

The Games of Life

Did you know that the Summer Olympics were to have been held now, July 24th through August 9th? When I was planning my sermon themes months ago, I thought it would be nice to do a message around sports and athletics. Of course, the Olympic games were postponed. But I'd still like to hold to that theme.

The Bible doesn't say a whole lot about sports and athletics, but there are some passages that draw examples from the athletic contests of that day and apply these to the Christian walk and to life itself. For example, in 1 Corinthians 9, the Apostle Paul refers to a "race" – he's probably thinking of the Isthmian games, held right there in Corinth, Greece. In the same section of Scripture he tells how he disciplines himself as a follower of Jesus, just as athletes discipline themselves to enter their contests. "Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26). He says he's not like a boxer, shadow-boxing, or like a runner, running aimlessly in all directions.

So, let's look at some other Scriptures, and think about sports and athletics today, and how they can provide insight for living, for running in the game of life. First of all, one point to be made is this: ***to be good, you have to practice and train.*** Professional athletes today pretty much train all year round. Olympic athletes devote themselves to rigorous training for years just to compete in Olympic contests that last just several weeks. Even those of us who aren't professionals have to practice and practice if we want to be good at golf or tennis or softball.

Paul says, "Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training" (1 Corinthians 9:25). If we want our life to amount to anything, we have to be purposeful and disciplined: morally disciplined, setting worthy life goals, taking time to practice spiritual disciplines like prayer and Bible study. How many people just kind of let life happen, take the easy route, and never stretch themselves to really make something of their life, to devote themselves to causes that will benefit others and outlive them.

You want to be good at sports, you've got to practice. You want to be good at life, you've got to work at it. It's the same with being a follower of Jesus!

Then too, ***you have to have rules for the game to make sense.*** Imagine a basketball game where there were no rules. Imagine playing golf and making up your own rules as the game progressed (that's the way I like to play!). I was playing baseball once with our grandsons. One of them was just kind of changing the rules along the way. I said, "You're just making up the rules as we go!" "No, I'm not, Pop, he shot back at me!" But he was! In the time period of the New Testament, on the day before games, the athletes from all over the world met and took a solemn oath before the gods that they had done no less than 10 months training, and they swore not to resort to any trickery to win, and they pledged to keep the rules of honor in their contest.

In sports, *the rules are not made up by the players* as they go! There are rules in place before the game or the season even starts. God has built certain laws and rules into the fabric of life: The Ten Commandments, for example, are a good place to start. The teachings of Jesus.

We're becoming a more secular society in the U.S. Many don't believe any more that there are divine laws, absolute laws. We humans set the rules (of course, we don't all agree on what the rules should be). The end result, eventually, is a moral vacuum, and chaos. We have a loving God who has *for our own sake* set limits and boundaries around life, rules and laws *for our good*, and life works better when we recognize and respect and obey these rules. *You have to have rules for the game to make sense.*

Then too, ***not everyone has the same amount of ability.*** Teams have their established players – their starters - also their bench players and subs, and their superstars. That's the way it is in life. We don't all have the same amount of ability. We all can't be superstars: super smart, super talented.

We all know that, don't we? *But often we're not at peace with that reality.* We're envious of the person who's got more talent, jealous of the person with more “smarts” (and who might well make more money than we do). *This leads into my next point:*

Every one of us is important and can contribute, if we play out our roles. Take the game of football, for instance. The speedy wide receiver who catches the long touchdown passes gets the highlight reels on sports programs. But coaches don't just look at highlight reels. They look at game video – and the tackle or guard who did the blocking that gave the quarterback time to throw the long pass. Not everybody can be a superstar. But the good pinch hitter in baseball is a valuable player. The forward in ice hockey who doesn't have speed and soft hands to score might be invaluable as a fourth line center and penalty killer.

So, don't put yourself down if you're not super talented. Don't feel like you've been cheated in life. And, on the other hand, don't be full of yourself if you've been blessed with a lot of ability and talent. Everybody has an important role to play in life!

The Bible is especially clear on this in regards to “spiritual gifts”, or gifts of the Holy Spirit. These are not natural talents, but special gifts given to Christian believers. Romans 12:6 says, “We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us.” 1 Peter 4:10 tells us: “Each of you should use whatever gift you have received to serve others.” This applies to *natural talents and abilities* just as it does to gifts of the Spirit.

Bottom line: Everyone is important and can contribute, if we play out our roles. A good coach, for example, will take the players he or she has been given, assess their skills and strengths, and fit them into a role that maximizes their skills. So, can we be comfortable with ourselves? Can we celebrate and be thankful for the talents and abilities we do have? Can we find our place in life and use what we have to make the world a better place?

