

Thou art not far from the kingdom

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Date: 01 January 2000

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[0 : 00] In the portion of Scripture, the Gospel of Christ is according to Mark, chapter 12, and verse 34.

When Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, or answered widely, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God, and no man after that doth ask him any question.

And these words especially, thou art not far from the kingdom of God. There are some things in life which are notoriously difficult to assess.

For example, it's very difficult sometimes to gauge distance correctly. It's very difficult to assess how many people might be in a building if we're not familiar with the building.

It's very difficult sometimes to gauge the speed of an oncoming vehicle when you're driving along the road. All of us are aware of these things.

[1 : 25] I remember when I used to look out to the islands. From the shores of Ardnun Ardnun. Sometimes these islands seemed miles and miles away.

Seemed very far away indeed. And then on other days, people would actually say, aren't the islands near us today? Well, of course, the islands weren't any nearer than they usually were.

But the atmosphere was so clear that they stood out very sharply. And they did seem to be much nearer. The island of Makk, which is, I suppose, about ten miles off Ardnun Ardnun Point, would sometimes look as if it was just half a mile away.

And we're used to that idea that it is very difficult to assess, to gauge, some things in this life. And as that's true in the material world, so it's true in the spiritual realm also.

It is sometimes very difficult to gauge or to assess or to weigh up where some people stand with God.

[2 : 39] Where they stand in relation to the kingdom of God. Very difficult, in other words, to assess correctly the most important thing about any man or any woman in this life.

There are some people, and it's quite clear to us where they do stand. There's not something about them that tells their profession of Christian faith and Christian character.

There are some people, and they stand on the other side of the line of things spiritual altogether.

And we know, it's quite evident from the walkthrough life and some other conversation with them.

From the whole tenor of the being, we know that they have no time for the things of God at all.

And if we're Christ, that's certain. And then there are other people, and there are kind of middle categories. And we can't really tell where they stand at all.

[4 : 06] Sometimes that's true of people who profess to be Christian, and sometimes it's true of people who would confess, no, they weren't sure if they were Christians at all.

But, of some people, we can be absolutely misplated. We feel, well, so-and-so seems to be very near the kingdom.

And then the days pass, and this is the following thing, the days pass, and the weeks pass, and the months pass. And they seem to be no nearer to being in the kingdom than ever they were.

But there is indeed to repeat from it. I have known, through my own ministry, and it's not been all that long, ten years, twenty years of preaching, if you just take preaching.

I have known men, and women, and I have known young people, and the things spiritual were concerned, they seemed very promising.

[5 : 17] And I had great hope before God. But these people were almost persuaded.

And I would say to myself, my, they're near the kingdom, one more step, and they're there. With one or two of them, I actually thought they were there.

And only time has proved, in fact, that they weren't in the kingdom at all. As far as it is humanly possible to assess the position, they are not in the kingdom.

Some of them, we have to say, as John said of people he knew in his day, they are not of us. Why? John said that because they are gone out from them.

They are gone out from among the people of God. Sometimes it's dangerous for us to think that so-and-so, or so-and-so, is so near the kingdom that everything is going to be well with them.

[6 : 27] And we get disappointed. But then on the other hand, there are people who seem very far away. And all the time, they, in fact, are very near.

And God is saying of them, they are not far from the kingdom. I can remember two young men who came to a congregation in Aberdeen.

They were actually in Aberdeen for four years studying. And of the two, you know, one of them, from the very first, seemed very promising, as far as spiritual things were concerned.

He would sit. He would sit in the congregation, sit in the seat, and he would never take his eyes off the pulpit. And he would listen to every word that was said in a sermon. Well, perhaps it's not always so, but often that's a good token, a good sign.

And people begin to hold open their physical ears to the gospel, and very often the Lord opens their hearts as well as their ears. The other fellow would shuffle about, and his head would be down, and he would never look.

[7 : 36] And I felt that he was coming to church only because of the persuasion and the power of the other young man. The days went past, months went past, yes, years went past, and you know, before they left Aberdeen, my assessment of them had to be completely reversed.

