

## On the Border

### Shema

Religious beliefs have deep roots. So deep in fact that sometimes people don't even remember the origins of their most important statements of faith. For Israel, it was the shema: "Hear O Israel. . .". The Hebrew word Shema means "hear". This statement from Deuteronomy 6 was the most important statement of Jewish faith. It was the greatest commandment. So in quoting it in his answer to the religious teacher's question about the greatest commandment, Jesus was giving a totally uncontroversial response - at the time. But what had been forgotten by this scribe, and probably most people, was the *origin* of that historic faith statement. To go back to the *roots* of the Shema, takes us back to the time when the people of Israel are just about to enter the promised land. Camped east of the Jordan River, still in the desert, forty years after the Exodus, they have finally come to the *border of the Promised Land*. They are now set to enter Caanan but they're not quite there yet. This is the historical setting of the Shema. It is Moses' last ditch attempt before he dies to sum up of all he has learned about Israel's god. He tells them times, for them, are about to get much better. They are going to have children and homes in a land flowing with of milk and honey. But every day in the Promised Land they must constantly go back to that time when they were still on the *border* between their past in the wilderness, and their future in the land.

Spiritual formation involves the constant entering of new territory. People who follow Israel's god will always remain, as they will grow into spiritual maturity, at one level a desert people, still dependant on God for the manna – the manna of the word of God, "for we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeded from the mouth of God."

Manna, the food God made to miraculously appear in the wilderness, symbolizes how God feeds and sustains his people spiritually. Manna is not the material goods of prosperity. But nor is manna simply possessing and reading the precious writings of Moses as if this is just another advantage of living in the promised land, like their homes and their vineyards and their fields. The "manna" is *living on the foundational love and obedience to Israel's god*. To *love one another* will always be the condition upon which we will receive God's blessings. So the historical root of the shema goes back to God's people on the border of the promised land.

So when Jesus receives this insightful answer from the scribe, he says, "You're almost there, you're like the people of God on the border of the promised land – right on the *border of God's kingdom*."

The man in Mark 12: 28-34 was full of the desire to love and be loved. *The greatest thing in all the world is to love and be loved*. But if that is his deepest desire, then why is he still only on the border? Why has he not yet entered in? Well, perhaps because it was still all

### Talk

The Jewish rabbis are always looking for a good debate. In fact, they saw debating over God's Word *as an end in itself*. To be a rabbi was the highest privilege a person could have because they believed there was no better way to spend ones time than in the constant discussion of the Law. In their quest for *holiness*, the verbal wrestling matches between teachers of the Law allowed the strongest ideals to win out over the lesser ones. There were always ongoing debates among the rabbis to distinguish between greater and lesser commandments

So when this man heard Jesus debating with the Sadducees about marriage and the resurrection, and saw how well Jesus handled himself in the debate, he said, "Wow, now there's someone who really knows the Scriptures. Brilliant." So this teacher of the Law sees an opportunity to get one leg up on his fellow rabbis. He could go back to his life of debating with his fellow teachers of the Law and say, "You know, just the other day I was talking to Jesus of Nazareth and he said thus and thus. . ." Big talk, Talk Big! Big talker

But perhaps this man was stuck on the *border* to the Kingdom because with him it is all a game – a debate. He only intends to stay in a philosophical wrestling ring without ever living out the commandments in actual relationships with others. So what would bring him across that border would be more talk but more . . .

### **Hearing 29-30**

All the commandments of God flow out of a love which moves through our lives like a mighty river and can change the whole direction of our lives and plunge us into the powerful currents of God's leading. But the mighty river begins in each life with one clear, tiny, trickling spring that starts way up in the mountain of your mind when we are awakened to the voice of God. **Hear**, O Israel. . . We must, in our inner person, recognize the voice of the Holy Spirit. It is impossible to truly love our neighbour until we *know* and *love* our God.

According to Jesus, the absolute very first and most important command given to us by God is to "*hear*." Until we have that relationship with God in which we are in an ongoing conversation with God, all of his commandments whether read in Scripture or spoken to us by others, will be purely irrelevant. Our *very* life begins when God *speaks* and we *hear*. God himself is the source of the mighty river. When he chooses us and calls to us, his love for us begins to flow back **to** him from *our* hearts, *our* minds and *our* strength. There's two things about water: it flows downhill and if it is *not* flowing it becomes stagnant. Faith statements can never remain words on a page or words recited. Words carved in stone. Our faith is utterly useless unless it is made visible in relation to . . .

