

PLAYING (from) YOUR HEART OUT

TRUE CONFESSION: I often think about golf when I'm in church. Is that a sin? I hope not, because I'm in big trouble if it is. It happened to me again Saturday night.

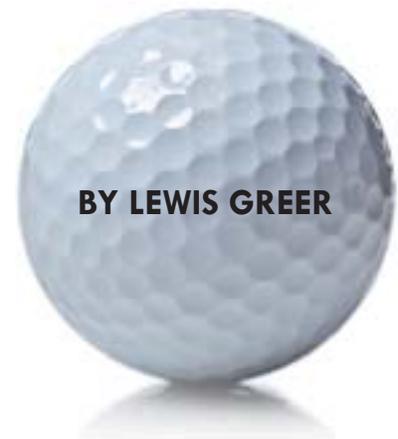
Actually I think about golf in many contexts, but church seems to really get those golf synapses fired up. And our preacher isn't even a golfer.

The good news is that I often think about God when I'm playing golf, so maybe I just have some weird form of dyslexia.

Either way, I've decided that God can talk to me about whatever He wants wherever I am, so I don't fight it any more. I go with the flow and think about whatever it is God puts in my mind to think about, and I try to figure out if He wants me to do something with it or just learn from it.

Sometimes those thoughts turn into daily devotionals for Links Players, sometimes they turn into a point I can share on the golf course, or even in one of my Links Fellowships. This one turned into this article. First the backstory, then the point.

How we
think about
golf and God



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*Was my right brain
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IN GOING THROUGH MY E-MAIL RECENTLY, I found a link to a new golf book that sounded interesting. Further investigation proved otherwise, but it did reveal a link to another golf book that sounded even more interesting. Sure enough, that one intrigued me and I ordered the book, which soon arrived on my doorstep. I arrived home late that night, but still found the time to jump into *Golf from the Inside Out*, by Barb Moxness.

In those pages she reminded me that golf cannot be played effectively from your left brain, something I have known for years but ignored lately. Was my left brain (the logical side) holding me hostage? Was my right brain (the creative side) on holiday? As I read, I wondered both how I had arrived there and how I would get out.

The next day I headed to the course, determined to know nothing about the swing except the feel. Sure enough, I played pretty well. But getting out of your left brain isn't as simple as determining to do so. I had work to do.

The next day I spent a few hours with a young friend who is in Arizona to play on the Cactus Tour. Naturally we talked about the concept of playing from your right brain, and we worked on it with her. At the end of our time together we engaged in a little short game competition, testing our right brains under pressure. (Note: she now owes me all the money in the world, which is what we were playing for. Second note: I predict that she will one day make almost enough playing golf to pay me.)

On Saturday evening I sat in church listening attentively to the message and not thinking about golf when the preacher said, "God's word goes in your heart, not in your head."

And suddenly I was thinking about golf in church, possibly sinning again, because I realized that following Jesus and playing golf are both heart activities.

Why I had not seen it until that moment aggravated me a tiny bit, but only for a moment. I thought of Proverbs, which says, "Keep my commandments and live, and my teaching as the apple of your eye. Bind them on your fingers; write them on the tablet of your heart" (7:2-3, all Scripture taken from the New American Standard Bible), and I thought of God's words through Jeremiah, "I will put My law within them and on their heart I will write it; and I will be their God, and they shall be My people" (Jeremiah 31:33b).

TOO MANY OF US PLAY GOLF FROM OUR HEADS and too few of us play from our hearts. That is not good for our games, which you will know if you have tried doing it. I think back on excellent shots that I have hit, and not a single one was based on mechanics. Every one was based on feel. Not as in "touchy-feely new-age contemplate-your-navel" feel, but as in "I know this is going to be a good shot" feel.

But have I applied this same principle to life, where it is actually of great importance? What does God mean when he says He will put His law within us and that it will be written on our heart? Why do we insist on following Jesus mechanically when that doesn't work in anything else we do, from driving a car to typing out an e-mail to hitting a golf ball?

SUSPECT THERE ARE TWO REASONS why we follow Jesus mechanically. One is that we find some comfort in mechanics, whether those are rules to live by or habits to emulate. The rules are easy enough to find, beginning with the Ten Commandments and moving on to slightly more obscure “rules,” like our own interpretations of Paul’s advice on identifying elders, or the relationship between husbands and wives. If the rules aren’t perfectly clear, we write our own.

