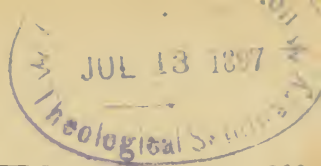


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XXV.

NOT FAR FROM THE KINGDOM OF GOD.

BY WILLIAM ADAMS, D.D.

Pastor of the Madison Square Presbyterian Church.

And one of the scribes came, and having heard them reasoning together, and perceiving that he had answered them well, asked him, Which is the first commandment of all?

And Jesus answered him, the first of all the commandments *is*, Hear, O Israel; the Lord our God is one Lord:

And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This *is* the first commandment.

And the second *is* like, *namely* this, Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself. There is none other commandment greater than these.

And the scribe said unto him, Well, Master, thou hast said the truth: for there is one God; and there is none other but he:

And to love him with all the heart, and with all the understanding, and with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love *his* neighbor as himself, is more than all whole burnt-offerings and sacrifices.

And when Jesus saw that he answered discreetly, he said unto him, Thou art not far from the kingdom of God. And no man after that durst ask him *any question*.—MARK, xii. 28-34.

THE *manner* in which the most weighty truths were taught by the Son of God deserves our special regard. Instead of bare and arid propositions, we have, very frequently, living forms, representative examples. Individuals, such as Nicodemus; the rich young ruler, a paragon of morality; the scowling scribe; Mary Magdalene, who was a penitent sinner; the thoughtful doctor of the law, and many others, representing each a class of the human species, are brought into the pre-

sence of our Lord, and the conversation which follows stands for all time, as a precedent and a law. In the New Testament, accordingly, we have not only a series of precepts, but a moving panorama of living characters, who come in contact with Jesus Christ, propose their questions, receive their answers, and pass along, giving place to others; but their questions and answers do not pass away with them, but remain forever, the record of spiritual truths in a living form.

The incident now before us will illustrate my meaning. Here was a man who was pronounced by our Lord to be "*not far* from the kingdom of God." If, now, we shall be able to understand the very posture of the mind here introduced and described, we shall very readily solve the question—whether we ourselves are near to or remote from the kingdom of heaven.

The individual here referred to was a scribe, an ecclesiastical lawyer, learned in all questions pertaining to the religion of his country. As it appears from the narrative itself (and the method of procuring the true stereoscopic impression of the whole scene is to collate the language of the several evangelists who have recorded it), he was a listener to what had occurred in Christ's conversation with other parties. The Herodians, designing to entrap him, had just asked him a question concerning the payment of tribute to the Roman government. Immediately after this, the Sadducees proposed to him another question concerning the resurrection. Both parties received an answer, but an answer so smooth, so adroit, so discreet, that they were transfixed on their own dilemmas. They were baffled and silenced, so that they did not dare to ask him any more questions. The scribe, who next appears in view, a spectator of the scene, seems to have been struck with the peculiarly neat,

wise and unanswerable language of our Lord. It evinced an accurate knowledge of the Scriptures. Wishing to ascertain more of this extraordinary stranger, and to improve the opportunity for solving certain matters which had long been upon his own mind, he now steps forward, and proposes a question to our Lord, for himself. His purpose in so doing, we must believe, was honest, his disposition was good. Matthew, indeed, says, that the lawyer asked the question "*tempting* him." But a very slight acquaintance with the language of the New Testament, satisfies one that the word thus rendered is used in a good sense as well as a bad. If in some instances it obviously imports a malignant design, such as solicitation to evil, or ensnaring one in mischief, in others, it is used, just as obviously, in the general sense of proving one for the purpose of ascertaining his opinions and character. Beyond all question, this was the intention of the individual now before us. There was no malign purpose in his heart, for, had there been, our Lord never would have said that he was near to the kingdom of God. Convinced that the man who, in his hearing, had just before refuted the Herodians and the Sadducees so cleverly, must have still farther knowledge of the Scriptures, and wishing himself to obtain information pertinent to his own profession, he also asked a question which was intended to develop the character of the man in whose presence he stood. The question proposed was this: "Master, which is the first commandment of all?" To redeem this inquiry from the appearance of frivolity, it should be borne in mind that this was a point long mooted by the Jewish teachers, whether the law of sacrifice, or the law of circumcision, or the law of the Sabbath, or the law of the phylacteries, should have the precedence. Our Lord answered the question thus proposed, by reciting

sentences which were written in the phylacteries themselves ; the compendium of the *moral* law. Taking no notice whatever of those disputed questions concerning the *ceremonial* law, he rehearsed at once the substance of the divine statute which epitomizes all morals : “Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind, and with all thy strength. This is the first commandment.” And the scribe exclaimed : “Master, thou hast answered *well*.”

