

“Hitting the Curve Ball”

During the late part of the 19th Century at the height of the Victorian era, the president of Harvard University, Charles W. Eliot, was often heard expressing his misgivings about sports. At one time, at the end of a successful baseball season, he even announced that he was thinking of dropping the sport. Pressed for an explanation, Mr. Eliot explained: *Well, this year I am told that the team did well because one pitcher had a fine curve ball. I understand that a curve ball is thrown with a deliberate attempt to deceive. Surely that is not an ability we should want to foster at Harvard.*

Rather than give up baseball, the attitude should have been to teach people how to deal with or handle the curve ball. Many never do. The death knell for many would-be professional baseball players is that short epitaph at the end of their scouting report: “Can’t hit the curve ball.” Unfortunately, that is true for many people outside of baseball, as well.

Life throws us many curves ... deception is found in all areas of life: deceptive advertising, false resumes, dirty tricks in politics, religious deceivers, consumer fraud, romantic seduction, medical quacks, internet spam ... deceptive practices in many other ways. Our society is corrupt with deception and we can’t stop the many curve balls being thrown at us. We just have to learn how to deal with them ... how to hit the curves, because in reality ... deception is a part of life. Street smarts! We just have to learn to stand in there, face whatever life pitches at us, and hit away ... while avoiding being sucked into bad situations ... deceived by the untruth ... the unreal.

In a small college town a bar frequented by students ran the following in the campus newspaper during the days before *Parents’ Weekend*: “Bring you parents for lunch Saturday. We’ll pretend we don’t know you!” The ad was soon challenged by the college chaplain, who posted a revised version on the campus bulletin board. It read: “Bring your parents to chapel Sunday. We’ll pretend we know you!” This is a deception within a deception ... the idea that humor tempers deceit and renders it somewhat cute.

A storekeeper, who was also the community’s postmaster, was a real go-getter. He had no helper, and when he had to leave his store to meet the mail truck, he was tormented by thoughts of customers stopping for gas and groceries and leaving when they saw the store closed and the storekeeper gone. He hit upon a shrewd solution. He printed a sign in bold letters which explained everything during his absences: *Back in 15 minutes. Already been gone 10.* When we ponder it, expediency and utility are deceptions within deception, too. The white lie, the “borrowed” money or goods, or whatever other means to an end, are all subtle tricks that deceive not only others but also ourselves. As one wise person remarked: *The Devil has a plausible answer for everything.*

Today’s lesson from Paul’s letter to the Galatians instructs us on how to hit the curve ball. I think the key lies in verse seven where Paul encourages the new Galatian Christians to persevere in doing good. It is interesting, however, that Paul bases his encouragement on somewhat different reasons than in precious letters. Rather than preach explicitly on grace, love and forgiveness, which will lead to good works, Paul reminds the Galatians that God is not to be trifled with ... that God is a just judge and operates on the notion that what people sow, they will reap.

If they sow the seeds of their flesh, they will reap corruption; if they sow the seeds of the Spirit, they will reap eternal life. In light of the coming judgment when reward will be made to those who have remained steadfast in their faith, Paul exhorts the faithful to do the good: *And let us not grow weary in well-doing, for in due season we shall reap, if we do not lose heart* (verse 9). There are no limits placed on our efforts to do the good. We are to do good to everyone and to do good all the time.

If this be true and I believe it is, then I think hitting life’s curve balls depends a great deal on our approach to life ... depends on our attitude, our outlook, our focus, our awareness, our dedication, commitments and disciplines. Could it actually be true that what we put into life is exactly what we get out of life? As a person of faith, I do believe that we will not be deceived if we consistently discipline ourselves with Jesus’ teachings. We need to remind ourselves that like the world of agriculture, as in our life, the seed determines the crop. We cannot plant grapes and hope for oranges! We cannot plant hatred, prejudice, and cynicism and expect to harvest for love, peace, and hope!

The seed and the soil are critical factors. One may have the seed of faith, but the soil into which it is planted can be either good or poor. Paul uses the language of higher nature (Spirit) and lower nature (flesh). The poor soil, the lower nature, includes natural desires, self-indulgence, anything where the focus is on oneself ... like the corrupt soil of entitlement ... and friends, faith does not do well in such soil.

For example: Take the story of the two people praying in the Temple ... one a Pharisee and the other a tax gatherer. Both

had the seed of faith, however, the Pharisee's soil was himself: "Dear God, I thank you that I am not like others ... I fast once a week, pray twice a day, and Lord, thank you that I am not like that tax gatherer over there." The tax gatherer also had the seed of faith, but he planted it in the Spirit: "Dear God, have mercy on a sinner like me!" The soil of the Spirit is the self striving towards that quality of life that remains in constant communion with God.

