

The setup for this ~~g~~ospel makes you think you're in for the fighting match of the century. "Jesus meets scribe at temple." From the very first chapter of Mark, the scribes enter the story as enemies of Jesus. When Jesus teaches, people contrast him with the scribes. When he interprets scripture, he corrects the scribes. The scribes complain about his healing, and argue with ~~his~~ disciples. They criticize how the disciples eat, and whom they eat with. Jesus rebukes the way scribes dress and where they sit at worship. They call him Beelzebul, the prince of demons. Jesus predicts the scribes will kill him. Sure enough, at the end of the Gospel, the scribes are there: in the plot to get him, during the arrest, at the trial, and when he hangs on the cross, the scribes are there, making sport of how he saved others, but cannot save himself.

A few days before his crucifixion, Jesus meets a scribe at the temple, the holy shrine of God. "Jesus meets scribe at temple." I can see the headline. It's like "Clinton meets Dole at Liberty Bell." "Axel Rose meets Garth Brooks at Graceland." "Rush Limbaugh meets Hillary Clinton at--" oh, gosh, just anywhere! The gospel sets you up to expect that when these two meet at this particular site, in this particular week, it's like high noon, holsters on, and all the apostles and all the pharisees won't be able to pin back their arms from a slugfest that ranks right up there in the annals of history with Popeye and Brutus. Every single time the scribes walk on the scene in Mark's gospel, every single time you can just smell bad blood--every single time except one: this passage. In the very moment you expect the two of them to shoot it out, this is what we get: a sincere, polite, enlightening conversation.

It begins because the scribe feels drawn to Jesus when he hears him answering questions so well. The scribe tosses one in on his own, as if he's joining a pickup game of basketball: "Which commandment is the first of all?" He's not trying to trap Jesus; he's posing a sincere question which springs from the soul of a man who spends his life trying to follow the law, and who recognizes a rabbi with smarts. Jesus plucks out a law from the scriptures, "You shall love the Lord your God;" a brilliant answer, ~~which~~ he improves with something the scribe did not ask, the second commandment: "Love your neighbor." The scribe praises the answer, and adds to it himself: Loving is better than offering sacrifice in this temple--a major concession for a law-conscious scribe. It would be like Dole saying you know universal health care has some merit. Then Jesus praises the scribe: "You are not far from the kingdom of God." This conversation, which should be a bitter debate, is downright respectful. In fact, it demonstrates what it's talking about. It puts into action the commandment to love.

We Christians may have our enemies, but we can treat them with respect. We might even accidentally say things which will benefit the world.