Our English word *well* does not exhaust the meaning of the Greek *καλως* —beautifully—excellently—conveying the high satisfaction which was felt with that reply. It was an answer which corresponded to his own judgment. What are forms and ritualisms—burnt-offerings and sacrifices, in comparison with the temper of the heart, the right quality of the affections ! When our Lord perceived the heartiness and discretion with which the scribe responded to his own saying, he said unto him, “*Thou art not far from the kingdom of God.*” He affirmed not that this man was *in* the kingdom, but that he was *near* to it ; far nearer than if his manner, his disposition, his opinions had been other than they were. Few words need be expended in proving that the expression, “kingdom of God,” signifies, in this connection, that state of blessed security which is revealed and proffered to us in the gospel. It indicates that condition of things which is by Jesus Christ insuring man’s highest welfare for this life, and for the life which is to come. Whether the person here conversing with Christ actually entered within the kingdom, receiving the gospel, and the salvation of his soul, we are not informed. No further mention is made of his case ; he is not introduced again in the sacred annals ; the curtain drops just at this time and place ; so that we cannot even conjecture whether, improving his advantages, he pressed on yet

farther, even within the precincts of safety, or, withdrawing his foot, retreated to a greater distance from the kingdom of God. The point of greatest interest to us is that which is disclosed in this one interview and conversation. If this individual evinced a condition of character which brought him into a critical nearness to the kingdom of Heaven, it is of great concern to each and all of us to know what that condition was, that we may measure our own relations to the redemption of the Son of God.

Our wisdom, therefore, is to ascertain, if it be possible, what there was peculiar to the individual thus described, which drew forth this judgment from our Lord, "Thou art not far from the kingdom of God?" The only source of knowledge which is open to us, in reference to this inquiry, is the narrative itself.

The first thing, of a hopeful character, in the state of this individual, was that he was *disposed to press an honest and earnest inquiry after truth.*

We are constrained to believe that this was the case, from all the attendant circumstances. He was not a skeptic; he was not stupidly indifferent; he was not a crafty opponent; but he was disposed to inquire after the truth. This was decidedly auspicious and hopeful. The first thing which the truth of God demands is a mind open and attentive to receive it. The greatest censure which Scripture and observation compel us to pass upon multitudes of men is, that though the light shines they will not receive it. The doors and the windows are barred closely against it. The mind has no interest in the truth; profoundly insensible to its existence. A disposition to ask for the truth, to inquire for instruction, is the first sign of spiritual vitality. Inasmuch as the truth of God is nigh to us, flowing around us like the air, shining about us like the sun, the opening of the

mind to acquire it advances one immediately into the most auspicious proximity to its blessings.

The thoughtful teacher of the law was favored with the opportunity of a personal conversation with Christ. That is denied to us; but we possess what is better and greater. The kingdom of God has had a fuller disclosure since that day when the Son of Man held these memorable conversations in Jerusalem. The redemption which is by Jesus Christ is amply revealed; and that revelation is given to us in a written form. Remote from all the benefits of the gospel are all they who feel not interest enough therein to consult the pages of inspiration with a candid and earnest spirit. Their faces are actually averted from the light; their backs are turned upon the kingdom of God.

The first step—and that step advances one farther than may be supposed—is when he begins with personal interest to ask for the way of truth. That way is so plain and infallible that to inquire for it is to find it. Show me the man who, roused out of apathy, is inquisitive after the way of the Lord; who is earnest for the solution of those questions which have agitated his soul; who daily seeks for light and truth out of the oracles of God, even as he would have hung upon the lips of Christ in the days of his flesh; who is alert to improve every opportunity and help within his reach for acquiring that knowledge which is eternal life; and I will show you now the very man who is not far from the kingdom of God. The only thing which separates one from the abundant blessings which are in Christ is that opaque, inert condition of mind and heart which is likened unto death. To give heed, to inquire, to be candid, honest, earnest in seeking, at the words of Christ, what is needful for us to know, is to begin to live. Deepen this spirit of earnest inquisitiveness, and you bring one nearer and nearer to

the kingdom of God. Eyes that are shut cannot see the light. Let the senses be opened, and we may hope for the spiritual discernment which brings salvation.

Indispensable as is this earnest action of the mind, it is only initiatory. That which shows a more decided advance towards the kingdom of God, is a correct judgment as to the import of *the divine law*. The gospel of Jesus Christ is designed to be remedial of all those defects which are under the law. The consciousness of those defects must spring from a knowledge of the law itself. That which was the most hopeful of all things in the condition of this scribe was, that he had a true discernment of the spiritual nature of the divine commandment. In his judgment, holocausts, oblations, forms, rites, were of no account compared with that supreme love, which is the one essential law of our being. He who has reached this conviction will be likely to reach the conviction also that by that law of judgment he is impeached of a vast deficiency; and for this there is no remedy but in the grace of the Son of God. The law is the schoolmaster who leads us to Christ. Not far from the kingdom of heaven is he who beholds himself in the perfect law of his Maker, while the gospel will be an enigma and a stumbling-block to all such as discern not the spirituality of the divine statute.

