

GOD GIVES US THE GIFT OF SPORTS

James 1:17 (NIRV) *“Every good and perfect gift is from God.”*

Best Buy gift cards, Fathead decals, shopping trips, Oakley sunglasses, Fossil watches, Nike shoes, Play Stations and other electronics top the list of gifts college athletes received when they arrived onsite for championship games recently. Companies line up in droves for the opportunity to dispense these gifts and goodie bags or, “Swag” as they are called, which have now become part of the American sports culture. These perks of the game are something players anticipate in addition to the possibility of bringing home a trophy or championship ring. After all, who can turn down the gift of a good Fathead decal?

You can't deny it - everyone loves getting good gifts. When Christmas, birthdays and anniversaries come around, we are beside ourselves with excitement and can hardly wait for the day to get here. We count down the months, days and hours anticipating whether we will receive that perfect gift we want. But sometimes the gift we receive wasn't what we were expecting. Or, perhaps we didn't even think of it as a gift at all. Does getting a pair of socks or underwear for Christmas ring a bell?

Did you ever think of sports as a gift from God? We may not have expected it or thought of sports as a gift, but sports are one of the creative ways He shows His love for us. Most of us think of God's gifts as things like human life and the world around us. We think of our families and friends, our homes and our country as gifts. God is a creative gift-giver. Not only does He give us what we need to live, but He gives us opportunities and experiences, like sports for our enjoyment and pleasure and to develop our character.

Before we were born, God planned for our participation in sports motivated by His longing to show His love to us. His ambitious desire is for sports to be of benefit to us. Unlike the motives of commercial sponsors who donate gifts to young athletes because it benefits their companies, God gave us sports so that we could come to know Him better, become like Him and bring honor to Him.

And, His gift of sports is also a made-to-order gift. He considers our unique abilities, experiences and talents, and He tailors our sports experiences into a one-of-a-kind creation. Because He considers how sports can showcase His design on our lives, we should thank Him and glorify Him. Athletes won't find this to be true with the 'one-size fits all' gifts they receive prior to championship games. One Best Buy gift card looks just like the rest. We don't always recognize God's good and perfect gifts. He has given us many including the gift of sports. Although they are not wrapped up in fancy boxes with shiny bows, they are wrapped in the love of a heavenly Father whose desire is to see those gifts bring honor to Him by molding us into the image of His Son, Jesus.

Devotion Prayer:

“Heavenly Father, thank you for Your good and perfect gifts including the gift of sports. We ask You to open our eyes to ways You are using sports in our lives. Help us be willing to let our sports activities be opportunities to know You, love You and serve You better. In Jesus name, Amen.”

SPORTS ARE FOR GLORY

I Corinthians 10:31 (NIRV) *“So eat and drink and do everything else for the glory of God.”*

There was no mistaking what he said, and no apology made. If you were fortunate enough to hear the post-game speech by Clemson head coach, Dabo Swinney after the 2019 National Football Championship game, then you knew where he placed the credit for their incredible routing of the Alabama Crimson Tide. It would have been oh so easy to relish in the accolades and praises of their 44-16 victory over one of the most formidable sports teams in recent history. But he had none of it. Instead, this Godly coach is quoted as saying, “This is not anything I’ve done – only God can do this. Even Hollywood producers couldn’t write this script. I give all the glory to God.”

The loving heart of God gave us the gift of sports with opportunities to enjoy its benefits and rewards. And, like Dabo Swinney, He gives us opportunities to use that gift to give Him glory. We can choose to allow sports to become a way of putting ourselves ahead and above everything and everyone. Or we can choose to use this gift as a way of letting God mold our attitudes, actions and associations with others so that we grow to be more like Him and so He gets all the glory. So, how do we do that?

It begins with being open to allowing God to alter our attitudes. In exchange for ungratefulness, we make a habit of continuously expressing thanks to God for all the gifts He has given us including sports. We ask His wisdom to recognize others as having great value and to quiet the temptation to build ourselves up above others. Negative thoughts toward those around us are replaced by seeking to find the good in them. Complaints take a back seat to compliments. We take on a heart of obedience and willingness to listen to those in authority. Our hearts develop a respectful attitude toward others even toward those who have caused us pain. Above all, we seek God’s grace to give all things in our lives, including sports, a backseat to Him.

Our actions become different when we choose to give God glory through sports. Because they are the outward expression of what is in our heart, commitment to fair play overcomes a desire to cheat. Giving less than 100% of our effort becomes something of the past. Tantrums are replaced by peaceful responses when we don’t get our way or fail to achieve something we wanted. Graciousness overtakes resentfulness, and being a good sport becomes more important than whether we win or lose a game. Our Godly actions can speak louder than the words of praise we give Him.

