

# A Sincere Scribe

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## **Text:**

Mark 12:28-34

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 and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength.' The second is this: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' There is no other commandment greater than these." And the scribe said to him, "You are right, Teacher. You have truly said that he is one, and there is no other 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 neighbor 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."

## **Introduction:**

It is easy to do right when we are under no great pressure, but dark times reveal true character. When the stakes of actions are high, the number of courageous leaders who will risk much to do the right thing diminishes significantly. Very difficult times brings out the worst and the best in human behavior, it reveals both tyrants and saints. No moment of human history was ever darker than the weeks and days leading up to and including the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. As we read the accounts of those days we are impressed with human failure. We see weakness and wickedness where we would expect strength and righteousness. The high court of Israel, God's chosen, covenant people, the recipients and guardians of divine revelation will plot against their Messiah and convince a weak-willed Roman governor to crucify him against his better judgment. The masses will both acclaim him king and cry out for his crucifixion. His own disciples, his closest followers, who had lived with him; been taught by him; observed his mighty works, and recognized him as their Messiah will abandon him in the heat of battle. One of Jesus' disciples, Judas, will betray him; another, Peter, will deny him; all will flee in fear.

Nevertheless, the accounts of Jesus' last days and not without heroes, they are not completely devoid of individuals who demonstrate unusual courage, compassion, and leadership. In these weeks leading up to and including Easter I want us to focus on four of these individuals.

What sets them apart? Why do some people stand firm and do the right thing, when others either give in to evil and actively participate in it, or, in fear, do nothing. Why does the majority have such a difficult time rising above self-interest to act for the greater good? The people we are going to look at are all what we would consider minor characters in the overall story. None of them play major roles, yet all are examples of courage and righteousness. They remind us first of all that courage and leadership often begins in small places with seemingly insignificant individuals. What sets them apart is not their position, but their conviction and their courage. If history is often polluted by the cruel and craven acts of tyrants and traitors, it is in those times that it is also purified by the courage of seemingly insignificant individuals who do not cave in to the pressures of evil times. Their stories often go unwritten and are known only to those who witnessed their acts of bravery, but when they are told they inspire us in at least two ways. First they give us courage to act, to be a faithful minority in our times. The majority is rarely right, and in times of great evil is probably never right. If we are to act righteously, we must be willing to be in the minority or even alone. Secondly, history teaches us that when one person finds the courage to speak in the face of great evil others take courage and what seems to be a weak minority often becomes a tide-turning force of righteousness. I have observed this not only in biblical examples, but in the courageous lives of people in the time period in which I have lived who have drawn a line and taken a stand, and whose leadership has transformed history. So, if we had the time, I would love to tell you the stories of people like Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Martin Niemöller, Corrie Ten Boom, Rosa Parks, Nelson Mandela, Laslo Tokes, Lech Walesa, Vaclav Havel and a host of others who like the characters we are going to look at in the Gospels found the courage to do the right thing, to be leaders of a righteous minority when others were either giving in to evil and becoming active participants in the works of darkness, or, out of fear of the darkness, were simply doing nothing.

The first of the four is the unnamed scribe of today's text. Scribes were scholars, and these scholars in first century Israel were on their way to becoming the most respected group of people in the society. In the Gospels they are sometimes referred to as lawyers (because they were experts in the law), and sometimes as rabbi (because they were considered masters to be followed). They wore special garments that identified them, and the masses were quick to defer to them and to honor them. They went through a long education to gain this status. Their esteem among the people was due to their knowledge of the law, and their ability to interpret the law and to judge in legal cases. Other than the major priests, and the elders, they were the only ones allowed to serve on the Sanhedrin, the high court that condemned Jesus and handed him over to Pontius Pilate. They were also believed to possess secret knowledge of the divine mysteries. By and large they were the enemies of Jesus, and as a group, Jesus had little regard for them. Notice how he describes them in the chapter from which we have read:

“And in his teaching he said, "Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes and like greetings in the marketplaces and have the best seats in the synagogues and the places of honor at feasts, who devour widows' houses and for a pretense make long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation" (Mark 12:38-40).

When we meet them in the Gospels they are usually trying to entrap him. For various reasons they considered him their rival, and like the priestly nobility eventually decided that he was such a serious threat that he must die.

## I. Positive Lessons

The text that we have read this morning is the conclusion of a larger passage that recounts the events of Tuesday of Holy Week. On Sunday Jesus had arrived in Jerusalem to the acclamation of the masses. This event is generally referred to as the triumphal entry. On Monday he had returned to Jerusalem from Bethany and cleansed the Temple. This establishes the setting for the events of Tuesday. The passage begins in 11:27-28 which states: “And they came again to Jerusalem. And as he was walking in the temple, the chief priests and the scribes and the elders came to him, and they said to him, "By what authority are you doing these things, or who gave you this authority to do them?" Notice that those who come to question Jesus are referred to as the “chief priests, the scribes, and the elders”. These are the three groups that make up the Sanhedrin, and they are the three groups of people that Jesus had previously predicted would put him to death (Mark 10:33 cf. Matthew 16:31). What ensues is a series of debates between Jesus and his enemies in which they try to entrap him and find something to accuse him of, but he answers every challenge. The conclusion is in verse 34: “And after that no one dared to ask him any more questions.”

The scribes as a group did not take Jesus seriously. They wanted to find a legitimate accusation against him in order that they might condemn him to death, but the scribe in our text distinguishes himself from the group, by asking the only honest question that is asked of Jesus. He was not trying to ensnare Jesus; he was not trying to find accusation against him. He asked an honest question and listened attentively to his answer, and when Jesus had given his answer he replied: “You are right Teacher”. Don’t miss the impact of the word “Teacher” with a capital “T”. He is saying to Jesus, you are the real scribe, the true teacher.

What can we learn from this scribe? First, we learn that to find the truth we must love the truth more than we love our own status. Jesus said that the downfall of the scribes was that they loved the praise of men instead of the truth. God is truth and he loves those who love and seek the truth. We can only imagine what price this scribe might have paid for breaking ranks,

but he is remembered in honor to this day, while his colleagues are remembered in infamy. Don't be afraid to follow the truth; to ask honest questions, and listen carefully to the answer. True leaders don't follow the crowd; they don't seek their own status or their own comfort. They seek the greater good. They realize that there is a higher truth, a truth that is greater than themselves, and they are not afraid to follow that truth, even when it involves great personal loss.

## II. A Word of Warning

If we closed here we would not be entirely faithful to the text. There is something that must be added. In fact the thing that remains is the thing that is usually emphasized. While Jesus finds this scribe sincere, and the two are in essential agreement on the purpose of the law, Jesus' last words to him are somewhat haunting. He says to him: "you are not far from the Kingdom of God". In this case, close is not good enough. Sincerity and a love for truth are prerequisites to entering the Kingdom, but they do not get us in. We must not just love the truth and pursue the truth we must find the truth that is Jesus and embrace it. Listen to this paragraph from Alexander Maclaren:

"There are multitudes who have, or who have had, convictions of which the only rational outcome is practical surrender to Jesus Christ by faith and love. Such persons abound in Christian congregations and in Christian homes. They are on the verge of the 'great surrender', but they do not go beyond the verge and so they perpetrate the 'great refusal.' And to all such the word of our text should sound as a warning note which has also hope in its tone 'Not far from' is still 'outside'" (Expositions, VI, p. 111).