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## Jesus Final Exam

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*Matthew 22:34-46*

Final exams are one of life's biggest challenges. They measure all that you have learned. They test all you can remember. They require stamina, quick thinking and understanding how the information fits into the larger scheme of things.

I have one friend who studied so hard for her CPA exam that she collapsed under the dormitory sink, and only woke up when she heard her head bumping up against the pipes. During NYU's medical school exams, I had a first-hand seat to the incredible anxiety and stamina of a half-dozen medical students, including my daughter. I remember my ordination exams, especially the one for biblical exegesis. We had a time limit, there was a huge storm and the power went out. I heard many non-seminary approved curses erupt in the room.

As Matthew's Gospel tells it, nearly everybody with any authority around Jesus seems to be giving him final exams. Chief priests, elders, scribes, lawyers, Sadducees, Pharisees. The atmosphere is not lively and amicable; it is hostile, and the purpose is to discredit Jesus. Much is at stake — Jesus' authority, his role and his identity. It is this test that ultimately dooms Jesus in the minds of the religious and scholarly authorities. What stands out is the way Jesus takes something complicated and comes up with a simple answer.

Jewish scholars had surveyed the Torah, counted carefully and discovered 613 commandments. To apply all 613 at once was virtually impossible, even if you could remember them all. 'If you were to focus on just one law,' asks the lawyer, 'what would it be?' Now, the lawyer and Jesus would probably have agreed that the law would be found in the Torah —the first 5 books of our Old Testament. They would have agreed that the law was a gift from God. They would agree that one must keep the Torah's commandments in daily life. Jesus preached about this. The most famous example was during the Sermon on the Mount where he said that he had come not to abolish the law and the prophets, but to fulfill them. He even added that, unless your righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The lawyer's question is a good one for us too. If we want to practice our faith, where do we start? If we want our everyday life to reflect our relationship with God, which of God's commandments is most important? There are so many we could choose. How do we land on the most essential thing; the command that rests at the heart of them all?

I once saw an amazing video on archery. You can find it on YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q8Yp9SjCU5E>

The archer first tosses a six-inch wooden disk into the air above his head. Seconds later an arrow swiftly shoots into the face of the disk, fracturing the wood into pieces. A high-speed camera, replayed in slow motion, captures the arrow's impact nearly dead center in the disk.

The next target is a two-and-a-half-inch plastic ball. Again, the archer tosses it into the air. Again, the arrow launches toward its target and hits it nearly on center.

The archer's arrow flies three more times, each time the target gets smaller: a golf ball, then a Life Saver candy, and finally an aspirin tablet. Every time the arrow goes straight to the mark, even when the target is no bigger than the point of the arrow itself.

The host then asks, "How can you shoot an arrow so accurately using a handmade bow, especially when the target seems so small?" The archer replies: "The center of an aspirin is exactly the same size as the center of a beach ball. Always aim for the center."

When Jesus responds to the lawyer's question, that's exactly what he does: he aims for the center, straight into the heart of their shared sacred scriptures. His answer lands in Deuteronomy, at the *Shema*, which is God's vision statement for God's people: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and with all your mind." Jesus then adds a quote from Leviticus: "love your neighbor as yourself."

Jesus' answer lands on the center of our faith--the Old Testament Scriptures that he, God's own Messiah, has lived and preached in fresh new ways.

What love looks like differs depending on the context, but the call to love remains the same. In Matthew, Jesus aims first and foremost on the needs of the most vulnerable people. Whether he meets them in houses, public markets, on the road or

in villages, Jesus makes sure that these people, the ones who need God the most, receive God's healing power.

The foundation of neighborly love is to recognize that we are called to love what God already *passionately* loves. When we love both God and neighbor, the boundaries around our puny selves expands, much like the Grinch's heart does for the tiny "Who's" of Whoville. Remember the story's ending? "And what happened, then? Well, in Whoville they say – that the Grinch's small heart grew three sizes that day."

The reason we need to worship is that we cannot be shaped into God-like people all by ourselves. Worship is what helps us to grow our sometimes small and errant hearts.

We know that loving God is not the same as loving our neighbor. Frankly, loving a neighbor may be harder than loving God, just by virtue of the concrete visibility of the neighbor. It is one thing to announce how we love humankind; it is another thing to specifically love the cousin at the Thanksgiving table who spouts off opinions that you do not share.

So let's look again to Jesus and how he passes his final exam. Do you want to know how to love God with your whole self? Practice loving your neighbor. Do you want to know how to love your neighbor? Practice loving God. Repeat. Do it over and over again.

And someday with practice you and I might pass our final exams too.