Sports builds associations or relationships with others, and in those associations, we have opportunities to glorify God. We focus on team building not self-building, and we become dedicated to giving others opportunity to play and excel. Compassion is a hallmark of our play, and we are ever ready to offer encouragement when others struggle or fail. We are no stranger to giving others credit even before we seek it for ourselves. We are quick to recognize other’s accomplishments, including those on the opposing team. Most of all, our hearts glorify God when we express forgiveness when being offended or hurt.

The gift of sports brings with it experiences filled with opportunities to make choices. Choices when we win and are successful and choices when we are not so successful, and experience loss. We can use these opportunities to lift God up in praise before a world who needs Him so badly. As we move through this sports season, it is God’s greatest desire to bless you and work on your behalf to mold your heart attitude, your actions and associations in ways that bring honor and glory to Him and make you a blessing to those around you.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

We are grateful that you love us so much. You gave us sports as a gift, and our heart’s desire is that we honor You. Please shape our attitudes, actions and associations and so that in anything we do bring glory to You.

SPORTS REVEAL BROKENNESS

Psalm 51:2 (CEV) "Wash me clean from all of my sin and guilt."

Following the 2014-15 Superbowl, there was an investigation into whether New England Patriots quarterback Tom Brady had tampered with the amount of air in the game footballs making them easier to catch in the frigid temperatures. The result: a four-game suspension and a cloud of suspicion over whether the allegations were true. And then there are other athletes who have earned millions only to end up broke due to poor investments and extravagant spending. Some have ended up in trouble with the law. Others have been stripped of their titles and medals. And it isn't just pro sports that hold title to this reputation. College teams have had their fair share of recruitment violations, and little league coaches have been accused of altering birth certificates of some of its players. No sport is immune or playing level untarnished: each has had its share of revealing brokenness.

Every sport is built around a series of rules. Rules are there for the benefit of the players and to ensure the integrity of the game. But brokenness is revealed when a player or coach breaches those rules and is willing to let his or her principles be compromised. When faced with the temptation to cheat, they may cut corners or break the rules of the game in order to gain advantage over their opponents. They allow their desire to achieve greatness or recognition to overshadow their willingness to obey the rules and play fairly, regardless of the cost. While they may win in the short term, there can be long term consequences that may remain with them throughout their lives. God understands the consequences and the dangers of disobeying rules. In fact, He has given us a rulebook: The Bible. The Bible is a blueprint of the rules He has given us for our benefit. When we follow that blueprint, He can build Christ-like character and blessings in our lives. When we choose to ignore those rules or break them, there are consequences and a loss of fellowship with Him.

Another way sports reveal brokenness is through pride. There probably isn't a player or coach that doesn't want to win and be first. But when they take full credit for winning and achieving top honors, pride can take root in their heart. That type of pride can grow into a disrespectful attitude toward other teams or even players on their own team. It can take on an air of superiority – an "I'm better than you" type of attitude. It may show up through bullying or making fun of others. It boasts of its successes vainly thinking no one can compare with its accomplishments. It carries with it an arrogance and unwillingness to learn from others. God's heart breaks when ours are filled with this type of pride. But He is gracious and willing to forgive a prideful heart if we ask Him. And He is willing to help us cultivate a heart of humility and to recognize life would not be as good as it is without His help. He is willing to help us have a heart that isn't boastful or filled with trying to impress. He will work with us to learn that we don't always have to have things our own way and to recognize that He values others as much as he does us.

Sports reveals brokenness when priorities are out of line. During this season, we've been focusing on sports as being a good gift God gives us. God wants players and coaches alike to give 100% of their effort in all that they do. He wants them to do their best. But, when players and coaches give overwhelming significance to sports or to winning so that it becomes the most important thing in their lives – more important than anything or anyone in their lives, then their priorities are out of line, and brokenness is revealed. God wants us to give Him top importance in our lives so that He can bless us and help us to learn to be more Christ-like. When we give Him our highest priority, He is honored, and others can see Him at work.

Sports can reveal much - the talent and skill of a player - the power and potential of a team and the drive and determination of a champion. Sports also reveal brokenness when principles are compromised, pride swells, and priorities get out of line. But God has a solution to this brokenness, and not just in sports but in every area of our lives. That solution is His Son Jesus. Jesus came to heal our brokenness when we admit our wrong-doing, or sin. We do that by asking Him to clean up our hearts and by trusting Him as our Savior. He is willing to mend broken lives and to forgive our sin when we ask Him because His greatest desire is that our lives would reveal His grace and love.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

Thank you for the opportunity to play sports. Please use sports to show us areas of brokenness in our lives so that we might ask You to forgive us. Thank You for being willing to heal our brokenness when we ask. In Jesus name, Amen.

