

## Matthew 5:17-22

Trinity 6, July 7, 2024  
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***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them. <sup>18</sup> For truly, I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished. <sup>19</sup> Therefore whoever relaxes one of the least of these commandments and teaches others to do the same will be called least in the kingdom of heaven, but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven. <sup>20</sup> For I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. <sup>21</sup> "You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.' <sup>22</sup> But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, 'You fool!' will be liable to the hell of fire.***

When I was in school, I used to get pretty anxious before any exams, and whenever a big, important exam was approaching, I'd tend to have dreams about it. In those dreams, I'd wake up and realize that I'd overslept and was late for class. I'd rush over to class and see that all my classmates were already half-way done with their tests, and I was going to be hard-pressed to catch up. Then, I'd sit down and look at the test, and most of the time, it would look like gibberish; I couldn't make heads or tails about what any of the questions were trying to ask. Looking around, everyone else would clearly be having no problem at all understanding the questions, and then suddenly the bell would ring, and I'd have to turn in my exam with only my name written across the top.

Maybe you've dreamt that same type of dream before. It's not too unusual. We are naturally scared to fail; we don't want to see an "F" at the top of our exam. And so, when we are preparing for something that we desperately *don't* want to fail, sometimes we feel intense "exam anxiety" which manifests itself in the form of dreams in which we *have* failed.

Well, Jesus is preparing us for an exam this morning. He's preparing us for the *final* exam, when we will stand before the Judge who will hand us our grade. And maybe in thinking about *that* exam, you have found yourself feeling some *exam anxiety*. So, rather than going into that exam unprepared, Jesus hands us a practice test today so we can be *well*-prepared. Our theme for this morning is:

### **Preparing for God's Final Exam**

- I. By yourself, you have already failed
- II. With Jesus, you've aced the test!

Jesus is speaking here this morning during what's known as His "Sermon on the Mount." His disciples are gathered there along with a large crowd, and most likely some Pharisees are also gathered around and listening in on the message. And Jesus is teaching them about the nature of discipleship, about what it means to be a follower of His. And no doubt here, as the one who is teaching from the mountain, He is hearkening back to the original mountain scene, where God's Law was delivered.

And in many ways, what Jesus does here in this sermon is expand on what God's original intention was in that Law. The Ten Commandments, as they were given, were intended as a *summary* of God's Law, but there was much more involved in keeping God's Law than what it might appear when you just read the summary of the Law as found on those two tablets of stone.

So, Jesus builds on them. For example, He takes up the topic here in our text of what we call the 5<sup>th</sup> Commandment. Looking at verse 21: ***“You have heard that it was said to those of old, ‘You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to judgment.’”*** Alright, that’s one of the questions on God’s Final Exam. “Are you a murderer?” That’s an important question, since God also tells us that ***“no murderer has eternal life abiding in him.”*** (1 John 3:15) So are you feeling any exam anxiety with that one? Well, that’s one that I’ve passed, right? I’ve never murdered anybody! I’ve never taken innocent blood! No, I’m safe on that one!

Oh yeah? Jesus says, “Listen on.” ***“But I say to you that everyone who is angry with his brother will be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother will be liable to the council; and whoever says, ‘You fool!’ will be liable to the hell of fire.”*** Ouch! That’s not quite what I expected. In other words, maybe you’ve never actually *killed* someone, but have you ever *wanted* someone dead? Or maybe you haven’t gone that far, but have you *hoped* for someone to get hurt? Or *thought* about hurting them? Or maybe you haven’t even gone *that* far! But have you hurt them through your words? Have you *thought* angry thoughts towards them? Then, Jesus says, you have broken this commandment. You’ve failed this part of the test!

But at least that’s just one out of the ten, right? There’s still nine others, and as with any exam, if you get most of them right, at least you pass. Isn’t that the case? “C’s get degrees,” isn’t that what they say? Isn’t that the way God works too? As long as you get most of them right, you still pass the Final Exam? 65%? No. 85%? No. 95%?! Not even that. How about 99%? If you score a 99% on God’s Final Exam, will that be good enough to get into heaven? No. God’s standard is absolute—100%. In fact, later in this same chapter, Jesus says, ***“You therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*** (Matthew 5:48) 100% right is what God requires from you, *if* you are to pass that Final Exam and graduate into Heaven. So, how’s your exam anxiety now?

Well, one more defensive response that we might have is, “Certainly God will grade on a curve, right?” I think many professors do that; they grade on a curve. That means that you take the highest score and automatically elevate it to an “A,” regardless of what the percentage correct is. And then everybody else’s score is grouped proportionately along the curve. If God’s grading on a curve and comparing you to the rest of humanity, then certainly you could still pass the Final Exam!

