

A serene golf course scene at dawn. In the foreground, a vibrant green golf green is visible, with a single green flag on a thin pole standing upright. The green is bathed in soft, golden light, and long, dark shadows are cast across its surface. In the middle ground, a calm body of water reflects the surrounding trees and the misty atmosphere. A small island with a few trees sits in the water. The background is a dense forest of tall, thin trees, their forms softened by a thick layer of white mist that hangs over the entire scene. The overall mood is peaceful and quiet.

The Perfect Round of Golf

The Perfect Round of Golf

is a publication of Links Players International,
committed to taking golfers beyond the game
to explore the person and work of Jesus Christ.

www.linksplayers.com

Copy: Jeff Hopper
Cover photography: Randy Wolff

Scriptures taken from the Holy Bible, New International Version®, NIV®. Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984, 2011 by Biblica, Inc.™
Used by permission of Zondervan. All rights reserved worldwide.
www.zondervan.com The “NIV” and “New International Version”
are trademarks registered in the United States Patent and Trade-
mark Office by Biblica, Inc.™

Copyright © 2015 Links Players International, Inc.

The Perfect Round of Golf

In his office with the door closed, a man putts one little white ball after another across the smooth carpet. He dreams of making every one.

In an airport news shop, a woman stands at the magazine rack, flipping through golf titles, looking at the pictures of faraway destinations. She dreams of unmarred fairways and pristine greens.

In a country club parking lot, as the twilight turns to dark, two old friends reminisce one last time about the day's great shots. Tomorrow, one will move away to be near grandchildren. They dream of when they will get a chance to tee it up together again.

Golfers are dreamers. We leave no divot unturned when it comes to finding the perfect round of golf. State-of-the-art equipment, hip attire (with the flat belly to go with it!), reaching the par-5s in two—all of these fill a golfer's crazy dreams.

But we also know this to be true: while there are all kinds of ways to measure a great round, when it comes to scoring, perfection has never been accomplished. In fact, when it comes to scoring, we're not even sure how to define a perfect round. It can't be 18 holes-in-one. But is it 18 birdies? What if an eagle gets thrown into the mix, or even a double eagle? Scoring perfection is golf's version of *The Limbo*—*how low can you go?*

We may not agree on what constitutes scoring perfection, but we can certainly agree on this: You're not going to achieve it, and neither is the greatest player who will ever play the game.

I don't know how that recognition sits with you, but I've discovered that most golfers are quite fine with it. As we've

already established, perfection in golf can be measured—and enjoyed—in too many other ways.

Make a birdie at the last—*perfect!*

Beat the trash talk out of your buddy—*perfect!*

Hang out with your partners on the patio after the round and watch the last players of the day come in as the sun sets beyond them—*perfect!*

All of these are concessions against the outrageous demand of mathematical perfection, and yet every one of them works, well, perfectly.

Even when golf is not perfect, though, we can take pleasure in this: it provides a buffer between us and the reality of life. For in life, too, the idea of perfection is overwhelming. No one closes every deal. No one says only kind words to their spouse and children. No one makes it to every appointment on time and ready to roll. In summary, no one lives mistake-free.

Is that a problem? Not usually, for we are all pretty good

at forgiving ourselves, at least for the little things. And even if you're one of those who takes your own errors rather hard, you know deep down that there is no way to get it all right. Sooner or later, we all spill our milk.

But what about when the conversation turns to spiritual matters? Now the discussion gets tricky, because if you dare to think of eternity and who holds your cards when it comes to deciding whether you're "in," you want to know just one thing: am I good enough?

If you are at all familiar with the Bible, you may be aware of the Sermon on the Mount. This was a teaching that Jesus gave to a number of his followers, and it contained such well-known passages as "Do not worry about tomorrow, for each day has enough trouble of its own," "Do not judge, or you too will be judged," and "Do to others what you would have them do to you." (You can read the whole teaching in Matthew, chapters five through seven.)

What makes a lot of people nervous, however, are some of

the other things Jesus said in that same sermon.

For one, Jesus said, quite plainly, “Be perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.” That’s almost unimaginable. It makes us want to say, “That’s fine for you, Jesus, but that’s not going to work for me.”

Jesus also said, referring to the most devoutly religious people of his time, “Unless your righteousness surpasses that of the Pharisees and the teachers of the law, you will surely not enter the kingdom of heaven.” Again, it’s easy to choke on Jesus’ words. Can he really demand such a standard of us? Doesn’t he recognize our humanness?

Our humanness is precisely what he sees. And what he hears are the words of the ancient writers, like King David, who wrote, “All have turned aside, they have together become corrupt; there is no one who does good, not even one.”