To illustrate the many mistakes of men in reference to this vital subject, the New Testament presents us with several tableaux of living personages. One resembles, as to the outward appearance, the scribe introduced into this narrative. He was a magistrate, in the prime of life, of great wealth, and altogether, as to position and character, the elite of the land. He, too, displayed an unusual earnestness in his interview with our Lord. Seeing him approach, he ran, fell on his knees before Him, saying, "Master, good Master, what good thing

shall I do that I may inherit eternal life?" However mistaken and impertinent the answers which we may give to such a question, our Lord never misjudged the character of individuals. The question proposed by this ornate moralist gives us the first glimpse of his character. "What *good thing* shall *I do* that I may inherit eternal life?" "If you are resolute in your determination," says Christ, "at *legal perfection*, the category of duty is briefly summed: Keep the commandments." "What commandments?" was the quick and eager inquiry. "Those, of course, which compose the moral law. Thou shalt do no murder; thou shalt not commit adultery; thou shalt not steal; honor thy father and thy mother; all of which may be summed up in the one comprehensive requirement—Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself." With the utmost promptness and decision the young man replied: "Why, all these I have kept from my childhood. *What lack I yet?*"

Our Lord looked at him steadfastly; his calm eye, reading that soul through and through; when, breaking the silence of that prolonged gaze he said: "One thing thou lackest—if *thou wilt be perfect*—if thou wilt establish thy claim to a legal obedience which hath no flaw—go sell all thy possessions, give to the poor, and come take up thy cross and follow me, and thou shalt have treasure in heaven." No one who is not disposed to cavil at the letter can misunderstand the meaning of this direction. He would only display his own petulancy and folly who should complain that this was an unreasonable demand made by Christ of all his disciples, and that this, indeed, was a hard saying, that every man must part with all his worldly estate before he can prove himself entitled to the kingdom of heaven. The passage contains no such sentiment, and the gospel presents no such condition. Here was a man who, by his

own words, declared a wish, and expectation to inherit eternal life on the *ground of perfect obedience*. Upon that ground, the ground which he had chosen, our Lord meets him, and for the purpose of convincing him that his legal obedience was fatally defective, he proposes a test to prove it. You will observe that in the commandments specified in the first instance, Christ referred only to those which belonged to the second table; of course the same which are comprised in every code of decent morality. Asserting his conformity to these, the ruler inquired with somewhat of pertness—"What lack I yet?" "*One thing,*" says Christ, "*and that THE WHOLE.*" To prove to this man's own conscience that he was altogether defective in that supreme love for his Maker, which is the essence of the whole divine legislation—he presented to him a simple test, which was explosive of his hopes. The truth was, that beneath all that fair and fascinating exterior there was a heart of idolatry. This man loved his money more than he loved his God. The finger of the physician was laid upon the very tenderness and soreness of the disease. He had asked—what *he did lack?*—and the answer came, with such a look and emphasis as convinced him that he lacked everything. The bolt hit the conscience in the core. He went away grieved. Trusting in his own obedience, he had asked how to inherit eternal life, and he had received a response which proved that no obedience of his had been commensurate with the holy law of God, which requires a love which is cordial, a love which is universal, a love which is supreme. The probe did its office; and this very man, who a few minutes before embraced the knees of Christ with fervid emotion, now turned away from him with sadness, because the words which He had uttered proved to his own consciousness that he loved his riches more than he loved his God—more than he loved his fellow-man.

It is *not* said of this man that he was near the kingdom of God. Whether he ever abandoned his ideas of legal perfection, and accepted the grace of his Redeemer we know not; but this we know, that an honest admission of what the divine law is, and what it requires, is a prerequisite to salvation through the Son of God.

As if to make this one point clear beyond all doubt, a third person is introduced on a third occasion, and he also was a lawyer of the church. The cast of his mind differed from those which we have considered already. He, too, inquired, "Master, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?" And Christ answered him: "What is written in the law? how readest thou?" And he answering said: "Thou shalt love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy strength, and with all thy mind, and thy neighbor as thyself." And He said unto him: "Thou hast answered right; this do, and thou shalt live." But this inquirer, addicted to a literal and superficial construction, was willing to *justify* himself, and asked, "Who is my neighbor?" Then followed the parable of the good Samaritan—the full meaning of which is not understood, except we bear in mind the man and the circumstances which called it forth. It may seem to us like a beautiful painting, but it was like one of those pictures in the Interpreter's House, which gleamed terror on the soul of the Pilgrim, making him to tremble like an aspen leaf. Both of these incidents had a common design—to convince the men here described that their obedience to the law of God was altogether defective—the one having no love for his Maker, the other no love of the right quality for his fellow-man.