The one who seemed so near was no nearer when he left after four years of fellowship with us in our congregation, if you can call attendance and service fellowship.

He was no nearer to having one clue what it was to be a real Christian than he was when he came. And the other young fellow, the guy who sat and shuffled and moaned and groaned when you were preaching, and was a real off-purt.

to anybody in the pulpit. He was shining and bright for Christ, filled with the Spirit and working for the Lord. How wrong we can be in our gauging, in our assessing people's spiritual state.

Now that should, I think that should do two things for every Christian. It should make us very careful about being over-optimistic about any person until we are sure that they are actually born again and that God's Spirit has done a real work in them.

[9 : 15] Let's not rest satisfied with promising signs in any person. and we have people coming in here, coming into this service.

I mean, in our churches every Sabbath morning and every Sabbath evening, we have people who appear to be very promising. I am sure that God is speaking to them, that the Holy Spirit is dealing with them.

And I, I thank God for that fact. but I must pray and you must pray that these people will not be left there.

They seem so near the kingdom but they are not yet in the kingdom. And they must not rest satisfied nor must we until they truly are in the kingdom of our God and of his Christ.

We must be careful. We must not be too optimistic. And my friend, unconverted friend, you with whom God is striving, you that are often under concern, you that are asking God to come and show you what it is to be a Christian, you must not be over optimistic about yourself either.

[10 : 36] Give yourself no rest of mind or of heart until you know that Christ is yours and that you are Christ's. And on the other hand, I think it should encourage us that sometimes people who seem very far away from the kingdom of God are in fact much nearer than we would ever suppose.

I've told you already very recently about that young man who is going out to Peru, boy from Leicester, Clive Bailey, brought up without any notion of what the real gospel was.

Come to study in Aberdeen in the middle of his course, arrested by somebody who was converted by what he saw in them. I told you how he came, how he phoned me, telephoned me and asked me to go and meet him, how we met around a cup of coffee and a little coffee in a street in Aberdeen and how I came away from there saying to myself, well, how dark and how blind sin makes man to the realities of the gospel and just three weeks later, very unpromising looking ground was already bringing forth fruit in things spiritual.

The same happened on many occasions, happened still. People who seem far, far away from the kingdom show no interest and yet God by his Holy Spirit coming and in a resistible grace laying hold of their hard and stony hearts coming with the light of the knowledge of God in the face of

Jesus Christ shining into the darkness and where there was complete misapprehension about the way of salvation they understand what it is to be saved and they are saved themselves.

They see that the work is finished and that all that they do is rest their souls upon Christ that they say thank you out of their hearts and with their lives every day and they rejoice in and rest on a saviour who saves from all sin.

[13:06] They come to understand what it is that we were talking about last Sabbath evening. They come to understand that the wages of sin is death. under the gift of God the free gift of God is salvation in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Now there's one thing about Jesus stands out in the face of the gospel. He could assess man's state man's spiritual state.

He could assess it correctly. He knew what was in man. And this is still true. Our Lord Jesus exalted and high he knows exactly tonight your spiritual condition and mine.

He knows where we stand. And that should give us great hope because Jesus is full of compassion and full of grace and he's able to save the most unlikely of us.

He is an unlikely man ascribed. One of the religious or the hyper-religious of Israel. One who opposed consistently and continually Jesus and all his ministry of the gospel.

[14:31] and one who it seems set out to join the Pharisees and the Sadducees in testing Jesus and in tripping him.

Attempting to trip the Lord Jesus with the questions. Scholastic questions. Even the scholastics of the Middle Ages didn't have too much on the scribes and the Pharisees and the Sadducees when it came to fine points of theological doctrine.

And one of the favorite topics of discussion and argumentation among the scribes. Jewish history tells us was this which of the Ten Commandments was the most important one.

And that's the question this fellow put to Jesus. And it would seem from the same history the same story in the Gospel of Matthew that he did not put his question initially in a very good spirit.

his question too was to test and to see if he couldn't tip the Lord Jesus. And yet by the time Jesus had answered such was the influence and the power being brought to bear on this man that Jesus could say of him accurately he could say you are not far from the kingdom.

