

**Series: OLIVE BRANCH DNA**

January 22, 2006  
**NO GAMES**  
 Matthew 5:3-12

## I. INTRO

- A. I thought this morning we'd start off with a game. Golf. I'll tee off—and whoever catches the ball gets a piece of fudge! Actually, it might be better to play a less **dangerous** game since we're in church. So, I thought we'd play another game. How many of you remember **Trivial Pursuit**? You choose the category. Play well, and **you** could have a wonderful, luscious piece of fudge to stave your hunger until you can get to Swiss Chalet!!

### [GAME]

- B. Truth is, in Church, it would be safer to play **golf** than **Trivial Pursuit**. It's dangerous to play **Trivial Pursuit** in church. It's dangerous to play **any** game in church, really. Some, like golf, can create lawsuits. I mean, one golf ball in the eye can make you totally not want to go to church for a while! But other, more subtle and secret games, can wreck your soul.
1. Let me explain what I mean by games. A game is defined as amusement; fun; sport; racket. A physical or mental competition conducted according to rules, with the participants in direct opposition to each other.  
 -A lot of people in our world think that's what a church is all about; a game. A competition. Rules. People competing with each other for God's attention—or networking for business purposes, or pretending everything's okay—or scoring points.
  2. The point of a gathering like this is not competition—it's cooperation. It's not seeing how many people you can fool into thinking you're cool God and cool with yourself. It's not seeing if you can fool God into cooperating with your plan. It's about transparency; it's about cooperating with God and others in a huge mission; it's about being at home where all masks come off and people are real; it's about helping—and being helped.  
 -And what makes it work is, simply, truth. Honesty. Integrity. Purity. No masks, no hype, no spin.
  3. And that's our vision for The Olive Branch; that we will simply be real people who love Jesus. Transparent. No codewords or secret handshakes. People for whom truth is full strength, undiluted—and life-changing. **No games!**

## II. THE GAMES PEOPLE PLAY

- A. Our world is **really** big on games when you think about it. In about a week, one of the most watched events of the entire year will happen. Anyone know what it is? The **Super Bowl!** And **you** get a piece of fudge! In case some of you might not know what that is, it's a football...**game**. Also coming up are the Olympic Winter—**games**. .

-It doesn't stop there. Think, not just about game shows, but about big-hit shows like **Survivor!** It really wasn't about survival was it; it was about playing an extended game. Competition. Rules. Contestants pitted against each other.  
 -And, truth is, games really don't stop there.

1. Sometimes the whole workplace thing becomes a game. Rules. Competition. People pitted against each other. That's why a TV show like **The Apprentice** can be so entertaining.  
-Some people spend their whole lives playing the real-life version of **Monopoly**—thinking that if they accumulate the most by the end their lives—they **win**. Truth is, like the board game, it all goes back in the box.
2. Sometimes we play games with God. Like **hide and seek**. I might warn you, I've never heard of anyone who's won—not playing with God, anyway. He always seems to know where to find us.
  - a. Sometimes people play **Truth or Consequences** with God. Or **Poker**. People will bet their entire future—their eternity—that they can be the only person in all of history to fool God.
  - b. Of course, one of our most favorite games is **Let's Make A Deal**. "God, if you let me win the Lotto—I'll give half to your work!! If you make me a famous football star, I'll kneel at the goal posts. God, I'll go to church and try to be a good person if you heal me."
3. So, why do people do this stuff? Why do we play games? Well, why does **anyone** play a game? I play games to **win**. I'm not really ashamed of that—when it comes to games, that is. People play the game of Monopoly in life—why? Well, to **win**. People play some real life version of the Dating Game—why? To **win**. And sometimes we do seem to win—for a little while.  
-But there's one thing to understand about God that is extremely important. God will not play our game. The Bible says:  
**<sup>7</sup>Don't be misled: No one makes a fool of God. What a person plants, he will harvest. The person who plants selfishness, ignoring the needs of others-- ignoring God!- <sup>8</sup>harvests a crop of weeds. All he'll have to show for his life is weeds! But the one who plants in response to God, letting God's Spirit do the growth work in him, harvests a crop of real life, eternal life (Gal. 6:7-8 Msg.).**

- B. When God stepped into this world 2000 years ago in Jesus, He was disappointed to find that most of the respected religious leaders were playing games. It was the game of **religion**. Anyone familiar with that game? The game of **religion** has rules, contestants, competition—and **winner-- and losers**. It's a funny thing. Jesus was perceived to be a **loser** when it came to the game of religion. In Jesus' day, **losers** ended up on crosses.

