

INTRODUCTION

Welcome back to the golf edition of GSPN. Today we’re talking about “Keep it in the Fairway.” Next week I’ll conclude the series as we focus on football. GSPN stands for “God’s Spiritual Playmaker Network.” You might not have the skill nor the strength to be a sports playmaker, but you CAN be one of God’s Playmakers. It’s not OUR strength, it’s HIS strength that empowers us to make a difference in this world as Spiritual Playmakers.

Most of you know that I love to play golf. A friend asked me the other day, “You don’t play as much golf as you used to with Jim Gillen. Why not?” I said, “Well, would you want to play with someone who cheats, and talks in your back swing, and gets so mad that they throw clubs?” My friend said, “No I wouldn’t want to play with someone like that.” I said, “Neither does Jim!”

Approximately 14 million Americans play golf, which makes it the most popular participatory sport in America. Golf is different from football or basketball because men and women can continue to play golf well into their eighties and nineties. Just last April, Elsie McLean, who is 102 years old made a hole-in-one on a par 3 at a course in Chico, CA. It was a 100-yard hole, and she used her driver, but it was her first ace in 80 years of playing. So for those of you who haven’t had an ace yet—don’t stop trying!

Golf isn’t an easy sport, and most golfers have periods of frustration. About the time you think you’ve got it figured out, it jumps up and bites you. Mark Twain wrote, “Golf is a good walk spoiled.” Winston Churchill wrote, “Golf is a game whose aim is to hit a very small ball into an even smaller hole, with weapons singularly ill-designed for the purpose.” Will Rogers said it well when he wrote, “I guess there is nothing that will get your mind off everything like golf. I have never been depressed enough to take up the game, but they say you get so sore at yourself that you forget to hate your enemies.”

If you’re going to appreciate golf you’ve got to understand a few of the terms. When the tee shot goes left it’s called a hook; when the ball goes right it’s called a slice; and when the ball goes straight it’s called a miracle. A “gimme” is an agreement between two golfers who are both terrible putters. A “mulligan” is a do-over invented by an Irishman named Mulligan who wanted to top another ball 20 yards down the fairway.

Of course, nobody in the Bible played golf, but some of Paul’s words sound as if he had tried golf. If you’ve tried golf, you may be able to relate to these words in Romans 7:15, 18: “I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do...For I have the desire to do what is good, but I cannot carry it out. For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing.”

As I’ve studied the teaching style of Jesus for the past 37 years, I’ve noticed His favorite way of teaching was by using parables. He took everyday, ordinary items like flowers, grass, and birds and used them to teach spiritual truth. It says in Matthew 13:34, “Jesus did not say anything to them without using a parable.” So I’d like to use golf as parable to teach some truths about the Christian life. I want to share four ways in which golf and the Christian life are similar, and one final way in which they are completely different.

(1) THERE IS A COURSE SET OUT FOR YOU

Golf is like the Christian life because there is a course set out for you. Golf is different from baseball or football, because football fields are identical. You can go to any football field in America know that there are 100 yards between goal lines and the same distance between the sidelines. The distances between the pitchers mound and home plate and the distances between the bases are the same in every major league ballpark in America.

But no two golf courses are identical. Each golf course has a personality of its own. Playing a new course holds many challenges because you may not know what lies ahead. Life is a lot more like golf than football or baseball in that respect. Life isn't the same routine day after day. We often face unexpected challenges that we didn't foresee.

Every modern golf course was designed by a golf-course architect. For instance, Robert Trent Jones is a well known golf course designer. Robert Trent Jones can look at a piece of property or a topographical map, and he can lay out 18 holes of golf. Before a shovel-full of dirt is moved, he can already envision the beauty and challenge of the course.

In much the same way, God, the heavenly architect has designed a plan—a course—for your life. From the foundation of the world, He could already see what your life could become in Christ. If you want to discover the layout of God's course for your life, look at the words God spoke through the prophet Jeremiah, "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future... You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart.'" (Jeremiah 29:11, 13)

As in golf, our job is to make our way around all eighteen holes of God's course for our lives. In golf, the first nine holes are called the "outward half" because in early links courses, the first nine holes always went away from the clubhouse. The second nine is called "the inward half." Some of you are still on the "outward half" but many of us are on the "inward half." We've already lived more of our lives than we have left. But age really has nothing to do with which hole you're on. We've all seen young people who finished the course. You might be on your last hole, or you might be facing your final putt on the 18th hole. Only God knows. As Paul came to the end of his life he wrote to Timothy, "I have finished my course." (2 Timothy 4)

