

## "The Winner"

Recently 2 individuals in Illinois won \$1.337 billion in the Mega Millions lottery. \$1.337 *billion!* However, because they chose to take the cash in a lump sum, they only got \$780.5 million. And, of course, they had to split this, so they only wound up with \$390.25 million. Now, they'll have to pay taxes on this, but still, I guess you could say they are *big winners!*

Have you ever fantasized about winning a million dollars or so in the lottery? What a difference that would make in your life? How you would spend it (maybe you already had the money spent in your mind!). How many are drawn to the convenience store lottery counter or the gambling casinos because of the lure of *winning big!* How often have we secretly (or not so secretly) envied people who were lucky enough to win big in the lottery?

TV networks are constantly competing to be #1 in the ratings. Even if it means "news" stations provide more biased entertainment than respected journalism, or that there is a flood of vulgarity and filth in TV programming. Doesn't matter how you get there, you just have to be #1 in the ratings business.

*Perhaps nowhere does this passion for winning show up more than in the world of sports.* Remember the old adage, "It's not whether you win or lose, it's how you play the game"? Well, that is hardly the prevailing motto in sports today! It's more like Vince Lombardi's famous quote: "Winning isn't everything. It's the *only thing!*"

A number of years ago a TV documentary was produced by the American Lutheran Church. It featured a well-known NFL quarterback, who said this: "A lot of us are caught up in the fever of being #1. Either as participants or as spectators trying to get ahead of everyone else, many of us are dominated by this need – or desire – to be on top. It scares me, because too often that's the way we judge ourselves and our self-worth. Our team has to do more than just be successful, it has to be #1. If it doesn't go to the Superbowl there are feelings of disappointment, betrayal, and the idea that somehow we're inferior." He went on to say, "What bothers me is so many people judge my worth, and their own worth, by what happens on that field."

Whether it's a Superbowl victory, a World Series title, or any major sports' championship, just having a good season, just making the playoffs and playing well, is no cause for satisfaction or celebration – you have to win it all!

*This mania for winning and being #1 has spread to youth sports also.* It used to be that sports were seasonal: kids played football or soccer or field hockey in the fall, ice hockey and basketball in the winter, baseball or golf in the spring, but now in school sports and club sports for many kids it's a year round proposition. Nancy and I have 5 grandsons, and for 2 of the grandsons it was hockey year round, and the other 3 brothers it's been pretty much baseball all year round (they live in South Carolina). The focus is on *that one sport – and winning!*

What troubles me is that children and youth ought to be trying a number of things, exploring, discovering what their interests and abilities are, not spending all of their time and effort on one thing.

Weekend tournaments, all day Saturday and Sunday (often even Friday nights too) where perhaps 4 or 5 games are played, suck up huge amounts of time not only in the kids life, but in parents' schedules. Young children, 6 years old, 8 years old, 10 years old, are traveling all over creation to play in *tournaments* where the focus is win, win, win.

One of our grandsons was maybe 6 or so, just starting to play organized baseball, and he was enticed to join a team that was to travel to Florida, near Disney, for a tournament. A *tournament*, when these kids should be just learning the basic fundamentals of the game – like which direction to run the bases, and which end of the bat you hold! And there's so much emphasis on *winning* that not only do kids feel this pressure, but parents often make idiots of themselves by yelling at their kids when they don't do well, or angrily screaming at the umpires.

I often wonder: What are some of these adults organizing youth sports thinking? Research has shown that prior to the age of twelve, 75% of children would rather be *playing* for a losing team than *sitting on the bench* for a winning team. It seems we adults are the culprits in robbing kids of the joy of playing for fun, when we impose our mania to win and be #1.

Vince Lombardi's mantra has infiltrated our culture: "Winning isn't everything. It's the only thing!" A man by the name of George Leonard, in a very thought-provoking article, suggests what many scholars believe, that society's sports and games mirror *that society's basic structure and values*. He points out that in some cultures, their games are not centered on a win/lose, do or die theme. For instance, a people in New Guinea play a popular game in which participants play, not to *win*, but to *draw*. They use their precise skills in such a way that the object of the game is to come to a tie or a draw. It's interesting that this reflects a value in their *society*, where food is to be *equally shared* among the people.

So, does our modern obsession in sports to *win and be #1* reflect a value deeply ingrained in our present way of life? Winning, being top dog, #1, is a big deal for a lot of people! You gotta be first in line...sell the most...beat the competition...get the highest marks – or you're a loser.

I've thought a lot about this whole matter of having to be #1. What, if anything, does Jesus and His life and message say to our present passion to be a winner? Was *Jesus* a "winner" or "loser"? What should be our attitude towards this if we're followers of Jesus? Let's think more about this issue of having to win in the light of Scripture and Jesus' life.

First of all, here are a couple of Scriptures that can help us gain perspective. Mark 10:42-45. The setting is that two of the disciples – James and John – asked Jesus for a favor. They wanted to sit right next to Him, on His right and on His left, when He came into His glory. They wanted to share #1 status! The other disciples get ticked off, and Jesus uses this as a teachable moment. "So Jesus called them and said to them, 'You know that among the gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; instead, whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.'"

