

Hooks and Slices: An Easy Swing Sunday, 2/9/20

1 Someone once said of the game of golf that it was “a good walk spoiled.” If you’ve ever played the game, perhaps you can relate to that quote. It’s great to get outside and get some fresh air, but often aggravating when the golf club and ball don’t cooperate! Even if you’re a PGA professional, the golf ball winds up going in places you didn’t expect. When the golf ball flies to the left of center, that’s called a hook, and a slice is what happens when the golf ball flies to the right of center. That’s my particular golf specialty, the slice!

I’ve noticed that our faith lives can look an awful lot like our golf games. Despite our best intentions, we end up hitting hooks and slices, unintended veering away from the path of following in the footsteps of Jesus. Thankfully, long before the game of golf was invented, Jesus offered us some swing tips to improve our games.

We’re starting today with developing an easy swing. When I first learned to golf, my impulse was to try to hit the ball harder to make it go farther. It was only when I began to relax and stop pushing the club that I began to be rewarded with decent golf shots. Let’s see what Jesus has to say about our swings in Matthew 6, verses 24-34. **{Read Matthew 6:24-34}**.

2 What we normally focus on in this passage is the instruction to not worry. After all, Matthew begins and ends the passage with that basic command, “Do not worry.” Haven’t you been chided at some point in your life by well-meaning Christian friends who cite this passage to correct us in the midst of an anxious situation? The problem is that it doesn’t help to advise someone to not worry without also offering them the means by which they can accomplish this transformation from hysteria to calm. When “do not worry” becomes nothing more than a command, we end up overwhelmed by guilt and self-loathing for having failed Jesus in yet another way. That’s the last thing we need added to our anxiety.

I want to help you break that cycle today by pointing out a valuable swing tip that Matthew has included in this teaching. Matthew put it smack dab in the middle of this passage: Seek first the kingdom and his righteousness. To call further attention to it, he book-ended that teaching with the exhortation to not worry. Not worrying isn’t just the absence of worry. Seeking God’s kingdom is the positive, active alternative to worry, the means by which we can stop worrying, and the reason for not worrying, all wrapped up in

one.

3 If you golf, or if you even know a golfer or watch golf, then you know that it's both a physical and a mental game. The professionals, like Ernie Els, can make golf look a lot easier than it really is. But lurking just beneath their calm facades, even professional golfers struggle to face down their anxieties before they destroy their games. And golf is a game designed to induce stress, carefully stacked against success.

The object of golf is to strike a small ball with a tiny club head so that it flies against the wind, over trees, rocks, water, sand, and other golfers, to land inside of a hole only inches wide and yet hundreds of yards away from the starting tee. As you step up to the tee, your mind begins to whirl. The opportunities for mistakes are legion! To make matters worse, we're supposed to keep score. For most of us, this is simply another exercise in self-deprecation, since casual golfers don't often make par or under- that is, get each ball into each hole within the allowed number of strokes.

It's not just hooks and slices we have to contend with, but also pulls, pushes, draws, and fades. In fact, here are many more chances to make the ball go off of center than to make it fly straight. The common result of all this pressure? Meltdown! You can see it on any golf course, even on the televised professional tournaments. And it's not only on the golf course that you can witness the destructive power of worry. Our families, our workplaces, and our church are all breeding places for worry and its aftermath.

4 But life doesn't have to be that way if we learn to develop an easy swing. Let's see if we can unpack Matthew's swing tip with the help of God's Word. Do you remember that swing tip? "Seek first the kingdom of God." We can do just that by working on the three H's, or H-cubed if you prefer. And the first H is for humility. If you want to develop an easy swing, you've got to keep your head down.

I'm a little worried about how often this topic of humility has been popping up for me lately! Let's start with the Apostle James, who reminds us in the fourth chapter of his letter just how limited we really are. Not only do we not know what will happen from one day to the next, James reminds us, but our days are numbered and only God knows that number.

We are “a mist that appears for a little while and then vanishes.”¹ Humility reminds us to put our confidence in God and not overestimate our own importance.

5 The book of Proverbs also extol humility and warn us against boasting. “Do not boast about tomorrow, for you do not know what a day may bring.”² Perhaps no other golfer understands this more profoundly than Tiger Woods, who has been on a roller coaster journey of learning humility. Tournament after tournament, he’s seen victory transformed into defeat by missed fairways, a runaway temper, a tortured body, and times of personal humiliation. Even top-ranked players need to be reminded to lighten up and take an easy swing.

6 Sometimes, it’s not our own pride, but the expectations of others, that sets us up for a fall. On the final day of the 2004 Open Championship, Ernie Els was a favorite to win as he battled Todd Hamilton to the 18th hole. But the pressure proved too much for him, and several missed birdie putts later, Ernie’s hopes for the championship were dashed in a four-hole playoff, with Hamilton taking the title.

The Apostle Peter reminds us that only as we humble ourselves under God’s hand can we be lifted up through his care.³ Of course, Peter also warns that this will happen in “due time.” God never promises us to deliver us according to our own schedule.

7 Phil Mickleson knows all about waiting for deliverance. For over 10 years and 42 major tournaments, Phil had been known around the world as the best golfer never to have won a major. All that changed for Phil in 2004 at the Masters tournament at Augusta, where his patient waiting finally bore fruit in a victory.

8 The second H of an easy swing is cultivating a habit of prayer. The Apostle Paul wrote to the church at Philippi that the cure to anxiety is prayer that is infused with an attitude of thankfulness.⁴ This kind of prayer doesn’t come automatically- it requires instruction and repetition before it becomes habitual.

Good golfers know the importance of following a routine. Routine is developed over

¹ James 4:14. New International Version (2011)

² Proverbs 27:1.

³ 1Peter 5:6-7

⁴ Philippians 4:6

years of intentional practice drills. The most successful practice starts in controlled situations, starting small and building on our existing strengths. If you want an easier swing in your walk with Christ, you might ask yourself: “What is it I’m doing well, and how can I build on that to do even better.”

9 Good golfers also know the importance of teaming up: Getting help from a coach and being a coach for others. God created us to be together in community. If you think you can become a mature disciple by yourself, it’s time to go back to the first H and relearn the lesson on humility.

10 The third H of an easy swing is Holiness. Holiness is both a condition of our hearts and a quality of our actions. Holiness begins with humility and grows through a habit of prayer. But it doesn’t stop there! Holiness bears fruit in a life that bears witness to the living Christ. Holiness is the follow-through of our lives of faith.

11 Follow through is what makes a good golfer great. Tiger woods is known for his incredible follow-through. In one memorable tournament, he missed more fairways from the tee than he hit. Yet despite taking his next shots from the rough, he consistently rallied to get the ball onto the green, even shooting around trees when he had to.

One of the Apostle Paul’s great confessions of faith is found in his second letter to the Corinthians. “We are hard pressed, but not crushed; Perplexed, but not in despair; Persecuted, but not abandoned; Struck down, but not destroyed.”⁵ A holy heart of faith doesn’t give up in the face of adversity, succumbing to anxiety and fear. A holy heart follows-through to the end, certain of God’s final victory.

12 Our lives of faith are like long golf tournaments. If we want to move the ball forward, we have to start by developing an easy swing. Resisting the temptation to worry, we have to develop a rhythm of seeking God’s kingdom on a daily basis. We can do that by: Keeping our heads down in humility; Cultivating a habit of prayer; and Following through with a life of holiness. Humility, Habit, and Holiness. Three tips for us to take with us today, on and off of the golf course. Amen.

⁵ 2Corinthians 4:8-9



Bill Reinhart, Pastor
pastorbill@buffaloumc.com