

“WHAT NOW, LORD?”

Psalm 107:1-9, 43, Luke 12:13-21, Colossians 3:1-11

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Baseball consultant, Chris Sperry, wrote a fantastic article about holding to standards in every aspect of our lives. His article is entitled, “17 INCHES.” Let me share it with you today. He says:

“In Nashville, Tennessee, during the first week of January, 1996, more than 4,000 baseball coaches descended upon the Opryland Hotel for the 52nd annual American Baseball Coaches Association convention. I was attending my very first convention. Nashville in '96 was special because it was there and then that I learned that baseball - the thing that had brought 4,000 of us together - was merely a metaphor for my own life and those of the players I hoped to impact.

“While I waited in line to register with the hotel staff, I heard other more veteran coaches rumbling about the lineup of speakers scheduled to present during the weekend. One name, in particular, kept resurfacing, always with the same sentiment - “John Scolinos is here? Oh man, worth every penny of my airfare.”

“Who is John Scolinos, I wondered. I had no idea. No matter, I was just happy to be there.

“In 1996, Coach Scolinos was 78 years old and five years retired from a college coaching career that began in 1948. He shuffled to the stage to an impressive standing ovation, wearing dark polyester pants, a light blue shirt, and a string around his neck from which home plate hung — a full-sized, stark-white home plate.

“Seriously, I wondered, who is this guy? After speaking for twenty-five minutes, not once mentioning the prop hanging around his neck, Coach Scolinos appeared to notice the snickering among some of the coaches. Even those who knew Coach Scolinos had to wonder exactly where he was going with this, or if he had simply forgotten about home plate since he'd gotten on stage. Then, finally ...

“You're probably all wondering why I'm wearing home plate around my neck. Or maybe you think I escaped from Camarillo State Hospital,” he said, his voice growing irascible. I laughed along with the others. “I may be old, but I'm not crazy. The reason I stand before you today is to share with *you baseball people* what I've learned in my life, what I've learned about home plate in my 78 years.”

“Several hands went up when Scolinos asked how many Little League coaches were in the room. ‘Do you know how wide home plate is in Little League?’ After a pause, someone offered, ‘Seventeen inches?’ more question than answer.

“That’s right,’ he said. ‘How about in Babe Ruth? Any Babe Ruth coaches in the house?’

“Another long pause. ‘Seventeen inches?’ came a guess from another reluctant coach.

“That’s right,’ said Scolinos. ‘Now, how many high school coaches do we have in the room?’

Hundreds of hands shot up, as the pattern began to appear. **‘How wide is home plate in high school baseball?’**

“**Seventeen inches,**’ they said, sounding more confident.

“You’re right!’ Scolinos barked. ‘And you college coaches, how wide is home plate in college?’

“Seventeen inches!’ we said, in unison.

“Any Minor League coaches here? How wide is home plate in pro ball?’

“Seventeen inches!’

“RIGHT! And in the Major Leagues, how wide is home plate in the Major Leagues?’

“Seventeen inches!’

“SEV-EN-TEEN INCHES!’ he confirmed, his voice bellowing off the walls. ‘And what do they do with a Big League pitcher who can’t throw the ball over seventeen inches? *Pause.* ‘They send him to *Pocatello!*’ he hollered, drawing raucous laughter. ‘What they *don’t* do is this: they don’t say, ‘Ah, that’s okay, Jimmy. You can’t hit a seventeen-inch target? We’ll make it eighteen inches, or nineteen inches. We’ll make it twenty inches so you have a better chance of hitting it. If you can’t hit that, let us know so we can make it wider still, say twenty-five inches.’”

“He paused again. Coaches ... what do we do when our best player shows up late to practice? When our team rules forbid facial hair and a guy shows up unshaven? What if he gets caught drinking? Do we hold him accountable? Or do we change the rules to fit him; do we widen home plate?

“The chuckles gradually faded as four thousand coaches grew quiet, the fog lifting as the old

coach's message began to unfold. He turned the plate toward himself and, using a Sharpie, began to draw something. When he turned it toward the crowd, point up, a house was revealed, complete with a freshly drawn door and two windows. "This is the problem in our homes today. With our marriages, with the way we parent our kids. With our discipline. We don't teach accountability to our kids, and there is no consequence for failing to meet standards. *We widen the plate!*"

"Then, to the point at the top of the house he added a small American flag. 'This is the problem in our *schools* today. The quality of our education is going downhill fast and teachers have been stripped of the tools they need to be successful, and to educate and discipline our young people. We are allowing others to widen home plate! Where is that getting us?'

"*Silence.* He replaced the flag with a Cross. 'And this is the problem in the *Church*, where powerful people in positions of authority have taken advantage of young children, only to have such an atrocity swept under the rug for years. Our church leaders are widening home plate!'

"And the same is true with our government. Our so-called representatives make rules for us that don't apply to themselves. They take bribes from lobbyists and foreign countries. They no longer serve us. And we allow them to widen home plate! We see our country falling into a dark abyss while we just watch.'