WE FAIL IN OUR EFFORTS PLAYING SPORTS

2 Corinthians 3:5 (NIRV) *“We are not able to claim anything for ourselves.
The power to do what we do comes from God.”*

In 2017, high school senior and relay runner Ariana Lutherman neared the finish line of the BMW Dallas Marathon. Just a few miles from the finish of the race, she noticed a competitor and leader of the marathoners Chandler Self struggling to maintain her pace. Rather than race past her, Lutherman met Self's stride and told her she was going to run with her. As they neared the finish line, Self's legs gave out from under her. Lutherman helped her stand, and together they crossed the finish line. Self's efforts were not sufficient to meet the demand. Unable to finish the race on her own, she relied on the help of another to complete her race.

Participating in any type of sport can be hard. Long hours, strength building and discipline are involved in order to meet the needs of the day in and day out schedules. We do everything in our power to be successful and meet those needs. But sometimes we drop the ball, blow a call or take a fall – we just flat out fail at what we were attempting. We stare our insufficiency in the face. Fears gets a grip on us, and we start to believe that we don't have what it takes, don't measure up or that we are lacking in some way. We become afraid we will fail again. So, we work harder, try harder, even play harder and we push others on our team to do the same. We think our success depends solely on us. We strive to be 'self' sufficient. And even with all our trying, sometimes we still fail.

But God reminds us that this is backwards thinking. In our memory verse this week, we learn that God is the One who gives us what it takes to do all that we do. He is the One who places people, opportunities like sports and challenges in our lives. He knows what our needs will be as we play and coach: ever working to meet those needs so that we can learn to trust Him. We may fail in our efforts doing sports, but He has a plan even in our failures to help us grow in our walk with Him. Through our failures, we learn we can trust Him to give us sufficiency in our playing and coaching because He does not fail.

Imagine if the marathoner Chandler Self had crossed the finish line claiming her win totally belonged to her. We are sometimes guilty of that - claiming credit for our success and accomplishments. There is a part of every one of us that longs to be recognized for our achievements, a part that wants the rewards, accolades, trophies. Who doesn't want to be a winner? We all want to be on top, and we want to be recognized for it. We struggle with the thought of sharing the glory of winning with others. In our hearts, we may even forget that it is God who has given us what it takes to do all that He has planned for us to do. Our memory verse reminds us that we should not claim that we have done anything on our own. God can use sports in our lives to help us be successful by recognizing that He is the giver of the good gift of sports, and that He is the one who deserves the credit.

The marathoner, Chandler Self made it across the finish line with another beside her. Without help, her attempt to complete the race would have been a failure. Sometimes we fail in our efforts to do sports. Sometimes we try to do everything in our own power and claim credit for our success. But, just like her, we have a helper. In our life race – we have God to come alongside us helping us to accomplish the things that He has planned for us to do. And even when we fail and our legs give out from under us, He is there helping move us across the finish line. Because of that, He deserves all the credit.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

You are so good and kind to us. You have provided what it takes to do the things You have given us to do. We are grateful for your presence helping us as we play and coach and grateful that you don't leave us in our failures but reach down to help us finish our life race. For that, we recognize that you are the one who deserves all credit and honor.

SPORTS DON'T DETERMINE WHO WE ARE

Philippians 2:3 (NLV) *“Nothing should be done because of pride or thinking about yourself. Think of other people as more important than yourself.”*

The stories of the deeds of athletes on and off the field or court are plentiful. For example, holding a net worth of over \$45 million, one pro athlete made an appearance at a shopping mall charging \$125 to sign autographs. The price increased to \$175 for an autographed jersey, and a personalized message cost \$50 more. Sadly, this wasn't a charity event. But other athletes use their success to promote charities and foundations benefitting disadvantaged populations, women and children. Their monetary contributions are not just their pocket change but range in the millions and represent a large percentage of their income. Others spend their off-season time contributing not only money but their time supporting various causes. In every case, these players were part of winning teams, but they were also on losing teams. Their success in their sport elevated them, but it didn't determine who they are.

In sports, it is easy to think the things we do and the successes we have determine who we are. When our team wins, we are winners. If it loses, we are losers. If we beat an opponent, we are superior. If not, we are inferior. But sports don't have true power to determine who we are. Rather, players and coaches have power in determining how they let sports impact who they become. With God's help, they can decide if they will let sports derail them or develop them, regardless of whether they win or lose.

