



Links Players

Testing of Your Faith

Consider it all joy, my brethren, when you encounter various trials, knowing that the testing of your faith produces endurance.

Let no one say when he is tempted, "I am being tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted by evil, and He Himself does not tempt anyone. But each one is tempted when he is carried away and enticed by his own lust. (James 1:1-2; 13-14)

I was never a competitive golfer, just a zealous one. I started at age twelve and played in High School but not in college. After graduate school, I eagerly took up the game again. My work involved a lot of international travel, and I was blessed to play quite a lot overseas, especially in Scotland.

As Links participants will know, business golf is not the same as teeing it up with your regular club group, and to the extent I had "serious" rounds, those were the limit of it. No "plus" handicappers. But we worked hard on our games – as work and family commitments permitted.

Eventually, I could do a little more work on my game and got my handicap to 2 for a while, and I guess I let the priority and importance of golf move to a different level mentally.

Too much so, as it turned out. One Saturday afternoon in our regular game, I was given a painful wake-up call that changed my thinking about the game and the priority I placed on it.

After the obligatory trash talk and negotiation of bets, the regular game kicked off really strong for yours truly. I double-eagled the first and followed with birdie, birdie, par, birdie. I finished the front with two pars and two bogies.

The two bogies were a blow, and the fear that I might be leaking oil changed my heart rate a little. I've lost track of the hole-by-hole scores, but I think I finished with 81. I know there were two doubles. It was a certifiable meltdown.

It took a while to wrap my head around that round. Shock, anger, embarrassment, and even a little self-pity made the rounds in my head. Eventually, bits and pieces of reason and self-analysis began to form as the mist began to settle a little. Some hard but oh-so-useful hard lessons eventually emerged.

In his book *Golf Is Not a Game of Perfect*, Bob Rotella extols the wisdom of William Ames, an American Psychologist of the nineteenth century. When asked to identify the most important finding of the first half-century of university research into the workings of the mind. Ames said, "People, by and large, become what they think about themselves."

This account in Rotella's book came at just the right time. As I repeatedly replayed that back nine in my mind, I came away with two big takeaways.

The two verses I cited from James speak directly to the lessons that round taught me. It might seem silly to most that the trials James refers to in vs. 1&2 would be relevant to something as "unimportant" as golf, but I don't expect I'm the only player who took himself far too seriously while driving home from the course or mentally replaying the day's round as he turned out the light and crawled into bed.

Something John Calvin wrote centuries ago captures something important to consider at this point. He said, "The human heart has so many recesses for vanity, so many lurking places for falsehood, is so shrouded by fraud and hypocrisy, that it often deceives itself." That convicts me.

I confess two big takeaways from this. First, despite the things I told myself about this wonderful game, I had allowed it to become more than a game. It occupied too much of my identity. My weak play and lack of composure on that back nine revealed that I had made golf a kind of idol. It took a long time to get over it.

Second, and following up on the first point, had the Lord not brought these things to my attention and I not recognized them, the time it took to get past that day could have had lasting effects, as the quote by William Ames and the excerpt from the Book of James warn us.

Prayer: Father, thank you for the many and varied blessings you shower on us who believe. Give us strength by the Holy Spirit within us to endure the testing we face and strengthen us to avoid coveting things we may enjoy. In Jesus' name, I pray.

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Rob Clark

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