Now if you read through the whole of the Bible, you will find a few people who are actually called “righteous.” The good things they did stood out among their peers. But the Bible is clear that while such works are good for earthly living, they

won't stand up under the scrutiny of perfection. It's like if we said, "I made a bogey on every hole, but look how perfect this shirt is!" Looking like a golfer isn't enough. And neither are our good works when held up to the perfection of God.

Consider this daunting fact. Let's say that you committed just one sin a day (a sin is a thought, word, or deed that misses the perfect standard of God). Honestly, that would be great, because most of us look down on others or mutter prideful criticisms with embarrassing regularity. But if you showed up at the gates of heaven at the end of your average-length life and said to God, "Just one sin a day for me, Lord," your sin count would stand at somewhere between 25,000 and 30,000! In other words, even pretty good people look pretty weak on the scoreboard of life.

The Bible, which is the complete Word of God, makes sure we understand that we cannot get to heaven on our own merits. The apostle Paul, a man who was more than open about his own many faults, expressed it this way as part of the Bible's teaching: "It is by grace you have been saved through faith—

and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God—not by works, so that no one can boast” (Ephesians 2:8-9).

There is great irony in those words, for Paul noted that even if we could do enough good works to save ourselves, we would end up bragging about them and undo all the good we had done!

If we can't get to eternity with God by ourselves, how do we get there? Paul's words say that we get there by grace. But this is not a grace that comes without cost. We are told as we read through the Bible that God's perfect demands required a perfect sacrifice. This meant that someone had to live a perfect life, then die a death that shed blood covering the sins of all others. Those others are you and me. That one who lived the perfect life was Jesus. It is by his sacrifice that we receive the grace of God.

Often you will hear someone say, “Jesus died for our sins.” What meaning this has when we stand back and calculate those 25,000-30,000 sins times the billions of souls who have

lived a life on earth! Jesus was not just a great teacher or a worker of amazing miracles—though he was each of these. Jesus came with a singular purpose: to die to bear the sins of all those who cannot obtain perfection. And in the midst of all those sins, we do indeed find our own. Jesus has borne these too.

The Bible, of course, has far more content than this. There are the histories and prophecies of the Old Testament, but these point to Jesus too.

When Adam and Eve committed the first sin, breaking the only rule God had given them, God told the tempting serpent that “the seed of the woman” would crush the serpent’s head. That seed, Paul would later explain, was Jesus, and the act that undid the serpent’s work, thereby crushing his head, was Jesus’ bloodshed at the cross.

Long after Adam and Eve came a man named Abraham, whose “faith was credited to him as righteousness.” Even this revered progenitor of the Jewish people could not enter eter-

nity on his own merit. Rather, only his faith that a redeemer would one day come to save him counted in God's sight. Again we find an explanation from Paul, who wrote that the story of Abraham can be our story too: "The words 'it was credited to him' were not written for him alone, but also for us, to whom God will credit righteousness—for us who believe in him, who raised Jesus our Lord from the dead" (Romans 4:24).

Finally, we also see in the Old Testament specific prophecies of Jesus' death. The prophet Isaiah wrote the words God had given him about 700 years before Jesus was born. They included declarations about how the Savior would reign in eternity, but also descriptions of the death of that Savior: "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed" (Isaiah 53:5).

All of these writings, as well as the familiar Psalms and Proverbs, preceded the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John that we find in the New Testament. These Gospels tell the story of Jesus, born in Bethlehem, raised in Nazareth,

ministering in the Galilee region, and eventually put to death in Jerusalem. Many people know this story because of movies like *The Greatest Story Ever Told* or even *Ben-Hur*. What they do not know, however, is that these “stories of Jesus” might be more properly called “accounts,” for they are backed up factually in many aspects by contemporary historians of Jesus’ time. Not only this, but Jesus’ remaining disciples were nearly all put to death for holding adamantly to the truth of those accounts—an unlikely sacrifice if they knew the circulating stories of Jesus to be false.

Above all the facts about Jesus, however, one stands uniquely: his resurrection from the dead. It was by believing in this fact, Paul told the Romans, that our faith would be credited as righteousness. And it is this fact that makes Jesus different than all other religious figures. The followers of Moses (Judaism), Mohammed (Islam), and Buddha do not claim that their leader lives. Nor do the adherents of any other major or minor religion claim that their leader lives. Only followers of Jesus Christ do this, and again they do so on the basis of Paul’s

inspired writings: “If Christ has not been raised, your faith is futile; you are still in your sins” (1 Corinthians 15:17). The resurrection of Jesus is essential to the Christian faith.

But not only is it essential in belief, it is essential in life. Eternity is impossible if resurrection is impossible. Either our bodies are all we have and upon our death they go into the earth for all time, or they do not. Those who are in Jesus anticipate being raised, their bodies made new for eternal life with him.

