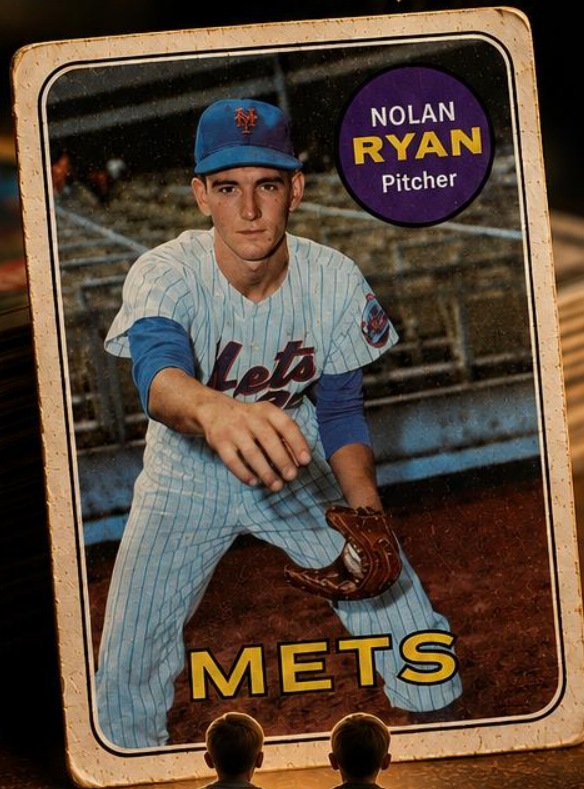


— A PESTER THE PASTOR PUBLICATION —

THE MOST VALUABLE CARD I EVER GAVE AWAY



A Baseball Card.
A Brother.
A Lesson in *Grace*.



*Some trades are about cards.
Others are about the heart.*



When I was eleven years old, I loved practicing baseball in the hot Alabama sun. Yes, you read that correctly. Unlike Allen Iverson, I loved practice.

There was something magical about those hot summer days. Dirt covered my cleats. A piece of Soft Good & Juicy bubble gum was usually tucked in my cheek. The smell of freshly cut grass filled the air, and the sound of aluminum bats launching baseballs across the field was intoxicating. If heaven has Little League baseball, maybe I will finally hit my first home run.

My younger brother Brent and I played for legendary coach George Buckelew during the summer of 1983 in Opp, Alabama. That season we won the Little League championship.

Our star player was a kid named Bobo King. Bobo could flat-out hit a baseball. I'll never forget the time he hit one over the fence with his off arm in a cast. We wouldn't have won the championship that year without him.

I still remember the championship trophies, the excitement of winning, and the feeling of being a champion. Our team's name that year was the Yankees. Looking back, that simple detail shaped more of my life than I ever imagined. From that summer forward, I became a lifelong Yankees fan.

Sadly, Bobo passed away in 2021 at only fifty years old from complications related to COVID-19. Rest in peace, my friend.

My brother and I traveled back to Opp to visit the old ballpark. I wasn't surprised when I saw that one of the fields had been named after George Buckelew. It seemed fitting. Men like George don't simply coach baseball games - they leave fingerprints on generations of young men.



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Coach Buckelew was old school. He would spit tobacco juice into the dirt to mark the bases, then grab a stick and draw a miniature baseball field. Right there in the Alabama clay, he taught us where every player should be, where every throw should go, and how the game was meant to be played.

Practice mattered to him. Missing practice was almost like missing church; if you weren't there, he might just come looking for you. He believed championships were earned long before the first pitch was thrown.

By my calculations, Coach Buckelew was in his late fifties when he coached our team. He would live to the remarkable age of 98 before passing away in 2024.

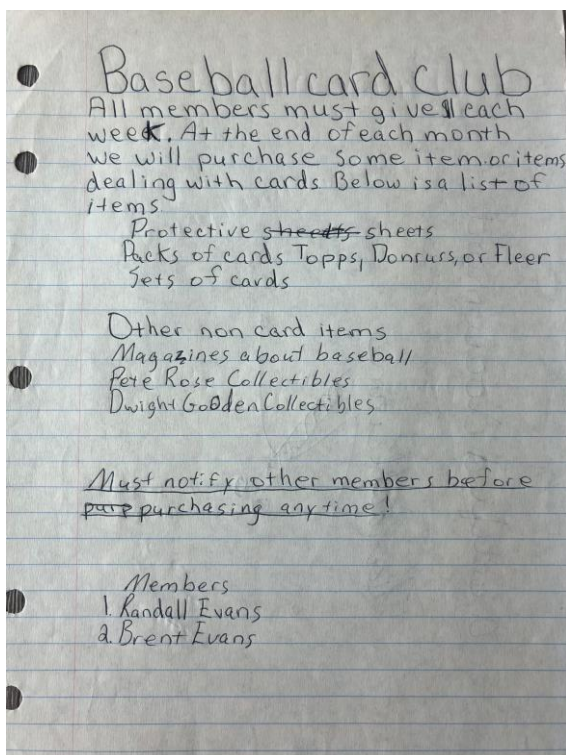
Rest in peace, Coach.
We will never forget you.

