

'GOING LOW' & the essence of life



Jeffrey Cranford, president of Links Players International, has played professional golf as a strong competitor at many different levels. In addition to mini-tour and Southern California PGA section championships, he has set the course record at many difficult golf courses in the United States. Needless to say, he has a reputation for “going low” on the golf course. Here he relates where that approach came from, how it was secured in his mind, and why it matters greatly even off the golf course. This article began as a correspondence between Jeffrey and another professional about how to Jeffrey was often able to score better than pros who had seemingly better inherent talent. It has been reworked here to benefit golfers of all interests and abilities.

IN 1983, AT A RUNDOWN MUNICIPAL GOLF COURSE in Midland, Texas, an assistant golf coach took me aside and gave me the simplest and most profound insight into going low on the golf course. His words, though not spoken with any kind of fire or eloquence, stick with me to this day. They were: “Jeff, whenever you get to two under, your only goal is to get to three under. If you are three under, your only goal is to get to four under.”

That was it! Something as simple as that forever changed the way I felt about golf. It was no longer OK to finish at two under, when I simply coasted in the last five holes just trying to protect a “good score.” That 70 didn’t reflect my potential that day; it actually represented my mental weakness—settling for a good score rather than firing for a great score.

So let me put a different picture out there for your consideration. I’m quite sure nobody else

will remember a day at PGA West more than 20 years ago. I was playing in an event and leading. I was five under for the day and was probably going to win by several shots. We were playing the Palmer Private course and eighteen is a par-5 that is reachable in two shots with a good drive (remember David Duval’s eagle putt there to shoot 59?). I hit a great drive and had a 1-iron to the green off of a slightly downhill lie.

Of course prudence would cry: “Hit a 7-iron and lay up; knock a wedge on the green and win the tournament!” I realize that would have been the wise thing to do, but I said to myself, “If you make a par and shoot 67, nobody will remember this round or win. If you make an eagle here and shoot 65, they’ll remember it.”

I chose the 1-iron and hit it into the water. I hit another 1-iron, same thing. Finally, I left the hole with a triple bogey 8 and then lost in a playoff. I realize that this “Tin Cup episode” was not very smart. I also realize that trying simply to leave a legacy in the minds of some club pros was not a noble motivation either. However, having said that, it cemented in my mind once again that I was a guy who goes low and is fearless. I was a guy who wasn’t afraid to lose. I was a guy who never backed off. Right or wrong, it has continued to serve me very well.¹

Knowing this may sound like bragging, I can’t count the number of course records I’ve shot through the years. I won our assistant’s championship shooting a course record on the last day. I once shot back-to-back course records at the course where they held the Nationwide Tour event in Odessa, Texas. Even in the past couple of years, I have shot three or four course records, while my new swing was still experiencing “growing pains.” All this, to me, means that our mouths and our hearts have a huge influence

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over our lives.

I want to elaborate on a few biblical insights I've lived by for a quite a few years that I think have solidified this in my mind forever. These principles are part of the total salvation process for Jesus followers. Remember, He came not simply to save us from hell, but to save us from ourselves and our destructive thoughts and ways.

These principles work for kingdom people and non-believers as well. But kingdom people have an added responsibility in all of this. Their primary goal is learning to become like Jesus. So in striving to cooperate with the Holy Spirit in this process of change, these kingdom people are greatly aided. Think of it as a kind of residual benefit of being a disciple.

A word of caution: the benefits that come our way are not attained through effort or striving, but by pursuing a daily life of intimacy with God. The "daily manna" of searching the Scriptures for truth will supernaturally prepare you for what God already knows will be your challenges. The Word of God transforms us from weak, fearful, people-pleasing people to those who simply live for Jesus and His glory. Great things can be accomplished when this paradigm shift occurs. As Jesus stated, "With men this is not possible, but with God all things are possible."

This applies to our mental approach as well. We are meant to be overcomers, not simply also-rans. Whether we win or lose is not the point. It is the faith and dynamism that is displayed in the process that glorifies God. The Bible clearly states that, "...whatever you do, do all to the glory of God" (2 Corinthians 10:31).