The world strives to be #1. You strive to serve others, not push ahead of them, or beat them! Wow! Imagine that!

The other Scripture is Philippians 2:5-8: "Let the same mind be in you that was<sup>[a]</sup> in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death - even death on a cross." Jesus was God, equal with God! He could have done anything He wanted, bested everyone He met, dazzled everyone by being #1 in everything He did. Yet He emptied Himself, humbled Himself, and took the form of a household servant.

With these Scriptures in mind, let me suggest some points to ponder. ***There's nothing wrong, per se, with being #1.*** It's ok to love competition, to thrive on challenges. It's good to be the best we can be, to develop to the fullest the talents and abilities that God's given us. When I played ball I used to get annoyed if a player was lazy or didn't give their best effort. There's nothing wrong with enjoying the satisfaction of winning a medal or a championship honestly and fairly, to celebrate your victories, savor your successes.

But let's follow that up by saying, ***it's good if we can expand what it means to "win"***. I'm quoting from an essay making this point. "Winning becomes a more appropriate goal if the definitions of winning are broadened. For example, winning can be defined as self-improvement and/or as goal attainment, improving on one's previous performance or attaining previously set goals can be interpreted as success in a sports setting where, by definition, there are only a few winners (i.e. first places). If sport is to be viewed as beneficial for our children, it must benefit the majority of participants in a meaningful way rather than be limited to the elite few who ultimately win the actual contest." I may not take first place, but have I improved? Have I attained goals that I set for myself? Has our team played beyond expectations?

In other words, can I enjoy participating, can I savor success and achievement, even if I don't take the grand prize or capturing the trophy? I don't have to be the best student in the class if I'm not the most gifted. If I'm a "B" student and get a B grade can I celebrate that? If I do watercolor painting, I may not be the best artist in the state of PA, but can I look at my paintings with a sense of satisfaction and achievement?

When I was young I was in a band that played on a nationally televised program called "Ted Mack's Amateur Hour" (it was sort of the America's Got Talent of an earlier era). Our band was good. We were just school kids. We played engagements in the Lancaster area – even played once for Eleanor Roosevelt). We didn't win the talent show. Who won? Four kids who did the "hambone"! That was disappointing. We also discovered that the show was rigged – winners were known even before the votes of people calling in were counted. But could we savor that experience of going to New York City, performing for a national audience, making music worth listening to? ***It's good if we can expand the definition of winning beyond just gauging it on the number of people we beat.***

***Another point: If we take Jesus seriously, to be a winner in life always includes the ingredient of serving others (not just beating them out at something).*** I quoted from George Leonard earlier. Hear him again, "There is nothing wrong with competition in the proper proportion. Like a little salt, it adds zest to the game and to life itself. But when the seasoning is mistaken for the substance, only sickness can follow." In other words: Don't make winning *everything*. Don't let whether you are #1 define that experience, and your life!

Mr. Leonard tells of once conducting a seminar with a group of top-ranking industrialists. He tried to convince them that hot competition does not have to be inevitable in the future, even in industry. He noticed a look of anxiety on some of the faces around him as he developed his point. Finally, one person there spoke up: "If there is to be no competition, then what will life be all about?" Leonard writes in response: "We would probably be appalled to discover how many people in this culture have no notion of *accomplishment for its own sake*, and define their own existence solely in terms of how many other people they can beat out."

Respected church leader and theologian Martin Marty once said, "There's no problem with being good at something; of developing our God-given talents the best we can, but we don't do that so we can be #1. If we end up on top, fine, but love – in a caring sense – has to color that as well as everything else we do with our lives." He mentions love, *caring* for those against whom we are competing.

Thank the Lord, in the mad rush to be #1 today, there are refreshing and inspiring stories of concern and cooperation among athletes. Many of you saw this clip from a recent Little League World Series game, where the pitcher hit a batter. As the batter takes first base, the young boy pitching is visibly upset. And then this happens! (*Show video clip*).

Someone has argued that the dog-eat-dog, pound your opponent mentality is changing. "Whether it's the mentality of the less antagonistic millennial generation or simply common sense, athletes these days are perfectly comfortable blending cooperation with competition." I hope this is the case! A few years back a beautiful thing happened in a college girls' softball game. The batter hit a home run, but was unable to round the bases on her own. And this is what happened: (*Show video clip*).

In many ways, Jesus could have been regarded as a "loser" by modern standards. He didn't have much money or a lot of investments. He never owned a home of His own. He never traveled very far, and when He did, He almost always walked. He never won a first place medal in the Olympic games of His day. He never was voted "Rabbi most likely to succeed". His "team" was a motley group of 12 men who forsook Him when it counted most. When He was on trial before Pilate, the crowd chose to release Barabbas (a murderer on death row) instead of Jesus. He came out #2 even in that small field of participants!

Jesus mode of death was capital punishment: He was executed as a criminal. *Talk about a loser!* And yet here we are, 2,000 years later, along with millions of others, worshiping Him as King of kings and Lord of lords! *Jesus redefined what it means to be a winner!*