We may even be better rule makers than rule breakers, but if so it is because we usually only make rules that we ourselves think we are unlikely to break. I’m happy to make a rule, for instance, that says one must think about God at least twice in every waking hour. I’m not happy to make a rule that says one must not think about golf in church.

The second reason we tend to be mechanical in following Jesus is that we have a very difficult time embracing grace as the only necessity for salvation. We still want to earn our way into heaven, because our human experience teaches us that we earn (and therefore deserve) everything we get, both good and bad. The principle of cause and effect helps us “understand” things, and we apply it even when we have no business doing so.

Because of that, some part of us thinks the young woman who became a multi-millionaire because she happened to be working as a temporary secretary for YouTube when they were purchased by Google deserved the money. We say, “How tragic,” when we hear of a fellow who was hit by a falling piece of glass and killed as he walked on the sidewalk beneath a skyscraper in Chicago—but some part of us thinks he must have deserved to die.

This mindset is very difficult to overcome. We reinforce it daily in so many ways, and we apply it so readily.

“Why did that ball slice?” is a cause-and-effect question. We want to know the cause and change it so that we can change the effect. We get so adept at this that we think of an effect we want (get to heaven) and we try to find activities and lifestyles and rules that will, in some combination and applied with diligence, result in that effect.

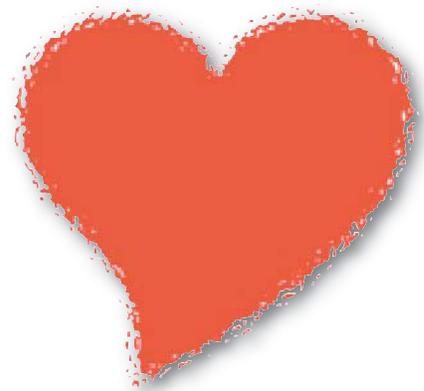
We schedule a daily quiet time. We sign up for a “read the Bible in a year” plan. We go to church regularly, and even give a little something. We keep the rules as best we can, and we admit openly that we are Christians.

All of those things are fine, but unless they emanate from the heart, they are merely mechanics.

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Likewise, I am in favor of using my mind in Christianity, of having understanding, and of being able to defend the faith.



Someone will say that we start with mechanics in a golf swing—grip, stance, etc.—and then move to the positions of the swing. Once those become “second nature” through a lot of practice, we begin to play by feel. I wonder if we wouldn’t be better off the other way around.

FROM TIME TO TIME MY GRANDNIECE and I hit golf balls together. She’s eight now, and with good hand-eye coordination she takes a mighty swing and almost always hits the ball. The only “instruction” I’ve given her is to put her right hand below her left hand on the handle, and that is all I will tell her until she asks for more. Otherwise she just watches me swing, copies that the best she can, and she loves it.

What would it look like if we “taught” Christianity that way? It starts with a love for Jesus, after all, so there it is in the heart. Why can’t we let it grow there instead of transplanting it to the head and then trying to push it back into the heart? Perhaps we should be asking, “How do you live your life if you truly love Jesus?” rather than stating, “This is how Christians live.”

I am in favor of thinking on a golf course, but only well before I hit a shot, not while I am hitting it. Likewise, I am in favor of using my mind in Christianity, of having understanding, and of being able to defend the faith (see 2 Timothy 4:1-4).

Isaiah 1:17 says, “Learn to do good; seek justice, reprove the ruthless, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.” Those words speak of using our minds well, and use them we must. But let our minds be guided by love, and let our love be guided by God’s word residing in our heart.

As brilliant as Paul was, and he was brilliant, he wrote this to the church in Corinth: “And when I came to you, brethren, I did not come with superiority of speech or of wisdom, proclaiming to you the testimony of God. For I determined to know nothing among you except Jesus Christ, and Him crucified” (1 Corinthians 2:1-2).

I don’t want to abandon my mind in following my Lord, and I don’t want you to abandon yours in your discipleship or on the golf course. But I do want us all to follow Jesus from the heart. The preacher was right when he said that our hearts are where God’s word should reside. That should inform every part of our lives, from how we interact with others to how we communicate with God.

That’s my plan, and I’m excited about it. Even if it means that, every once in a while, I think about golf in church. 🏌️

LEWIS GREER is the Arizona region director for Links Players. En route to Links Players, Lewis has been a tennis pro, an athletic club manager, a songwriter, a techie, and a pastor. We dare you to match that job profile!

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