

## **Hooks and Slices: Find the Fairway Sunday, 2/16/20**

**1** This morning we'll complete our two-part look at "Hooks and Slices: Golf Lessons from Matthew." Remember that a hook is what happens when a right-handed golfer causes the ball to fly left of center, while a slice describes an opposite movement to the right. Last week I compared our lives of faith to a long golf tournament in which our only hope of victory is looking to God's word to correct our wayward shots. We also talked about worry, both on and off the golf course. Worry crowds out God's Spirit, ruins our daily swings, and causes us to make wild shots. Matthew helped us with our swings last week, not by simply telling us not to worry, but by showing us how. Matthew's swing tip from last week was this: Seek first the Kingdom of God and His Righteousness.

But the most-perfect swing possible will be useless to us if we don't aim our shots at the fairway, that beautiful but narrow stretch of closely mowed grass that leads from the tee to the hole. And as Matthew reminds us this morning in Chapter 7, finding the fairway can be both difficult and rare. I'm reading verses 13 and 14 in the NIV. [{Read Scripture}](#)

**2** I've learned enough about myself over the last 58 years to know that there's almost always a difference between the way I want things to be, the way I imagine things really are, and the way things are in fact. The way I usually want my golf course, and my life, to be is wide fairways, huge holes on the greens, and unlimited swings and putts. The way I sometimes imagine my walk with Jesus to be is a bit like a simple miniature golf course- A putting green with no sand or water, and boards along the edges, so that no matter which way I hit the ball, or how hard, it's bound to bounce its way into the hole eventually.

**3** Our lives of faith are, in fact, much more complicated. From far away, the fairway might appear nice and flat, with no hills or bumps. And even though we can't see the entire fairway from the tee, for the most part it looks pretty wide and inviting. This is the view that most prospective Christians see when we invite them into a life with Christ.

However, when we step up to the tee, facing difficult choices and being called to act on our faith, things start to look a bit different. We notice for the first time that the surface of the fairway isn't as flat as we were told it would be. Those slopes could really cause our ball to roll. We might notice the dense stands of trees for the first time and begin to entertain the real possibility that we might wing a stray shot in there that will never return. And what

about that power pole hiding behind the trees? By the time we add in the cart path, the sand traps, the divots, the tall grass of the rough, and the hidden sprinkler heads, the fairway begins to look considerably narrower than it did when we first believed!

**4** Why are we so surprised to find the Christian life difficult? Jesus never claimed it was easy! He neither lived nor died easily, and he warned us in his teaching that, in contrast to other paths we can follow in this life, his road is narrow, and the options for entering onto that road very limited.

Jesus said, “I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me.”<sup>1</sup> The gate turns out to be a person, and the road is our life of discipleship. The gate is small because Jesus doesn’t offer us “five excellent options for enlightenment.” No, he offers himself. The road is narrow because Jesus asks for us to be “all in” with our discipleship, a complete dying to ourselves and a rebirth into the righteousness of God. Only then can we be the holy people of our holy God.

**5** Sometimes avoiding the road to destruction seems manageable, like the conspicuous water hazard and sand trap to the left of this fairway. We know that coveting our neighbor’s riding lawn mower riding lawn mower would put our ball out of bounds and murdering her to get it would be at least a three-stroke penalty. So instead we do our best to find the fairway and move the ball forward.

At other times, the fairway seems impossibly small and unattainable, like many of the teachings we find in the Sermon on the Mount. You know the ones I’m talking about, because we’ve all broken them. Don’t sin in your anger. Don’t look at someone with lust. Turn the other cheek. Love your enemy. Forgive your neighbor. Break one of these commandments, Jesus says, and you’ve broken them all. As other would-be followers of Jesus said before us, “This teaching is difficult! Who can accept it?”

