

Final Exam

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Scripture: Matthew 25:31-46

My sisters, my brothers:

Some of us have had the privilege of undergoing a most fascinating experience: Doctoral Qualifying Exams. For others the privilege is called: Ordination Exams. Whatever the name, the process bears a family resemblance: you get a list of three thousand books to study for each exam. Then you read, read, read, read, and read some more . . . until your eyeballs *throb* and your neck aches like sin. You scribble notes, rewrite them, condense them, reread, and outline, trying to *cram* it all in. On the fateful day, you go in to school and pick up your exam at 7:30 in the morning: one sheet of paper, four sections, ten questions in all. You are to answer one question for each section. For each question you have one hour to outline your answer, and one hour to write it. So you frantically try to pour out everything you know about the question in *one* hour. Eight hours later, you drag what's left of you back to school, and hand in this *packet* of writing, answers *and* chicken-scratched notes, hoping to high heaven that you've done enough. And you get to perform this delightful exercise four times. You find yourself thinking, "I *volunteered* for this?" "I'm *paying them* for the privilege??" Now . . . what if *this* time the teacher handed you a piece of paper and told you: "*This* is your final exam. All the questions that will be on your Final. Everything. Here it is"? And then told you, "But I'm not going to tell you *when* you're going to take it"? Well, in today's scripture we just heard Jesus Christ's Final Exam.

Did you notice? Two troubling words stood out. The first word is: "Nations." "Before him will be gathered all the *nations*." Did you notice? Not "Christians." Not "individuals." Not "saints." Only vast, teeming throngs of all *nations*. *All* peoples: good, bad, ugly, one great big messy mass of humanity. We're talking *grand scale* here. Wide screen, plasma TV. No isolated, single brave souls standing before Judge Jesus, one by one. He is gaveling them nation by nation. Yikes! What happens on a *national* scale is what Judge Jesus seems to care about here. This could get ugly. It just might be that we're going up that final escalator — or down! — depending on what our *nation* does. And that puts the responsibility square in *our* hands, friends. In this crazy year, when we hear strident voices blaming Katrina's *victims* for their *own* devastating losses, voices suddenly "discovering" budget shortfalls and bleating, "cut, cut, cut those handouts; give, give, give those tax-cuts;" listen carefully: you just might hear the sound of another Voice as well. Weighing our fate by the actions of our *nation*. What a troublesome thought! One word can ruin our day: "nations." Jesus is going to judge the *nations*.

Well, the other word is worse: "When?" Did you catch it? *Both* groups said, "*When* did we . . . ?" Both the sheep *and* the goats cried out in amazement, "*You*, Jesus? *When*? We never knew it was *you*. Heck, if we'd known it was you, we'd have pushed the Spiritual Overdrive button on the gearshift: white-knuckled praying till we sweated blood, shaking the rafters with our "praise-the-Lords," raising holy hands — maybe even getting a case of happy feet! — slipping tracts under *all* the wiper blades in the Wal-Mart parking lot, maybe even dropping a couple of double-digit bills

in the offering plate. You know: *impressive* stuff. Maybe getting up an anthem with full choir, and both piano *and* organ rolling like thunder, congregation on their feet roaring and clapping, white-robed preacher descending from the ceiling by a rope (but always, always decently and in order). If we'd only known it was *you*." Scary word, that word, "when." Could mean that we're looking for Christ in all the wrong places. Truth is, we *may not know* exactly when He is there. "That was *You*? You were *there*?? We didn't know!"

But take a closer look: the actions Jesus is talking about are surprisingly "unspiritual." No high, dramatic sacrifice. No hymns, no prayers. Just food, clothes, holding a hand beside the hospital bed . . . simple, ordinary stuff. The kind that's easy to miss. The kind you may not need special seminary training to perform. The Final Exam is simple, you see. Plain vanilla. Ordinary actions. Feed, clothe, visit, greet. Common, human stuff. The kind of stuff that just happens to make an eternity of difference. Here's the bottom line, says the Son of Man from His throne: are the outcasts from New Orleans' Lower Ninth Ward being taken care of, yes or no? You opened your cities to them, even your homes, you made kits with emergency supplies for them – wonderful! Now make sure that they can return home with clothes, shelter, schools, and jobs with a living wage! *Resist* anybody trying to pull the plug on funding temporary housing in motel rooms just in time for Christmas! Where else are they going to stay right now? Talk about "no room at the inn"! Are the *nations* taking care of their hurting, sick, little ones? *Fight* to care for them, raising your voice against cuts in Medicare, food stamps, Head Start, school funding, health care, and all other "responsible" efforts to "balance the budget" by snip-snipping away at the social safety net of the poor! Are followers of the Prince of Peace bending over backwards to make sure the *nations* "study war no more"? Use your brand-spanking-new Hebrew knowledge on the Ten Commandments; make it just as plain as baby-talk: "you . . . no . . . kill!" Are the *forgotten* children of God being taken care of, yes or no? says Judge Jesus. Don't just *see* the good news; *be* the good news, one cup of cold water at a time. Now, you can argue all you want about the *details*: call them "socialized medicine," or "welfare state," or blue-ribbon Governor's panels, or whatever. But the bottom line is, are the hungry fed? I don't care *how* it's done, says Jesus, government, churches, girl scouts, adopt-a-family, piggy-banks. . . . Hey, the more the merrier! Your job, Christians, He says, is to bunch together and *see to it* that your sisters and brothers are *taken care of*! To push, prod, plead, argue, to be "in your face" Christians! Common, ordinary, *unspectacular* actions: feed, visit, clothe. Make it so!