The drive to win has a powerful effect on players and teams. Winning can contribute to how they identify themselves. It can be an influential motivator driving them on to the next success, and it can push them to become more skilled and better at their craft. But it also has the power to derail them when everything becomes about winning. It has the potential to elevate what they think of themselves and their abilities compared to others. It can inhibit the opportunities to put others first. But, losing can also contribute to how players and coaches identify themselves. If allowed to fester, losing can extinguish a player or team's motivation and create an attitude of helplessness. It can derail their efforts and sour their attitudes resulting in becoming sore losers or poor sports.

Both winning or losing can derail players and their teams, but they also have the potential to develop them. Winning can be an opportunity for a player to develop Christ-like character and a humble attitude and a gratefulness for accomplishments. It has the potential to help players put others ahead of themselves. It allows them opportunities to support their team and show respect for opponents. Contentment and satisfaction with their accomplishments can grow. But God gives opportunities for players and coaches to develop even in losing. He can use a loss to spur a team or player on to try harder. He knows losing can help them develop a gracious, courteous attitude and empathy for others. It can help players develop Christ-like character and an understanding that even in losing, they can be successful in their relationships with others.

In sports, teams can be defined by winning and losing seasons. Athletes can be defined by whether their skill and ability surpass that of other players. Coaches can be defined by their talent for moving an underdog team to the winner's bracket or remaining in the loser's ranks. But our performance and whether we win or lose, have skill or not, does not determine who we are. What truly determines who we are is how God sees us – and that is: valued and loved. His desire is that every player and every coach will understand that their importance and value is in Him and not in sports. His desire is that they not be derailed through sports but will allow Him to develop them in ways that benefit them and honor Him.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

We are grateful that you determine who we are and not sports or any other thing in our lives. Please help us not to be derailed by false thinking that our value is in our performance and that we are above all others. Help us to develop Godly character whether we win or lose so that others might see You and want to know who You are. Amen

SPORTS TEACH US HOW TO COMPETE

Galatians 5:26 (CEV) *“But don’t be conceited or make others jealous by claiming to be better than they are.”*

Yankees vs. the Red Sox, Ohio State vs. Michigan, North Carolina vs. Duke, Celtics vs. Lakers. Auburn vs Alabama. These rivalries rank high on the list in their respective sports for being among the fiercest, most competitive matchups. At their combative matchups, fans better pick a side because there is no neutral territory. The goal: the disgrace of the opponent with a resounding victorious win. The contentions between them aren’t limited to the playing field or court. Their fans also exhibit a competitive edge with behaviors such as taunting: making fun of anything from the opposing team’s colors to their mascot. In some cases, players and fans have engaged in more serious behaviors like shouting matches, fighting and damaging property. Competition among rivals has always existed – in every sport, in team and individual play, among men and women, and in all cultures. It’s based in the desire to win which motivates us to put forth greater effort in order to achieve that goal.

Competition does have positive effects such as building work ethic, developing discipline and time management, shaping attitudes and making relationships through recreation. Our world prizes winning and applauds the value of competition. It elevates winners giving them status and prestige, fame and rewards. Because of that, it has the power to foster attitudes among players and coaches that creates a ‘me against you for my glory’ mindset. God values competition as well. His design for competition is to provide players and coaches with opportunities to compete for His glory – to develop attitudes of ‘striving with others, not striving against them’.

So, what are the differences in the way the world looks at competition and how God sees it? Worldly competition recognizes, even idolizes players and coaches for their ability to get the job of winning done. It focuses on the stats and records of players, coaches and teams. Worldly competition devalues those who don’t measure up and has little sympathy for those who don’t meet its standards. While it recognizes the importance of sportsmanship, underneath remains a current of value in seeing an opponent defeated. It creates a hunger for demoralization of opponents both on and off the field or courts. The world has created a platform for individual players to achieve glory. But this often takes a toll on players when their sole objective is to strive for that glory rather than embracing the joy and privilege of participating in the sport itself.

God wants us to strive to do our best to win both in sports and in our daily lives. But His approach to competition is based on His purpose: to build Christ-like character in its participants. He desires that players and coaches shift their focus on achieving glory for themselves and place it on Him. He isn’t as concerned about the stats and records of athletes as He is about their character and how they treat others during competition. He values the contribution of each player equally and wants them to view their opponents the same way. Godly competition creates an atmosphere of appreciating an opponent’s efforts and giving recognition when they are successful. His design for competition includes athletes learning to compete with their rivals by encouraging them to achieve their best even if it means that recognition goes to others. He will work with us to be able to do our best, support our opponent to do the same and leave him or her with their integrity intact.

