

# The Secret Message of Jesus: The Kingdom's Entrance Exams

Luke 12:22-34, Galatians 5:2-6

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GR FUMC

Good morning students! I hope you're prepared for today's exam. Will everyone take out their #2 pencil, please? What? You don't have a #2 pencil? Well, fortunately for you any writing instrument will do for this test. So find a pencil or a pen or even a crayon if you have one. The well-prepared students with pens in their pockets or purses may need to share. And luckily for all of us this morning, our bulletin cover has plenty of room on it for you to write down your answers.

Before we begin, let's do what so many students in schools and universities around the world do before a test...let's pray.

*[Prayer]*

OK, are you ready? All answers are to be written as a number: 1, 2 or 3. 1 means "not at all" 2 means "sometimes" and 3 means "always." You may want to write that down. 1 is *not at all*, 2 is *sometimes*, 3 is *always*.

1. I spend at least 15 minutes in prayer everyday.
2. I give 10% of my income to God's work.
3. I refrain from swearing.
4. I successfully resist the temptation to gossip.
5. I regard my body as a temple of God, nourishing it on a daily basis with a healthy diet, daily exercise, and 8 hours of sleep.
6. I am calm, focused and mindful of those around me.
7. I observe the Sabbath by attending worship services and refraining from commercial activity.
8. I am free from all jealousy, envy or desire for possessions.

9. (This question is especially for the teenagers in the balcony.) I am respectful and polite towards my elders.
10. I refrain from cheating...in games, in my marital or life partner relationship, on my taxes and...especially...on tests.

Please add up your score, write it on your bulletin somewhere, turn your test booklets over and put down your pencils.

So, how'd you do? You didn't need a test to give you the score, did you? I'll bet you already knew. Most of us – maybe all of us at one time or another – carry these test questions, these “shoulds” of the proper Christian life, in our heads. We think of life the way we think of school or work: trying to earn a good grade, trying to win the teacher's approval, trying to demonstrate our worth to the boss.

We do this, us good Protestants, even though we *know* that we are saved by grace, not works. We carry around this list of prerequisites for God's grace even though we know every single verse of “Amazing Grace, How Sweet the Sound.” We do this even though we hear sermon after sermon telling us that God's love can't be earned, it's just a gift.

We persist in thinking that our good behavior is necessary for entrance into the Kingdom of God because, in so many other parts of our lives, reward depends on behavior. Work hard: move up. Remain loyal: earn trust. Play by the rules: win the game. At least it's *supposed* to work that way.

“Author Philip Yancey writes of a time in his life when, as part of his graduate work, he had to study German for an entire summer in preparation for a comprehensive language exam the coming September. Since Yancey did not have a great love for the

German language, and since the summer generally offers more exciting possibilities than brushing up on umlauts and vocabulary lists, Yancey found the summer arduous and tiresome.

But he had to pass the exam and so he stuck with it. Later he wondered what his attitude would have been if someone had come to him in, say, early July, and said, ‘Yancey, I want you to stick with this German because it’s good for you and you should put your brain to good use at all times. But I’ll let you in on something. Come September, no matter how well or how poorly you perform on the exam, I guarantee you’ll get a straight A.’

Would you do it? If you knew that no matter how hard you studied you would ace the exam, would you still be able to find any motivation to stick with the studying? What would prevent you from saying, ‘Nuts to this – I’m heading for the beach. What’s the sense of studying when my grade is already in the bag?’” (Hoevee, 50)

The same thing that makes the beach vs. German story so ridiculous also makes us act as if God’s grace is something to be earned. Reward should require effort . If grace assures us a straight A in the kingdom of God, if our every error is already erased, what possible purpose could be served by our striving for goodness? Surely there should be a reason, a motivation, to behave ourselves.

This was the dilemma of the people of the church in Galatia in the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. They were divided into two camps. There were those who believed that the freedom of living under God’s grace meant license to do whatever they pleased. They believed that, since setting the human spirit free from matter and flesh is the whole point of life and that what you actually do in that life is of little consequence, they didn’t have to pay attention

to any rules of behavior. The theological term for this is “antinomianism,” which literally means ‘anti-law.’ Antinomians are those who use grace as an excuse to live however they want, an attitude that can be summed up well in the famed words of Heinrich Heine, ‘God likes to forgive, I like to sin. Really, the world is admirably arranged.’ (Adams; Hoezee 49)

Paul’s response to the antinomians in the Galatian church is found in the verses following the ones we read this morning. In verse 13 of chapter 5, Paul says, "Do not use your freedom for self-indulgence, but through love become slaves of one another, for the whole law is summed up in this single commandment: You shall love your neighbor as yourself."