So where does all this lead? Here: If I recognize the perfection of Jesus, both in his life and in his death on my behalf, I am faced with a decision. And even if the decision is simple enough on paper, many people resist making it. The decision is whether or not we will surrender to Jesus and allow his work to be made complete in us.

You may think, *That’s no big deal. We’re just saying, ‘I believe,’ and beliefs don’t require much more than a thought and a word.* In a way, you’d be right. Many people have said they believe in

Jesus and it has had no significant effect on their life. But in the Bible, we find Paul calling those who believe to transformation. He wrote to the Roman believers, “Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is—his good, pleasing, and perfect will” (Romans 12:1-2).

Believism can be easy, requiring nothing more of us than a mental affirmation. But when God’s mercy comes into view through the death of his Son Jesus, belief compels us to so much more. In fact, Jesus himself asked his disciples, “Suppose one of you wants to build a tower. Will he not first sit down and estimate the cost to see if he has enough money to complete it?” (Luke 14:28). When considering the accounts of Jesus, we are always pushed to this next step: Am I willing to live for him?

Many of us would be inclined to walk away at this point, even with eternity sitting on the table before us. “There are too many unknowns,” we protest, “too much of a chance that God will ask me to do things that I’m not ready to do.” And yet, even those who do their due diligence and consider every possible scenario ahead of stepping out in education or business face the unexpected. Neither does Jesus guarantee ease. But he does guarantee you three things:

God as Father will love you

“Which of you, if his son asks for bread, will give him a stone? Or if he asks for a fish, will give him a snake?... how much more will your Father in heaven give good gifts to those who ask him?” (Matthew 7:9-11)

God as Holy Spirit will equip you

“I have much more to say to you, more than you can now bear. But when he, the Spirit of truth, comes, he will guide you into all truth.” (John 16:12)

God as Jesus the Son will carry you into new life

“And if I go to prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you may also be where I am.” (John 14:3)

Jesus has done the work necessary to purchase your salvation and welcome you into his eternal kingdom. Now the call is yours. Will you believe? Will you follow?

It is likely that you have seen a fan at a golf tournament or other sporting event holding up a brightly colored sign with the reference John 3:16 neatly printed there. Here is what that passage says: “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”

Those are amazing words, a promise in exchange for our faith. You may feel inadequate for such a journey. But you are only asked to take the first step. You can say to God, “I am a sinner, far from perfection. I have no right to heaven on my own merit. But Jesus has done this wonderful thing, allowing

me to lay claim to his perfect righteousness. Lord, take the sins of my past and the sins of my future. Throw them far aside and please see Jesus instead. In faith, however small it is, I cling to his righteousness as my own, undeserving but completely thankful.”

With such a prayer of true confession and earnest acceptance, you enter the kingdom of God. This is an amazing place to be. God is at work, changing hearts and equipping people to encourage and love one another so their very lives give glory to God. Believe in Jesus and you become part of this!

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO NOW?

If you aren't ready to pray this prayer, but you are interested in considering more about who Jesus is and what he came to do, we would suggest three things:

- If possible, continue to talk about Jesus with the person who gave you this little book, asking them about how God has worked in their life personally.
- Get your hands on a Bible (or read online at biblegate.com)

way.com). Begin with the Gospel of Mark and Paul's letter to the Philippians, which describe and explain the work of Jesus.

- When you come to a place of believing and desiring Jesus, pray the prayer of confession and acceptance—wherever you are, whenever it is.

If you have prayed this prayer, we also suggest three next steps for you:

- Tell the person who gave you this book, or someone else you know who is a follower of Jesus, that you have prayed this prayer and celebrate with them.
- Commit yourself to a daily time of reading the Bible and prayer. These practices will help grow your understanding of God and relationship with him.
- Find a group of like-hearted people in a small group or church, people who desire more of Jesus and turn to the Bible to find out more about who he is and how he works.

The Perfect Round of Golf

was written specifically with those who love golf in mind, though its greater message is not for golfers alone. If this booklet was helpful to you, it will be helpful to others like you.

Please share this book, along with the story of how Jesus has changed your life.

To help you do this, we offer this book at simple cost of printing and shipping.

You may order them online at

www.linksplayers.com,

where you will also find more about the work we do building fellowships for study and prayer where people play golf.

A misty golf course at dawn. The background shows rolling green hills, a blue body of water, and a dense line of trees under a soft, hazy sky. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is centered over the image, containing two paragraphs of text.

Is it possible to play
golf so flawlessly
that we can call it
a ‘perfect round’?

Is it possible to live a
life so good that we
can stand before
God and say,
‘I’ve done everything
just right’?

LINKS PLAYERS INTERNATIONAL
www.linksplayers.com