



*Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonor others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs.—1 Corinthians 13:4-5*

Keeping score is one of the fundamental predispositions of human beings. Keeping score is the way we operate, it's the way we gauge our progress and that of others and it is one of the primary ways in which our culture motivates us.

I learned to keep score at an early age via two of my passions—sports and music. The first score-keeping experience I had in sports was with the game of baseball. As I recall, I was about ten years old when I was introduced to the intricate system of using a scorebook to record the performance of each player in the batting order of each team. I was fascinated and became an avid scorekeeper as I listened to a man named Vin Scully announce games on the radio.

About the same time in my pre-teenage years I became passionately interested in the performance of rock n' roll songs—as rated by the Billboard top 40. KFWB and KRLA were the two rock n' roll radio stations I religiously (and I use that word advisedly) listened to in Los Angeles. Both of

these radio stations would announce their own weekly top 40 and distribute printed copies of the top 40 to local record stores. I was a regular customer, picking up the KFVB Fab Forty and the *KRLA Top 40* each week on the way home from school. These surveys told me how each song was doing—if it was going up the charts or down the charts—what its ranking was the previous week—and if it was # 1 how many weeks it had managed to stay on top.

Scorekeeping was fundamental to these two religious pursuits in my life at the time. Between the two of them I spent hours every day, faithfully listening to my prized transistor radio, purchased with the money I earned delivering papers and mowing lawns. I was devoted to scorekeeping!

Keeping score is all about performance—it's how we determine success or failure. Scorekeeping, both physically and spiritually, fascinates and motivates us. But God's grace functions on an entirely different economy, an entirely different set of principles. **Grace = No More Score-keeping!**

A few weeks ago I was looking at an intriguing book called *The Universal History of Numbers*. It's a comprehensive overview of numbers, looking at early decimal counting systems, calendars and numerical systems. The author, Georges Ifrah, explains and illustrates counting devices and their use. He traveled the world for ten years talking to mathematicians, historians, archaeologists and philosophers. He explains the history of counting on fingers and toes, of the abacus, of tally sticks—up through modern adding machines, calculators and computers.

Numbers make the world go round, don't they? Numbers are the primary way in which we keep score. Our human financial economies operate on the basis of how much and how many—specific numbers are absolutely necessary for human economies to work. Who would accept a job if they weren't promised a specific wage? How would people shop for groceries, clothing or goods of any kind if no price tag was attached?

I would be interested to see a similar book, exhaustively detailing the many devices invented, fabricated and used by religion, over time, to count, calculate and compute the human relationship (as religion defines it) with

God. You see, physical scorekeeping is not only fundamental to our human economy of work and production, of payments and bartering, but spiritual scorekeeping is at the heart of Christ-less religion.

We prefer to have a method that enables us to measure and quantify our relationship with God. Even though any and all such methods of keeping score are religious contrivances, we still like to think that we can know exactly “where we stand” with God. Legalistic religion is all about how much and how often—it’s all about records—spiritual bean-counting and bookkeeping.

Where would we even start in a survey of all the methods and practices used by religion in a grand pretense to let humans know how well they are doing in their relationship with God?

- Without excluding others we would have to include church/temple/synagogue attendance as one way religious professionals use to grade followers.

- Then of course there’s confession and the specific penance that one needs to pay to “get right” with God.

- Christ-less religion describes and prescribes prayer as a pragmatic, mechanical exercise—chanting and reciting the right words, while the body assumes the right posture, logging appropriate lengths of time. Those who fulfill all the daily religious requirements of prayer are led to believe that God then places a gold star next to their name in heaven.

- Creeds and catechisms attempt to normalize and standardize specific and exact belief—which if deviated from means that the individual has failed to meet the standard.

- Christ-less religion approaches the Bible as another exact science—complete with humanly devised rules, standards, techniques and approaches for understanding it and obeying it.

- Of course religious score-keeping would not be complete without the many religiously mandated observances of special or so-called holy days, of giving a specific percentage of one’s income to the church (called tithing) and a whole host of rituals and ceremonies, all prescribed in detail.

Jesus came into our hopelessly confused, contorted and corrupt world of Christ-less religion with a new and revo-

lutionary way in which humans might relate to one another and to God. Jesus introduced grace and in effect, he said, “you can forget about counting your deeds and behaviors. Kiss that methodology good-bye, because it is meaningless as a method by which humans might relate to God.”

We’re going to consider several biblical teachings and examples illustrating that God’s grace is the end of religious score-keeping as a way of relating to him. Based on our keynote passage in 1 Corinthians 13:5, where we read that love *keeps no record of wrongs* let’s briefly survey seven other biblical passages which will help illuminate the difference between religious scorekeeping and God’s amazing grace.

- **The Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14).**

The Pharisee thought he had religious credits—commendations and assets that God would regard. The Pharisee was counting on things he could count that were just a mirage, in God’s eyes. The Pharisee proudly reported that he gave tithes (precise percentage) and that he fasted twice (specific number) each week.