"I was amazed, [Sperry reflected]. At a baseball convention where I expected to learn something about curveballs and bunting and how to run better practices, I had learned something far more valuable. From an old man with home plate strung around his neck, I had learned something about life, about myself, about my own weaknesses and about my responsibilities as a leader. **I had to hold myself and others accountable to that which I knew to be right, lest our families, our faith, and our society continue down an undesirable path.**

"If I am lucky,' Coach Scolinos concluded, 'you will remember one thing from this old coach today. It is this: If we fail to hold ourselves to a higher standard, a standard of what we know to be right; if we fail to hold our spouses and our children to the same standards, if we are unwilling or unable

to provide a consequence when they do not meet the standard; and if our schools and churches and our government fail to hold themselves accountable to those they serve, there is but one thing to look forward to ...’

“With that, he held home plate in front of his chest, turned it around, and revealed its dark black backside. ‘... We have dark days ahead!’

Chris Sperry concludes, “Coach Scolinos died in 2009 at the age of 91, but not before touching the lives of hundreds of players and coaches, including mine. His message was clear: ‘Coaches, [parents, teachers, pastors, leaders,] keep your players - no matter how good they are - your own children, your churches, your government, and most of all keep yourself at seventeen inches. **DON’T WIDEN THE PLATE!**”¹

Folks, we can see the impact of Coach Scolinos’ wisdom in our world today. Yet this is not his wisdom, but the wisdom of the Lord that we have failed to adhere to in our lives. **It’s the message throughout the pages of the Bible and they echo down the ages from long ago even to today.** And we hear it loud and clear in the Epistle lesson of the Apostle Paul’s letter to the Colossians 3:1-11. It was a problem then as much as it is a problem today. Listen to it carefully. (READ Colossians 3:1-11)

We, who profess Jesus Christ as our Savior and Lord, have been called to a high standard, a standard set by the Lord God Almighty, set for all who will be called by the Name of Christ so that we might live as witnesses to the rest of the world of those guidelines. **That standard is right and true!**

But the world seeks to widen the plate, to relax the guidelines and to remove the restrictions so that “everyone can play.” We keep allowing the guidelines of God to be watered down so that their potency no longer “offends” anyone. We keep expanding the guidelines to include everything and everyone doing everything just so that we might be counted as “inclusive.” We elect school board members who have agendas to bring our schools into conformity of the “woke mentality,” and they widen the plate as to what can and cannot happen to our children and young adults. We continue to

¹ (STAY AT 17 INCHES. Dec 9 (15) · Chris Sperry · Baseball Thoughts · 134)

support organizations that are adamantly against the values of the church by purchasing their products. We elect representatives to government who only act according to their desires, not the people they represent. And we allow leaders of the church to change the standards of belief within our denomination so that everyone is accepted as members, pastors and even bishops with no consequences or restrictions.

The plate is being widened all around us. FOLKS, THAT'S JUST WRONG!

Widening God's home plate, expanding His laws and commands to include things that were never there, removing the fences of His guidelines so that His Word fits our desires, only leads us into hardship, struggle, and ultimately rebellion against God. And though God loves us dearly, He lets us go our own way, even if it is to our own destruction.

But we are called to stand up for God's guidelines, to stay grounded in His Word, so that we don't widen home base. We are to "*set [our] hearts on things above, where Christ is, seated at the right hand of God.*" **We are to "*set [our] minds on things above, not on earthly things.* For you died, and your life is now hidden with Christ in God. When Christ, who is your life, appears, then you also will appear with Him in glory"** (Colossians 3:1-4).

Folks, when we give ourselves over to let Jesus become the Lord of our life, we are no longer our own, to do as we please, but we are God's people called to do as He dictates and determines. We're not to focus our attention on what the world can do for us. We no longer belong to the world, but to God. Yes, the world's stuff is attractive. Yes, the things of this world are flashy and exciting. Yes, the things in this life can be so alluring to us, but when we belong to Jesus Christ, all of the stuff of this world is not to have its sway over us. **We are to focus on keeping according to the things of God, following His laws and commands in order that He might protect us, provide for us and bless us.**

When the world calls us to "lighten up" and "get with the rest of the crowd," we are to stand firm in God's convictions and His principles. Jesus reminds us that we are to "*Watch out! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; life does not consist in an abundance of possessions*" (Luke 12:15). It's not the world's things that give us life, it is following the Lord's ways that bring us to life. As long as we

stay in focus with the things of the Lord, then our minds will be clear as to what we are to do while we are here on this earth. Building bigger and better barns to hold all our possessions is not what we are called to do (Luke 12:16-21). That only leads to God's judgment. **We are to hold each other accountable to God's ways, while at the same time encourage each other and build each other up according to God's ways.**

The world calls us to lighten up on pornography as freedom of speech. The world calls us to look the other way when confronted with human trafficking. The world entices us to destroy our bodies through drug and alcohol use; it calls us to lie, cheat and steal; and the world calls us to do as little work as possible while getting the biggest pay check we can. The world calls us to go beyond the law to get what we want, whether its sexual satisfaction, or special rights, or material possessions, or leadership positions. The world says "Do what you have to do to get what you want!"