### **Others 31**

Jesus pairs the greatest commandment with a second. "Love your neighbour as yourself." Authentic faith is never merely words *or* merely deeds. Authentic faith is always the coherence of word and deed. *Love* is essentially what the law of Moses was all about. The Law understands the sinful core of human being. And the Law's purpose is to control the effects of that fallen nature on the human community. Therefore: you shall not kill, lie, steal, covet, commit adultery because such acts can never be expressions of *love*. . . ." If we love people, we do **not** do certain things.

But *Jesus'* love, a love so great that he laid down his life on the cross, radically re-interpreted what "love your neighbour" really means. When we see the love of God for us on the cross, we have to admit it's not humanly possible for *us* to ever really love our neighbour –not like Jesus. So we stand before God having fallen short of that possibility.

Yet we can love others because of Jesus on the Cross. We can live in the confidence that God does love us and therefore we can also live in the confidence that *his* love can flow *through* us to others. Our love *for* God is fleshed out in our love for others. This core teaching of Jesus was to make a deep impression on the later teaching of the apostles.

## Rom 13:8-10

We are called to receive others, freely and without holding back or placing conditions – even if there are differences in our understanding of the Bible, family background, social situation, ethnic origin etc. So what about this guy? He’s still on the border, he’s not *in* the Kingdom yet. But he’s getting there. Before he can really cross the border into true spiritual life, he must redefine....

## Sacrifice 32

To put this into context, in the Gospel of Mark, Jesus had recently gone into the Temple and driven out the money changers and said, “ My house was to be a house of prayer for all nations, but you’ve turned it into a hangout for thieves. “ This was kingdom behaviour. This is what happens when the Kingdom of God invades the kingdom of the world. Such acts define what it means to “cross the border.” Action that *fulfill* Israel’s confession of faith as worth more than the Temple and its sacrifices. Jesus was in fact declaring the Temple to be out of business. He was leading the whole world across the border and *into* a new way of life in which there was no need of a temple in which animals were sacrificed.

Jesus was unusually warm to this teacher of the Law because this guy was at least beginning to recognize that to live in a loving way is more important than “ burnt offerings .”

So, did this teacher of the Law follow Christ? We don’t know. We leave him on the border. His concept falls short of the spiritual transformation that allows men and women to obey God just because he’s God. He’s on the border because he wasn’t yet ready to follow Jesus in the kind of radical action Jesus took in the Temple. But yet, he still answered *wisely*. He acknowledged at least the requirement to love was more important than sacrifice. But if he is to ever get beyond the cold ethics of the Pharisees, if he is to ever truly cross the border into the kingdom of God, he would need to be reborn in his heart. To truly cross the border will require of him a definite . . .

## Response 34

You’re getting close. You’re getting warm. You don’t have far to go now. It’s just down the road. . . It’s like when you ask directions from someone and they give you them and you know they’ve been where you want to go countless times. As they give us directions: how far to go, where to turn, you *can see it in their eyes: they’re already there*. They know the way. As they give the directions, you can see that in their minds, *they are already where you need to go*.

The Kingdom of God is not something that will dawn some day in the future, but is already present. In Jesus, in his words, his deeds, the Kingdom of God has come to earth. As that scribe looks into Jesus’ eyes, he can see it. He can look over the border. Jesus is *already there*. *He is already where I need to go*”.

The kingdom of God is *near: believe* it or not, or *buy into* it or not. Jesus is already there. That was so clear at that moment that *no one dared asked Jesus any more questions*. . . We can spend a lifetime asking questions. Intellectual questions. Theological questions. Evasive questions. But there comes a point in our journey when, for each of us, a critical moment with God, when we have heard the story of Jesus, we can see the kingdom in his eyes and we dare not ask any more questions. We must act --we must *cross the border*.

Could it be that God has so much more for us: more abundant life, fuller, deeper, more loving relationships? Could it be that *we*, like this teacher of the law that encountered Jesus so long ago, are also living on the *border* of so much more! Abundant life, deep loving relationships, ever so close, yet just across the border from that great abundance. What will take us all the way *in*? Well, the big BUZZ WORD in Christian circles these days is . . .