On the other hand, the publican knew he had nothing at all to offer God. Which man was closer to God?

- **The Unmerciful Servant (Matthew 18:21-35).**

Jesus gave this parable as a response to Peter’s sincere question: *Lord, how many times shall I forgive my brother or sister who sins against me?* (Matthew 18:21). As Peter was wrestling with the concept of forgiveness, we might paraphrase the way in which he explained his dilemma to Jesus: “Well, surely there has to be a limit to the number of times I should forgive someone. After all, we wouldn’t want another person to take advantage of our forgiveness—so perhaps seven would be, at the very outside, where forgiveness ends?”

Jesus’ response paints a clear comparison between God’s grace and Christ-less religion. Jesus says that there is no end of God’s love and forgiveness. In effect Jesus says, “It is not possible to count or compute God’s love. Therefore, forgive others an infinite number of times—70 X 7.”

- **The book of Numbers**—appropriately titled “Numbers”—here is an Old Testament example illustrating the futility of attempting to gauge, weigh or measure our relationship with God on the basis of human performance:

Numbers is an entire book of the Bible which, from our Christian perspective, offers a comparison between the old covenant, based on counting, and the new covenant, based on God, in Christ, *who keeps no record of wrongs* (1 Corinthians 13:5). The book of Numbers lives up to its title—it is a book of specific instructions about amounts—it’s a spiritual recipe book that gave the nation of Israel a way to measure their acceptability to God as well as a scorebook of some of their failed attempts.

- **Gideon**

Gideon was one of the judges of Israel—judges at the time were the national leaders of the nation. We find the story of Gideon, the judge, in chapter 6 and 7 of Judges, another appropriately named book. This is not a book about grace—this is a book about judgment.

The specific story of Gideon is about how God deliberately whittled down the size of Gideon’s army, until at best it could be called a group or a troop. God drastically reduced Gideon’s army so that no one could boast of the victory he would give Gideon and all of Israel. God wanted to ensure that everyone knew that there was no way, apart from him, that they had the resources necessary to accomplish what was needed. So even though Gideon was embodied within the old covenant, God wanted the message of his grace to ring loud and clear.

- **Ephesians 2:8-10**

By contrast with boasting and the pride of religious accomplishments which are kept and maintained in religious scorebooks by religious scorekeepers, Paul simply says this: *For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast.*

- **The Lost Sheep (Luke 15:1-7)**

Jesus gave this parable by way of response to the self-righteous religious leaders of his day who felt that Jesus was spending too much of his time with losers—with people who would never “amount to much”—at least by their religious measuring sticks and standards.

Jesus told these self-assured religious professionals that a good shepherd doesn't keep score. According to Jesus a good shepherd doesn't regard the sheep as assets in a ledger, so much so that if one sheep in a herd of 100 was lost a good shepherd would leave the 99 and go after the one. That's grace—complete disregard for religious scorekeeping! The standards of religious scorekeeping and God's amazing grace are as far apart as east is from west and north is from south.

- **Finally, let's briefly consider two groups of people mentioned in Revelation 7:**

People often wonder about two groups that God presents, in a positive light, in Revelation 7. The first group is reckoned by old covenant standards—12,000 each from twelve tribes of Israel—numbering 144,000. It's a precise and specific number. This precise number of 144,000 can be reached and realized by counting. Revelation says that God seals the 144,000 to protect them from the figurative harm caused to land and sea by four angels. On what basis? Their protection is because of their race—and it is specifically numbered and limited, because it is a picture of the limits of the protection afforded by the old covenant.

On the other hand, after describing the specific number of 144,00 who are sealed, then God reveals a great multitude in white robes.

Here's John's report of what was revealed to him:

*After this I looked, and there before me was a great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands.—Revelation 7:9, my emphasis*

This great multitude is assembled on the basis of the new covenant. The great multitude is beyond human calculation, because it is assembled and filled by God's grace, not by human calculation. The new covenant recognizes no limitations, no restrictions, no gender or race or culture. The new covenant does not count. **Grace = No More Score-Keeping.**

Those in this great multitude follow the Lamb of God in that, as Christ-followers, they suffer in their physical lives—for they live lives of service. But while they are not at all sealed from physical harm in their physical lives (precisely what Jesus tells us as Christ-followers) in eternity those who are part of this great multitude:

*...are before the throne of God and serve him day and night in his temple; and he who sits on the throne will shelter them with his presence. Never again will they hunger; never again will they thirst. The sun will not beat down on them, nor any scorching heat. For the Lamb at the center of the throne will be their shepherd; 'he will lead them to springs of living water.' 'And God will wipe away every tear from their eyes.'*—Revelation 7:15-17

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NEXT WEEK we will plumb the depths of God's love. **How Far Will God Go?** will discuss just how far God's love and grace extend before he says "enough." **How Far Will God Go?** in letting us "take advantage" of his good graces?