(2) TO IMPROVE YOU MUST MASTER THE FUNDAMENTALS

Another way in which golf is like the Christian life is because to improve you must master the fundamentals. Golf is not a game that comes naturally. It looks pretty simple, but if you've ever tried it, you know it's not easy. Have you heard the expression, "practice makes perfect?" That's not exactly true with golf. You can go to a driving range and pound balls until your hands bleed, but if you don't know the correct fundamentals all you're doing is ingraining your mistakes. Some of you may remember Robert Miller. He was our associate pastor here for several years in the 1990s. Robert was a big, muscular guy who had played baseball in college. He thought he shouldn't have any trouble hitting a little golf ball...but he was pretty bad at golf. One year on our staff retreat we were playing golf. Robert was standing on the first tee and it was morning

with dew on the ground, and he was wearing tennis shoes. Robert drew back and took a mighty slash at the ball and completely missed it...but his follow through made him lose his balance and he spun around and slipped and fell all the way off the tee box. Of course you know we didn’t laugh much. Robert told me later he had spent hours on the driving range, and he had the blisters to prove it. I look at his hands and the blisters were in the wrong places for someone who held the club correctly. So, practice doesn’t make perfect in golf!

One of the greatest golfers of history, Ben Hogan, wrote a book on the five fundamentals of golf. He said there are five elements of the golf swing that you must master in order to break 80. They are (1) The grip. That’s where the club is connected to the rest of your body. You can’t hold the club too tight or too loosely. Someone said you should hold it like a baby bird—tight enough to hold onto it, but not too tight to kill it. (2) The stance. You must stand over the ball with the correct posture and have the ball in the proper location, which many teachers say is in front of your left shirt pocket. (3) Alignment is the next fundamental. You must make sure your feet, hips, and shoulders are all aligned toward the target. (4) The next fundamental is the back swing—he says it should be on a plane as if a pane of glass with a hole for your head is positioned between you and the ball. (5) The last fundamental is the swing and follow-through. Actually if your grip, stance, alignment, and back swing are correct, there’s not a lot to do except return the club through the starting point and end up with your body facing the target.

Like golf, there are some important fundamentals in the Christian life. If you want to grow and mature as a follower of Jesus you must master these five simple fundamentals: (1) Prayer. You must communicate with God through prayer. The Bible says we’re to pray without ceasing, and that means it’s possible to live with the attitude of trusting God every minute of every day. But there must also be seasons of prayer where you get alone with God and talk to Him. You don’t have to use big “church” words—you can talk to God the same way a child talks to their daddy. (2) Bible Study. We speak to God through prayer, and He speaks to us through His Word, the Bible. If you want to know what God is like and what He wants you to do, you need to dig into His word. Chances are God isn’t going to write a message to you in letters 100 feet tall in the sky. HE doesn’t need to because He has already spoken—and we can hear His voice in His Word. You must have a regular time each day when you commune with God in prayer personal Bible Study. Don’t do it because you think it’s an obligation; do it because you love the Lord and you want to spend time with Him. (3) The third fundamental is worship. Worship is more than just coming here on Sundays to worship with this congregation. You should have a time of personal devotional and worship. You need to get alone with God and just worship Him. You can sing songs to Him, you can write love letters to Him. Once you have a dynamic personal worship life, you’ll have a fantastic corporate worship experience. (4) The fourth fundamental is ministry. Ministry is finding a need and meeting it. Ministry is giving yourself away to others through your service. You’ll never grow until you find a place to minister in Jesus’ name. (5) The fifth fundamental of the Christian life is sharing your faith with others. Jesus taught that we cannot be closet Christians. We must tell others. In order to share your faith, you don’t have to memorize the nine steps, the seven keys, or the four laws. All you have to do is to naturally talk about Jesus has changed your life.

Now mastering these five fundamentals won’t get you into heaven any more than practicing your golf swing will get you onto the PGA tour. These fundamentals just get you ready to enjoy the

blessings of the Christian life.

(3) TO SUCCEED YOU MUST LEARN TO PLAY OUT OF THE TRAPS

Another way golf and the Christian life are similar is that to succeed you must learn to play out of the traps. Most golf courses have sand filled bunkers that are called traps. These traps may be on the fairway to catch your tee shot, or most often they surround the green so if your approach shot is off line or short, you’ll end up in a trap. Obviously, the best thing to do is to avoid the traps all together, but that’s not always possible even for the best golfers.

The oldest golf course in continual play is the Old Course at St. Andrews. The course is littered with 112 bunkers. These bunkers were originally created by sheep lying down to avoid the cold wind that blows off the sea. The bunkers at St. Andrews are deep and narrow. One pro calls the traps at St. Andrews “uncovered manholes.” Some of them are so treacherous that even the best pros take two three shots to get out successfully. In 2000 Tiger Woods won the British Open at St. Andrews and he negotiated the course for four rounds without ever hitting into a single bunker. But that kind of play isn’t usual—it’s Tigeresque!