God gives us opportunities through sports to enjoy competing. He has given us the gift of sports for our benefit and for His glory, and He desires that we learn Godly ways of engaging in competition. He wants us to compete to win but in His way. We can focus on our accomplishments, strive against our opponent doing whatever is necessary to defeat them and become conceited thinking we are better than them when we win. Or, we can honor God in our competition by striving with our opponent. As we compete, we should do our best but also seek ways to help our rivals do the same. We can learn to recognize their value, not just our own. We can use our opportunities to compete as a way to glorify God by the way we treat those we play against.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

We are grateful that allow us opportunities to enjoy competition. We know that the world has a view of competition that is very different from Yours. Please work in our lives so we learn to compete with our opponent instead of against them. We ask You to help us learn to focus on bringing glory to You rather than ourselves. Amen

WE TRUST OUR COACH BY RESPONDING

Titus 3:1 (NIRV) *“Remind God’s people to obey rulers and authorities.
Remind them to be ready to do what is good.”*

According to the Rules of Sport¹ website, there are rules for all kinds of sports including: football, baseball, arm wrestling, archery, bossaball, bobsledding, canoeing, cricket, curling, darts, dodgeball, handball, horseracing, pickleball, sumo wrestling, thumb wrestling, underwater hockey, yes underwater hockey, and more. In addition to rules of a sport, there are league rules and team rules, and rules that govern coaches and officials as well as players. Sports rules provide boundaries for play and behavior, prevent chaos and provide for integrity of the game.

But the rules are only effective when players follow them. The headlines are filled with stories of players and coaches who did not follow the rules. The result: personal consequences as well as consequences for their team. The problem wasn’t the rules themselves. Rather it was a refusal to submit to the authority of those responsible for enforcing those rules. God uses those in authority to benefit players and coaches as they engage in sports activities. It is important that they recognize and trust those in authority and respond with respect to them.

For players, the first authority God gives them are their parents. Athletes who follow the rules and guidance that parents lay down for them generally tend to be better players and team members. That is because they trusted their parent’s authority and have had practice in following rules. They understand that the rules are there for their benefit and protection. Coaches, assistant coaches and game officials make up another type of authority. The rules they lay out for players are important in building the skill and character of individual players as well as the team. Players can trust that their coaches and game officials to give them instructions and rules that make them better players and teammates. In sports opportunities like those in ISO, Jesus stands as the ultimate authority for players as well as coaches and officials. His playbook, the Bible, gives us the rules by which we can live our lives and play sports to our benefit and to His glory. Because of His great love for us, we can trust Him and follow His instructions for learning how to play sports well.

It isn’t enough to just recognize those in authority that God has given. More importantly, their authority needs to be respected. Players show their respect for the authority of their parents by listening to them and being obedient to them following their rules. When players understand that their parents have the best in mind for them, responding with respect to that authority becomes easier. Coaches and officials deserve the respect of players. They invest much of their personal time and energy to make it possible for their team to play. Their dedication to helping their team learn the sport and to be successful in play should be a motivator to every individual player. Coaches provide instruction, and officials guide players in following the rules of play. Because of that, players benefit when they submit to their authority and respect what they are trying to teach them by following directions and honoring their requests.

Jesus is the authority who most deserves a respectful response to His leadership. He has given us life itself and all the benefits and blessings we experience. He sacrificed everything for us when He submitted to God’s authority by dying on the cross for our sins. His example of submission to authority is a model for every player, coach and official. It teaches them how to submit to earthly authority by obeying rules and following directions. Like the trust players put in their coaches, Jesus is worthy of their trust.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

Thank You for giving us rules to follow in sports and in every other part of our lives. We trust You that you have given them to us for our good. Thank You, too, for those You have put in authority over us. Please help us to trust them and to submit to their leadership by listening and obeying. Thank You for Jesus who is the greatest authority. Help us to trust Him, listen to Him and obey Him in order to be ready for the good things He gives us. Amen

Source for citation:

<http://www.rulesofsport.com/sports/athletics.html>

WE ARE DEPENDENT ON TEAMMATES

1 Peter 3:8-9 (ICB) *"All of you should live together in peace. Try to understand each other. Love each other as brothers. Be kind and humble."*

Let me tell you a story
Of two players and glory
And how they each played the game
One played for team highlight
One played for the spotlight
His focus on self and on fame.