We've been looking at how we can draw life-lessons from sports and athletics. Here's another point: ***There's no “I” in TEAM.*** Imagine a field hockey player, a lacrosse player, a soccer player, who runs around the field trying to do everything himself or herself. Or a player who never passes. I was an assistant coach for a high school ice hockey team a few years back.

One of the things that would irk me was a player who would tend not to pass the puck. This would especially happen where a player was really good and a cut above the others, and try to do everything himself. Our one son coaches ice hockey. We've talked about this different times. I asked him once, "Did you ever bench a player for not passing?" His quick reply was, "Oh yeah!" In professional team sports, word soon gets out whether a player is a team player or not.

In life, we need team players. People working together, people cooperating. In neighborhoods, in churches, in the workplace, in government and politics, in families. Be a team player – not a prima dona - in all of life's activities.

Here's another way sports reflects life: ***Sometimes games and their outcomes aren't fair.*** Referees, field judges, umpires make bad calls. (Fortunately, the use of instant replay and reviews helps correct these mistakes, but they are still made). If you are a football fan you may remember the controversial non-call on an obvious pass interference in a 2018 NFL playoff game. That officiating error enabled the Rams to beat the New Orleans Saints and prevent the Saints from going to the Super Bowl.

I will always remember an infamous non-call in a Philadelphia Flyers Stanley Cup final game, even though it happened way back in 1980. Linesman Leon Stickle (yes, I still remember his name!) failed to call an obvious offsides against the New York Islanders that led to a goal, and helped the Islanders beat the Flyers to win the Stanley Cup. Then there was the church softball game where I was batting. It was not slo-pitch softball. So a pitch came in and hit me on the hand. It bent a ring I had on my finger. But the umpire said I wasn't hit. I showed him the bent ring. But he still insisted I wasn't hit by the pitch!

Life isn't fair. Here again, we all know that. But we can be bitter. We can blame God and turn from God when life treats us unfairly. Or, on the other hand, we can accept the inherent unfairness of human life. Not dwell on it. And even allow God to bring good out of it.

Life isn't fair. And here's something that follows from this: ***Sometimes you lose.*** If you're a Philadelphia sports fan, you're used to losing! If you have ever played sports, you've undoubtedly played games where you lost. Now there is a trend today to award trophies to everyone, not just winners. You get a trophy just for showing up! I guess some adults feel it's going to damage a kid's psyche to lose a tournament and see some other kid get a trophy when your little darling gets none! But, hey, that's life! And I believe one of the values in sports is that it teaches us you don't always win. Sure it hurts to lose, but it's a part of life. The Apostle Paul understood this. He wrote to the Corinthians Christians, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize" (1 Corinthians 9:24).

The important question is not whether I'm going to lose sometimes in life, but how do I respond when that happens. Do I throw a pity party for myself? Do I become bitter, and resent the winners? Do I give up? Or do I pick myself up, dust myself off, and move on? (Or, if I can't do that in my own strength, *do I let God pick me up, dust me off, and get me going again*)?

Here's one more way I think athletics and sports reflect life. ***There is a prize to be won, and it's worth striving for.*** For us amateurs it might be a trophy from the local trophy store, or a jacket stitched with the name and date of our championship game. (I had one of those jackets. I loved that jacket. It broke my heart when one day people from the church came in to paint the walls in the parsonage, and one of the youth got paint on that jacket which was in one of the closets).

In professional sports, it's the big prize: the Super Bowl or World Series or NBA championship ring, or having your name inscribed on the Stanley Cup (and, of course, the thousands of dollars that goes with winning).

But there's a prize in life even more valuable: *it is the crown of life*. The Apostle Paul talks about this, as he nears the end of his life: "The time for my departure is near. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. Now there is in store for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will award to me on that day – and not only to me, but also to all who have longed for his appearing" (2 Timothy 4:7-8).

The "crown" in the Greek Olympic games, the greatest prize, was not a gold medal, but a laurel wreath. Now this wreath would shrivel up and wither and die within a few days, but the "crown of righteousness", the "crown of life", God offers in Christ will last forever!

Paul mentions it in another passage: "Not that I have already attained all this, or have already arrived at my goal, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me...forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus" (Philippians 3:12-14). He tells of "straining toward what is ahead", and the Greek word is that of a runner going hard for the tape or finish line.

There is no greater prize in life than to face our Creator in judgment and hear God's words: You are my forgiven child in Christ, you are clean and righteous not in yourself, but because you trusted my Son Jesus to make you clean. And to hear God's words summing up our life: "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the joy of your Lord."

There's a heaven to be gained or lost. Don't confuse the real prize in life with other awards and trophies that may be good, but won't last forever.

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