There are traps to be avoided in the Christian life as well. The most common trap we face is the trap of temptation. Just like a trap on a golf hole, temptation is there. Do yourself a favor and stay out of the trap! Other traps include fear, anger, anxiety, and doubt. The New Testament speaks in several verses about the “traps or snares of the devil.” Anything that hinders your spiritual maturity and growth can be a trap.

It’s best to stay out of traps, but if you ever get in one, it’s very important for you to learn how to get out of a trap. Beginning golfers often flail away at their ball in the sand and finally pick it up and throw it out! But the pros are good at hitting out of the sand.

In the 2000 Ryder Cup match, the U.S. team was trailing when Paul Azinger hit his ball into a trap on the 18th hole of his match. The ball was sitting on the back downslope, one of the hardest shots in golf. But Paul gave it his best and he hit the ball on the green and it bounced once and went into the hole. The U.S. team eventually lost, but Azinger’s shot from the bunker is remembered as one of the greatest shots in the history of golf.

In the Christian life, avoid the traps! But if you find yourself in one, don’t quit. Don’t give up. Don’t toss your ball out. Stay in the game. Get it back on the fairway or the green.

(4) YOU MUST KNOW THE RULES—AND CALL PENALTIES ON YOURSELF

The final way golf is similar to the Christian life is that you must know the rules—and call penalties on yourself. In order to enjoy the golf, you need to know the rules. The basic rules of golf are “play the ball as it lies, and play the course as you find it.” Beyond that there are a plethora of rules about hazards, lateral hazards, out of bounds, taking relief from a temporary obstruction, etc. In addition to the rules of the golf, there are the unwritten rules of golf called golf etiquette that have to do with things like, pace of play, fairness, being quite when another

golfer hits; not standing or walking in another player's line on the green. These rules and etiquette make golf a civilized game.

At NBA games, the home fans screaming and wave balloons to try to distract visiting players shooting a free throw. But at a golf tournament, you often hear a Marshall say, "Quiet please!"

Another thing that makes golf different is that it's only sport where the competitor calls penalties on himself. If a golfer's ball is in an unplayable lie, he calls a penalty on himself and drops a ball while adding a stroke to his score. Think about that. In football, if a defensive back is called for interference, he usually argues with the call and says, "No way." Or sometimes a basketball player will be called for a foul, and he'll argue with the ref that he's innocent.

But in golf, there are no referees following the golfers around calling penalties. In a pro event, each group has a rules official, but they are only consulted if there is a question about a rule.

Bobby Jones was perhaps the greatest amateur golfer in history. He won the British and U.S. Opens and never turned pro. He founded the Masters tournament in Augusta.

In 1925 Bobby Jones was playing in the U.S. Open in Worcester, Massachusetts. On the 11th hole he hit his ball into thick grass behind the green. As he addressed the ball, he saw it move slightly. He called a penalty on himself. Nobody else even saw the ball move, but he did, so there was no question in his mind to call the penalty. He eventually missed the playoff by one stroke. When people congratulated him for being so honest, he replied, "You might as well praise me for not breaking into banks. There is only way to play this game."

God established rules and etiquette as well, and we need to familiarize ourselves with God's rules. Life is like golf in that we don't have a referee who follows us around and calls penalties on us. My job is not to call penalties on you, and your job is not to call penalties on me. We should each be so perceptive to the conviction of the Holy Spirit that whenever we transgress God's rule, we should immediately call the penalty on ourselves. When we recognize we have broken God's rules, we should confess that sin and repent and get back into the action.

(5) UNLESS YOU SHOOT A PERFECT ROUND, DON'T SIGN YOUR SCORECARD!

Those are four ways golf is like the Christian life, but there is one way in which golf and the Christian life have an enormous difference: Unless you shoot a perfect round, don't sign your scorecard! Golf is all about performance. You have to keep a scorecard to record your scores. In pro tournaments, before a player can leave the course, he must double-check his score and then sign the card. If he signs an incorrect scorecard, that golfer is disqualified. There are several horror stories about pros that were leading a tournament, but lost when they signed their scorecard that contained a mistake.

In golf, you often hear someone say, "You don't write HOW on the scorecard, only HOW MANY." I could hit a tee shot into a lateral hazard, drop the ball and hit three. That shot could go forty yards right and hit a tree and end up in a trap, and if I hit that shot in the hole for a four, I'd say, "Just a routine par." It's a four just as if I'd hit the middle of the fairway, hit it on

the green and two putted. Golf is all about score. It’s performance that gets recorded. There’s no place on the card for how pretty your swing is, or how nice you were. Only how many strokes it took to get the ball in the hole. In golf you are judged strictly by your performance—that sounds like the Old Testament Law. Fortunately for us, salvation isn’t based upon performance. You can’t work your way into heaven. The Bible says, “Not by works of righteousness which we have done, but according to his mercy He saved us.” (Titus 3:5)

Life is like a round of golf. Even Ben Hogan once waxed poetic as he said, “As you walk down the fairway of life, you must smell the roses, for you only get to play one round.” If life is like a round of golf, and IF you could earn your way into heaven, what score would you have to shoot? Par? Not really—that’s just another word for average.

