit everything to the Lord.

God. But you know, sadly, like many people, the scribe only responded to Jesus with his head and not his heart.

We're told in verse 34, and when Jesus saw that he answered wisely, he said to him, you are not far from the kingdom of God. Jesus saw that he answered wisely.

He responded to Jesus with his head, but not his heart. And you know, like many people in here today, this scribe knew his Bible, he attended church, he was brought up in a devoutly religious home.

[26 : 55] He had all the right answers, but he refused to wholeheartedly commit his life to the Lord. And what does Jesus say to him? My unconverted friend, what is Jesus saying to you?

You are not far from the kingdom of God. You are so near and yet so far. So near and yet so far.

at this moment in time, you are lost. You are lost. And even though the scribe was close to the kingdom with all his Bible knowledge, it didn't save him.

He was close to the kingdom, but he wasn't close enough. He needed to be in the kingdom. He needed to be committed to the Lord. He needed to love the Lord with all his heart, mind, soul, and strength, and his neighbor as himself.

He needed to be in the kingdom. And my unconverted friend, you need to be in the kingdom. It's no use being close to the kingdom. You need to be in the kingdom.

[27 : 58] And the only way to enter the kingdom of God is by whole heartedly committing your life to the Lord Jesus Christ. My friend, the only way to enter the kingdom of God is to bow your knee before King Jesus and earnestly ask him to save you.

To seriously come before the Lord and plead that you will be saved. Because being close to the kingdom is not close enough.

Do you know when the aisle layer struck the beasts of Holland on the morning of the first of January 1919, 201 men who had survived the horrors of war in Europe, hope?

And yet they drowned only feet from their home. Those 201 men were lost. They were so near and yet so far.

And today the tragedy of the aisle layer it should be a solemn reminder to us of the need to be saved.

[29 : 12] The need to be saved. Because you can be so near to the kingdom of God. And yet so far. And my unconverted friend as I said earlier, if you die in the spiritual condition you're in today, it will be said of you, you were lost.

You were so near. And yet so far. you were in church often. You were under the sound of the gospel. You were brought up in a Christian home.

You had Christian parents. You lived in a Christian community where the word of God was part and partial of life. You had all the privileges that could possibly be given to you to ensure that you would seek the Lord with all your heart.

And yet after all that, after all that, you were lost. you were so near. And yet so far.

And you know, I look at some of you, and I know that you're not far from the kingdom of God. You're here all the time. You want to be in church.

[30 : 27] You have an interest in the gospel. You love hearing about Jesus. You're so close. And your interest in Jesus, you have this desire to hear about Jesus more and more and you want to be saved.

But you just can't bring yourself to doing anything about it. You can't bring yourself to wholeheartedly committing your life to Jesus Christ.

You're not far from the kingdom. You're not far. But you're, but being so close is not close enough.

My friend, you're so close, but you have to enter. You have to enter the kingdom of God. You have to make that commitment. You have to take that step of faith. You have to let go, whatever it is that's holding you back, and wholeheartedly commit your life to loving and following and serving Jesus Christ.

Christ. And my friend, the only way to enter the kingdom of God is to bow your knee before King Jesus and earnestly ask him to save you.

[31 : 40] You are so near, but are you so far? You are not far from the kingdom of God.

May the Lord bless these thoughts to us. Let us pray. O Lord, our gracious God, we give thanks to thee for the worship that we can have, that we are able to worship a saviour who loves us, a saviour who has provided for us a wonderful salvation.

We give thanks, Lord, that we are able to worship one who has created us, who sustains us day by day, and a saviour who loves us so deeply. We're not only able to worship, but we give thanks, Lord, for the warning.

The warning, Lord, that we must be in the kingdom, that we must commit our life and our heart, our will, our everything. We must commit everything to the Lord, realising that without him we can do nothing.

All but with him, all things are possible. Lord, speak to us, we pray, that, Lord, that even history would speak to us so loudly and so clearly, that it would not repeat itself in this congregation, for those here today, that it might be said of them that they were lost, that they were so near, and yet so far.

[33 : 06] O Lord, hear us, we ask, speak to them, Lord, we plead, draw them to thyself, for thy glory's sake. Go before us then, we pray, take away our iniquity, receive us graciously, for Jesus' sake.

Amen. We shall bring our service to a conclusion by singing the words of Psalm 25.

Psalm 25. Psalm 25, it's on page 231, we're singing from verse 4 down to the verse mark 7.

Psalm 25, and if you are someone who can describe themselves as lost, this should be your prayer.

As David was praying, show me, teach me, lead me. It doesn't get much better than that. Show me thy ways, O Lord, thy path, so teach thou me, and do thou lead me in thy truth, therein my teacher be.

[34 : 19] For thou art God that dost to me salvation send, and I upon thee all the day, expecting to attend. We'll sing on down to the verse marked 7. So Psalm 25, from verse 4 to 7, we'll stand to sing God's praise.

To God's praise. Show me thy ways, O Lord, thy path, so teach thou me, and do thou lead me, thy truth, let my teacher be.

For thou art called that does through thee salvation send, and I I accord thee all the day expecting to attend.

Thy tender mercies, Lord, I pray thee to remember unloving kindnesses for thee have been old forever.

My sins unfold, my sins and faults of you do thou know Lord forget after thy mercy pay on me, and for thy goodness pay.

[36 : 53] The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God the Father, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and forevermore. Amen.