Following the law, the whole law, was the obsession of the other camp in Galatia. The group of people who thought it imperative to adhere to the requirements of religious ritual, the most significant of which was circumcision. These are the legalists, those who dismiss God’s grace in favor of keeping the rules as a way to make God love them. The legalist says, ‘God loves me because I’m good. As opposed to those other people who lead bad lives, I’ll make it to heaven because I’ve lived a good life.’” These are the ones to whom Paul writes “Listen! I, Paul, am telling you that if you let yourselves be circumcised, Christ will be of no benefit to you. Once again I testify to every man who lets himself be circumcised that he is obliged to obey the entire law. You who want to be justified by the law have cut yourselves off from Christ; you have fallen away from grace.”

To insist that the rules be followed *or else*, is to try to earn God’s favor. Instead, Paul says, “through the Spirit, by faith, we eagerly wait for the hope of righteousness. For

in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything; the only thing that counts is faith working through love.” The only thing that “counts” is faith working through love. We live out our faith by acting in love not because we think we have to in order to pass the test, but because, having found out the test was cancelled, we are compelled to share the joy with others we have received.

In other words, grace isn't fair. It isn't "fair," in the way we think of fairness, because it's not earned, it's received. This is what Jesus taught his disciples at the end of his words about fear and anxiety. "Do not be afraid, little flock, for it is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom."

Notice that God *wants* to give us the kingdom, not to dangle it in front of us as a bribe for good behavior. God *wants* to give us the grace we need to move our lives according to God's will. God *wants* us to live as forgiven and reconciled people. God *wants* the world to be a place of peace and justice.

So many people grew up with a picture of God as a stern, angry judge whose job it is to punish people for wrong doings. (Jewell) This is the God of the Far Side cartoon which shows the deity at a computer. On the screen is an image of an ordinary man in the street with a block of concrete over his head. God is looking at the screen and is just about to hit the 'smite' button to wipe him out. (von Kalm) Yes, God desires responsible and right living, but Jesus is telling us that God also takes great delight in giving good gifts to all who are willing to receive them. (Jewell)

We don't have to earn God's grace, in fact we *can't* earn it and no amount of worrying or fearful rule-following about it will help us to do that. But we do have to receive it. Eventually, when one gets old enough, one learns that in order to receive

lasting love from another human being, we must be ready to *receive* that love by learning to love ourselves first. We can't earn that love, but we can be ready to enter into a loving relationship that requires the best of us.

In the same way, we cannot merit God's grace, we can't earn our way into God's kingdom...but we can prepare ourselves to receive it. Pastor and author Brian McLaren says that we begin doing this by repenting. We prepare ourselves to receive God's grace by repenting: by opening ourselves to the possibility that, relying on our own abilities, we may be headed in the wrong direction. When we repent of our own attempts to control our own lives, we open ourselves up to the possibility of change. We question our own motives and our own abilities to do, by ourselves, what is good and right and true. Doing this, we open ourselves to the possibility of trusting God instead of ourselves.

And this, this trusting, this opening oneself up to God, is faith, faith that comes by the grace of God. Not faith in something *about* God, but faith *in* God. It's 'believing God' with the same kind of confidence one has when saying 'I believe in my spouse.' Equally, it's not simply believing this or that *about* the good news of the kingdom; it's believing *in*, having confidence *in* the good news of the kingdom.

This kind of faith doesn't mean you no longer have doubts or questions. This isn't being certain that you're right about everything. Jesus said that all we need is a little bit of faith, just the size of a mustard seed. Faith isn't the absence of doubt, it's the presence of action, it's a new way of living and loving that is reflected in everything you do. "Neither circumcision nor uncircumcision counts for anything," Paul says; "the only thing that counts is faith working through love."