Let’s imagine for a second that God gave you a set of clubs, and one golf ball and took you out to a golf course and said, “Take these clubs, and this ball and play 18 holes. Your score will determine whether you get admitted to heaven or not.” Just before you tee off, God says, “Wait a minute. I’ll make a deal with you. You can play yourself, or I can let Tiger Woods play in your place. Whatever Tiger shoots, I’ll count as your score. So, what’s your choice? You play, or you let Tiger play as your substitute?”

Let Tiger try it—and if he has his A-game, he may just shoot a 60 or 61. You take his scorecard instead of one you’d have used and you sign your name beside his. Sound like a good deal? It’s not, because God doesn’t require just a good round, He requires PERFECTION. And the Bible says, “ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.” (Romans 3:23) It’s like trying to hit a drive across the Atlantic Ocean. Tiger would get it farther than any of us, but even he would fall short. The point I want you to see is that if a golf score COULD get you into heaven, the only score good enough would be an 18! A hole-in-one on every hole! Tiger’s good, but he’ll never be *that* good.

No, the only one who ever lived a perfect life was Jesus Christ. In the golf course of life He shot a perfect 18, and I don’t know about you, but I’m not trusting my performance or Tiger’s performance to get me into heaven. I’m falling upon the grace and mercy of God through Jesus Christ for salvation.

Speaking of Tiger, someone asked me once to pray for Tiger’s salvation. He said, “Just imagine what an impact Tiger could have on God’s kingdom!” I said, “I’ll pray for Tiger to be saved, but not for the reason you mention. I’ll pray for him because just imagine what kind of an impact that God could have on Tiger’s life!

CONCLUSION

Golf is just a game, of course. And the Christian life is so much more than a game: It’s real life. Even golfers on the PGA tour are sometimes reminded of the brevity of life. The golf world was shaken in October of 1999 when Payne Stewart lost his life. You may recall that Payne boarded a Lear Jet in Florida for a quick trip to Dallas. For some mysterious reason, the jet lost pressure and it continued on autopilot until it ran out of fuel and crashed near Aberdeen, South Dakota.

Earlier that summer, Payne won his second U.S. Open. His friends had noticed a dramatic change in his life. For most of his career he had been known as an irritating, egotistical competitor. But earlier that year, through the influence of his children who attended school at the Academy of First Baptist Church, Payne had been seeking the Lord. When he won the U.S. Open that summer he could be seen wearing a WWJD bracelet given to him by his son. When he received the trophy Payne said, "First of all, I have to give thanks to the Lord. If it weren't for the faith that I have in Him, I wouldn't have been able to have the faith that I had in myself on the golf course. I'm proud of the fact that my faith in God is so much stronger, and I'm so much more at peace with myself than I've ever been in my life." A few months later, Payne entered eternity. His funeral was broadcast throughout the world. Paul Azinger, who is a committed Christian, was one of Payne's closest friends and at the funeral, Paul said, "Payne Stewart has finished the course, he has kept the faith, and now the crown of righteousness is his. Payne Stewart loved life and loved people...During this past year, everyone who knew Payne Stewart saw a dramatic change in his life. They saw in Payne what the Bible calls a 'peace which passes all understanding.' Only God can do that because only God can change a heart. Whoever you are, wherever you are, whatever you have done, if you feel the tug of God's Spirit on your heart, do not turn away. If, like Payne, you want to know the happiness and peace that only Jesus Christ can bring, I invite you to confess your sins and receive him as your Savior. Regardless of what your life has brought you, His love is enough. And His peace is for real."

OUTLINE

(1) THERE IS A COURSE SET OUT FOR YOU

"For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the LORD, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future...You will seek me and find me when you seek me with all your heart."
Jeremiah 29:11, 13

(2) TO IMPROVE YOU MUST MASTER THE FUNDAMENTALS

1. Prayer
2. Bible Study
3. Worship
4. Ministry
5. Share your faith

(3) TO SUCCEED YOU MUST LEARN TO PLAY OUT OF THE TRAPS

(4) YOU MUST KNOW THE RULES—AND CALL PENALTIES ON YOURSELF

(5) UNLESS YOU SHOOT A PERFECT ROUND, DON'T SIGN YOUR SCORECARD!

"ALL have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." *Romans 3:23*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes