

If you're a fan of Major League Baseball, then most likely you are aware of a change that was introduced last year to help make the game shorter and more exciting. The change I'm referring to, was the implementation of the pitch clock, which according to Mark Leibovich in *The Atlantic*, is "a kind of pacemaker to reregulate the game's lagging heartbeat." Pitchers are now "allowed just 15 seconds to begin their motion to deliver the baseball to home plate," he explains; hitters "have to be set in the batter's box by the 8-second mark."

Now, it might seem like a small adjustment, but it's a radical change. Previously, pitchers could take as long as they wanted between throws, and batters could shuffle around endlessly in the batter's box. "The goal is to curtail dead time," says Leibovich, "the endless velcroing and re-velcroing of batting gloves and strolling around the mound." And it works! We are now seeing a whole new ballgame, one that is faster and more thrilling!

Consider the following reactions to the new change: "The pitch clock is amazing." It's the greatest thing "since the invention of baseballs," writes sports journalist Neil Best. And apparently, it is a big help, even if your team is terrible. American author and former football player Geoff Swartz says he didn't have to watch the Giants play for three hours. Instead, it took just "2 hours and 30 minutes for them to get shut out." Echoing many others, reporter Royce Young said, "It feels like I'm watching a new sport."

Ok, so this morning, you might be wondering why I am talking about an added change to the game of Baseball. Well because it provides us with a good segway into a certain rule change for the **God game** introduced in our second lesson this morning. You see, for centuries, God's people lived by complex religious regulations: The Ten Commandments, laws about clean and unclean foods, rules about ritual and moral holiness. The regulations went on and on and on, like a baseball game that lasts more than three hours.

But then, God's love was revealed in Jesus. The compassion and mercy of God became visible through Jesus' life, death, and resurrection. This inspired John the Evangelist to offer a new rule to the followers of Jesus in the first century: "Let us love one another, because love is from God." This change came from the discovery that love is the very heart of God's will for our lives. Talk about a whole new ballgame!

John knew that love had been part of the **God game** for many years. In fact, the commandment, "you shall love your neighbor as yourself," was first introduced in the book of Leviticus. But the game changed when God chose to put a human face — the face of Jesus Christ — on the commandment. "God's love was revealed among us in this way," said John: "God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him. In this is love, not that we loved God but that he loved us and sent his Son to be the atoning sacrifice for our sins."

Ok, so why was this change necessary? Many people might say, "We like the game the way it is!" The problem with the love commandment in Leviticus was that it could easily become a matter of endless philosophical debates, like discussions of baseball's infield fly rule. We might start asking questions like, "Who is my neighbor, what kind of love do we offer them, how can we love them if we don't love ourselves, what if they don't reciprocate our love?" So, John changed the rule by attaching it to the sacrifice of Christ.

Now, when we look at Jesus on the cross, we see the love of God for us. We discover that even before we could express our love, God showed us love by sending Jesus to be an "atoning sacrifice for our sins." Jesus died to show God's love for us, and to restore the relationship with God that had been broken by our sins. Now, when we look at Jesus, we see God's love revealed. We see the loving face of God. In Christ, God's Love is a Home Run!

And like the introduction of the pitch clock, that change has had a powerful effect. “Beloved, since God loved us so much,” said John, “we also ought to love one another.” Suddenly, the love of God in Jesus became more than a good idea. It became a vivid illustration of how we are to love.

In addition, John found that God helps us when we attempt to love. “God abides in us,” he said, “and his love is perfected in us.” And with the Lord’s intervention and help, we can be confident that God is with us and working through us. Our love gets faster and stronger because it is based on the activity of God, the working of the Spirit. Says New Testament professor Clifton Black, “God’s love for us is the source of our power to love God and one another.”

“We love because he first loved us,” St. John declares! The result, according to the Apostle, is that those “who love God must love their brothers and sisters also.” And when we demonstrate that kind of love through kind, caring, selfless, and compassionate words and actions toward one another, God lives in us, and God’s love is perfected in us.

The rules began to change when God’s love was revealed in Jesus. With the arrival of Christ, the compassion and mercy of God became visible to the world. Then God promised to live in us, and perfect his love in us, so that we would be able to love one another. This transformation occurred when John discovered that love is the heart of God’s identity. John captured this fact in three simple but profound words: “God is love.”

Think about it. Not only does Jesus reveal God’s love, but Jesus reveals that God is love. That’s a game changer. In the novel *City of Peace*, a pastor named Harley Camden makes a visit to jail to see a Muslim inmate named Muhammad Bayati, accused of murdering his daughter. The two begin to talk about their beliefs, and Muhammad says, “God is merciful and just.”

“God is also love,” adds Harley. “Our Bible says that God is love.” Muhammad cocks his head slightly. “That is different from our understanding. We have many names for God, but love is not among them.”

“For Christians, love is at the core of who God is,” explains Harley. “God reveals his love by sending Jesus to bring us forgiveness and new life. And the response we are supposed to make is to love one another — a love that should be extended to friends, enemies, blacks, whites, Muslims, Jews, fellow Christians. It is all supposed to come down to love. In fact, the Bible insists that those who say, ‘I love God’ but hate their brothers and sisters, are liars.” “I would agree with that,” says Muhammad. “Loving God does require that we love the people around us.”

Like baseball, religion is a change-averse game. Many people of faith prefer to play by traditional rules and are nervous about innovations that run counter to their understandings. In fact, often times it is difficult for change to occur because people cling to the popular adage, “but we’ve always done it this way!”

Apparently, traditional baseball fans were not happy about the pitch clock when it was first proposed. “Baseball is a timeless game,” they would argue. “It is the only game without a clock, and it will last as long as it needs to last.” A clock was not part of their understanding, even though most of them wanted the game to move more quickly. “They craved more action and offense,” says Leibovich; “more balls hit into play; more doubles, triples, and stolen bases.”

Finally came the innovation — the pitch clock. It was a game changer, and a good one. In the same way, John came along and said, “God is love,” changing the Christian faith forever. This assertion, “God is love,” is a powerful “pacemaker” to regulate our heartbeats, keep us spiritually healthy, and inspire us to “love one another” just as God has loved us. As Harley says to Muhammad, “It is all supposed to come down to love.”

Yes, “loving one another” is the heart of a whole new ballgame. Because “God is love ... those who abide in love abide in God, and God abides in them.” And just in case you need a bit of a reminder, the word abide means to live or to dwell in something — to accept, observe, and follow a particular path. For John, to love God is to love our brothers and sisters, and to abide in love is to abide in God with no distinction between the two. That is a whole new approach to the faith game, based on the love of God in Christ, and the love that God has for each and every one of us.

And it is quite the challenge, especially these days when there are so many things that divide and separate us as Christians. After all, John is not talking strictly about an emotion or feeling, but an act of the will that can have a transformative effect. "If we love one another," promises John, "God lives in us, and his love is perfected in us." So, when we take the bold step of loving one another – especially those who are different from us or those we don't quite understand -- God will live in us and bring his love to completion in us.

Love is at the core of what it means to be a Christian. John tells us that God lives in those who love, and at the same time, God lives "in those who confess that Jesus is the Son of God." In other words, loving one another and believing in Jesus are two sides of the same coin.

So, do you feel that your Christian game has a lagging heartbeat? Install the “God is love” pitch clock, and let it help you to love your brothers and sisters. That is a change that will draw you closer to God and to the people around you. It will focus you on the action, and keep you excited and engaged. And once you truly learn and understand what it means to “love one another,” you’ll never want to go back to the way the game was played before. And thanks be to God for that!
Amen.