

## Far From the Kingdom

At the beginning of the year 2020, there was a meeting here at Bath Christian Church to discuss the new corona virus that we have all come to know as Covid 19. At first, we did not want to close down our worship service. Worshiping God is our primary aim for Sunday morning worship. To cease assembling for worship seemed totally against our desire and mission. Shortly after that meeting there was another meeting in which the safety of our congregation took center stage and we closed our doors for a while. We found an avenue to reach out to our congregation and community through video recordings that were posted on Sunday mornings. We also began a series of Wednesday morning devotions. We posted these videos on the social platform known as Facebook and also on the church's website.

During the meetings, the question was raised about closing and reopening and the impact on church attendance. My prediction was we could expect to lose between 30 to 40 %. That prediction was based on some research done by the Barna Group. (The Barna Group studies trend in churches).

Unfortunately, my prediction has been pretty close to accurate. I know there has been a lot of talk about our attendance and some of the people who once were here and now are not. Some may have left for their reasons and we will not address those this morning. Some are still concerned about their health and are still choosing to stay home rather than risk exposure in the assembly. However, some are not attending because they have developed other interest that keep them away from Sunday morning worship.

Those other interest have replace God in order of importance. Sadly, we have failed to instill in our children and their children the importance of serving God. As Moses was preparing the children of Israel to enter the Promised land, he gave them instructions concerning the law. We find his words in Deuteronomy the 6<sup>th</sup> chapter. He tells them that God had commanded him (Moses) to teach the law and statutes. The purpose for Moses' teaching is also spelled out; **that you might do *them* in the land where you are going over to possess it, so that you and your son and your grandson might fear the LORD your God, to keep all His statutes and His commandments which I command you, all the days of your life, and that your days may be prolonged. (Deuteronomy 6:1-2 NASB)** Moses is repeating what God has told him and it seems that know and keeping the law was to be important to fathers, sons, and grandsons. The inference is that it is a parental duty to see that the children learn about and know about God. Let's read on and we will see this is more than an inference.

**“Hear, O Israel! The LORD is our God, the LORD is one! You shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your might. These words, which I am commanding you today, shall be on your heart. You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand and they shall be as frontals on your forehead. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates. (Deuteronomy 6:4-9 NASB)**

The idea of loving God with all our heart, soul, and might are an important theme within the Bible. We will see these words again coming out of the mouth of Jesus. Did you notice the words: **You shall teach them diligently to your sons?** I believe this is where we failed. We scarcely talk of God at all in our homes. It's the news of the day, the current sports teams and their rankings, the interest of our friends and family, our plans for the weekend and vacation.

These are the topics of our conversations and not God. Is it any wonder that our children are not here this morning? Is it any wonder that many of our adults are not here?

When we read through the Old Testament, we find that it did not take long before the children of Israel forgot God. They may have gone through the motions and rituals, but they no longer kept God as the primary part of their life. This law that had been given through Moses was a lot more than the 10 Commandments that we often think of when we hear the Mosaic law mentioned. The law was a compilation of 613 laws. 365 of those laws were negative (Thou shall not laws.) and 248 were positive. The rabbis, who taught the law were always faced with the burdensome set of laws and attempted to differentiate between the "great" and "little" commandments. The rabbis also made attempts to formulate great principles from which the rest of the law could be deduced.

It is against this backdrop that we find one of the scribes approaching Jesus in Mark's gospel. In this account, there is no hint that the scribe was trying to trap Jesus or find a flaw in His teaching. It would appear, from the context, that the scribe was sincere in trying to find the answer to his question. Let's turn to Mark the 12<sup>th</sup> chapter as we begin in the 28<sup>th</sup> verse.

**One of the scribes came and heard them arguing, and recognizing that He had answered them well, asked Him, "What commandment is the foremost of all?" (Mark 12:28 NASB)**

Mark tells us that this scribe had heard Jesus answering the various questions pose to Him concerning taxes and marriage and the resurrection. From the answers that Jesus gave, this scribe had determined that Jesus knew the law. He poses the question that many rabbis wrestled with, is the one law that is key to all laws?

**Jesus answered, "The foremost is, 'HEAR, O ISRAEL! THE LORD OUR GOD IS ONE LORD; 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." (Mark 12:29-31 NASB)**

In answer to this question, Jesus quoted two passages from the Old Testament, Deuteronomy 6:4-5 (which we read earlier) and Leviticus 19:18. The first of these is a confession of faith that is recited by pious Jews every morning and evening. It basically affirms two things: (1) the unity of God and (2) the covenant relationship of God with the Jewish people. God is to be loved completely and totally because he alone is God and because he has made a covenant of love with his people. In the covenant God gives himself totally in love to his people; therefore, he expects his people to give themselves totally in love to him.

The scribe had asked for the one law that was most important. Jesus combines two laws giving equal weight to both.

**You shall not take vengeance, nor bear any grudge against the sons of your people, but you shall love your neighbor as yourself; I am the LORD. (Leviticus 19:18 NASB)**

Jesus places both of these laws together. They cannot be separated. The love of our neighbor is a natural progression from loving God.

There is a problem in defining our neighbor. The Jews had a narrow view of who was a "neighbor". They only considered fellow Jews and proselytes as neighbors. Jesus redefined the term to mean anyone with whom we may meet in our daily walk. We know this from the parable of Jesus we read in Luke 10:25-37 (the Good Samaritan).

Our reading from Mark ends with these words:

**The scribe said to Him, "Right, Teacher; You have truly stated that HE IS ONE, AND THERE IS NO ONE ELSE 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 HIMSELF, is much more than all burnt offerings and sacrifices." When Jesus saw that he had answered intelligently, He said to him, "You are not far from the kingdom of God." After that, no one would venture to ask Him any more questions. (Mark 12:32-34 NASB)**

This scribe was honest enough to recognize that Jesus gave the correct answer. Jesus paid him a complement: **"You are not far from the kingdom of God."**

The problems with Christians not participating in church activities and worship are not related to Covid 19. They are directly related to our turning from the two basic commandments. We no longer love God with all our heart, mind, and soul. We no longer love our neighbor enough to care about their salvation.

Rather than looking upward toward God, we are looking inward toward our preferences and likes. To be certain, the Covid 19 pandemic has exacerbated the downward trend but it is not the sole culprit. The isolation and continued hesitance to resume full fellowship activities due to health concerns still limits and hampers the healing process that churches need to regain loss ground.

Thom S. Rainer, CEO of Lifeway Christian Resources, recently published an article about churches in decline. Based on his more than 25 years of studies of patterns and trends in churches, he has identified certain characteristics of declining churches.

***Stated simply, the most common factor in declining churches is an inward focus.***

He lists several characteristics that are easily found to those who wish to find them. I will share two of them here:

Any change necessary to become a Great Commission church is met with anger and resistance. The past becomes the hero.

Personally, I believe the underlying case is simply that we no longer place God in the central core of our life. We are more concerned about our pleasures and comfort than knowing God and what He expects of us. It is the ultimate inward focus. We, as an individual, no longer are willing to share our life with God except on our terms.

This has come about because we have failed to do as Moses instructed the children of Israel **You shall teach them diligently to your sons and shall talk of them when you sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up.**

The good news is there is time to turn this trend around but it requires that we change. Are we willing and ready to do it God's way? We are not too far from the kingdom that we cannot reach out to God.