

Students of the Game  
Matthew 23:1-12  
© Stacey Steck  
Preached October 30, 2011 at San José, Costa Rica

One of the highest praises one sportsman can offer another, especially in baseball, is to say that he is a “student of the game.” To say someone is a student of the game is to say that they have so much respect for the game that they never take it for granted, that they know they are not greater than the game no matter how much talent they have, that they respect the history of the game and never lose sight of the fact they can be humbled by it. A student of the game is a lifer in the game, even though they know their time on the field must come to the end to make way for a new generation. These are the guys in the clubhouse who have the respect of all of their teammates, except of course the ones who wouldn’t know a student of the game if they met one, being too self-absorbed and thinking about their next contract. Students of the game are watchers, and questioners, and sports encyclopedia readers who absorb into their own skin and bones the very ethos of the game and its traditions and its winners, and probably without even being aware of it, keep the spirit of the game alive when it teeters on the brink of being a petulant, self-important, scandal-ridden caricature of itself. Talking about the attitudes of players, former Los Angeles Dodgers star, Steve Garvey, once said, “The difference between the old ballplayer and the new ballplayer is the jersey. The new ballplayer cares about the name on the back. The old ballplayer cared

about the name on the front,” and that’s a good description of “a student of the game” by one who should know.

I suppose I wax poetic about baseball tonight because the season is now over. For those of you not following, the St. Louis Cardinals won the World Series in seven exciting games over the Texas Rangers, and now, every team in the league, and all their fans, including the Cardinals actually, must “wait until next year,” the proverbial cry of the fan whose team has swooned in the stretch, and is just playing out the string on the rest of the season. Truly in baseball, one can find eternal hope. But perhaps too, the idea of being a student of the game is running through my mind because of what Jesus is saying to his disciples in our story from Matthew gospel. “But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you all are students.” And, I would add, students of the master, students of the Gospel.

Jesus is speaking now to his disciples, but also the crowds who have formed around him. He is no longer speaking to those who are conspiring to get rid of him, but rather to those who want to hold onto him, and those who want to get to know him better. He starts this teaching by pointing out what everybody there already knew, that life under the leadership of the scribes and Pharisees was harder than it had to be. “They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of other; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them.” The carefully crafted ways the Pharisees had come up with to try their best to honor

God and the commandments they had received had been refined so thoroughly they resembled a religious minefield through which people needed to walk without stepping on a rule that would put them on the outside looking in. What began as a gracious way for God's people to live together had become a tedious game of keeping up with the latest developments of the Pharisees, and nobody wanted to be a student of that game. It *is* important to know what defines "work," so that if God does not want you to work on the Sabbath, to honor the day that God rested after all the work of creating the world, then you don't work, intentionally, or accidentally. That's important. It really is. But when the sum total of all the definitions of work betrays the very idea of the Sabbath it is trying to defend, then the burden lays heavy on the shoulders indeed. And then who can rest on the Sabbath, wondering how many ways they have accidentally violated the commandment to refrain from work? Perhaps an example might be something like if your very own church council here at ECF decided that since the piano is not mentioned in the Bible, then we must not use it, because even though God values music, if music from a piano was pleasing to God's ears, we certainly would have been told that. I really believe that God values the effort we put into trying to determine whether we have crossed a line we were told not to cross. But I also believe that God values even more the life we were given in the first place, the life for which the lines were drawn.

And then when you add on top of that burden the hubris that these scribes and Pharisees seem to have shown, you have a situation about which Jesus simply must comment. And so he does, by reaffirming the gift of the law, but instructing people to follow it, rather than those who are interpreting it in such a burdensome way. And he instructs them to not use the kinds of titles which might add to the confusion. Do not let yourselves be called rabbi, or Father, or instructor, since those titles are better reserved for the one who gave the graceful commandments in the first place. Some of you may come from traditions that still use terminology like Father or Teacher, but we are not the Pharisees, so we won't hold that against you. You see, what is even more important than being careless with titles is what he concludes with, "The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." Now, if you go about defining "servant" and "humble" so thoroughly that actually being a humble servant becomes a burden, then we'll have some trouble. But I think you can avoid the temptation.

I think the key to these words of Jesus tonight lies in his statement, "you have one teacher, and you are all students," a true call to humility. It is not that we do not have something to teach to others, and the responsibility to do so, but rather that we should not presume that the student will ever surpass the teacher, or come to a point where we believe there is nothing left to learn. It is ironic really, that Jesus seizes on this image of student and teacher, for this is of course what the

Scribes and Pharisees thought they were doing, being good students of God's word and teaching it to others. But reading between the lines, the criticism Jesus is offering is that for as much as they studied, they seem to have forgotten that the reason to study in the first place was to learn humility and servanthood, rather than to be able to teach others the finer points of the law. I have often said that upon graduating from Seminary, the overwhelmingly humbling feeling I had was that no matter how much I had studied, there was still so much more to study. Always being a student always keeps us humble.

Perhaps as I was describing a "student of the game" of baseball as I began tonight, it also sounded like a pretty good description of the kind of people we are called to be as disciples of Jesus Christ, people whose life is the Gospel, and who live it for the love of it, not whatever rewards we might receive. We follow Jesus for the name on the front of the jersey, rather than the back. We study the whole game, its tips and tricks, its history and its heroes, and not just our statistics from that day, although we don't overlook those either. This Sunday is celebrated in many churches as either Reformation Sunday or All Saints Sunday, or both, and both of them well known to students of the game. Without both of them, we wouldn't be here tonight worshiping, at least not in the particular way we do as products of the Protestant Reformation. Reformation Sunday remembers and celebrates others who truly were students of the game, the Luthers, the Calvins, the Zwinglis, the Knoxes, whose faith and insight helped the church to realize that all

are called to be students of Jesus Christ, and not just the receivers of information someone else is passing along to them. It was they who insisted that the Bible and worship must be in the language of the people participating in it, that the power of clergy was to be balanced with that of lay people, so that the burdens of living and learning together were equally shared. They were indeed students of Jesus' game. Likewise on All Saints Sunday remembers all who have gone before us in the faith, not just the famous Christians who occupy prominent places in our history books, but those who in every generation have been the students of the game that have kept the spirit of the church alive whenever it has teetered on the brink of being a petulant, self-important, scandal-ridden caricature of itself. On All Saints' we remember humbly all the saints, both those who were not perfect, ourselves included, but also those who learned from our one teacher that "the greatest among you will be your servant," and that "All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted." And they have been. And may we be also. Amen.