-I was wondering about the whole concept of **games** when it came to the Bible. So, I looked up the word in The Message—a paraphrase of the Bible that uses our everyday language. I found 19 different references.

1. A number of the references dealt with people playing games with each other. Jacob was playing a game of deception with his father to get the inheritance; Sampson was playing a game of cat and mouse with Delilah—who was needling him for the secret of this strength.
2. But then you hit Isaiah, where God says to his people, Quit **your worship charades**. **I can't stand your trivial religious games: Monthly conferences,**

***weekly Sabbaths, special meetings—meetings, meetings, meetings—I can't stand one more (Isaiah 1:13 Msg)!***

-In a nutshell, this is the game of **religion**. It's when everyone pretends to be someone they're not, and pretends to worship God-when they're actually worshipping another god, like money, or success, or reputation, or themselves. The game of religion is us trying to impress God with what good people we are.

- a. Put yourself in God's place--Someone who sees **everything**. How would you feel if people were playing peek-a-boo with you, treating you like you're the village idiot—like you **don't know!** Like the hand game we play, "*Here's the church, here's the steeple; open the doors, where's all the people?*"  
-At the very least, you'd be sad. You'd think, "Have they so diminished who I am that they really think I don't **know?**"
- b. My guess is that the biggest turn off regarding faith in Jesus Christ in our world is that people have been to churches where it all seems to be one big game. It's all this pomp and circumstance; tradition; ritual; lifeless, soul-less stuff. They look around and realize that no one's being real—they put on their Sunday clothes, Sunday attitude, Sunday manners, and their Sunday voice.  
When the charade is over, they go home and put it all away for another week or two—then come back and fake it again.
- c. It's clear from everything the Bible says that God hates this stuff. And when Jesus showed up, He couldn't stand it either. It diminished God. It made Him into a fuss-pot; a kind of eternal Felix Unger who was worried about germs and spills and protocol and image.

-Jesus confronted the religious professionals on this stuff. He said, "Why would you fake prayers to impress people? God is not impressed with where you hold your hands, your posture, how deep your voice is, whether you use a special language or special tone. Why would you think you have to explain to Him in detail what's wrong? Don't you think He **knows!**"

-It was clear, this stuff they were doing wasn't about God—it was about impression management. It was about winning. About knowing the rules better than anyone else. It was about how good and how spiritual you appeared. It was about **pride**.

3. And then it got **really** toxic. Several times Jesus confronts the religious professionals on playing games with Him. As you know, they couldn't stand Jesus—and so the deal was to win the crowd's loyalty back to themselves by discrediting Jesus. So, they would corner him with trick questions to get Him in trouble. On several occasions, He said, ***Why are you playing games with me?***  
-The most profound of all these comments comes when Jesus is at the last supper with his disciples—and he reveals that one of them will betray him. So, all of them are asking, "Is it me, Jesus?" Matt. 26:25 says, ***Then Judas, already turned traitor, said, "It isn't me, is it, Rabbi?" Jesus said, "Don't play games with me, Judas (Matt. 26:25 Msg.)."***

C. Let me ask you a question. When it comes to playing games with people or playing games in church or playing games with God—what *is* that stuff, at the core? It's deceit. Pretending to be something you're not. It's where there's this growing gap between what's really going on in your heart—and what you're saying or doing. And that gap is called **hypocrisy**.

1. Jesus was extremely gentle and loving and accepting. That's what makes his confrontation of the religious professionals in his day hard to understand. His favorite term for them was **hypocrite**. Oh, he had other names. Vipers. White-washed graves.

-Why do you think he was so harsh? Any ideas? I'll tell you why. It's because when deceit, game-playing, lying gets into the soul, the spiritual part of our lives, it's deadly. We become self-deceived.

2. I want to read you something you might find interesting. Paul is pulling the cover off what he calls **false apostles, deceitful workmen, masquerading as apostles of Christ**.

Then he says, **And no wonder, for Satan himself masquerades as an ANGEL OF LIGHT (2 Cor. 11:13-14 NIV)**.

-Paul links up faking it—with the ultimate faker; Satan who masquerades as an angel of light. Anyone know who the ultimate game show host is? It's not Bob Barker. It's Satan.

3. If this goes on in a church, over time people, to appear spiritual, are almost always acting. And it's because the leaders have been acting the longest—and are the best at it. And before long, everyone does it—because, see, if you're transparent and reveal your flaws, you get judged. You **lose the game**. And people would rather fake it than lose. And when struggles and failure and trouble go into hiding, they always get worse.

