

LOVING WITHOUT LIMITS LIFESTYLE

As you probably know, I like to play golf. The game of golf has been described in various ways:

Golf – God’s idea for a few laughs.

Golf – A good walk, spoiled.

I hate golf, I hate golf..... good shot – I love golf!

There are many jokes about the game of golf.

One Sunday morning the vicar decides he’s going to go and play golf. So, he phones the curate and asks him to cover at the service for him. The angel Gabriel nudges God and says: “Do you see that...he can’t do that!” God replies: “Don’t worry – I’ve got it sorted!” Well – on the 9th hole the vicar gets a hole in one! Gabriel turns to God and says: “I thought you said you’d got it sorted?” God replies: “I have. Who can he tell?”

Golf is a game of great nuance as no two shots are the same. There are all sorts of different ways to play the game of golf: stroke play, stableford, four ball, better ball, Texas Scramble, Scramble, Shamble.

There’s one thing about golf though that makes the game really challenging. It’s a simple but profound truth: no-one can take your turn. Whatever format of golf you play, wherever you play, whoever you play with, however good you are – no-one can take your turn.

When it’s your turn to stand on the T, no-one else can take your turn. When you’re on the green and its time to putt: no-one else can take your turn. And maybe that’s where the game of golf reflects how life works. Because, as in golf, in this thing we do called life, no-one else can take your turn.

And, you have a ‘turn’ every time in life you get to choose. Every time we get to decide, we get an opportunity to choose and we get to take our turn, and, no-one else can take your turn.

Just think for a moment how many times a day you get to make a choice: what will you eat? When will you eat? Who will you speak to? What conversations will you have? What will you think about? What will your mind dwell on?

What will you choose to be interested in? How much effort will you apply to what task? How will you spend your time? In all the choices we face each day – no-one else can take your turn.

¹ In the third year of the reign of Jehoiakim king of Judah, Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came to Jerusalem and besieged it. ² And the Lord delivered Jehoiakim king of Judah into his hand, along with some of the articles from the temple of God. These he carried off to the temple of his god in Babylonia and put in the treasure house of his god.

³ Then the king ordered Ashpenaz, chief of his court officials, to bring into the king's service some of the Israelites from the royal family and the nobility— ⁴ young men without any physical defect, handsome, showing aptitude for every kind of learning, well informed, quick to understand, and qualified to serve in the king's palace. He was to teach them the language and literature of the Babylonians. ⁵ The king assigned them a daily amount of food and wine from the king's table. They were to be trained for three years, and after that they were to enter the king's service.

⁶ Among those who were chosen were some from Judah: Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah. ⁷ The chief official gave them new names: to Daniel, the name Belteshazzar; to Hananiah, Shadrach; to Mishael, Meshach; and to Azariah, Abednego.

⁸ But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine, and he asked the chief official for permission not to defile himself this way. ⁹ Now God had caused the official to show favour and compassion to Daniel, ¹⁰ but the official told Daniel, "I am afraid of my lord the king, who has assigned your food and drink. Why should he see you looking worse than the other young men your age? The king would then have my head because of you."

¹¹ Daniel then said to the guard whom the chief official had appointed over Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah, ¹² "Please test your servants for ten days: Give us nothing but vegetables to eat and water to drink. ¹³ Then compare our appearance with that of the young men who eat the royal food, and treat your servants in accordance with what you see." ¹⁴ So he agreed to this and tested them for ten days.

¹⁵ At the end of the ten days they looked healthier and better nourished than any of the young men who ate the royal food. ¹⁶ So the guard took away their choice food and the wine they were to drink and gave them vegetables instead.

¹⁷ To these four young men God gave knowledge and understanding of all kinds of literature and learning. And Daniel could understand visions and dreams of all kinds.

¹⁸ At the end of the time set by the king to bring them into his service, the chief official presented them to Nebuchadnezzar. ¹⁹ The king talked with them, and he found none equal to Daniel, Hananiah, Mishael and Azariah; so, they entered the king's service. ²⁰ In every matter of wisdom and understanding about which the king questioned them, he found them ten times better than all the magicians and enchanters in his whole kingdom.

²¹ And Daniel remained there until the first year of King Cyrus.

(Daniel 1 v 1-21)

The story of Daniel is about choice, and Daniel chooses wisely. We read in the opening verses that Daniel is the victim of circumstances. I hope you know enough about the history of Israel to have a good idea of what is happening in these verses.

Israel, since its beginning, was given a choice by God: blessing or curse – you decide. It will matter how you choose to live. Israel kept choosing its own way, not God's way. God sent along the prophets to challenge Israel about the way it was choosing to live, and the prophets made clear the consequences of living their own way. "If you go on choosing to live this way, the consequences will be exile."

It did not matter how hard God tried through the prophets, neither Israel, or the small part of the divided nation, Judah, followed God's ways. In 722BC, Israel was invaded by the Assyrians and the nation came to an end. Then in 586BC, Judah was invaded by the Babylonians.

And this is where we find Daniel. Judah is captured by Nebuchadnezzar, and Daniel is taken to Babylon.