As the ball started flying
Both players kept trying
Their goal: to catch it and score
One passed to team brothers
One kept it from others
To get glory by keeping it more

Others out of the way
Waited for their time to play
Both players now have to choose
One let others join in
One chose personal win
For without him his team might lose

When a teammate would fumble
To be mean or be humble
Each player was left to decide
One was gracious and kind
One left others behind
His trophy, a heart stained with pride

Just picture it – a player without a team. It would be pretty silly for that player to step on to the field or court and believe that they could compete successfully much less win the game. Or, imagine if one player did everything, and the other members were never given opportunities to show their ability and use their skills to help the team? The result would be disastrous for the one and demoralizing for the rest. Team sports are built on the 'team'—a group working together and depending on one another for a common goal.

Team sports built on Godly principles are grounded in the belief that all players are valued. That is because each is created in God's image and because He loves them. God also sees each individual player's contribution equal in importance to that of all the others. His design for sports here in the ISO ministry is that players and coaches will have that same attitude and place a high value on their teammates. That includes the opposing team as well. To do that, they must recognize the condition of their heart, and then they have to choose what they will do about attitudes that don't line up with God's game plan.

In the poem, it was easy to recognize the player whose attitudes were Godly and the one whose attitudes were not. But what about you?

Are you the one who trusts your teammates' efforts or the one won't share opportunities to score?

Are you the one who is willing to sacrifice your play time to allow another player in the game to have equal playing time, or are you the one who thinks the game just cannot go well without you?

Are you the one who acknowledges your own mistakes and overlooks those of your teammates, or are you the one who will make fun of others, but never yourself, when a mistake is made?

Are you the one who is gracious when hurt or defeated or are you the one who looks to tear down others and retaliate?

God wants us to understand that we are dependent on our other team members. He also wants us to be the type of player or coach that can be depended on. That can happen when we understand how much God values each and every person we play with or against. It can happen when we choose to share the opportunity in play. It happens when we learn Godly attitudes that don't tear others down while lifting ourselves in the process.

Each player in this story
Had their chances for glory
God offers these chances to you
Will you humble your heart?
Giving others a part
Tell me, what will you choose to do?

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,
Thank You for giving us our teammates. Help us to understand that we cannot play well without them. Help us to realize how much You value them and value us. Because You value each of us, please help us to choose attitudes that honor You and show our teammates how much we value them. Amen

SPORTS AREN'T ALWAYS FAIR

James 4:3 (ISV) *“You ask for something but do not get it because you ask for it for the wrong reason — for your own pleasure.”*

It still hurts – going on two years later. If you are a New Orleans Saints fan, you know why. The pain comes from the blown call during the NFC Championship game between the Saints and the Los Angeles Rams. In the closing minutes of the game, officials declined to throw a flag after Rams cornerback Nickell Robey-Coleman clearly hit Saints wide receiver Tommy Lee Lewis before the ball arrived on a third-and-10 pass. If a penalty had been called, the Saints could have let the clock run down and had an opportunity to kick a game-winning field goal. Instead, the game went into overtime, and the Rams' 57-yard field goal sent them to Atlanta for the Super Bowl and the Saints back home to New Orleans.

Over the years, and in every sport, there exist examples of times when play has been downright unfair: sometimes intentional and other times just due to human error or flaw - the nature of the beast in sports. It may be because players or coaches have gotten away with an infraction of the rules. Or, it may have been because officials made poor calls. Or it may have been the result of some level of prejudice. Or it may have been the result of preference of one athlete or team over another despite their ability. And, perhaps, the sense of unfairness came from feeling that we just didn't get what we deserved and worked so hard for. Regardless of the reason, when sports, or anything in life, are unfair, it hurts. Our response to unfairness determines how we will learn to move on from the hurt. We can either choose to fixate on it, or we can choose to focus God's grace.

Many Saints fans became fixated on the loss. There was a flood of complaints aimed at NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell for not acting. A New Orleans attorney even filed a lawsuit against the NFL on behalf of ticketholders. Coach Sean Peyton wallowed in sorrow by watching Netflix and eating ice cream for days on end. Local businesses posted evidence of their displeasure on their billboards and marquis. But this fixation on the loss didn't change the outcome.

During this sports season, there may be times when things happen that are not fair. Players are overlooked and may not get as much playing time as they need and deserve. The ball may go to another player less talented. Calls by officials make smiles turn to frowns. The concession stand sells their last bag of popcorn to the person in front of you. Or, time may run out split seconds before making a score. The recognition and the reward of winning are pulled out from under them. Fixation on the unfairness is an option, but it won't change the outcome. What will change in response to unfairness is when our heart is fixated on God. God wants us to come to Him and fix our eyes on Him instead of the unfairness.