PRINCIPLE 1 • Do not fear what others think

There is nothing more fundamental to failure than to be overly concerned about what others think about you. This is debilitating! Part of coming into the kingdom is the core value of transferring our allegiances to God and away from man. I love the FCA tagline that says, "Audience of One." This has become one of my ultimate goals in life—to live for Him and no other.

This fear of man is in all of us. From the time we were young, we have naturally tended to follow the crowd and give into peer pressure. I was deeply mired in this kind of behavior. I only wanted to be popular, accepted and loved. I

learned that beautiful people, talented people and sports stars and rock stars were the ideal. It took years of spending around many of these kinds of people before I finally learned that chasing the acceptance of others only ended in disillusionment and frustration. Sports stars got old and were put on the sidelines of life. Beautiful people got wrinkles and added a few pounds. Rock stars fizzled out. It wasn't what it was cracked up to be. It is a snare to believe that getting the world to love you is a dream worth pursuing. Scripture verifies this:

The fear of man brings a snare, but he who trusts in the Lord will be exalted. (Proverbs 29:25)

Stop regarding man whose breath of life is in his nostrils; for why should he be esteemed? (Isaiah 2:22)

Nevertheless many even of the rulers believed in Him, but because of the Pharisees they were not confessing Him, lest they should be put out of the synagogue; for they loved the approval of men rather than the approval of God. (John 12:42,43)

The fear of man is at the root of "choking" and falling short of reaching our potential. The apostle Paul wrote that we should not compare ourselves with others. When we do this, we simply lack understanding (2 Corinthians 10:12).

PRINCIPLE 2 • Control your thoughts

The hardest thing to do coming down the stretch in either a normal round or the final round of a tournament is to control our thoughts. Crazy things can pop into our minds when we are trying to be a "closer." How can these things be handled? Again, a follower of Jesus has divine guidance in the matter. Although Paul's context in the following verse is slightly different, the application is valid:

For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh, for the weapons of our warfare are not of the flesh, but divinely powerful for the destruction of fortresses. We are destroying speculations and every lofty

thing raised up against the knowledge of God, and we are taking every thought captive to the obedience of Christ,... (2 Corinthians 10:3-5)

Part of becoming a follower of Jesus is having our minds renewed. We have been warped by years of wrong and harmful thinking. So we need a new mind:

...be renewed in the spirit of your mind, and put on the new self, which in the likeness of God has been created in righteousness and holiness of the truth. (Ephesians 4:23,24)

This is an aspect of kingdom life that many times I take for granted now. I'm accustomed to relying on the power of the Holy Spirit to help me take thoughts captive. I am dependant on the Holy Spirit. As a follower of Jesus, I signed a "Declaration of Dependence." This applies in relationships at work, in the home, in my neighborhood, and even on the golf course. God always wants me to rely on His power and His strength for mental stability. I may not win the tournament, but I can always access His power to help me in time of need. This is the children's food in the kingdom.

PRINCIPLE 3 • Speak well, even to yourself

At the end of the day, our life takes the same shape as the words we have spoken. If you hear a father constantly telling his child that he or she is skillless and stupid, that child will probably end up believing it. Worse, that child will speak these same words into his own mind, thus creating a destiny. Much has been written about the power of the spoken word, and it is warranted!

But more powerful than the spoken false word is when we merge what God says with what comes out of our own mouths. When these two are combined and then practiced day after day, we are transformed through the process. As Jesus said, "[My] words are spirit and are life" (John 6:63).

So here is a pattern for new life, according to the Word of God:

- *First*, we must come into the kingdom and access the Holy Spirit through the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus.

- *Second*, we must begin to utilize the power He gives us by taking thoughts captive.
- *Third*, we must have our minds renewed daily by prayer, fellowship of other believers and studying God's Word.
- *Fourth*, we must begin to speak as our thoughts become driven by what God says about reality.
- *Last*, we must continue this process until our minds come into alignment with His will for our lives. As that happens, success will be a by-product. He will provide the means and the people and the circumstances that you cannot, to make what you have spoken (based in His will and Word) come to pass.