4. We have decided that we will not do that here. No games. This will be a place where we will be straightforward with each other. We will not pretend to be better than we are. We will not do tradition and ritual for the sake of appeasing people. What we are is what we are. No pretending. Are you okay with that? I hope so!

### III. WHAT GOD BLESSES

A. The quality Jesus **constantly** emphasized was realness, transparency, truth telling, purity of heart. Over and over again, he said to his followers. "Don't act! Don't pretend! Your soul is too important for that. Don't call lying something else. Don't call lust something else. Don't gloss over relationships. Don't hydroplane over truth. Just be real with God and real with others.

-In fact, right at the beginning of his ministry, Jesus laid down eight things God blesses—or honors, smiles on, treasures—and for the most part, they all deal with authenticity.

**"God blesses those who realize their need for him, for the Kingdom of Heaven is given to them.**

**God blesses those who mourn for they will be comforted.**

**God blesses those who are gentle and lowly for the whole earth will belong to them.**

**God blesses those who are hungry and thirsty for justice, for they will receive it in full.**

**God blesses those who are merciful for they will be shown mercy.**

**God blesses those whose hearts are pure, for they will see God.**

**God blesses those who work for peace, for they will be called the children of God.**

**God blesses those who are persecuted because they live for God, for the Kingdom of Heaven is theirs (Matthew 5:3-10 NLT).**

1. What does it mean when we say our vision for this church, for this gathering of people—is *no games*. How do we live that out? Well, there is an organizational side to that—where this whole operation—all we do, say and stand for is open, transparent and honest. But there is a “we” side to this, a personal side that you and I have to take on for our **own** sake.
  
2. I think most people would like to have a whole life that God blesses, right? God blesses integrity—where yours and my inner life is **integrated** with our outer life. The life God blesses seems to have a **lot** to do with living truth, loving truth, and telling truth.
  - a. In these verses, Jesus is saying that God blesses those who understand that, spiritually speaking, they’re busted. There is not a person who has ever lived on this planet who doesn’t **desperately** need God. That, friends, is what we **all** have in common. When we forget that—or if we refuse to admit it—we in essence blow off everything Jesus came to this planet for.
 

-When we understand just how desperately we need God, we begin to see the damage sin has caused in our lives—and we also come to this reality check on how our sin has hurt others. And we mourn.

-Brennon Manning writes this incredible story of Max, a guy who came to his AA group. He was proud and arrogant when they started. He didn’t need them. But the leader of the group began to systematically hammer away at this guys veneer—until he finally admitted that he had a case of liquor in the garage, a couple of bottles stashed in the nightstand, and several at work. But still he said, when confronted with his lies, “Hey, everyone gilds the lily occasionally.” Then the leader probed further—and called Max’s wife concerning an incident that had happened the previous Christmas Eve. Max couldn’t quite recall what had happened.

-Over the speaker phone Max’s wife sobbed—and told how Max had bought his little girl a pair of shoes—and then gone into The Cork and Bottle to celebrate while he left her in the truck with the engine running. He forgot she was there.

When he finally came back to the truck, drunk, the truck had run out of gas, and in the bitter cold, his daughter had suffered severe frostbite—resulting in total deafness and losing several fingers and toes.

-Brennon Manning said that none of the men there would ever forget the sight, as they left of Max down on all fours, howling in pain as he saw himself for who he really was.
  - b. The only comfort Max found—and the only comfort we find when we see—and **own**—what our sin has cost us and others—is the comfort and grace

God gives. But it only comes to those who stop playing games. And if we will stop playing games, we become meek people. We understand that God is God—and we're not.

-It's a freeing thing, you know, to be meek—strength under control. To just be real—with nothing to prove, nothing to hide—and nothing to lose.