## Community

It's very trendy to talk *authentic community*. *What we really need, they say, what is the missing element in most churches is real **community***. Community is a very good and useful thing, but also very dangerous. Why? Because it all depends on what *kind* of community we're talking about. And it's quite possible to be a part of a church community but still lack any deep connection with God and others. We can be so close, yet still far away.

Community has become the selling point of many churches : The sign on the front lawn says, "*Come and experience Christian community*". But the idea that community is something you can get by showing up at this or that church that *talks* a lot about it, is almost guaranteed to be a red herring.

## Model Railroading

A few years ago a friend of mine, Brian, wanted to start a model railroad club. Only it was going to be a special kind of model railroad. Each member would build their set-up as a module, built to certain specifications that would allow these modules to be connected together into one huge set up. The National Model Railroad Association determined a height and width and the size of the tracks, electrical system . Everything needed to be built on exacting specifications. The reason for these exacting standards was that as part of this national organization, your local club could go to big gatherings in shopping malls and arenas and, because all the modules were built to the same specifications, they could all be linked together and wired-up so you could run your train across this humungous model railroad, running around the circumference of a hockey rink. We went to one of these meets and saw what could be done. WOW!

I thought it was a great idea, so I said I would join, and my friend Brian and I put an ad in the newspaper and talked it up around town, and there were some rumours that there were a few guys that were interested. Finally we found *one other guy*, John, who was a high school teacher, who said he would join and we could hold our evening meetings in his classroom room at the High school. So we had our big kick-off meeting, and we arranged the chairs. . . . *no one came*. There was just the *three* of us. So we soldiered on. We each started building our modules, but. . .

One problem: we really needed a least *four* modules to make the four sides of the rectangle we needed to make even the smallest set up. I mean there were only *three* of us, we needed *one more guy*. But we kept soldiering on in faith. We kept on working, building our modules, laying the tracks, shaping the landscape with trees and buildings and populating the scene with little tiny people. But if only we could find at least one more guy. There had to be *someone*. One night a mom brought her 12 year old, but when they saw it was all grown men he wasn't interested. It started to get depressing – to the point where it was discouraging just to hear our footsteps echoing down that dark empty highschool hallway leading to John's classroom.

I remember one night, walking in, and I saw this old guy sitting all alone in the library. So I went in and found out it was the AA meeting, but he was the only one who showed up that night. So I said "Ummm, you wouldn't wanna join a model railroad club would you? *We never did find a fourth guy*."

That wasn't the only problem: you were supposed to use only these special electrical connectors to plug the wires together. This was one of the NMRA *standards*, and those little electrical plugs were only available in a certain hobby shop in Winnipeg, and no one was ever going there any time soon, and when we did go they were out of stock. . . You know how these

things go.

Brian had this huge stack of model railroad magazines and we'd flip through them and get all inspired. . . . But then we'd check with the NMRA standards, and, nope, wouldn't work.

The *main problem* with our model railroad club was that it was all based on a set of standards that didn't work for *us*. It seemed there were these standards that none of us seemed to be able to live up to. We *could* have said, forget it, let's just make a triangular set up, the three of us. It wasn't the number of people in our club that mattered. We could of forgot about the special electrical connectors and just twisted the wires together. . . . It was the *standards*-- that were our downfall – the need to conform to the national association. So we never did finish our railroad. I sold mine in a garage sale. I had laid the tracks, but never once did a train go over them.

### **The Closer**

The Scriptures give us unchanging truth. Yet sometimes without meaning to, we can set ourselves up for failure in the way we interpret that truth. We can focus on certain standards that none of us can meet. Or if we meet them, certainly many other people can't. When we do that, we're missing out on the GREATEST THING.

But what if we just twist the wires together and get ourselves in touch with God. What if, the sign on the lawn in front of the church simply said, "*Come and learn how to Love*" What if whoever shows up here is simply accepted for who they are and then challenged and encouraged to serve, to forgive, to reconcile, to give, to speak the truth, to not judge others, to be merciful? Because it's all about connecting with God.

Here's the GOOD PART: When we focus on learning to love, we will never have to worry about leaving here on any given day without having experienced a powerful sense of community. Nor will we ever have to worry for one moment that we're somehow lowering any truly *important* standard. Because love is the *standard*. It is the *fulfilment* of the Law. Love meets the standard. And that is what takes *us across the border*.