

I really, really

L V E

birdies!

In 2014, Kevin Streelman set a PGA Tour record by finishing with seven straight birdies to win the Travelers Championship.

In 1999, Hall of Famer Beth Daniel established the LPGA Tour record with nine birdies in a row at the Phillips Invitational Honoring Harvey Penick. She obviously did the late Mr. Penick quite proud!

But when it comes to sheer numbers in a single round of golf, it looks like that distinction belongs to major champions Ernie Els and Darren Clarke, who both have carded 12 birdies in tournament play on the European Tour. Els performed the feat at the 1995 Dubai Desert Classic, and Clarke matched him five years later at the Smurfit European Open in Ireland.

I'm thinking we need to teach these professionals to share, because heaven knows we all really, really love birdies!

For many seasons now, I have wedged into my spring afternoons the coaching of a high school boys golf team in my local area. And one of the uniquenesses of our team is that we keep a Birdie Board. Each time a player makes a birdie, whether in practice or in tournament play, it adds another number to his total. This is good fun for even the best players, but it provides the biggest joy for players whose birdies don't come too often. I can count on this: when a fledgling player comes in from his round, the first thing he'll tell me, provided he got one, is "I made a birdie!"

Maybe you feel the same sort of pleasure. Birdies are that easy to love.

I'll let you in on a little secret. I've played golf regularly now for 40 years and I've put plenty of rounds at par or better on the board. But no matter how bad a round is, if I can say I made one birdie, then I've reached my goal. Perhaps that is setting my sights too low, especially if the birdie comes early in the round, but I know when I have made a birdie that I will have a least one good story to tell at the end of the day.

I'm also no dummy. The more, the merrier. If I can find two or three or four or five (OK, I've only done this a couple of times) birdies out there, I'm walking on the tops of grass blades. And one of my former players who has gone on to enjoy four years of college golf tells me, "If you're going to shoot a low

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score, you'll need to make at least five birdies." I like his thinking!

All that said, it's easy to agree: no matter how good a player you are, you'd be silly to spit on a birdie. They're just too fun.

Oh, how we love what's fun! But we make a critical mistake in life when we reduce love to enjoyment. We love hamburgers and puppies and movies—at least we say we do. But we don't have to sit and think for too long to remember that this is not the love we mean when we speak of loving our mother, our spouse, our children. Not even close.

Then there is our love for God.

Did I just make you nervous? If you came here with no idea that this article was going to reach "beyond the game," it's pretty likely. No one likes a bait and switch. But since I'm in the mood for telling secrets, here's another one: even religious types get twitchy when you start talking about love for God.

You see, irregular churchgoers and devoted monks are pretty much the same. When you talk about this good deed or that, when you talk about doctrinal creeds, even when

you talk about missionary work and martyrdom, they've got things to say. But when you start talking love for God—and here we mean not enjoyment-love but intimacy-love—just about everyone takes a big gulp and points their pupils to the floor.

Here's why: talking about love for God is not too far from talking about love for children. That is, we all know what it is—sort of. But if you turn the conversation just a little bit and it sounds like you're questioning one's love for their children or vetting the depth of their love for God, things can get ugly. I have never said to any living soul, "I love my kids more than you love yours." But—and this is a truly nasty *but*—I've thought it. Which means I've thought the same thing about my love for God. Mine beats yours.

If this sounds like true confessions, maybe it is. But it is also true accusations. Because we have all been there. At least in our minds, we have all set up our love against the love of another.

No wonder, then, that we are uncomfortable getting into a discussion about our love for God, for this is *God*, and we would be having our discussion before him. Let's assume he won't call out from the heavens, laughing at us and saying, "Ha! You think you love me. Let me show you Mother Teresa over here." But in the end, if God is who we have been told he is and we are who we have been told we are, we will stand be-

fore God and he will give us a good looking over and in that moment we will know—*just know*—how well we really love him.

So we back right off such a deep thinking and find ourselves saying much easier things, such as, “I really, really love birdies.”

That might be OK for now, because if nothing else it will let you sleep a little easier tonight. But a distant night will come, that night when your body has failed and you know it. Your grandchildren are gathered at your bedside and your thoughts are a mix of nostalgia and guesswork, and you ask yourself, “Have I loved my family enough? And what of God—have I loved him at all?”

Neither religion nor irreligion mean a thing at a time like this. Whether you’ve made no room for God, or only guarded room by checking off churchy boxes but never reckoning with Jesus, the question of your love for God will hit you right between the hemispheres of your brain.

So if you’ll give me a minute, maybe we can think about this matter of loving God. But let’s start in a different place altogether. Let’s consider God’s love for you.

In the Gospel of John, we read these amazing words, “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son that whoever

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believes in him will not perish, but will have eternal life.”

God’s greatest act was motivated by his love for us. That’s not just the big, universal *us*. That’s the small, individual *us*. God has plenty of love to go around. Kind of like those birdies, when God looks at the people of this earth and his opportunity to show them his love, he thinks, *The more, the merrier*. How do I know this? Because the apostle Paul wrote in his first letter to Timothy, “God our Savior...wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.”

So what did God do to get our attention with his love? He gave his Son, who is Jesus Christ. Extending the story as you may already know

it, God *gave up* his Son, who died on a cross to shed perfect blood as an offering for our sin. Some people get hung up on the extremity of that act, in the same way they get hung up on all other “unbecoming” expressions of love. But this is God we’re talking about, and we’re not in a very good position to tell him how things should be done. There’s a lot of theology behind all this, more than we’ll take time to get into here, but here is what is unmistakable: God went all out to demonstrate that he loved us.

But divine affection is like human affection. It can go unrequited. God is not forcing you to love him in return. Yet he has made a way for you to step away from your sin and be reconciled to him. Many people say, “Thanks but no thanks.” They don’t believe God’s love to be true, or they would rather rule their own life, or they’re waiting for a “better time.”

Can I give you some encouragement? When love is true, there is never a “better time.” If you knock it close from out in the fairway, you never say to yourself, “I’ll miss this one. There will be a better time for this birdie.”

Birdies are to be loved. Now. Spouses are to be loved. Now. Grandchildren are to be loved. Now. Maybe it’s time to think the same about God. 🏌️

Article written by Jeff Hopper, editor of the Links Daily Devotional.

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