- c. When we are able to get our eyes off ourselves—the truth about the world we live in begins to sink in. Instead of thinking constantly about how we can get a bigger piece of the pie, or how we can insulate our lives with money, we realize, “God can use me. God **wants** to use me.” And we engage with others. And what makes us useful is our meekness. Other's sense that we're fellow travelers—not “almost perfect people who've arrived.” And we're blessed.
- d. In this process, something begins to happen in our hearts. Instead of our motives being mixed—you know, “a little for God, a little for you, and a lot for me”—we begin to understand how ugly deceit is. And more than anything, our longing is to just have a pure heart—unmixed with anything. Life is so much easier that way—and we're blessed.
- e. And this trickle down process transforms our relationships. We begin to understand how much time and energy we waste on conflict. We begin to understand how willing we are to omit details and twist truth to win an argument. We eventually get to the point where we want **rightness** more than we want to **be** right. We find out how much easier it is to get along with others when our ego isn't in the way. And peace follows us. And God blesses us.
- f. Over time we become real people. Courageous people, who don't feel like they have to please everybody, fit into every crowd—but people who are authentically salt and light wherever they are.  
-Anyone know what happens when you are real and authentic—no games, no politics, no hiding? Some people love that. But some people will hammer you for it. But the hassle it creates doesn't remove the smile—the blessing of God. That stays—and that makes it worth it all!

3. Again, God blesses **real, authentic, transparent people**. Others may never agree with you—but they **will** admire you for it.

The people in our culture—especially in a world of hype and spin and airbrushing and lies—long for something and someone who's real. So...why don't **you and I** be that person?

B. And what would a whole gathering of real, authentic people be like? Unfortunately, we live in a world that doesn't expect to find that in the church. There are a bunch of people who, I think, would say, “I believe in God and I love the teachings of Jesus—but I don't trust the church.”

-It's because of what some of them have seen and found. Sometimes, instead of finding people who realize they're spiritually busted—and people who mourn over their sin—and people who are meek, they've found people who can be preachy and judgmental and condescending. People **hate** that!

-Let's be honest, we live in a world where people are jaded by TV evangelists who flash smiles and promise miracles—when some mainly want money. They're jaded by people

who go to church—and that's all they really do; there's no concern for justice, for mercy and for peacemaking. They're jaded by a church that has—to our shame—covered up predators posing as priests and ministers.

-This morning I'd like to publicly ask forgiveness for how poorly people like me have represented Jesus; for how people like me—in my position—have been *posers*—and not real. With shame I'd like to ask forgiveness for those of my kind who have been greedy and proud and arrogant and pompously strutted across stages like this, pointing their fingers at others. People who have sometimes been filled with lust or jealousy or other unclean stuff.

I would like to ask your forgiveness for how we have hurt the name of Jesus and wounded people He's asked us to serve. Jesus is **so** much more noble, **so** much better, **so** much more humble and loving than we have been.

-My vision for us is not that you would be like me, but that we would be like Jesus. Honest. Straightforward. Pure-hearted. Totally trustworthy, accepting, kind and patient. People of depth and character. Let's be a church of people who are okay with being honest—even when that's unflattering, okay?

1. I think that will mean several things we will **not** do!
  - a. We will **not** play church. We will not go through religious motions for the sake of honoring the way things have always been done.
    - And along that line, we will not try to be slick. We will always give our very best to Jesus—because that honors Him. But we will not try to be slick or cool or hip.
  - b. We will **not** use God-talk. It's very easy when you've been hanging around the church for a while to use language that **sounds** more spiritual. When I was younger, you could always tell when someone was praying because they used King James English.
    - How many of you think God has a British accent—or prefers that we talk to him in the language of the KJV Bible, translated in 1611? How many of you think that God has a preference for religious words? My guess is that what **God** wants are words that reflect **exactly** what's going on in our hearts, not words that will impress others.
    - We will do our best to use language that everyone understands.
  - c. We will **not** insulate or isolate ourselves from the real world. We will **engage** life as it comes to us in the lives of people. Know why? Because we all have to live in the real world—and it doesn't get better by people avoiding it; it gets better when real people with the Spirit of God in them take it on.
  - d. On the other side, we will **not** water down truth. God, to the best of my knowledge, has never given anyone editorial privileges over the 10 commandments—or any truth—to make it more palatable or more politically correct. The Bible addresses a lot of stuff in a very straightforward way: gluttony, drunkenness, promiscuity, greed, materialism, laziness, marriage, child-raising, humility and leadership.

-Let me ask you a question: How would you feel about my leadership—about me as a person—if you felt that I changed the truth because I was

afraid of how you would react? You wouldn't have much respect for me, I don't think.

-Hebrews says that the truth of God's word is not like having a good back massage, or like taking a tranquilizer, or having your 4<sup>th</sup> glass of wine. It's says that it's like a sharp sword that cuts right through everything and exposes our motives. So, if it's going to do its work—we need it full-strength.