In a post-game interview, quarterback Drew Brees told fans that the loss was tough but that the team and fans should concentrate on the things that can be controlled. He reminded the viewers that there would be lots of good times ahead. Even though it would not change the outcome of the game he focused on something other than the unfairness.

We can remain fixated on the unfairness focusing on our desire for the reward and recognition or we can use these situations to focus on God's grace. His Son Jesus understood unfairness, so He understands how much it hurts when we experience it. He knows how it feels to be overlooked, undermined and rejected. Even though He is the perfect Son of God, it was the ultimate unfairness when He was punished for our sins. God doesn't give us the punishment we deserved. Instead, He forgives our sin or wrongdoing and gives us a relationship with Him – that is called grace.

In this sports season, players and coaches may experience unfairness, but they may also be part of the reason others experience it. God wants to help us learn to give grace to others as well. Players and coaches give grace when they give others opportunity they would really like for themselves. That might mean that less skilled players are given equal chance to play. It might mean distributing the ball to another player to make a score. It may mean giving up a coveted position to allow another player the opportunity to play that role. Or, it may mean forgiving and encouraging an official when they've made a poor call. God honors that grace because it comes from a heart of looking to do good for others at the risk of not getting the honor for ourselves.

When unfairness knocks on our door, God desires that players and coaches fix their eyes on Him. He wants us to replace our focus on reward and winning with focus on His grace. And, then we can learn to be a grace-giver to others.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

Sometimes things can be so unfair, and it hurts. Help us not to fix our eyes on the unfair things that happen to us but to fix our eyes on You. We know that Your Son Jesus understood unfairness because He took the punishment we deserve because of our sins. Thank You for that grace, and please help us learn to give grace to others.

WE ARE TO FOLLOW THE RULES; PENALIZED IF WE DON'T

Proverbs 13:13 (ERV) *“Those who reject a command hurt themselves; those who respect a command will be rewarded.”*

Vitamin Water hats, purple cleats and shorts that were too long were among the reasons pro athletes received fines for not following the rules set for team uniforms. An oversized engine or lug nut violations have resulted in fines for race car drivers. Golfers have been penalized with extra strokes if they give advice to another player. And, runners have lost their medals when they removed their racing bib or shirt during a race. Of course, there are stiff penalties for more serious violations like intentional injury of another player, substance abuse, not following team rules or engaging in behavior detrimental to a league or to the sport.

The rules of sport are essential. They define what athletes can and cannot do and make it possible for them to play. Rules provide boundaries of behavior. Without them there is disorder, confusion, chaos and potential for harm. If an athlete rejects the rules, they are penalized. God has provided rules for our life in His Word, the Bible. These rules provide boundaries that are there for our protection. If we reject His rules, we suffer the consequences of being penalized and by losing out on His best for our lives. This would include times when we break God's rules or when we don't do the good things He instructs us to do.

There are rules in every sport regarding where a player should be positioned during game play. In football, basketball, rugby and ice hockey, a player breaks a rule when he is offside. Basically, being offside is when a player is not where he or she is supposed to be. Depending on the sport, the penalty for being offside might be a loss of playing field advantage or loss of the ball. That means it is much harder for that team to score. Sometimes, we find ourselves offside in places where we should not be or participating in activities that we should not be engaged in. That puts us offside with God's rules, and it means that there may be penalties such as loss of privileges, loss of possessions or loss of personal freedom. That means it is going to be harder to live the life God intended for us to live.

In sports, there is a rule regarding 'holding' which may involve restraining another player who is not in possession of the ball in order to gain advantage. It happens when a player's hands or feet interfere with a player on the opposing team. Penalties are typically harsher and can include loss of playing field advantage as well as loss of points. We can be guilty of holding in our relationships with others by keeping them from doing their best. God's design is that we should encourage, support and help others to be successful. We should be elevating their needs above our own. We forfeit friendships, respect and our reputations when we are guilty of holding.

Almost every sport has a rule about roughing other players. It can range in a minor altercation among players to late hits following a throw or a kick. It is contact that is avoidable in most cases and brings with it some of the strictest penalties in sports because of safety concerns for both players. God has outlined rules for us to follow regarding harming others. Most of us may never be involved in incidents where we physically harm someone intentionally. But God's rules regarding roughing also include harm inflicted by words that damage another person in some way. God is very clear that our words have a harmful impact on others when they are intended to hurt or demean someone. When we are guilty of roughing others with our words, we may pay the high cost of being excluded from activities with others and rejected by those we most want to be with.

