

## Keeping Score

Text: Matthew 5:17-26

Hymn: "All Mankind Fell in Adam's Fall" (*LSB 562*)

Keeping score. It's a vital part of our life, right? We've learned it from early on, even the earliest games that we play. You have to keep score; otherwise, how do you know who wins and who loses?

When I was younger and more fleet of foot than I am today, I played tennis a lot. And one of the most irritating things to me was when a friend would say, Oh, I just want to hit groundstrokes. I, on the other hand, wanted to get right to playing games for points. After all, wasn't the whole point to be able to say who won and who lost afterwards. One has to keep score!

And we keep score all the time. Maybe we don't use the phrase, but we keep records and we know amounts. When you drive down the street, you keep score. You keep track of how fast you are going. And the police officer sitting at the stop light just might be keeping score on you when you drive by. Whatever the score is determines whether you are a winner or a loser.

You go to school. You get a grade. The higher the score, the better the grade. You go to work. You are offered an amount of money per hour, per day, per week, per year. You want a raise. Why? Because you're keeping score.

When it's time to pay taxes. They keep track of how much you make and you send some or more than some. We keep score. It's part of life.

We keep score in our relationships, don't we? We're like Santa Claus that way. We keep score on who's been naughty or nice to us. We keep score with our

neighbors. If the score doesn't seem very even, we do our best to even it up. We even keep score with our spouses and with our children and with our parents. In the sequel to *Father of the Bride*—the Spencer Tracy, not the Steve Martin version—Mrs. Banks keeps score in a way: She's distraught over the prospect that her son-in-law's parents will get to see the grandchild more often than she does. Only in the movies, right?

This whole keeping score business, is a vital part of life, whether we like it or not. But we have a big problem when we try to project this scorekeeping life that we live on to God. We imagine God marking things down in His heavenly scorecard, keeping track of the good things we do and the bad things that we do. So, what do we try to do so that God will like us, so that God will love us? We increase our score. We have to do more good, be a better person, pay it forward, hoping that the good will outweigh the bad in the grand scale of God's justice.

We think that this is how God works. Or, maybe if intellectually we know it isn't really, we still live, act, and move as if it is. We live our lives wanting to make sure someone else notices but absolutely certain that God is noticing every time we do something nice, good, holy, or pious.

There are many religions throughout the world that are built on this notion of God keeping score. It even sneaks its way into the way Christians think and speak. We'll say when a loved one dies, "Oh, they were such a good person. If anybody is going to make it to heaven, it'll be Aunt Betty, it'll be Uncle Fred. They were so good." You see the problem, don't you? This may be a pious wish, or it may be a foolish notion, a transferring of so much of how life works on to God's justice system. But God does not keep score the same way we do.

God says, “If you break one law, you’ve broken them all.” (Matthew 5:18, James 2:10). Not three strikes and you’re out, but one strike and you’re out. If we focus on that, we’re not even going to suit up and play the game. We’re all out. Already!

We just sang the hymn, “All Mankind Fell in Adam’s Fall.” One common sin infects us all. We are by nature sinful and unclean. We have sinned in thought, word, and deed. We want to keep score on others—we want God to keep score on others!—and yet we hope and pray that God doesn’t keep score with us. If you want to get to heaven, you have to keep score. Unless your righteousness, your perfection, exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven.

The scribes and Pharisees were the most respected, most looked up to people at that time and in that culture. They were considered the holiest of the holy. They built their lives on being good and right and holy and pious. And Jesus says, “Pick out the holiest, best person in the whole world, Aunt Betty, Uncle Fred, unless your righteousness is better than theirs, you’re out of here.”

Our Old Testament reading reminds us of the mirror of the law. We heard those ten commandments that show us our sin, that show us how far we have fallen short of the glory of God. It hurts to hear them. But we want to keep score. So let’s not consider all the commandments. Let’s just pick one that we’re really, really good at. Surely, there’s one out of ten that we haven’t broken. How about, “You shall not murder”? I would bet that outside of military service, there is no one gathered here this morning who with a gun or with a knife or with poison or even with a candlestick in the conservatory, has actually murdered another human being. We’re off the hook, right? Finally, we have one commandment that we haven’t broken.

But did you hear Jesus' words from the Sermon on the Mount just a few minutes ago?

"You have heard that it was said to those of old, 'You shall not murder; and whoever murders will be liable to the judgment.' 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."

Have you ever been angry with your neighbor? Ever insulted your neighbor? Ever said something bad to or about your neighbor? Of course you have. We all have. It's not just the physical act of murder. We sin in thought, in word, and in deed. There is no way we can get off the hook simply by keeping score.

Who could have a righteousness that meets that standard? Who? Not you. Not me. Not Aunt Betty. Not Uncle Fred. A perfect God requires perfect obedience, perfect holiness, perfect righteousness, to stand before His perfect judgment. And that's why He sent His perfect Son. That's why God sent Jesus, the only One whose righteousness exceeds that of the scribes and Pharisees. All mankind fell in Adam's Fall, "But Christ, the second Adam, came." He succeeded where Adam fell. Jesus placed Himself under the harsh, condemning law, and in thought, word, and deed, He did not sin once. He fulfilled the Law perfectly. Not for Himself but for you and me. Our holy, perfect Jesus, who sinned never, took your sin and mine, took all sin from all people of all time into Himself, and He died with it on the Cross. Death could not hold the perfectly righteous One. Three days later, Jesus rose from the dead. And as we heard in the epistle reading, He "will never die again" (Rom 6:9). You, by virtue of your baptism into Christ, have been baptized into His death, into His resurrection. His righteousness is yours. His forgiveness is yours. His eternal life is yours. God now

looks at poor, miserable sinners like you and me through the cross of His Son Jesus Christ. He looks at you and says, “My son, my daughter, you are not guilty but innocent, holy, perfect, free.”

The righteousness of God is a scary thought if it is something that we have to do, earn, achieve, or keep score about. But when we understand the righteousness of God is Jesus—His life, death, and resurrection, for us—it is music to our ears. It is the most joyful, peaceful, and encouraging and inspiring Word that we can ever hear.

With regard to your human relationships, quit keeping score. The people God has put in your life are just like you in the most important way—they are sinners for whom Christ died. Forgive as you have been forgiven. Be reconciled. Love. In so many other areas of life, you have no choice; you have to keep score. You have to earn a paycheck. Good grades are important. Don't drive over the speed limit. But for all the times that you're required to keep score in life, remember and give thanks that in God's perfect scorebook you are marked forgiven. In Jesus' name.

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