At still other times, the hazards seem hidden, and we imagine the fairway to be safe and easy, not seeing the threats that lay hidden from our view, like the person who suddenly drives his golf cart out from behind a tree and across the fairway. Other golfers can be especially difficult, to cope with, which is why Jesus has so many positive things to say to us

---

<sup>1</sup> John 14:6. New International Version (2011)

about loving our neighbor, and so many prohibitions of things that keep others from finding the fairway, like adultery, judgment, and hypocrisy.

**6** No matter how we want things to be, and no matter how we imagine them to be, the facts, as Jesus presents them, are clear. We need to find the fairway if we want to live. All other alternatives lead only to destruction- final, complete, hopeless, eternal separation from God. And that separation that doesn't wait for final judgment, although it will be made complete then. Rather, we begin to distance ourselves from God with each wild swing, each journey into the rough taking us farther from the fairway and closer to a triple-bogey game.

This idea of two roads isn't exactly new. Moses preached it long before Jesus, when he made his farewell speech, delivering God's message to his people: "I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses. Now choose life!"<sup>2</sup> It's a choice we make, not something which simply happens to us: day by day, hour by hour, minute by minute, decision by decision, and thought-by-thought. Choose life, because, the Psalmist tells us, "The Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked leads to destruction."<sup>3</sup>

**7** A modern imagining of this passage from Psalm 1 might sound and look like this: The righteous are like scratch golfers, enjoying the provision of God's fairway, confident in their swing. The wicked, however, are like children lost in tall weeds, swinging their clubs in futility and never striking the ball. They'll never find the fairway.

If we all want life, why is it that so many enter the wide gate to destruction and wind up in the rough, while so few enter the small gate and find the fairway? I suppose there are many reasons we fail to find the fairway, but I think this Eugene Peterson paraphrase captures well what Matthew had in mind: "Don't look for shortcuts to God. The market is flooded with surefire, easygoing formulas for a successful life that can be practiced in your spare time. Don't fall for that stuff, even though crowds of people do. The way to life - to God - is [r]igorous and requires total attention."<sup>4</sup> Shortcuts to God. They just don't work.

---

<sup>2</sup> Deuteronomy 30:19

<sup>3</sup> Psalm 1:6

<sup>4</sup> Matthew 7:13-14. The Message.

**8** There are similarities between the shortcuts we try in our golf games and the shortcuts we try in our walks with Jesus. In the world of Golf, the most common shortcuts involve the clubs and the balls. If we spend enough money on the latest and best clubs, we believe that we'll hit the ball straighter and farther. If we have the best, liquid-core balls, we think that spin control will be a breeze. The problem, of course, is that after we buy them, we usually fail to show up at the driving range for swing lessons and the hours of practice needed to improve our game.

What does this look like in the Christian life? Without a doubt, the main Christian analog to clubs and balls is the Bible. We buy new translations and special editions, then leave them sitting on our bookshelves. But there are other accessories to buy as well. You can't have been a Christian for long if you don't already have at least one cap and T-shirt as well as a cross and a coffee mug. Don't have them yet? You're only one click away on the web from complete discipleship.

**9** Forget the shortcuts- they don't work. But even though the gate is small and the road is narrow, Jesus hasn't left us without a way to find the fairway. The secret turns out to be no secret at all. Jesus is the fairway. New bibles are great- I have many of them in my office, but they're only helpful when I do the time reading and meditating on God's word. Go ahead and buy a coffee mug with a cross on it, but while you're sharing that coffee with a friend, consider the quality of your conversation, and the weight of your words. By all means, wear a Christian T-shirt. But when you put that shirt on for all the world to see, be sure to read it first and meditate on its application for your life, lest the witness you give to the world is one of hypocrisy rather than God's grace.

And remember to keep your swing easy. Seek first the Kingdom of God, because there's nothing we can do apart from God that will save us. Self-discipline is good, but yielding to God is better. Following God's law is good, but receiving and offering God's grace is best of all. We all make our choices in life, but it's by God's grace that we find the fairway, Jesus, and are saved.



**Bill Reinhart, Pastor**  
[pastorbill@buffaloumc.com](mailto:pastorbill@buffaloumc.com)