

Let me apologize right up front, I have used this sermon before, but since a large number of us are going to the baseball game this afternoon, I thought it would be worth repeating. As I have said before, I love baseball. I grew up playing baseball almost every day during the summer or whenever I had the chance. I have had the opportunity to attend baseball games at some of the most famous ballparks such as Wrigley Field, Fenway Park, Candlestick Park, and all three of the Atlanta Braves stadiums. Judy and I try to attend Spring Training in Arizona each Spring. I have had the privilege of coaching my two sons and grandsons in T-Ball and Little League. And I'm really looking forward to our baseball outing this afternoon.

Someone once said that baseball is the only orderly thing in an unordered world. If you get three strikes, even the best lawyer in the world can't get you another strike. Baseball is also the only job where stealing is encouraged. Former President Herbert Hoover said: "Next to religion, baseball has had a greater impact on our American way of life than any other American institution." Yogi Berra, the great New York Yankee catcher once said: "Baseball is 90 percent mental and the other half is physical." You have to love Yogi's sayings.

Even though baseball is not mentioned in the Bible, in a way the Christian life is a lot like a baseball game, because some principles of the game of baseball also apply to life. So, this morning as several of us prepare to spend the afternoon at the ballpark, let's discuss some of the similarities between baseball and life from the Christian perspective. Since seven is considered the perfect number and often used in the Bible, let's discuss seven spiritual truths from the mound. I will include a scripture reference with each one.

First, no one is perfect. No player gets a hit every time at bat. No pitcher or team wins every game. As Tommy Lasorda, former manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers put it: "No matter how good we are, we're going to lose one third of our games. No matter how bad we are, we're going to win one third of our games, and so it's the other third that make a difference." Baseball is a game of numbers in which each player falls short of perfection. Very few players have a batting average over 300 which means that they only get a hit three out of ten times at bat. It's the same in life, while we get a few hits and may even score some runs, we will strike out at times. As Babe Ruth said: "Never let the fear of striking out keep you from playing the game."

The point is that all of us are going to make mistakes. The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote in Romans 3:23 that we have all sinned and fallen short of the glory of God. In baseball when a player strikes out, he knows that he will get another chance to bat, and so do we in life. Fortunately, we worship and serve a God of second chances. Remember how Jesus gave Peter a second chance after he had denied knowing Jesus three times. God is patient with us even when we continue to strike out, and fall short of being the servant that He wants us to be.

Second, hope springs eternal. The start of every season inspires hope. Every team begins the season expecting to win the World Series. Every pitch is a new opportunity. It is no accident that the baseball season starts in the spring. The change in season reinforces this lesson, as we have witnessed the flowers blossoming and the grass and trees turning green over the past few weeks, so there's hope and new opportunities for the future and for each of us. Bob Feller, former great baseball pitcher, said it best: "Every day is a new opportunity. You can build on yesterday's success or put its failures behind and start all over again. That's the way life is, with a new game every day, and that's the way baseball is."

A man approached a little league baseball game one afternoon. He asked a boy in the dugout what the score was. The boy responded: "Eighteen to nothing; we're losing." "Boy," said the spectator, "I bet you're discouraged." "Why should I be discouraged," replied the little boy, "It's only the top of the first inning; we haven't even gotten to bat yet."

When we accept Jesus Christ into our hearts, we get a new start in life, and with this new life comes hope. As I have said many times, Jesus Christ is the only hope for us and this world. The next time you feel down, tired and worn out, overwhelmed by life, at a loss with no glimpse of hope, remember the words of our Responsive Reading from the great prophet Isaiah in the 40th chapter, verses 28-31: "Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and His understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youth grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." Isaiah tells us to put our trust and hope in the Lord, and let Him carry us through the storms of life.

Third, don't get discouraged, keep trying. Baseball, like life, is a game of high and low points. When you make a great catch, get a hit, or hit a home run, life is good. But as I noted before you are not going to get a hit every time at bat; you will strike out, and you will make errors. The key is to not let these failures get you down. You have to forget the last strike out or error you made, and press on. On our Little League team a few years ago, we had a young man who really got down if he struck out during his first time at bat. His play in the field the next inning would reflect his disappointment. As coaches we tried to keep his spirits up.

In the same way it is easy for us to become discouraged when things don't go our way or when we are faced with problem after problem. A former pastor of mine told me that the Christian journey is not a straight line always going up. It is a series of peaks and valleys. We are going to have high moments in our lives followed by low moments; times when we are closer to Jesus and other times when we fall short of being a good Christian. The key is to keep the distance between the peaks and valleys as small as possible. Once when Billy Graham was asked if he was a Christian, he replied: "I try to be." He went on to explain that being a Christian is an ongoing quest; a process of becoming more like Jesus each day.

The Apostle Paul understood this when he wrote in Philippians 3:12-14 – “Not that I have already obtained this or have already been made perfect, but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own, but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead. I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.” As Christians, we are called to keep going, put our past mistakes behind us and walk in faith. Remember what we just discussed – in Jesus Christ there is hope. The best is yet to come; don’t give up; keep going. Leave the past behind you and strive to be all that Jesus wants you to be.

Fourth, as I have coached my sons and grandsons, I have heard the term “keep your eyes on the ball” a thousand times. In Little League, the batter hears this all the time from the coaches, parents, and fans. The key to being a good and consistent hitter is seeing the ball. Another phrase that players hear a lot is “look the ball onto the bat;” eye-hand coordination is essential to good hitting.

