

Diamonds in the Rough: The Gospel According to Baseball

II. "Fielding Bad Hops"

James 1: 2-8



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For those of you who might have missed last week, we opened our series on "The Gospel According to Baseball" with a discussion about hitting. We talked about two main fears: the fear of getting hit by a pitch and the fear of striking out. As life pictures, those two fears represent our fear for survival and our fear of failure. I then invited you, in light of God's forgiveness, the power of the Holy Spirit and the gifts God has given you to confidently swing for the fences, living your life all out for Christ.

Today, we move from offense to defense, taking our place in the field. Just as there were hazards in hitting, there is a major one on defense, fielding bad hops. Sometimes they are due to the field conditions and sometimes due to the way the ball is hit, bad hops are an unavoidable part of playing the game. Bad hops are not fair and they respect no one. It doesn't matter how good you are or how long you have played the game. They eventually happen to every player. And how you handle them can be the difference between winning and losing. Bad hops are our life picture for talking about trials in life.

James writes,

"Consider it pure joy my brothers when you face trials of many kinds, because you know that the testing of your faith produces endurance; and let endurance have its full effect, so that you may be mature and complete, lacking in nothing."

One of the key things about bad hops is how you position yourself. Cal Ripken Jr. is our model for readiness. He is up on his toes with his weight ready to move in any direction. This is why Christians pray, why Christians study God's Word and why Christians regularly share in worship and fellowship. Following 9-11, churches and synagogues filled with worshippers and many people predicted wholesale revival across America. Everybody was praying, reading their bibles and making commitments to be more faithful to God. That revival lasted less than two months. It is correct that there are few atheists in foxholes, but worthwhile faith has to be more than foxhole religion. The most important thing about fielding life's bad hops is being ready for them before they come. So I ask you, "How is your prayer life and is God getting the necessary time for you to be ready for what comes your way?"

Notice that I did not say that your readiness would spare you the experience of bad hops. The bible openly tells us that "the rain falls on the just and the unjust," and I can find nothing to dispute that. None of us likes it, but as I heard a fellow African-American pastor say once, "Life is not fair, but God is good." So you are playing in the field and a ball is hit sharply in your direction. How will you respond? The Phillips translation of our scripture lesson says, "**Greet your trials as friends.**" That sounds counter-intuitive doesn't it? It's more natural to treat them as enemies, as threats. But if you live your life always trying to get out of the way of challenges and difficulties you are going to miss out on one of the great secrets in life. Derek Jeter gives us the proper fielding position for fielding bad hops. You put your body in front of the ball and have a hand ready to guide the ball into your glove, if possible. Even if the ball doesn't get to your glove, your body or hand will help knock the ball down in front of you, allowing you either to throw the runner out or at least keep the ball from getting past you for extra bases. Most of the time, the best

strategy for facing unfair situations and difficult challenges is to take them straight on. Put who you are in front of the challenge and put your faith in God and your life experience to work. Just like fielding a bad hop can be painful and the possibility of making an error is huge, life requires us to take the risk.

When I was in junior high I played on our church youth softball team. I usually played catcher or right field, testifying to my outstanding fielding abilities! But there was one double header where I was invited to pitch. We lost the first game 27-1, so there was truly nothing to lose. Well, I ended up doing well against this team of outstanding athletes, even striking out three of them (no small feat in slow pitch). We went into the last inning tied 4-4. There was one guy by the name of Howard who could hit the ball a country mile. Two were on and he came to the plate. I don't know if he saw how much I was shaking. But I just wanted to keep him from hitting the ball out of the park. Well, he hit a sharp grounder directly at the mound. Rather than place myself in front of the ball, I stepped to the side. He ended up getting a double as it went through the center of the infield and out deep into center field for a double, driving in two runs. Needless to say, my older infielders were calling me names my mother did not call me, for I had missed a wonderful chance at a double play ball and end the inning...if I had been willing to put my body in front of the ball. We did not score in the bottom of the last inning and lost the game 8-4.

Our natural tendency in the challenges of life is to recoil in fear, but faith says that challenges are the material in which God does his greatest work in and through us and the material that builds two crucial parts of our Christian character.

Our scripture lesson says that **“the testing of our faith develops endurance.”** The KJV translates this “patience,” but that is far too passive a word for what the bible means. “Steadfastness”, “resilience”, and “endurance” are better words. The issue is not just how you field that bad hop, but how you will field the ones that are yet to come. If you make an error or get hurt from the last one, what did you learn and how will you position yourself for the next one that comes. It's not just about one play but what kind of player you will be for the long haul. How many games are there in a major league season? 162. That doesn't include spring training and the pre-season and it doesn't include the playoffs and the World Series. The total number of games could be more than 200! There is a certain team I know of that tends to start very well, getting the hopes high for its fans, only to eventually tail off in the end. But the season is won and lost in August and September. I said last week that playing baseball is an exercise in managing failure more than managing success. This week I remind you that playing baseball is an endurance event, again a wonderful picture of life. We had a picture of Cal Ripken Jr. up there earlier. Do you remember when he broke the record for consecutive games played held by Lou Gehrig (aptly named “The Iron Horse”) for more than 50 years? His value to his team was about more than home runs or even great plays in the field. He was there, come rain or shine. So many of you in this church are examples of that to me. We buried a couple of them this week. You inspire so many when we want to take ourselves too seriously or think that our present challenges cannot overcome. Quite often you calm us with a short statement, “This, too, shall pass.” You teach us endurance.

Life's bad hops also develop something else in us. Peter writes in his short letter in chapter 1, **“In this you rejoice, though now for a little while you may have to suffer various trials, so that the genuineness of your faith, more precious than gold, which though perishable is tested by fire, may redound to praise and glory and honor at the revelation of Jesus Christ.”**

The curse of American Christianity is that it is often shallow and easily undone. We are people of privilege in the world and so we think that when “bad hops” come our way that God has abandoned us and that our faith no longer works. The truth is depth, maturity and genuineness are developed primarily by our difficulties more than our times of ease, by our losses more than our victories. I love that description when Peter writes that we experience “various trials.” How many have discovered that bad hops come in

clusters?

One of the former members of a church I served plays now for the Kansas City Royals. He had more than 100 games last season without an error and fielding average of .997. Then in a single game he had two errors. Is that life or what?

What do we do when those clusters of “bad hops”, of unfair situations and overwhelming challenges come? We prayerfully turn to God, put ourselves in front of the ball and let God do his best work, developing us more fully in faith, hope and love from the inside out. One of the great awards that is given to major league fielders is the Golden Glove. You saw a picture of the award just moments ago. The award is given to the one who has done the best fielding job for his team in the majors for that year. It is given for performance not just for a game or a series, but for a whole season. And it could be argued that for many who have received it, it was an award for great player for many seasons. “The gold glove.” Peter writes that our trials test us like gold is tested by fire, purifying us and allowing the impurities to rise to the top so that they can be disposed of. The result is gold that has such worth that it remains as a standard for wealth and commercial exchange in our world. No gold glove winner gets the award without his share of bad hops. And no Christian becomes fully who she or he can be without difficulties and trials.

So let me encourage you this morning. My guess is that in this past week, more than 25% of you have experienced some “bad hops.” I regret to inform you if you didn’t have any this week, there is a good chance this could be your week. And when you do, get out that gold glove. Put yourself boldly in position and watch God do more than you could ask or think. God doesn’t send the trials. He just does his best work during them. And since “bad hops” are part of the game, it’s good to know you have somebody like that on your side. And all the people said, AMEN.