God will not be deceived by our behavior or attitude; we can not say we believe then compare ourselves with others in an attempt to make ourselves out to be not so bad. God will not be mocked! God knows us and though God is generous with His love and forgiveness, God still holds us responsible and accountable for our faith. God loves us with the expectation that we will obey Him; obey means love the other as oneself. Planting in the soil of the Spirit simply means doing the good as we have the opportunity ... and since opportunities are limited, we need to make the most of them. The truth is, God will forgive us our sins, but the *consequences* of those sins ... ah, the marks ... the scars ... the adhesions ... they remain a life time! That's reality!

Paul further lays out three steps of discipline on how we are to relate to each other, particularly when relationships are strained or broken. Paul reminds us that the first step is not one of punishment but of restoration ... reconstruction ... rebuilding something that has broken down. As in Paul's time, so in ours, there is far too much thought of revenge ... get even ... make the guilty party pay ... lay on the guilt ... sue, even if its over a pair of lost pants! Because so much attention is focused on self-interest, the behavior towards one another is more toward destructive means and less on constructive ways.

When we know someone is hurting, or lost, or doing wrong, we are to help restore them to the proper path; this we can do by adhering to Paul's second step: be in the Spirit of gentleness. Very gently help with the healing process. With tenderness, care, and being present in the most intimate way possible, aid the person suffering ... all the while keeping Paul's third step in mind: we are to be wary of our motivations for helping others and that requires self-evaluation. Because self-satisfaction and complacency produces a patronizing arrogance where we too readily call attention to the faults of others, but are blind to our own faults.

There is a thin line between genuine care and self-righteousness. I can't help think of the numerous times when more damage was done by someone trying to do good ... if they just would have kept their mouth shut ... or did nothing, it would have been better! There is the danger of helping people when we are so full of our own goodness ... those are times we deceive ourselves. Comments like, "you must have done something really bad for God to punish you that way," quite frankly are not helpful, and at best, dishonest. I agree with Paul, the more faith you have ... the closer you become to God ... the more humbled you are and the less judgmental you become.

This is because when we look upon Jesus Christ ... when we stand beside him ... when the light of his life shine on ours ... the greater the awareness of how much further we have to go to be like him. Abraham Lincoln is often quoted on this, but usually the last part of the quotation is omitted from his original saying: *We may deceive all the people sometime; we may deceive some of the people all the time, but not all the people all the time, and not God at any time.* Yes, God is not mocked!

The classic tale of deception that bares repeating is Hans Christian Anderson's fairly tale, "The Emperor's Clothes." The emperor ruled his country in a haughty fashion and thought that because he was such a special person, he should look like a special person. He wanted to wear the finest clothes ever made, so he search for someone to make them. Finally, he met a tailor who said that he would make the emperor a wonderful outfit. The clothes would be so beautiful that the only people who could see them were those who were extremely wise. Of course, the tailor was just pretending to make clothes. Actually, he wasn't making a suit for the emperor at all. But because the great ruler didn't want to appear stupid, he raved about how extraordinary the clothes were. All the people around the emperor said that they were special clothes, too, for no one wanted to appear disloyal. Finally, when the whole outfit was finished, there was a parade. The emperor rode in the streets with his new clothes on. No one knew what to say. Then, a little boy suddenly blurted out that the emperor had no clothes on. The emperor realized that the boy was right. It took a small child, who was not worried about impressing anyone, to expose the deception and tell the truth.

Deception is called the "utility sin." Sins are usually distinguished by the end that a person pursues in each case --- lust, money, power, public reputation. Deceit, however, is distinct from the other sins in that it pursues no particular end but rather serves whatever end is pursued. Deceit is the strategy of sin rather than the goal of the campaign. The addict doesn't willingly pursue addiction; the addict is deceived into addiction. Adam and Eve didn't pursue disobedience to God, they were deceived into it. Proceeding every sin known to humankind is a deception; a curve ball that we safely hit or miss.

Paul knows the curve ball will come to believers and unbelievers alike, and coaches the Galatian Christians, "Do not be deceived" (keep your eye on the ball). "God is not mocked" (deceived). And we need not be either. Whatever we sow that we will reap. Therefore, let us strive always to be genuine in our faith. We all struggle to keep the faith and we all slip at times; we all fall short. But let us struggle together towards God's truth, a truth that will set us free from our deceptions and self-righteousness. Let

us be disciplined in our faith. Let us be honest about our faith. After all, who are we fooling? Certainly not God!