

**Date: November 4, 2018**

**Scripture: Mark 12:28-34**

**Title: KINGDOM OF GOD**

The billionaire Warren Buffett was asked by some reporters for the best advice he ever received, Buffett didn't talk about money at all. Rather he focused on how best to live . . . and how to raise your children. Buffett said the key is unconditional love. He said, "There is no power on earth like unconditional love. And I think that if you offered that to your child, you're 90 percent of the way home. There may be days when you don't feel like it, it's not uncritical love; that's a different animal, but to know you can always come back, that's huge in life. That takes you a long, long way. And I would say, every parent out there, that can extend that to their child at an early age, is going to make for a better human being. It's much more important to make a better human being, than to make a great fortune."

It wasn't a billionaire but a teacher of the law who asked Jesus a critical question. He asked, "Of all the commandments, which is the most important?" Deeply devout Jews observed hundreds of religious laws. This teacher knew it was impossible to keep them all. So he asked the Master "which is the most important?" Jesus answered, "The most important one is this: 'Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'Love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no commandment greater than these." The teacher of the law was impressed and replied, "Well said teacher. You are right in saying that God is one and there is no other but him. To love him with all your heart, with all your understanding and with all your strength, and to love your neighbor as yourself is more important than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." Now, it was Jesus who was impressed. When Jesus saw that the teacher of the law had answered wisely, he said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God."

It's a surprise, that it was a teacher of the law to whom Jesus said, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." A "teacher of the law" is called in other places, a "scribe." In most of the New Testament conflicts, the scribes and the Pharisees were the guys in the black hats. Yet Jesus saw something within this particular scribe that thrilled him. And he said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This reveals the nature of the kingdom of God. **It says to us, that the kingdom of God is already here.**

Jesus' first sermon began like this: "The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel." Note that: "and the kingdom of God is at hand." I'm sure you've noticed that nearly all of Jesus' parables begin with "The

kingdom of God is like this . . . and the kingdom is like that . . . .” The interesting thing is, that most of the references that Jesus made to the kingdom of God, are to a kingdom that’s already here. “The kingdom of God is like a mustard seed . . . the kingdom of God is like a treasure hidden in the field . . . the kingdom of God is like a pearl of great price . . . you are not far from the kingdom . . . the kingdom is within you . . .” Most of his references are to a kingdom already here. It appears to me, the kingdom of God isn’t only a state of existence to come; it’s also a state of mind, here and now. The kingdom of God exists wherever God reigns in human hearts.

Let’s use an analogy. When you or I go overseas we remain an American citizen. We may be on foreign soil, but we take our citizenship with us. Like that, we can be in this world, and yet recognize that this world is not our home. We are citizens of another kingdom, even though we’ve never set foot in that kingdom. That kingdom in its fullness is yet to come, but we are already citizens of that kingdom when we have God’s love in our hearts. Jesus prayed, “Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done,” and the two are linked forever. Wherever God’s will is done, there’s the kingdom, and wherever the kingdom is, you’ll find people doing God’s will. Jesus embodied within his own life that precious, priceless kingdom that he taught. The kingdom of God is already here and available to us.

**There’s a second thing that must be said from this text: the kingdom has something to do with unconditional love.** With our finite minds there’s not a whole lot we can say about the kingdom of God. Jesus doesn’t describe it in detail, but one thing we can say with certainty is that, it has something to do with love. The scribe asked Jesus, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength and your neighbor as yourself.” The writer of First John put it even more strongly, “Beloved let us love one another, for love is of God and he who loves is born of God and knows God. He who does not love, does not know God for God is love.” (I John 4: 7-8)

Did you hear that? God **is** love. In other words, wherever God is, there’s love. And wherever love is, there’s God. Paul writes, “And now these three remain: faith, hope and love. But the greatest of these is love.” In other words, if you’re a citizen of the kingdom of God, it will show by the way you love. That’s not new to you, but I’m amazed how many people have missed this truth, which is the very heart of the gospel. You can’t hold on to resentment, anger, prejudice, and bitterness, and claim citizenship in Christ’s kingdom. The kingdom is centered in love. We would be so much healthier and happier if we accepted that principle. Love heals hurts, the eye can’t see.