So they start relaxing the guidelines for certain people, and they start making up new guidelines eliminating regulatory restrictions, and they redefine marriage, and they say a person can choose their gender if they're not happy with the one that God gave to them, and they try to make laws that give permission for murder to happen "without consequences," eliminating whole generations of people before they are even born. **When the supporting structures of our society are weakened and removed, when we expand God's home plate, the whole of our society comes crashing down.**

Paul tells us plainly, "*Because of these, the wrath of God is coming*" (Colossians 3:6). God does not tolerate our rebellion against His laws and commandments for very long. And, whether you want to acknowledge it or not, God's wrath is already at hand, all around us. When we turn away from God's commands, when we expand God's home plate, when we turn to our own ways, God removes His hand of protection from us and He allows all kinds of things to happen in order to get our attention and help us to open our eyes and minds to understand the consequences of leaving Him.

It happened over and over again in the Old Testament as examples for us, but then we're told that the Old Testament doesn't really count. We're told it's the New Testament that's most important.

While the New Testament is vitally important, unless we become aware of what happens when we turn away from God's ways, expanding His home plate when we should be holding strong to His guidelines and commands as we see in the Old Testament, we end up repeating our mistakes again and again.

So Paul calls us to *“Put to death, therefore, whatever belongs to your earthly nature...”* and he gives a list of what to avoid, *“sexual immorality, impurity, lust, evil desires and greed, which is idolatry”* (Colossians 3:5). Putting them to death means that we are to eliminate them from our lives. But when we are surrounded by all of these things, how do we go about doing that? Can we isolate ourselves in order to stay focused on the things above? Well, that's one thing, but another is to be very careful about what you watch or what you listen to, or what you become involved in or even the things you read.

We need to ask “What Now, Lord?” and let Him show us all that is good, and pure, and righteous and holy and generous. God will direct us if we ask Him to lead us, but we have to be willing to follow His guidelines so that we can stay safe. We have to keep our minds focused on Him.

In his book, *The Making of a Christian Leader*, Ted Engstrom makes this strong statement. He says, *“The World Needs Men (and women) who cannot be bought; whose word is their bond; who put character above wealth; who possess opinions and a will; who are larger than their vocations; who do not hesitate to take chances; who will not lose their individuality in a crowd; who will be as honest in small things as in great things; who will make no compromise with wrong; whose ambitions are not confined to their own selfish desires; who will not say they do it ‘because everybody else does it’; who are true to their friends through good report and evil report, in adversity as well as in prosperity; who do not believe that shrewdness, cunning and hardheadedness are the best qualities for winning success; who are not ashamed or afraid to stand for the truth when it is unpopular; who say ‘no’ with emphasis, although the rest of the world says ‘yes.’”*² We are to stay true to God's home plate.

Paul goes on to say, *“Since then, you have been raised with Christ...you must also rid yourselves of all such things as these: anger, rage, malice, slander, and filthy language from your lips. Do not lie*

² (Chuck Swindoll, *Swindoll's Ultimate Book of Illustrations*, [Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1998] pg. 304-305)

to each other...” (Col. 3:1, 8-9). These are the things of the world, the way the world expects us to respond to others and even to do business with each other. But they have no lasting value. They only degrade each other and they demonstrate that we are not God’s people, but the world’s people. **We are called to a higher standard, and the things of the Lord enable us to be agents of change, not agents of conformity.** When we stand up to the things of this world, their power crumbles at our feet. When we stand strong against their evil and wicked intentions, those intentions become nonsense and are quickly defeated. When we trust in following God’s ways, He delights in empowering us to do all that He has called us to do.

Yes, we use to live in the ways of the world, but when we accept Jesus Christ as our Savior, and when we allow Him to become the Lord of our life, we are not to live according to the things of this world any longer, but to present the ways of God boldly every day of our life.

Think about this for a moment: When you die here in this world, what things of this world do you take along with you? *Pause.* That’s right, NOTHING! So if we can’t take anything from this world with us when we die, why do we spend so much time and energy trying to get everything we can? The things of this world will all pass away, but the things of God are forever, and we can only take those things of God with us if we claim them and use them and practice them and hold onto them here in this world.

So put on the new self, found in the image of Jesus Christ, and focus your life on living according to the things above, not the things of this world. **Hold fast to God’s home plate, His 17 inch restrictions, and be counted as people of integrity and faith, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Let’s pray. Father, thank You for calling us to be Your people. Help us to remember that this is not our home, so we need to be doing the work You have called us to do so that we might prepare for living in Your kingdom, having followed Your laws and commands to the best of our ability. Thank You for Your Holy Spirit who guides us and strengthens us to live for You all the days of our lives. Give us the courage to be Your people, no matter what, in the Name of Jesus Christ our Lord. AMEN.