- e. We will not pretend God is safe. Kind of like a **friendly giant**. The Bible presents God as the most loving, merciful, patient, kind and good Being you can meet. Forgiving beyond belief. But **safe?** He's awesome. His eyes cut through all the smoke we put off. He's absolutely holy and pure—and has power that is beyond anything we can ever get our heads around.
- f. We will **not** pretend that putting your faith in Jesus entitles you to a safe trouble-free life or a miracle a day. Jesus doesn't allow that. He said, very plainly, **In this world you will have trouble!** It couldn't be much plainer than that. Jesus never promised that we'd always be healthy, never struggle, never miss cues, never have relational breakdowns, never be misunderstood. He did promise that we'd never face life alone. He did promise that He can use these things to make us better and stronger.
- g. We will **not** pretend to be better than we are. Know what the truth is about me—actually **us?** We're all a little screwed up. We're a mixture of generosity and selfishness; of good and bad; of peace and chaos; of humility and pride. We all need help—that's why we're **here!**

-So, we're going to do a mass confession. I want you to turn to the person next to you and say, **I'm a little messed up—but that's okay. So is the pastor.**

-But we will promise that, over time, we will improve. The mixture will get better. And, instead of trying to parade our progress, we'll all just try to help each other. You need to know, if you're expecting a perfect church that makes perfect decisions—you've come to the wrong place. But we will always apologize when we're wrong—and fix what we've screwed up, okay?

- h. And we will **not** try to scam God. I know, that should be automatic, but sometimes it's not. We sometimes think—or lead people to think—that you **can** fool God--manipulate God, into healing you, helping you, giving you good parking spaces and great kids. But there are no fool-proof plans. And we will do our best to make that obvious.
2. But not playing games is not just about what you **don't** do—it's about what you **DO!**
- a. We **will** be the Church—the gathered, sometimes frail and faulty people of God. What we do in our times together will be based on truth—not tradition, or what we think will impress people.
  - b. As I mentioned last week—no walls! We **will** do everything we can to be understandable to as many as possible.

- c. We **will** talk in plain terms and images and stories about how to live our faith and values in the real world. We have a great role model on this. Anyone know who it is? Jesus. Even his disciples finally asked him one day, “Wow! How come you tell so many **stories?**” Jesus said, “So no one will miss the truth!”  
-And we will do this because truth is essential, eternity is real, and the stakes are higher than we can **possibly** imagine.
- d. God **is** God. He’s loving and knowable—**and** awesome, massive and mysterious. No one can dumb Him down or tame him—so we’re just going to submit to Him. How’s that?
- e. And we won’t hide the fact that God can’t be tricked into giving us a cushy life—and sometimes life is sometimes tough and heart-breaking and painful. So we will point to Him as our Best Friend and Comforter.
- f. As leaders and fellow travelers, we will live with transparency and integrity. Our goal is not to intimidate—but to draw others. We will not play charades.  
-And this transparency will be a part of all we do and all we communicate. We don’t want there to be any bad surprises around here—only **good** ones. So, we will always be forthright with you about problems and challenges.
- g. God **will** be first in our lives. We will never pretend to worship him on weekends, while during the week we worship money or structure or power or success or comfort. And you have the right to call us on it, if you sense that’s happening.
- h. Finally. We can’t customize everything we do for everybody. In fact, because we don’t ever want church to be predictable, we will sometimes try things that don’t work—or that you don’t like.  
-But...**everybody counts!** God set it up like that, you know.  
\*everybody’s prayers count...not just those who pray well.  
\*everybody’s participation counts...not just those who excel  
\*everybody’s feelings count  
\*and everybody’s struggles count—with God, and with us.

#### IV. NO BAD SURPRISES

- A. Most of you are familiar with the end of The Wizard of Oz—you know, when Dorothy, the Tin Man, the Scarecrow, the Lion and the dog meet the wizard. At first they’re terrified because of his booming voice and all the visual effects. Then the dog pulls down the curtain, and there’s this very average, very human little man who says, “Pay no attention to that man behind the curtain!”  
-Most of us, at one point, have an experience like that. Someone we deeply respected disappoints us. Someone we counted on lets us down. A close friend we trusted betrays us. When that happens, there’s a part of us that gets more cynical. We think, “I wonder who I can **really** trust?”
- B. Our vision is to **never** be a place where we **appear** to be something we’re not. Where what we promise, we can’t deliver. When someone looks behind a curtain and sees people who aren’t real. God knows we will sometimes fail—and He hasn’t called us to be successful or influential. God has called us to be authentic. No Games! And, by His grace, that’s what we will be.