

"The More You Practice,
The Better You Get"

O.T. Lesson - First Kings 8/57-61
N.T. Lesson - Timothy 4/7-8
Mark 12/ 28-31

1st Kings 8/57-61 - King Solomon speaking to the
Isrealites...

"May the Lord our God be with us as He was with our fathers. May He not leave us or forsake us... that He may incline our hearts to Himself - to walk in all His ways, and to keep His commandments, and His statutes, and His ordinances which He commanded our fathers...and these words of mine with which I have made supplication before the Lord, be near to the Lord our God day and night, that He may maintain and cause His servant and the cause of His people, Isreal as each day requires - so that all the peoples of the earth may know that the Lord is God - there is no one else. Let your heart be wholly devoted to the Lord our God - to walk in His statutes and keep His commandments as at this day.

FIRST N.T. Lesson
Timothy 4/ 7-8

"Have nothing to do with worldly fables. On the other hand, discipline yourself for the purpose of godliness. For bodily discipline is only for the present, but godliness is profitable for all things since it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come."

Mark 12/ 28-31 - JESUS SPEAKING

"...and you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind and with all your strength. The second is this You shall love your neighbor as yourself. There are no other commandments greater than these." And one of the scribes recognizing Jesus asked Him what commandment was formost of all? And Jesus answered " The formost is Hear Oh Isreal^The Lord our God is one God."

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Many of you in this congregation know of my love for the game of golf. I began playing golf in my early thirties, and I continue to enjoy it.

When you think about it, a round of golf is very much like the day to day experiences of living. Each hole - each shot demands the best collection of your golfing talents. And, so it is with life. Each day calls for our best efforts no matter what our circumstances.

Golfers can play a miserable round of golf and come off the course bemoaning their fate, but there were a few good shots remembered and that will bring them back to pit themselves against the course and the elements again. Some will submit to the various golf swing theories... that latest ~~mirical~~ ^{MIRACLE} club... the amazing "never-miss" putter. They will spend time and money to improve their game - sometimes to no avail.

After winning a golf tournament, Raymond Floyd was asked ~~helped~~ ^{WHAT} him most to win. Rather than give the interviewer a short cryptic answer ~~to the question~~, Floyd launched into a reflection on his early years as a pro golfer on the PGA Tour. He said that back in those days he pretty much got by on his raw athletic talent. He confessed that he loved the good life and had no intention of letting golf infringe upon the full enjoyment of the ~~good life~~ ^{HIGH LIVING} of his salad days. He was making good money and a good living with relatively little effort. So, why spoil a good thing. Nothing was ~~broken~~ ^{BROKEN}, so there was nothing to fix.

That attitude abruptly changed when a beautiful ³ young lady entered his life and became his wife. The stability of this new relationship gave him a whole new outlook...a new perspective on life - including his life as a professional golfer. He realized that he had a great gift from God, but he was barely using that gift to its fullest potential. He had been a good professional golfer at virtually no personal cost or effort. He began to think what would happen if he dedicated himself to developing his ^{FULL} golfing ^{SKILLS,} potential.

So, for the first time in his professional career Raymond Floyd committed himself to improving and developing his golfing ^{ABILITY,} potential. He began practicing in earnest. By doing so he raised the level of his game physically, mentally and emotionally. ~~to doing so~~ ^{ALSO} He gained an important insight concerning life in general and his playing abilities in particular. And, with that he concluded the interview by proclaiming..." and the moral of the story is... the more you practice, the better you get."

For Raymond Floyd that meant devoting time each day to practicing the various facets of the sometimes perplexing, agonizing, enjoyable game of golf.

For us in our Christian walk it means that we must submit ourselves to the disciplined Christian life that moves us closer to God and His Son, our Redeemer Jesus Christ. Faith is a gift from God. It is not to be received lightly ^I nor passively. Like the wise servant in the parable of the talents, we must take the measure of faith we receive and develop it... ^{MAKE IT GROW.}

(4)

We must exercise it - work it - pray about it and thereby make it grow stronger. We ~~use~~^{USE} it, or lose it.

This is the advice the writer of the letters to Timothy gives to his protegee in ministry... "Train yourself in godliness. This advice, though addressed to one of the leaders in the early Christian congregation is good advice for us ~~those~~ who inhabit the household of faith today... laity and clergy alike.

Train Yourself In Godliness.

We **rejoice** in our initial awakening to God through the gift of faith, but **awakening is merely the turning point.** It's our entry into a new way of life. God promises to accompany us in this awakening journey...in this transformation. But, we cannot sit back and leave it entirely in God's hands. You've heard the phrase... God helps ~~them~~^{THOSE} who help themselves. Faith does not work by remote control. We have to steer our ^(INDIVIDUAL) faith courses ourselves...each and everyone of us. God grants us the freedom to decide whether we will accept His invitation to a fuller, faithful life, or not. Either we choose to do so, and give it our total attention - our best shot, or dub the opportunity off into the rough places where no Christian...or golfer for that matter, wants to be.

When we choose to accept ~~the~~^{God's} invitation to faith, we must take full advantage of it. We must train ourselves for it. Just as Raymond Floyd hits hundreds of practice shots daily...sand shots, chip shots, putting strokes, fades, draws, explosion shots... we as believers must build our faith by working daily at practicing our faith before God.