Daniel is a victim of circumstances – the unfaithfulness of Judah over a long period of time. Daniel loses his freedom, his home, his culture, his friendships and his status as a young man in a noble family with all its potential. He has to learn a new language, and eat a new diet. He has his name changed in a Babylonian power play, and as far as we know, Daniel will spend the rest of his life in a place he never would have gone to, and a place he never wanted to be in. Daniel found himself in a second-choice world.

If you had been Daniel, what would you have done?

In the beginning of the story, it's the Babylonians, and king Nebuchadnezzar who determined everything. Daniel has no say – he's simply taken off and told what happens next. But in Daniel 1 v 8 Daniel takes the initiative – “But Daniel resolved not to defile himself with the royal food and wine.” (NIV) “But Daniel made up his mind...” (NASB) “But Daniel was determined.” (NLT) This is a firm decision that Daniel makes. Daniel resolved in his heart that he would honour God. Daniel would take his turn, something no-one else could do.

The writer isn't interested in why Daniel didn't want to eat the royal food – the important thing is that Daniel chose! In all the circumstances he faced, Daniel found a way to express his deepest commitment.

We have a Value that says this: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions. And we get to choose.

So, how are you doing?

Daniel's choice was one of great courage. King Nebuchadnezzar was not a nice man. King Zedekiah rebelled against him, so King Nebuchadnezzar had Zedekiah's two sons killed in front of him, and then cut out Zedekiah's eyes so it was the last thing he saw.

Daniel was wise. He proposed an experiment and exercised faith that God was at work in the mess. God was present in Daniel's second choice world – Daniel was not alone. Daniel's diet worked out so well, that everyone was put on it! But Daniel was not done with difficult choices in his second-choice world, and neither were his friends.

Faced with the furnace, Daniel's friends make an extraordinary statement about their deepest commitment.

¹⁶ Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego replied to him, “King Nebuchadnezzar, we do not need to defend ourselves before you in this matter. ¹⁷ If we are thrown into the blazing furnace, the God we serve is able to deliver us from it, and he will deliver us from Your Majesty’s hand. ¹⁸ But even if he does not, we want you to know, Your Majesty, that we will not serve your gods or worship the image of gold you have set up. (Daniel 3 v 16-18)

But, even if he does not.... An extraordinary choice. But no-one else can take their turn.

Daniel is told, ‘stop praying or we will throw you to the lions.’ Daniel’s choice is to keep on praying because this is about his deepest commitment.

We have a Value that says: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

How are you doing?

Friends, we have been made in the image of God, and God gave us dominion. God gives us a tiny measure of what God has without limit – the ability to choose – we are made in his image. The ability to choose is deeply connected with the kingdom of the heavens because we are made in the image of God. Choosing is a kingdom thing.

Perhaps one of the most devastating things we can believe about ourselves is that we do not matter.

There is a thing called ‘learned helplessness.’ Experimenters, researching about depression, gave dogs a series of small electric shocks. Some dogs learned they could stop the shocks by jumping over a wall. Other dogs were given shocks at random. This second group simply lay down and stopped trying to do anything. Later, these dogs were put in a setting where they could have stopped the shocks by jumping over the wall – but they never tried to. They had learnt they were helpless.

We have a value that says: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

How are you doing?

It turns out that humans are more vulnerable to learnt helplessness than dogs. Daniel flourished in Babylon because he refused to believe he was helpless.

Viktor Frankl was a highly respected psychiatrist in Vienna. He lost everything when the Nazi's rose to power. The pain and torture inflicted by the Nazi's on Frankl and those in the concentration camps is utterly distressing to hear. Somehow, in the midst of this hell on earth, Frankl began to realise there was one freedom not even the Nazi's could take from him. Frankl realised he had one choice open to him. He came to realise everything can be taken from a man but one thing – the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way.

In the concentration camp, Frankl began to make his choices. He chose to cherish the thought of those he loved; he chose to give what help he could, as a doctor to others. He grew conscious of making choices – what he would think about; what memories he would dwell on; what words he would speak; how he would say them; how he would respond to humiliation; how he would walk; how he would hold his head high.

One writer expressed what was happening this way: the guards had more liberty – they could leave the camp, walk where they chose, spend what they wanted. But Frankl had more freedom!

We have a value that says: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

How are you doing?

Friends, we know that the world is not always how we would like it to be. We know that the world is often unfair, tragic, unkind and challenging. We know that there are many things that are, simply, outside our control. We know that we can be deeply affected by the choices of others. We know that we live in the consequences of the world as it actually is.

We know that many of us, probably all of us, in one part of our life or another, live in a second-choice world. We know that the world, in one way or another, makes many demands on us. We know all of that is true, but we also know that we are made in the image of God – with the ability to choose. We also know that God looks at us and declares us very good. We also know that we have one life. We also know there are some things we can control.

We have a value that says: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

How are you doing?

One choice you have is to find ways to express your freely embraced deepest commitment. And no-one else can take your turn.

Friends, we say we are a GOSPEL people:

Grace: We will be motivated by God's free gift of Grace in all that we do.

One Another: We will be real as we care for One Another and work together

Servant Hearts: We will Serve those in the local community and beyond with integrity and love.

People: We will share the Good News of Jesus with anyone who does not know him.

Equipped: We will identify, develop and use our God given gifts

Lifestyle: We will be good stewards of our time, talents and possessions.

How are we doing?

How are you doing?

Daniel resolved in his heart that he would honour God. Now, it's your turn!

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