Earlier this year, I experienced what I can only describe as a full-circle moment. For the first time in my life, my wife and I traveled to New York City. On Friday evening, we found ourselves sitting inside Yankee Stadium watching the Yankees play the Boston Red Sox.

As I sat there looking around that magnificent stadium, my mind wasn't really in New York. It drifted back to a little baseball field in Opp, Alabama. Back to the scorching summer sun. Back to a coach drawing baseball diamonds in the dirt.

Back to a little boy whose biggest concerns were keeping his baseball cards from getting bent and figuring out how to get the bubble gum stain out of the pocket of his baseball pants after his mother washed them.

You know...the really important things.



I wasn't just a baseball player. I was a baseball fan. I watched the Baseball Bunch every week on Saturday mornings. I watched Mel Allen's This Week in Baseball every week after church.

I loved the game.

I also loved collecting baseball cards.

Brent and I spent countless hours buying, trading, organizing, and admiring our collections. We even started our own Baseball Card Club. I was the president, Brent was the vice president, and I still have the paperwork to prove it.

Most of those cards eventually became little more than wonderful childhood memories. But one card took on a life of its own. It passed between two brothers, disappeared into a safe for years, and eventually became more valuable than either of us could have imagined.

There are baseball cards that collectors dream about. The 1952 Mickey Mantle. The 1909 Honus Wagner tobacco card. The 1989 Upper Deck Ken Griffey Jr. Every collector has a card that captures his imagination.

For me, growing up, it was the 1969 Topps Nolan Ryan card. His official rookie card was the year before, appearing with Jerry Koosman on the card in '68. The 1969 Nolan Ryan card was his first Topps card by himself. Guess who owned that card? The vice president of the Baseball Card Club - my younger brother Brent. I traded him roughly 900 football cards for it, convinced I was getting the better end of the deal. Looking back, I sometimes wonder which football cards I gave him. Some of them might be valuable today as well. But the trade went through, and for the first time, I owned that 1969 Nolan Ryan card.

It was mine - all mine.

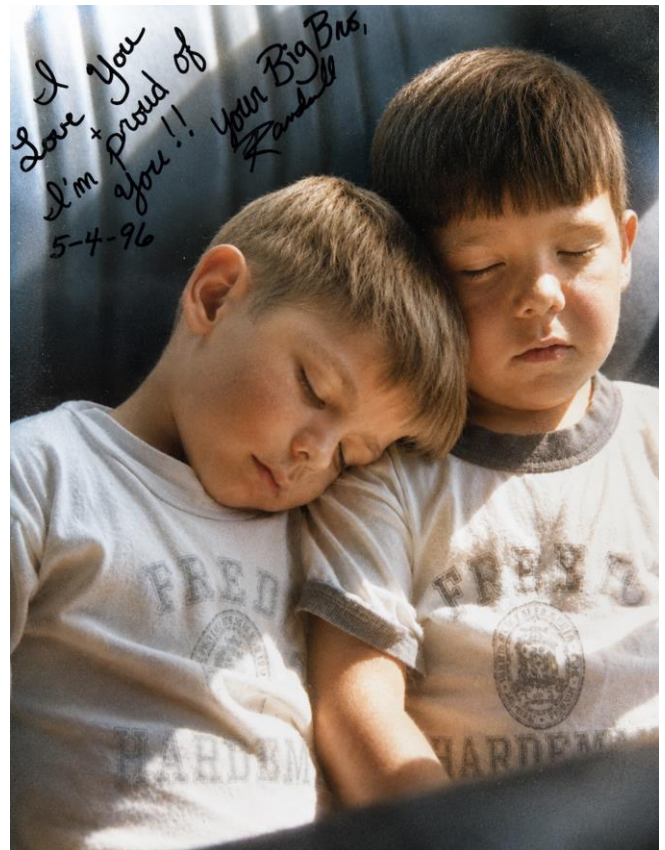
I placed it in a glass case and kept it locked inside a Sentry safe for years. My brother knew it wasn't just another card. It was my favorite card. If someone had asked me which card in my collection I would never part with, that would have been my answer without hesitation.

But as the years passed, something about the trade continued to bother me. Brent had agreed to it, and no one had forced him, but I could never completely shake the feeling that I had taken advantage of my younger brother. I had wanted the card so badly that I had persuaded him to part with it, and somewhere in the back of my mind, I had always felt guilty about that.

Years later, my brother was preparing to graduate from Freed-Hardeman University, and my parents planned a celebration at their home in Ramer, Tennessee. Brent and I had always been close. We were born only eighteen months apart. We played baseball together, practiced and taught karate together, and even performed on the Marshall County High School drumline together - my senior year and his sophomore year.