The mouth and tongue are truly like rudders on a big ship. Though small, they can direct the entire ship (James 3:2-4). We can bring death or life to our families, relationships and careers (even our golf games) according to what we speak into them.

Death and life are in the power of the tongue, and those who love it will eat its fruit. (Proverbs 18:21)

We must always understand that ultimately the mouth will speak what the heart holds within it. The mouth really does just speak out what is in the heart. So we are in need of a heart transplant. God promised this to us long ago.

"Moreover, I will give you a new heart and put a new spirit within you; and I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh and give you a heart of flesh." (Ezekiel 36:26)

This is a process. The new heart and the new spirit are not beholden to men and their approving pats on the back. They only live for the One who created them. This is the key to our breakthrough in everything. We really must live for that Audience of One.

Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the issues of life. (Proverbs 4:23)

PRINCIPLE 4 • Move on from failure

Most every follower of Jesus will talk from time to time about “freedom in Christ,” usually meaning that they have been set free from the chains of the sin that kept them from Him in the past—addictions, anger, stubborn pride, profane living, you name it. And this is certainly an aspect of the freedom God has given us through His Son.

But consider this as well. What would you think of a golfer who told you that he would never make another bogey, double bogey, or worse? We would think such a guy foolish. No golfer can go about his business never making another mistake.

Neither can any follower of Christ. We will fail. Believe it or not, this is good news. There is a name for religious people who go around avoiding mistakes at every cost: Pharisees. Such people are so concerned about having their sins exposed that they hide their righteousness as well!

Jesus told a parable about three men who had been given gifts by a king (Luke 19:11-27). They were told to work with these gifts, parlaying them into gain. Of course, every investor and entrepreneur realizes that there will be losses in getting to the gains—it comes with the territory! But one of the three men decided gain wasn't worth the risk of embarrassing failure, and he hid the king's money. Bad idea! The king reprimanded this man severely for his unwillingness to put his reputation on the line.

Freedom in Christ means freedom to fail. It doesn't mean we set out to miss the mark, making errors and sinning along the way. Not at all. But it recognizes that mistakes, like bogeys, will be made. We can fuss and fume about this, or we can say, “Dang, I blew it! OK, let's go!” We can let God pick us up and keep us moving forward in the gifts and skills and truths He has given us. That's where the idea of “going one lower” fits right in. No matter where we stand today,

we can seek God's will for us for tomorrow—His will for us to keep going low.

Conclusion

In the end, this is not just about shooting lower scores. This is a process by which we can grow into the image of Jesus. He had no fear of man. He controlled His every thought—even in the garden of Gethsemane where He could have caved under the impending weight of His crucifixion. But He didn't, because He was a “closer.” He spoke the truth by acquiescing to the will of the Father. He said, “For I did not speak on My own initiative, but the Father Himself who sent Me has given Me a commandment as to what to say and what to speak.” (John 12:49). And while He never failed, He went boldly toward each new calling the Father gave Him.

Life in the kingdom is very good. I am only a learner myself, but each new truth I uncover gets me more excited to seek Him more. Winning and losing is only temporal, but the courageous nature of true kingdom people will be reflected for all of eternity. Never back off. Speak it and live it!

1 Yes, there is balance in all of this. My friend Dr. David Cook always pounded into my head that you should be aggressive to a conservative target. I agree with that philosophy to a point. There are times when par is like a birdie—U.S. Open conditions or howling wind or the like. But, a marginally tucked pin in normal conditions with an 8-iron and no wind is not the time for a bailout approach to the middle of the green. That may work if you are a seven handicap, but not if you truly want to compete against the best. Prudence yes, but fear-driven, score-driven timidity is not the answer. (One note: There are days when you don't have your game. In that case, prudence would dictate that it is wise to try and piece a round together that allows you to work out the kinks after the round and then charge tomorrow).



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