At one time or another, many of us have tried to hit a baseball with varying degrees of success. One of my tasks as assistant coach was to hit infield and outfield practice. Now I didn’t do too bad for a 79-year-old man. Hitting is sort of an art. You have to keep your body – hands, head, shoulders, and feet in the proper position, and then as the ball is delivered, swing at the right time keeping your eye on the ball. For great hitters, the ball almost slows down because they can pick-up its speed and movement so well. They are able to hit it because they see the ball so clearly.

Unfortunately, life does not always go the way we want it to. At times, life throws us change-ups, curves, and occasionally inside fast balls that knock us down. Jesus never promised us a rose garden or that life would always be easy, but He did promise to be with us always. In Matthew 6:33, Jesus tells us: “But seek first His kingdom and His righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well;” in other words, keep your eyes on Him.

Fifth, be a good sport. Baseball is a competitive sport. However, I have observed in Little League that the most competition is between the coaches and the fans rather than the players. The kids are just having fun, but every league has a coach or two who think winning is the only thing. I have even seen coaches yell at kids when they strike out or make an error. While Tom Hanks said: “There’s no crying in baseball,” in the movie *A League of Their Own*, unfortunately some kids have been belittled to this point. And then there are the parents who are trying to relive their childhood dreams through their child and push them so hard that they will eventually quit baseball.

At the end of each game, win or lose, the players line up and shake hands congratulating the other players on a good game. And that’s the way Jesus wants us as Christians to play this game of life. In John 13:34-35, Jesus said: “A new command I give you: love one another. As I have loved you, so you must love one another. By this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another.” The word that Jesus uses here for love is *agape* which means seeking the best for the other person no matter what they have done or said about you.

It means looking for the good in all people and not judging them according to your own personal moral standards. Just think how much better our world would be if everybody practiced being good sports.

Sixth, in baseball, especially Little League, everyone gets to play. Height is crucial for basketball. Weight is crucial for football. Speed is critical for track. IQ is crucial for chess. Yet, all of these measurements are generally not important for baseball. Anyone can play. All you need to do is suit up. As you look at baseball teams, you see all kinds of players from different backgrounds, walks of life and nationalities. You have right-handed and left-handed batters, switch hitters, right-handed and left-handed pitchers, tall and short players, but they all play as a team, and accept each other for their individual abilities and personalities.

In the same way, the Church is made up of different people from various backgrounds, ethnic groups, religious denominations, and spiritual gifts. Just like the players on a baseball team are different so are we. And that is good, because if all the players could only play the infield, who would catch the fly balls in the outfield. God gives each one of us spiritual gifts to build His kingdom and to fulfill the purpose He has for each one of us. The Apostle Paul understood this when he described our role as the body of Christ in Romans 12:4-6 – “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us.”

As the body of Christ, we are to support and encourage each other. We are to be inclusive and not exclusive. We don't look alike, think alike, or agree on everything, which is good because it is our differences that make us stronger and more productive for the Lord. Therefore, we must practice the agape love I just discussed, always looking for good and seeking the best for each other. Let's agree to disagree in love and not push our own personal and political opinions on others.

Finally, enjoy the game whether you are a player or a spectator. I enjoy watching baseball games; however, there are some people who would not agree. One of my former members once told me that she would rather watch paint dry than watch a baseball game. Not only do I enjoy watching the game, but I enjoy watching the fans. I have observed that a lot of fans arrive after the game has started, and some even leave the game early. Now this is interesting since the average ticket price today is between \$50 - \$100 at a major league ballpark. They don't get to enjoy the entire game or take full advantage of the entire event.

So, this got me to thinking – how many people are there who don't really enjoy life and take full advantage of the price that Jesus Christ has already paid for us on the cross at Calvary – the forgiveness of our sins, the freedom from guilt and fear of death, mercy, grace, salvation, and the promise of eternal life? How many people are missing out on the abundant life, the peace of mind and joy that Jesus offers to each of us freely.

Now I'm a true fan, I don't want to miss a single pitch. I even chart the game on a score card. But there are the casual fans who come to the game to just socialize and eat hotdogs. And believe me there's nothing wrong with that; who doesn't enjoy a good hotdog at the game. But they miss so much – the home run, the double play, and the over the shoulder catch Willie Mays' style. Tommy Lasorda once said: "There are three types of baseball players: those who make it happen, those who watch it happen, and those who wonder what happened." In life, which are you?

In John 10:10, Jesus said: "I have come so they may have life, and have it abundantly." The *Message* paraphrases it as follows: "I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better than they ever dreamed of." In other words, living life to the fullest in a personal relationship with the Lord as God originally planned. A little boy was memorizing John 3:16, which he quoted word for word except for the end where he said: "... whoever believes in Him should not perish, but shall live happily ever after." Not a bad paraphrase! How many of us as Christians fail to live the life Jesus has promised us because we fail to put Him first and get involved in the game of life?

I once had a T-shirt that read "Life Begins with Baseball." Many die-hard baseball fans would agree with that statement, but for me life begins with Jesus Christ. Until you fully accept Him into your heart, and walk with Him each and every day, you are not truly living. Put Jesus first and let life begin! Let's play ball! Amen