These interpretations of law are interpretations of ourselves; and no man is near to the kingdom of God—as that expression is used by Jesus Christ—salvation

through redeeming grace, without merit of our own—whose self-complacency has never been dissipated by a right discernment of the law. The law never can save us, and he is the nearest to the forgiveness of the gospel, who, with a contrite heart, discerns most clearly, and feels most profoundly, that perfection of the divine statute, which impeaches and condemns us. The publican, standing afar off from the throng of worshippers, was already within the kingdom of God, while the conceited Pharisee, pressing up to the chief places of the temple-courts, and foremost in his religious histrionism, was far removed from the grace of the Redeemer.

Our discourse, however, intends something more than the analysis of an historic incident. From the instance which is here recorded, I turn to that which occurs in these living hearts before me. Would you compute aright your own relations to the kingdom of God, measuring your own proximity to those incomparable benefits in the gift of the Redeemer, answer to yourself, whether there has been any change as to the interest you feel for the wise provision of your immortal spirit. The time was, it may be, when you were conscious of a most profound indifference to the love which passeth knowledge, and to the wrath to come. Is it so—that by influences, which you can neither control nor describe, you have come to feel a want that has never been met, and to inquire for a good which never yet has been found? Does it seem as if a veil had been withdrawn from before your mind, so that in hours of deep and earnest thinking, objects which you never believed before, seem to start out from the shadows, as if just created?

Have you begun to knock at those gates of wisdom, where you never knocked before? Have you begun to pray for divine help in the solution of those spiritual

mysteries which agitate you? Have you felt that your pride was melting down into a meek and gentle desire to know the way of the Lord more perfectly? Are you a candid, diligent reader of the Scriptures, and do you ask that your soul may be illuminated, quickened, and inclined aright?

Have you been conscious of some new discernment of the divine law, admiring it as the expression, not of cruel severity, but of God's infinite benignity; clear as crystal, and glorious as this Sabbath firmament? and does there gleam across your mind, at times the thought of what you are, when judged by that perfect commandment? Times in which the truth will grapple with you, as a mighty wrestler, in whose grasp your strength withers, that, if you love anything in the universe more than your Maker, then, indeed, you are an *idolator*—whether that object of preference be hideous as a hydra, or fascinating as a syren? Are you ever startled by the thought of what the issue must be, if your self-assertion should never bow itself in happy submission to God, and your soul, with such a purpose should be set free, amid the powers of a changeless eternity? Does the conviction, sometimes clear and strong, amid all your gains and profits, plough through your deepest consciousness, that you need out of yourself, just that which the Christ of God offers to give you—pardon, hope, peace, suretyship, salvation?

My dear friend, amid all these agitations, self-judgments, depressions, inquiries, gropings, if you did but know it, you are not far from the kingdom of God. You may be ready to judge yourself at a hopeless distance; but your condition is a thousand fold more hopeful than it was before you awoke to this conscious sensibility. You feel that you are sick—and lo! the physician is at your bed side; the wound pains you;

the balsam is nigh at hand. You have discovered that you are in want, and hard by is all the fullness of God.

It is a great thing to be *near* the kingdom of God, because it is such a great thing actually to be within it. All that is not within is without. It is not enough to be near salvation—*we must be saved*. I need not inform an intelligent hearer, that the condition I have described is peculiarly *critical*. In that immediate vicinity to the help which he needs, he stands balancing himself on the question, whether he will advance or retreat, whether he will press on and cross the threshold, or turn back, and prove himself not fit for the kingdom of God.

To remember that once we were near the salvation of Christ; so near that our right hand might have touched and taken it; and, after all, that hand was withheld, this is a memory which will enhance remorse forever. God forbid that one of our number should at last come short of the proffered rest: but should one from among us fail of the grace of God, the recollection of his former nearness to it will “bite like a serpent and sting like an adder.” We can all of us recall seasons in our lives when, in a special sense, we were near to the salvation of God; affliction had mellowed us—truth had stolen into our hearts—we were inclined to an unusual sobriety—parental faithfulness melted us; but let us never forget, that to be almost persuaded to be a Christian is not the same as being a Christian; to walk around the city of God is not the same as to enter it: to discern our need, great as that is, is not precisely the same thing as to receive what that need requires. Let our subject, therefore, plead with all to press into the kingdom of God. Now, when you are so near to its security—now, when its gates stand open wide—now, when you can look in upon the brightness of the celestial metropolis, and hear the

gladness of its music—now, when invitations come forth from the Spirit and the Bride to take of the waters of life freely—now, when opportunities are so favorable, when the breath of prayer seems to waft you upwards—now, while God waits to be gracious—now, while He who calls himself your Redeemer, Saviour, Friend, Physician, Helper, is so nigh, avail yourself of his offices, and live forever!

THE END.