(5)

This involves daily prayer, charity, exemplary ~~living~~ living, and a commitment to the Body of Christ.

We practice charity, the graceful love that is supremely exemplified in Jesus Christ, because doing so constitutes our obedience to God. We must try constantly to show ourselves to be good examples of being "Right Related" to God. When we do that we maintain the integrity of our witness as Christians.

We, as individuals, commit to a local congregation of believers...in our case Trinity United Methodist Church and Methodism locally and world-wide. We are a connectional body of believers. By doing this we affirm that God's salvation comes from, and is sustained through, an ongoing historical connection with the "Community of Faith" embodying a number of diverse Christian theologies.

Getting back to Raymond Floyd...no matter how many practice balls he hits daily he will never become the perfect golfer. No pro or amateur golfer ever will. Likewise, no matter how diligently we practice our faith in God's presence we will never become perfect believers because we are mortally human...and only Jesus Christ was and is and will be perfect.

Along this path of faith which we have chosen to walk we sometimes get so wrapped up in our busy lives that we forget the basics of our Christian roots.

A consistent, well-timed, smooth golf swing... one that automatically and faithfully repeats itself without undue concentration - especially

when the pressure is on - is the dream and desire of every golfer - pro and duffer alike. Top flight professional golfers can generally count on their swings to hold up even when a fortune hangs in the balance on every shot.

How is this high level of consistency maintained? It's a combination of natural ability, hundreds of hours of practice and occasional advice from a good observer, a teaching pro, or a friend who can help you re-orient your swing. They ~~do~~ simplify your swing by building, or re-building it around the few basic principles. The simpler it is, the easier it is to maintain and correct when things go sour and the ball goes crazy after you hit it. (Brad and Paul correcting my backswing)

Most good pro and amateur golfers concentrate on the basics focusing on steadiness and consistency... making sure that the grip ^{IS CORRECT THAT THE} ~~and~~ stance is aligned toward the target. But, when you listen to the pros reflect on their success one element crops up again and again...bedrock basics and consistency produce a trustworthy golf swing.

This also applies to many aspects of life including how we as Christians understand ~~and~~ and practice our religion. It speaks to all of us because we want to be the kind, and good people God wants us to be.

Sometimes the zeal of some Christians drowns out the simplicity of the basics to the Gospel to a point where they ^{FADE INTO OBSCURITY} ~~become obscured~~. Then it becomes almost impossible to fulfill the desire to please God.

The Bible diagnoses and treats this problem. ^{US} God promises love and to provide for His creation. He introduced the 10 Commandments to Moses and from Moses to the rest of us...broad basic principles that clarify the ~~character~~ ^{CHARACTER} that the love of God and the rest of humanity should be like. ⑦

But - for a number of obscure, misguided reasons God's simple basic foundation of love and respect for each other has been overlayed with hundreds of statutes and ordinances, rules and regulations which try to anticipate every possible situation ^{AND CONDITION} and provide a ready-made, politically-correct response to it. And, if that wasn't enough these same basics we have received from God have been plastered over with what ^{IS} ~~is~~ called "the tradition of the elders"... an expansive oral commentary on the written code which, in Jesus day was considered by many to carry the same weight as the Scriptures themselves. As a result the understanding of the beautiful, simple, basic Gospel of Jesus Christ grew into a man-made tangeled mess of do's and don'ts including ~~such~~ ^A multitude of interpretations that the true essence of the covenant relationship we are supposed to have with our God...the love of God and all humanity, was all but obscured.

Against this background Jesus answered the scribe's question about the heart and intent of the law...
"Love God. Love your neighbor as yourself."...more than a handy basic summary of our faith. It is our Savior's pleading for us to return to the basics that sometimes ^{ARE} ~~is~~ forgotten. God wants our love and ~~do~~ ~~no more~~

devotion - no more, no less. Jesus' crucifixion and resurrection are the ultimate proof of this.

When we sometimes puzzle over how we can keep faith with God, we need to go to life's "Manuel of Operations"...our Bibles, to get in touch with the basics..."love God...love our neighbors". We all face crucial situations in our lives. It's good to know that we do not have to be strung out by needless ^(THEOLOGICAL) complications in those crunch times. God has given us the simple, basic key...LOVE. St. John said it over and over again all through his life. When he was so old and feeble that he had to be carried into Christian meetings on a palet he would be asked to say something to those assembled. With a voice that was hardly above a whisper he would say "Little children, love one another." That was Jesus' message for His followers then and now.

PRACTICE DOES NOT ALWAYS MAKE US PERFECT - BUT NO PRACTICE MAKES US IMPERFECT. GOLFERS.

So, when we claim our gifts...our talents, and devote ourselves to practicing them daily, our faith matures and strengthens. And, that strength, and THAT maturity brings us increasing joy in the game of life as we move closer to God, and walk the Christian walk with Him. As it is with the game of golf, so it is in the game of life...the more we practice our faith...the more faithful we get. ^(-NO PRACTICE - LITTLE OR NO FAITH.) Let us pray.

PRAYER AFTER SERMON

Father, as we try to live the best Christian lives we can, we pray for Your guidance...your still small voice of advice that when we are still and know You as our God...one who loves us...we can strengthen our faith to a point where we begin to grow in our faith and live ~~the~~ more fulfilling, Christian lives... ~~in~~ IN JESUS NAME WE PRAY - AMEN.