[15:59] Now it's good for us especially for any unconverted person to be able to assess how far or how near we may be to the kingdom of God.

And we can do it only in the light of God's word. That's what we want to do in the remaining part of this sermon. How was this man near to the kingdom of God?

In what ways? Well he was near as a plain matter of fact. He was near to the kingdom. He was near to the kingdom in a physical sense, in a general sense.

Just think he was one of the ancient covenant people of God. He was one of whom the Bible says their privileges were great.

He was one of those to whom were committed the oracles of God. God's written revelation of his mind and purpose for men. He was one who had in his hand the scriptures.

[17:06] He had known the scriptures. He had studied the scriptures. And we can say that in his own way at least he loved the scriptures. More than that, he lived in the day when God's Son walked among men.

And he lived where the Son prosecuted his public ministry. He lived in the shadow of the Son of the Triune God.

He walked with them and he heard him talk. What a privilege, we often think, don't we? What a privilege those people had who actually saw the Lord Jesus and heard his ministry and saw his mighty works.

There was something surely about Jesus and the beauty of holiness that was to be seen in him that attracted him. Well, this man had that privilege.

He wasn't like one of the ones we were talking about this morning, Lydia, belonging to the European continent. He wasn't like Simon of Cyrene, the African.

[18:24] This man had known the Son of God manifested in the flesh. And in that sense, in that general sense, he was very near to the kingdom of God.

Surely anyone who heard the Son of God himself preach, we would have had great hope for them. We would have great hope today. for people who were attending a ministry that was being owned and blessed of God, who were going to a church where the Holy Ghost was there in power, and

where men and women were being born again.

How much more would we have hoped for men who could actually listen to the preaching of the Son of God himself? Now that, I think that fact is true of very many of us here this evening, if it is not indeed true of us all, that in a physical sense, in a practical sense, as a real matter of fact, we are near to the kingdom of God by the good providence of God himself.

How many of you here were born into homes? where you knew a mother who loved God, and one of the earliest memories you have of her is her earnest intercession for your soul's salvation.

How many of us here knew what it was to have a father who walked with God? How near we were to the kingdom, born into a family where God ruled and reigned and where his peace was to be known, born where his word was honored and read, and believed as the inspired and authoritative and inerrant word of God.

[20 : 24] My friend, what a privilege God gave you if he gave you a believing mother, a Christian father, a home where the Bible is read.

yes, even if it's just a home where grace is set at meals. And I hope every home in our congregation is a home like that, where God is honored and where we acknowledge still that we owe even our daily food to him.

And is it not true that you're near the kingdom in this too, that all your days you have had access to places of worship where the gospel has been preached in its purity, and often in its power.

And I'm not just thinking of the free church, many of you have worshipped in other churches. Yes, and we praise God you've heard the gospel in other churches, whether it was Church of Scotland or Pentecostal or Free Presbyterian or what, where Christ is preached we will rejoice, we'll be like Paul.

And there are men and women and young people in here tonight and you have scarcely ever gone to listen to a preacher but a preacher who was preaching the three great hours of Christian theology, ruined by the fall, regeneration by the Holy Ghost and redemption through the blood of Christ.

[21 : 54] The preaching that made Scotland once a great nation for God. We were once known as the people, the land of the book and they meant only one book when they talked of us like that, the word of God.

Well, in that sense, you're near the kingdom, haven't you? My friend, with all these privileges and you look back, some of you tonight, you look back many years to your home and I want to ask you this question, are you still, although so near, are you still outside of the kingdom of God?

That's sad. Why? Why, why, when you've had all the privilege, are you not in the kingdom? And then I think that this man too was near the kingdom because it seems evident that he had a real admiration for Christ and for the way that Christ dealt with his question.

He said, ah, Master, thou hast spoken truth. Thou hast answered well. Here was one and he had asked a question in order to trip Jesus.

He was so impressed with the way Jesus answered. With Jesus, the summing up that Jesus gave of the real point of the teaching of the moral law, he said his two things.

[23 : 37] The first one is this, love God with all your mind and with all your heart and love your neighbor as yourself. And he says, Master, you have answered well. And it was because of that that Jesus said, you're not far from the kingdom.

Now I think it's wonderful when we see people begin to admire the character of the Lord Jesus. And if you read the gospels, can you do anything else but admire the character of Jesus?

The winsomeness. We talk sometimes of the beauty of holiness. And we see the beauty of holiness in Jesus as we see it nowhere else.

Jesus I think comes across to us as somebody who is nice to know. That's what holiness is.

Holiness is not an off-putting thing.

is something very attractive, winsome in itself. God preserves us from the religiosity that puts people off and from the kind of holiness that drives people away from the gospel.

[24 : 46] That wasn't the holiness that characterized Jesus. us. So we begin to take hope when we see people and hear them who admire the character of Jesus and who admire the ideals of his teaching.

And you know there are thousands tonight who perhaps never darken a church door and who have never given allegiance to Christ and still they admire him.

And they say oh yes he was a great religious teacher. And he put forward a wonderful philosophy of life. If only men would follow the philosophy of Jesus of Nazareth what a different world the world would be.

If only everybody would follow these two commandments that he pinpointed. Love God and love your fellow men. Today they concentrate on the second one.

And they say if only man would love his brother man. Even the Marxists and the Lenins whatever you call them the lemons. They do the same thing don't they?

[25 : 50] This is what communism is at least idealistic communism is all about. Caring for one another sharing. And you know they've stolen their philosophy from the New Testament scriptures.

That's where they got it. That's where Marx got it. There's only one thing. The Marxists forget that it is not possible for a sinful man to love his fellow men until they first of all know what it is to love God.

And we can love others only when we love God. And we can love God only when we know him in peace that is in Christ. Isn't that right?

That's where the philosophy falls down. And that's why idealistic communism will never really be a practical working thing. That's why there's another type of communist as well as the ideal communist.

The one who enforces his communism through the barrel of a gun. man and they're all over the world today. And the comradeship and the brotherhood has been built up not in the power of love and caring but it's been built up on a very shaky foundation.

[27 : 17] It's been built up through force and terror and bloodshed and agony and wickedness. It can never prosper. as long as God reigns it will never really prosper.

It may spread but it will never, it will never really lay hold of the hearts of people. Will it? That's why there's a danger.

A danger in the person who admires Christ or a danger for him. In a sense he's near the kingdom but in a sense he's still very far away.

Because it's not enough to admire the character of Jesus and it's not enough to admire the teaching and the ideals and the philosophy of Jesus.

Admiring Jesus is not the salvation of your soul. My friend you can admire Jesus and admire his teaching and still be lost.

[28 : 21] Christ. Because the gospel demands not just that you admire him but that you love him and entrust yourself to him and that you follow him all the days of your life.

Then this man I think was in a promising condition because he not only admired the way Jesus answered but I think he was given a real spiritual insight to the way of salvation.

Let me put it a little bit differently. I think this man saw how the gate of the kingdom could be reached and walked through. He glimpsed a spiritual truth that lies at the very heart of the gospel. He said to Jesus yes master you've answered correctly. This is the great commandment to love God with all your heart and with all your mind and with all your strength because that is more than all whole burnt offerings and sacrifice.

That is far more meaningful. That meets the kind of God that God is. sacrifice and that meets the need of man as man is in a way that sacrifice never will.

[29 : 54] He's saying to Jesus that's far more real than all the elaborate ritual that so many of us are resting on. A ritual that was speaking to them really of the coming of Christ and of the death of Christ but which many of them were making the whole of the religion.

And you know there are people who do the same today. Still, I was talking when I was down at the conference in Leeds there almost two weeks ago talking to many ministers of independent evangelical churches and they're telling me that down there in most of the churches, the parish churches in England still, the things that really matter are the cut of the minister's coat or the vestments he wears or doesn't wear, whether he wears breeches or trousers, margin, whether he wears a stole or doesn't wear a stole, whether he faces east or west or south or something, when he prays, talk about the Pharisees depending on ritualism.

It's scattered through what are called Christian churches today. and instead of going down to the teaching of the Bible and the doctrines of God's saving grace, they spend months and months in committees and in conferences and in general assemblies talking about the kind of clothes that ministers should wear.

God help a church that's in that condition is all I can say. And may God keep us from it too. It's a Saturday for the free church when all its people can talk about is what their ministers wear when they're preaching or not preaching.

Whether they wear a collar and tie or a dog collar that came originally from the Roman Catholic Church. And yet there are many people in our church and that's all they seem to care about.

[31 : 54] And there is no word about why we're not seeing the coming mighty power of the Holy Ghost that will transform the pulpits and the pews. And when we see that we'll not be too concerned what our preachers are wearing or not wearing.

And we'll not be too concerned about the cut of their hair either. Whether it's long or short or medium. God is not interested in these things. God is interested in reality and in power and in clean hearts.

These things may have their place. The Bible talks about doing everything decently and in order. I grant you that. The Bible exhorts the men and women who profess godliness to be modest in their apparel.

Yes it does. The Bible doesn't make these things contingent on spiritual power and spiritual blessing and the salvation of our souls.

And I'm beginning to get sick of it. Hearing people talking about it. Elders and deacons. Thank goodness not in this congregation but in other congregations of church.

[33 : 04] And if that's the measure of godliness I ask you what have we come to? He glimpsed spiritual truth.

My friend are you as near as that to the kingdom are you seeing that the thing that matters is your personal relationship to Christ. Not what you wear or don't wear when you come to church.

Not what the minister is wearing. Not the elaborate things that you may do. Yes can I say this and don't misunderstand me. Not even how often you read your Bible.

Not even how often you pray. Not even how often you come to listen to the gospel. And these things are good. They are means of grace and God can bless them to you.

But they are not salvation. salvation is found in trusting and in resting upon Christ and upon Christ alone. Not far from the kingdom.

[34 : 11] Because he was saved. People ask the question was this man this guy was he saved?

And some commentators I was surprised to some commentators say yes they believe this man was saved. And others say well no they are quite sure he wasn't saved. My friend all we know about this man is what we have told in scripture.

He came to the place where the son of God said of him you are not far from the kingdom. And when the son of God spoke to him like that he was still outside of the kingdom.

And we don't know because it is not revealed to us whether he ever took the final step and came into the kingdom. We would hope that he did. I have a far more important question to ask my own heart tonight.

And my friend to ask yours in the name of God. Are you one who is still just not far from the kingdom?

[35 : 25] Because to be not far from the kingdom is to be still outside of it. You may just be a step away. You may just be very, very near the gate.

The light of the kingdom may be shining on your heart already but I want to ask you are you really inside it? As the gospel come to you the way it came to that church at Thessalonica that we were thinking about this morning in the power of the Holy Ghost and in much assurance.

To be so near in so many ways and yet finally to be shut out of God's kingdom God's grace and God's love.

How sad. My friend can I ask you in the name of God can I ask you to take the step that will finally decide mothers to take it by the grace of God this evening and to come to the place where you rest on Christ on him on him alone and be no longer merely not far from the kingdom but in the kingdom. I came across the other day the words of a poem and I want to quote just four lines to you to every unconverted person here yes to everyone so near to the kingdom yet what dost thou lack so near to the kingdom what holdeth thee back renounce every idol though dear it may be and come to the saviour who died on the tree because that saviour who died on the cross of country is the only saviour he is the gateway into God's kingdom and there is no other name given among men under heaven whereby we must be saved let us pray we thank thee tonight oh god for the reality of the

kingdom we thank thee for the reality of the power and the attraction of the kingdom thank thee that the holy spirit gives us longings and desires to be part of the kingdom and we pray thee for any tonight who truly in thy sight are not far we pray thee lord that thy holy spirit will work in them give them deciding grace and bring them to the king of the kingdom himself the saviour jesus that they may be saved in him hear us and answer us in thy power for his name's sake and for his glory amen