I wanted to give him something meaningful for his college graduation. For the party, I enlarged an old photograph of the two of us as young boys to an 8-by-10, signed it, and added a personal inscription. That would have been a perfectly fine gift. But I wanted to give him something he would never forget.

My thoughts returned to that Nolan Ryan card - and to the uneasy feeling I had carried since the day we made the trade. The card was still the most valuable possession in my collection, but by then I understood that I had something far more valuable than cardboard.



I had a brother. So I made a decision.

I took the 1969 Nolan Ryan card out of the safe, wrapped it, and gave it to Brent as his graduation gift. Inside, I placed a handwritten note expressing my regret for taking advantage of him when we were younger. I told him that he meant more to me than the card ever could and that I wanted him to have it back. That day, something remarkable happened. The card didn't change. I did.

Its corners were the same. Its colors were the same. Its market value had not suddenly increased because of anything I had done. Yet somehow, it had become infinitely more valuable to me. It was no longer simply a baseball card. It had become a picture of love and grace between two brothers.

When Justice Has Finished Speaking

By every measure, our childhood trade was legitimate. No one forced either of us. No promises were broken. Justice had already rendered its verdict. The card belonged to me. Justice had settled the matter. But grace has a way of asking a different question.

Justice asks, "What is owed or owned?" Grace asks, "What can love do? What can grace give?"

The older I get, the more convinced I become that some of life's most beautiful moments occur after justice has finished speaking. Justice settles the transaction. Grace transforms the relationship.

Grace Costs the Giver

Every act of grace carries a cost. When I placed that Nolan Ryan card into the gift box, I wasn't giving away something that belonged to someone else. I was giving away something that belonged to me. Grace is never free to the one extending it. It always costs something. That is why the cross stands at the center of the Christian faith.

God did not simply overlook our sin, nor did He merely ignore justice. Instead, He satisfied justice by paying the cost Himself. The gospel is not the story of a God who ignored justice or lowered His standards. It is the story of a God who satisfied justice at immeasurable cost to Himself so that He could extend grace to us.

Giving away a baseball card cannot compare with the sacrifice of Christ, but in that small act I began to understand something about grace: it costs the giver.

The Greater Treasure

Collectors sometimes ask, "What is that card worth?" That's an easy question. Price guides can estimate it. Auction results can compare it. Professional graders can assign it a number. But none of them can calculate its true value. Because the greatest treasure in this story was never a baseball card.

It was a brother.

Somewhere between childhood and graduation, my priorities changed. I realized that my relationship with my brother was worth far more than preserving a possession.

Love reordered my treasures.

Grace Gives

Grace cannot be demanded. The moment it becomes an obligation, it ceases to be grace. The same is true of salvation. We do not earn it or demand it; we simply receive it with grateful hearts.

The law says, "Pay what you owe." Grace says, "Receive what you could never earn." Justice settles accounts. Grace restores hearts. Love is the fuel that burns the engine of grace. And grace cannot be achieved, it can only be received.

Thirty-Four Years Later

Last week my phone buzzed with a text message from my brother. He had seen an advertisement for a local baseball card show and sent me a picture. Beneath it he wrote:

"Let's go see if we can sell that Ryan card. We could give half the proceeds to Dad and split the rest."

I smiled. For just a moment, my mind traveled back thirty-four years - to a college graduation party in my parents' home, a Nolan Ryan card wrapped as a gift, and a handwritten note to my younger brother.

Then I texted him back, "I gave you that card as a gift. The proceeds belong to you, my brother." When I hit send, I realized that the lesson God had begun teaching me all those years ago was still shaping my heart. Grace doesn't give while quietly holding on.

Grace doesn't expect repayment.

Grace doesn't reclaim its gifts.

It simply gives because it loves

Today, collectors can tell you what a 1969 Topps Nolan Ryan card is worth. Price guides can estimate its value. Auction houses can tell you what someone might be willing to pay for it. But none of them can measure its greatest worth.

That baseball card first captured the heart of a young boy. Years later, God used that same baseball card to reshape the heart of a grown man. And it continues to remind me that the greatest gift ever given came from a heavenly Father who did not ask us to earn His grace, repay His grace, or deserve His grace.

He simply gave His Son for us.

He did it out of love.

That is the beauty of grace.

About the Author



Randall Evans is a former pastor and the creator of Pester the Pastor, a faith-based ministry dedicated to providing biblical encouragement, practical counsel, and a Christ-centered community for those seeking to grow in their faith.

After serving in ministry for nearly twenty years, life took him down an unexpected path. Broken by life and rebuilt by grace, Randall has experienced firsthand the restoring power of God's mercy.

Today, he is passionate about sharing the story of Jesus Christ and the life-changing message of God's amazing grace. Through his writing and ministry, he seeks to help people exchange fear for faith, performance for promise, and striving for rest in the finished work of Christ.

If this article has encouraged you and you would like faith-based counsel, additional faith-based content, or a faith-based community, please visit www.pesterthepastor.org.