McLaren says that “in this light, the phrase *leap of faith* isn’t a leap *into* faith; it’s the leap that you take because you’re already in faith and want to put your faith into loving action. The little boy who leaps from the stairway into his daddy’s arms wouldn’t leap unless he were, in a certain sense, already securely and confidently there in those arms in his imagination. Once the deed is safely done in his imagination, the actual leap is pure, exhilarating joy” (McLaren, 109).

Long before he became a nationally-known preacher and writer, Brian McLaren was a coach for his daughter’s soccer team. “We were the mighty Yellow Jackets,” he writes, “an eight-and-under girls’ team, and in our first few seasons we would lose by double-digit scores that seemed more like football scores: 21-3; 17-0; 28-4.

During one game, one of the girls, Emily, in an unusual moment of inspiration, stole the ball and dribbled. A swarm of opposing players descended upon her. Spinning about and breaking free, Emily saw something she had never seen before: a wide open field between her and the goal. On her face was a look that McLaren had never seen before: “for the first time she knew exactly what to do. All her resources were unified in a glorious moment of clarity, hope and commitment. She was going to score!”

So the intrepid Emily started dribbling. Driving forward, deep in concentration, she had never dribbled so well. Kick, kick, step, kick, step, step, kick. There was only one problem in the entire universe at that moment, a problem of which she was blissfully unaware: she was driving to the wrong goal.

“Turn around, Emily!” McLaren started yelling. “It’s the wrong goal!” She plunged ahead. The parents started yelling, too. “Wrong way! Wrong goal! Turn around!” She couldn’t hear them; she was in another dimension of time and space. She

neared the goal and looked up once more, oblivious to the shouting, grim in her determination. She had never been in scoring position before. As her right foot cocked back in her backswing, somewhere in the inner regions of her brain a tiny alarm went off. *Why was her best friend and teammate Robin in the goal box? Why did Robin look so afraid?*

But it was too late. Emily's reflexes had clicked into motion and could not be stopped. As her foot connected with the ball you could see the agony of an awful recognition spread across her face. First her expression and then her crumbling body folded into a living parable of repentance as she collapsed to the dirt. Her heart sank and the ball rose, sailing in a beautiful arc toward the net.

Robin dove to her left, and at the last instant, her knuckles grazed the ball so that it veered slightly to the right, tipped off the goalpost and dropped to the ground, rolling to a stop just out of bounds. Robin had averted disaster for the mighty Yellow Jackets. Her teammates, including Emily, ran to her and tackled her in a joyful, shouting, screaming mass of relieved girlhood. Emily's mistake was swallowed up in Robin's amazing save.

At the awards banquet at the end of the season, Robin received the most valuable player trophy. Emily presented it to her, beaming with pride...because the memory of her mistake was no longer her moment of shame; it was their moment of pride. (McLaren, 105-108)

Grace isn't fair. It isn't given to us because manage to pray every day or tithe our income or go to church every Sunday. But once we open ourselves up to the possibility that we may be headed in the wrong direction and that we may need to trust

God to turn us around, we allow God to grace us with the faith that compels us to pray and give and share and live out of love instead of fear. Our mistakes are swallowed up in Christ's amazing save.

I invite you to find your tests. Take out your pen or pencil once more. And over the top of your score, whether it is a 30 or a 10, draw not a circle or a star the way teachers do for whom grades and scores mean something, but a cross. One line down, from God to you; one line across from you to your neighbor. It's not your score that counts. The only thing that counts is faith, expressed in love.

John Jewell, "God Wants to Give You Something" Sunday August 9, 1998 ~ Tenth Sunday After Pentecost ~ Luke 12:32-40. <http://www.sermonhelp.com>

Joanna Adams, "The Predicament of Freedom" Galatians 5: 1-6, 13-15; Proper 8 - Year C; July 01, 2007. [http://day1.org/1049-the\\_predicament\\_of\\_freedom](http://day1.org/1049-the_predicament_of_freedom)

Nils von Kalm, "Matthew 20:1-16, The workers in the vineyard."  
<http://jmm.aaa.net.au/articles/21711.htm>

Brian D. McLaren, *The Secret Message of Jesus*. (Thomas Nelson, 2006)

Scott Hoezee, *The Riddle of Grace: Applying Grace to the Christian Life*. (Eerdmans, 1996)