And why? "Because," says Jesus, "that's where you'll find *Me*. Surprise!" My address, you see, has *always* been: corner of Forgotten Street and Nowhere Avenue. My servant Matthew knew it. For him the "Son of Man" -- no, better, "Child of Humanity" -- that mighty, mighty, mighty savior of cosmic power, was called a drunk, a glutton, because he seemed to prefer the company of sinners and tax-collectors. He was murdered on a Cross *outside* the city walls. Yes, Matthew knew what I'm all about. You want to find *Me*? Look, says Jesus, I'll make it easy for you; I'll give you my personal address: Tupelo Street, Lower 9th Ward, New Orleans, hip deep in the muck. In the Al-Nazal neighborhood, Fallujah, Iraq, ducking bullets jacketed in depleted uranium, stamped "Made in the U.S.A." Tossed in a cell without a number, Guantánamo Bay, Cuba, where nobody is tortured because America doesn't do that. Living in those shacks with the cracks in Smoketown, West Side of Louisville, Kentucky. That's my address, says Jesus, you can reach me there. Down

with the *folks*, with the power-*less*. Yes, Judge Jesus looks straight into our eyes: “You want to find me?” he says. “Look for the *overlooked*. That’s where I’ll be.”

Now, wait just a minute. What kind of a switcheroo is Christ pulling on us here? “*I was hungry?*” “*I was a stranger?*” “*I was naked, sick, in prison . . . ?*” Christ is turning things all “jeehockeyways,” as my Grandmother used to say. I mean, come on, *we* are used to being the Representatives of the Lord here on earth, right? Look, doesn't Paul say it, right in Second Corinthians (5:20), calling *us* “ambassadors for Christ?” Christ working through *our* hands, and all that? So what's going on here? Well, think for a moment. Why do we bother to wander into someplace called “church” in the first place? Why do we strain our ears to listen *beneath* the words of Scripture? Why do we torture ourselves trying to learn glories of the Hithpael? Maybe . . . maybe because beneath it all, we desperately want to find *God*. We search for God every time we sit down in these pews, we listen for God as the lector stumbles through a Scripture lesson, with every Hebrew flashcard we strive to learn the very tongue of God’s soul. We hunger to feel the touch of the divine hand in our lives. So consider: could it be . . . , could it possibly be that the more we let Christ into our lives, feeding on the honey of God's Word like Ezekiel (3:1-3), clustering together to sing our high praises to God, praying for each other and the world, hearing God’s Word set loose once more to range across the globe, serving each other the Lord's Supper’s banquet of grace, offering the stuff of our life to God, and then flinging the good news far and wide, stretching out hands of Christian compassion, and praying and praying and praying some more . . . could it be that the closer we get to God, the more we act our way into Christ-like-ness, the more we let the Spirit sculpt the wet clay of our souls — the more we will begin to see Christ *precisely* in the faces of his little ones? Anywhere? Everywhere? Could it be that the more time we spend with Christ, the more we will begin to perceive Christ’s *ethical demand upon us* in every “marginalized” face we see? That maybe we with our casual sense of privilege *don’t* own sole copyright on Jesus Christ? Do you think that maybe the mysterious heart of God, Whose love reaches beyond our wildest reckonings, could turn the tables on us in some kind of high, holy, incredibly blessed joke? So that now, instead of us generously *offering* Christ to those poor slobs, like some sort of Heavenly welfare check, the *Christ in us . . . touches the Christ in them . . .* and *all* are blessed, in some kind of mysterious Divine logic that simply blasts open *all* our cramped little theological boxes? What kind of Love would turn things so upside-down? So that those who think *they* are giving in Christ's name . . . *find Christ in the very act of giving?* What kind of a Christ? What sort of Love, so amazing, so divine . . . ?

Well, we’ve got an advance clue what's on our Final Exam, don't we? Ordinary, human actions, on a national scale. An “in-your-face” Christianity that *pushes* nations into compassion. A Christ whose Love defies human logic. And the Judge . . . who stands with the nobodies . . . has given each one of us the bottom line Himself: Are your sisters and brothers taken care of, yes or no?

We've got one lifetime to write our answer. . . .