

How to hit your sweet spot!

Living the New Life:

John 7:37-39

September 24, 2006

Bethany Church

Wesley J. Gabel

God created you for a certain kind of life. None of us are capable of living that life without the work of God's Spirit in us. The most essential part of that work was lost through sin, but it is regained in a new birth through Jesus Christ. With God's Spirit, we live a new life, the life for which we were created. What does that life look like? As important as education and work is, life is not about going to school, getting a good job and enjoying its fruits. We are not made like vacuum cleaners that focus on consumption. You will not be fulfilled by tending to your own needs and wants. You were made in the image of a loving and generous Creator. You were created both for a relationship with that Creator and to make an impact with your life. You were not made to live like a vacuum cleaner. You were created more like a baseball bat. This baseball bat was formed to make an impact. It was shaped to swing and it was made to hit. Likewise, you and I have been created for activity in this world that makes an impact. We can be living instruments of God that make a difference when we do what we were created to do. This bat has a sweet spot. If it hits the ball with its handle, it probably will break and the ball won't go far. If the bat hits the ball with its end, it will sting the batter and the ball will either dribble on the ground or pop up. Between the handle and the end of the bat is the sweet spot. If the bat hits the ball there, the ball will launch with the impact for which the bat was made. All of us have a sweet spot like this bat. When we hit things with our sweet spot, when we do things from our sweet spot, we make an impact, a real difference.

I know that not everyone likes baseball, but this season is special. The Rochester Honkers were awesome. The Rochester Royals won the state championship, and the Minnesota Twins are really entertaining. A manager of an opposing baseball team said that he liked his team, but loved the Twins; and he called them a bunch of piranhas. He said that in a game they just chew away at you, and the next thing you know, “You’re dead.” I think he meant that they do nothing dramatic, but suddenly you look up and you’ve lost the game. We can learn from that. We can learn something from baseball hitters, not just their bats. I’m changing the analogy from bat to batter. We all could be called God’s designated hitters, where the outcome of our lives and this world depend largely on whether the sweet spot of our bats hit the balls that are pitched to us. To hit our sweet spot, we have to do three things right. We need to choose the right bat, the right pitch and the right swing.

First, we need to look for the right bat. We don’t all have the same strength. We are not all built like Babe Ruth, Barry Bonds, and other home run hitters. We can’t all swing the heavy lumber they chose. We’ve got to choose our “lumber” carefully for a size, weight, and grip that fits our ability, skills and calling. God has built each of us differently, and each of has a strength that will make a difference. In Christ we have a divine strength. Jesus said:

Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said, streams of living water will flow from within him. (John 7:38, NIV)

Jesus was referring to the Spirit of life that was within him and affecting others. Through faith, that same Spirit works in you and through your personality and abilities. There is an impact that only you can make. It is an impact that brings life to a world that needs it because, alienated from God, we humans do so much harm. With God’s Spirit directing, your attitudes and actions advance Christ’s cure and God’s blessing.

In choosing the right bat, you need to think of how God formed you, worked with you and will work with you. There is a divine order. You play a role on a team. Hear God's voice:

As God's messenger, I give each of you this warning: Be honest in your estimate of yourselves, measuring your value by how much faith God has given you. Just as our bodies have many parts and each part has a special function, so it is with Christ's body. We are all parts of his one body, and each of us has different work to do. And since we are all one body in Christ, we belong to each other, and each of us needs all the others. God has given each of us the ability to do certain things well. (Romans 12:3-6, NLT)

God's Spirit calls us to honestly estimate ourselves, not as superstars who can do everything, but as people given faith and confidence to perform certain functions on the team. We fit somehow with other people. Together we are a body that belongs to one another and needs each other. There is no salvation for us and our world without our individual and corporate relationship with Christ.

I'm holding a part of a disc brake called the rotor. I had to replace it because a mechanic told me I needed to. My son John helped me do this on Labor Day. John told me that his air force work has given him the faith to tackle jobs like this. He replaced the first rotor; then he had me replace the second and helped me when I got stuck. He helped me gain confidence and competence in doing this. Indeed, I now can change some disc brakes because I have had some coaching. My confidence and competence have grown because of my relationship with my son. Where has God given you the coaching? Where do you have confidence? Where do you see your competence? How does that fit with the team and the mission? Do you need more coaching? Do you need more experience? This is what I mean when I say that you need to choose the right bat. God has been at work in you, coaching and developing your confidence and competence all your life. God may be at work, giving you a desire to develop new competence in some area. That is the bat.

You can have the right ability or bat, but you must also have the right opportunity. To hit your sweet spot, you need to swing at the right pitch.

Remember that your new life in Christ is about redemption of the world. In Matthew 25:31-45, Jesus talked about the final judgment when the sheep are separated from the goats. They were divided by their response to six situations: hunger, thirst, homelessness, nakedness, illness and imprisonment. These are visible needs. Those needs are pitches being thrown at us in life. All around us are visible needs and deeper needs like difficult relationships and estrangement from God. We have to see the ball, see the concern, before we can do anything. Jesus told a story about a rich man who ignored Lazarus, a beggar that was hungry, injured and sitting at the rich man's gate (Luke 16:19-31). Jesus made it clear that we are not to ignore the Lazarus at our gate. Who has God place at your gate, and what are their needs?

Some pitches are out of our strike zones. We're not meant to swing at them. Our bats won't reach certain pitches. No individual and no congregation can do everything. We have to be selective and recognize what we can do. We've got to pay attention to our bats and the pitches. If we keep swinging and missing, that could tell us something. We are unique and not a clone of another congregation. Collectively and individually, we must define our strike zone. What we are responsible to hit, what we can hit, and what we can learn to hit? What are the needs about us that you and I can do something about with our abilities and skills? What can we learn to do about the need? Who else is responsible and who can help us?

We hit our sweet spot and make a real difference when we choose the right bat, select the right pitch and make the right swing. Our swing is the action we take. The right swing depends upon our ability, the need and our role. In baseball there are different roles. A leadoff hitter takes a very different swing than the cleanup batter. The leadoff hitter swings to get on base.

The number two hitter tries just to get his bat on the ball and move the runner over. The cleanup often, but not always, swings for the fence. He wants to clear the bases and bat in runs. The pitch, ability and team situation determines the swing.

How do your abilities, the need at your gate and your church situation shape your action today? To hit your sweet spot and live the new life God has for you, you need to adjust your swing or train your swing for impact. You need to take actions that (1) utilize your abilities in sharing the living water Jesus is giving you, (2) cultivate your role in Jesus' church and (3) deal with need in the appropriate time. Swing is ability, role and timing applied to a need.

In baseball, it has been six decades since a batter has hit safely 4 out of 10 times over the course of season. Despite that, many swings that resulted in outs have helped win games. Great batters deal positively with failure. They are grateful to play the game, and want to contribute. Only with that attitude do people ever develop and hit their sweet spot. Only then do they know they are doing what God created them to do.

The ministry sheet you see today is a tool to help you live your new life in Christ. It is a tool to help you choose the right bat, select the right pitch and make the right swing in accord with God's call for your life. It is an imperfect tool, but it can help you. Please take and look at it now.