Alice Gray in her book *Stories for the Heart*, tells a story from missionary doctor Dr. Paul Brand that wonderfully illustrates that kind of love. A patient of Dr. Brand's was a man named John Karmegan. John suffered from leprosy. Just as badly, John suffered from hurt and anger over the fact that he had this disease. The leprosy had decimated John's feet and hands, and had partially paralyzed his face. Also, in order to protect his eyes from the effects of the disease, a doctor had sewed his eyes partially shut. John's appearance often caused people to reject him, even to turn from him in fear. John dealt with his pain and anger by lashing out at people and causing problems at the hospital where Dr. Brand worked. Dr. Brand's mother took a special interest in John, lavishing him with love and attention, and sharing with him her faith in Christ. John eventually came to Jesus and was baptized. But John was still dogged with anger, and still had trouble accepting himself or others. He taunted Dr. Brand with the question of what would happen if he tried to attend the local church. He was convinced that surely they, too, would reject him, just as everyone else had. So Dr. Brand approached the leaders of the local church and asked them if John could worship with them. Upon learning that John's disease was no longer contagious, the leaders of the church not only allowed John to worship with them, they also agreed to let John take communion. This was a bigger issue than you may think, this congregation drank from a common cup.

It was a tense and anxious moment when Dr. Brand and John arrived at the church, that first Sunday. After years of being the object of other's disgust, John expected others to reject him, even to hate him. John had learned to believe that Jesus was love, but, if even Jesus' followers rejected him, then who could possibly love him?

Dr. Brand noticed John trembling as he made his way down the aisle of the sanctuary. Just then, an elderly, Indian gentleman turned and saw John shuffling through the church. With a warm and welcoming smile, the man scooted over and indicated for John to sit with him. John's life was completely different after that. His anger melted away in the face of the people of this church. He eventually left the hospital and got a job. Many years later, Dr. Brand happened to cross paths with John again. He was working at a factory, creating tiny and intricate screws for use in typewriters. In recognition of his excellent work at the plant, John Karmegan had just been named that company's best employee in all of India. That's healing that only love can perform. That's unconditional love . . . love from the heart of God. It's really beautiful when we encounter such love. Wherever love is, there is God. Wherever God is, there is love.

**Here's the last thing to be said: The kingdom of God is centered in Christ himself.** It's not enough to sing simply, "What the world needs now, is love sweet love." If we concluded the sermon at this point, we could say to our friends and

neighbors, “Let’s just love each other a little more and the kingdom will be ours.” That answer is not sufficient. As human beings we will not love one another until, we understand that we are loved. Unless we feel ourselves loved, we cannot love. That’s a principle not only of theology but psychology and sociology as well. Just as abused children often grow to abuse their children, loved children grow up to love their children. That’s why unconditional love is so important in a family. Loved persons are able to love the world. But where does love come from? There’s only one place. That’s from the heart of God. And there’s only one place, that we can see God’s love completely revealed. Someone here wants to say we can see God’s love in nature. That’s awfully easy to say in this blessed land. We can go out and see beautiful forests and flowers and all the wonders of nature. But what if you lived in Ethiopia where famine and drought are a way of life, not just a temporary inconvenience. Would you see God’s loving hand in nature? Nature is a fickle god that brings floods and droughts as well as blessings. But you say, I can see love in other people. Well, living in the secure atmosphere that many of us have grown up in, that may be true. But wait until you get out into the world and see the monstrous barbarity of which people are capable.

So, where in this world can you see unconditional love? There’s only one place, and that’s on the cross of Calvary. There the very heart of God is displayed for all the world to see. Recent polls show that most Christians don’t actually experience God’s love in their lives. I believe it’s because we’ve neglected Calvary. When we’re able to say, “God so loved the world, that He gave his only begotten Son . . . and it was for me,” then we’re able to go out and love the world. The kingdom is here. It has to do with love, but it has even more to do with Christ. We are far from the kingdom of God in this world. We don’t know when God will bring it, in all its fullness. In the meantime, individual persons can become citizens of that kingdom here and now, by faith in Jesus Christ, and by allowing his love to flow through us to the world Trusting, Believing and having an Active Faith in God making disciples in Jesus Christ in the transformation of the world. Amen.