But Jesus has an answer for this too. He says in verse 20, ***“I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”*** Of course, when we hear the word “Pharisee” now, there’s a whole lot of baggage that comes with that term. We understand them to be largely hypocritical, avowed enemies of Christ the Savior. But at the time that Jesus is speaking here, Pharisees are thought of as the good, church-going people of the day. Think of the best Christian that you know, the person that you cannot imagine hardly ever struggling with any of the sins that you struggle with. That’s the imagery. These were the “A” students. If there was ever anyone most likely to pass God’s Final Exam, they were the Pharisees! But Jesus says that unless you *exceed* them in righteousness, ***“You will never enter the kingdom of heaven.”***

How’s your exam anxiety now? I’ll tell you, hearing these words, that my exam anxiety is high! I’m feeling pretty nervous! Because how can I meet the high and holy demands of God? How can I hope

to meet His *absolute standard* for entrance into His Kingdom? What God expects is too high for me, too great, too perfect. We cannot achieve God's standards. Nothing less than 100% will be good enough to pass and graduate into Heaven, and God is *not* going to be grading on a curve. Better than average will not do it. What we *need* God to do is to relax the test! What we need is for God to make it easier for us to pass, to lower His expectations! But Jesus says, ***"I say to you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law until all is accomplished."*** God's not going to make this an easy test to pass. So, as we're **Preparing for God's Final Exam**, Jesus wants us to know first of all that **by ourselves, we have already failed.**

So, our only hope is the one who *can* achieve God's high and holy standards, the one who *did* achieve God's high and holy standards. And He is the one who is speaking these words. He is the one who is teaching these commandments. He is Jesus Himself. And **with Jesus, you've aced the test!**

At the beginning of our text, Jesus makes a profound statement: ***"Do not think that I have come to abolish the Law or the Prophets; I have not come to abolish them but to fulfill them."*** What Jesus here is driving at is that He is the one who came to fulfill both what the Prophets foretold and what God's Law required. He is the one with *all* the answers. He is the one who aces God's Final Exam—100%. And He does so *as your substitute.*

No doubt, you remember times when you had a substitute teacher when you were in school. That's a teacher who comes in and fills in for the regular teacher when that teacher is sick or away. Well, Jesus here is the Teacher on the Mount, but we could also say that He is the *substitute* Teacher. But He doesn't come to substitute for another teacher; He comes to substitute for the student, for the test taker, for you. He comes and aces God's Final Exam as a substitute for you.

There was a show that Jess and I were watching a while ago, about a man with photographic memory who used that photographic memory to study Law. And while, for various reasons, he was ineligible to take the Bar exam and become a lawyer himself, He would take the Bar for other lawyer-hopefuls and pass the test for them. Of course, if this was a real-life story, it would be shocking news, and our response would be that this is unethical, even illegal. And indeed, it would be.

But something even more shocking took place that was completely legal, ethical, moral, and right. And that is that Christ came and took *your* exam for *you*. And now, *His* perfect score, *His perfect record* is transferred to your spiritual transcript so that you pass.

And let's just look at His record! Let's look at how He compares to the practice test presented before us today. He's the one who doesn't need relaxed standards. ***"Not one iota, not a dot, will pass from the Law..."*** Jesus said. And for Him, that wasn't a problem. He kept each and every commandment—not just on the surface, through His actions—but even with His tongue and even with His thoughts. For Jesus, every thought of His life was one of perfect love—both for His Father in Heaven and for you.

He's the one who doesn't need to be graded on a curve. Again, He said, ***"I tell you, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven."*** Well, Jesus' righteousness *did* exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees, for a couple reasons.

First, because while they only *appeared* to keep God's Law on the surface, Jesus was the one who actually did so. Jesus was the one who *could* stand up and announce that He was not like other men. And second, because while the so-called righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees was only done to make themselves look good in the eyes of others, Jesus' perfect righteousness was for you. So that *you* could look good in the eyes of God.

Or, we could look at His record with the Fifth Commandment, and we can see so clearly that Jesus aced this portion of the test along with all others. Because even when He was being abused, and reviled, and maligned, and crucified—even still Jesus did not think an evil thought towards His abusers. Jesus did not speak even an *unkind* word against them, but instead said, ***"Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do."*** (Luke 23:34)

And those are the same kind words He has for you. Even though, looking at our records, we see that we have failed miserably—as if we'd never even spent a *second* studying—and looking at the evidence of our lives we see clearly that we are ***"liable to the hell of fire"***—instead, Jesus says of you, ***"Father, forgive them."*** Blotting out the red ink all over our Final Exams is the blood of Jesus Christ which ***"cleanses us from all sin."*** (1 John 1:7)

And not only that, but it needs to be said again: Jesus' perfect score is given to you as your own perfect score. This means that when you stand before God for the Final Exam on Judgment Day, what God will see is someone who didn't need relaxed standards, who didn't need to be graded on a curve; God will look at you and see someone who scored 100% throughout your life, the perfect test! This is what Paul means when he writes, ***"For our sake [God] made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God."*** (2 Corinthians 5:21) Because Jesus is righteous, you are righteous. Because Jesus is perfect, you are perfect. **With Jesus, you've aced the test!**

So, if you've ever experienced that type of dream before—the kind that comes from severe exam anxiety—where you go to take the test and absolutely fail; you know that after waking up and actually taking the test, it was never as bad as you dreamed in your nightmare.

Similarly, if you have any exam anxiety thinking about Judgment Day, know this: not only will it not be as bad as you've dreamed in your nightmares, but you will pass through with flying colors. Not because you've earned that perfect score, but simply because of what Christ has already done for you. So, how's your exam anxiety now? In Christ Jesus, you need not fear. Amen.

***"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."*** (Philippians 4:7) Amen.