Sometimes we reject God's rules by not doing the good things He has given us to do. In sports that might look like not showing up for practice when there is no good reason. The penalty may be a low score or loss of a game. Or perhaps, players don't give their best effort which may contribute to loss of the game and poor morale among their teammates. Or, they may fail to recognize the effort and accomplishment of others which may mean others may not strive to do their best and keep on trying. Or, they may not take advantage of opportunities to show their appreciation for those who help them like coaches, parents and the officials.

God gives us rules for our benefit and for the good of others. We have rules in sports, and we have rules in life. We have God's rules which help us to understand how He wants us to live our lives so that we honor Him and show our love for others. Just like in sports, when we choose to reject the rules, not only do we only hurt ourselves, but we risk hurting others as well. Most importantly, although He continues to love us, we injure our relationship with God when we break His rules. When we are committed to respecting His rules, we open the door for His blessings and His best for our lives.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

Thank You for providing rules for us to play by. More importantly, thank You for giving us Your Word as our set of rules that help us live life abundantly. Help us to follow the rules of sports. Even more, help us to follow Your rules. Remind us of the penalties that come with not following the rules and help us make the right choice to obey them. Help us to focus on respecting Your rules so we might experience your best for us.

WE LEARN HOW TO SACRIFICE FOR OUR TEAM

John 15:13 (ICB) *“The greatest love a person can show is to die for his friends.”*

Following coach's orders, the player steps up to the plate. Moving up in the box, he sets the barrel of the bat, looking only for strikes. When it comes, he catches the ball with the bat and watches it down before racing to first base. The ball goes just right of the pitcher who throws him out at first, but his teammate rounds third and then slides into home plate scoring the run. Mission accomplished! The sacrifice bunt did what it was intended to do. Sacrifice bunts as well as sacrifice fly balls are deliberate acts allowing another player to advance bases or score. But it comes as a sacrifice to the player who surrenders his or her potential for the sake of the team. It takes away the potential for personal gain and is easily forgotten and uncelebrated. There are other types of sports play that involve sacrifice such as in substitutions. Designated hitters and designated or 'pinch' runners substitute for injured or less skilled players who would not be able to do the job as well: a sacrifice for both. For one player it means giving up his or her position, and for the other it means possibly not receiving credit in their stats even though they were the one who accomplished the goal. Substitutions occur in almost every sport including football, soccer and basketball. This type of sacrifice for the sake of the team requires a substitute who is able to accomplish the goal. And it takes others who acknowledge they are not up to the job and who are willing to accept the substitute's help to do so. Frank Thomas, aka 'The Big Hurt', David Ortiz and Edgar Martinez proved they were able. They are ranked among the ten best designated hitters in baseball. Herb Washington, considered one of the best pinch runners of all time, was able. Each of these men stepped up to take on the job as a substitute for a player on their team and in many cases made the difference between a win and a loss.

Following God's orders, Jesus made the ultimate sacrifice for every one of us. Coming down to earth, He stepped up to take the punishment for our sin, bowed His will to God's and followed through by dying on the cross. It was a deliberate act allowing us to have the reward of eternal life in Heaven. He surrendered His life for our sake. God's holiness demanded a sacrifice for sin or wrongdoing, but He knows we are not able to meet that demand on our own. So, He sent Jesus as our substitute. As our substitute, He proved He was able to meet the payment for sin through His resurrection. His death on the cross and His resurrection makes it possible for us to have eternal life in Heaven with God.

In sports, for a substitution to be successful, the player who is injured or unable to continue in a game, must acknowledge or agree that they need someone to take their place. If they argue with the coach and insist on continuing in the game, they risk a loss. They suffer, and their team suffers as well. When Jesus stepped up to take the punishment for our sin, He allows a choice to acknowledge whether we need Him as our substitute. We can argue with Him and insist that we can pay the penalty for our sin on our own by being good or doing good things, but we risk great loss in doing so. We risk everything including our eternity in Heaven. But it isn't enough for a player to just acknowledge that they need a substitute. They must accept the substitute's help, step back and let them work. A player who acknowledges they need a substitute but continues trying to make plays themselves jeopardizes their own safety as well as the outcome of the game. By accepting the substitute's help then the substitute is free to work on getting the job done. When we acknowledge the fact that we need Jesus as our substitute and accept His offer of forgiveness of our sin, then He is able to get the job of forgiving our sin done.

Jesus surrendered His place in Heaven and surrendered to the will of God in order to come to earth and die on the cross. He risked opportunity for recognition and personal gain. Instead of allowing us to suffer the penalty for our sin and wrongdoing, He became our substitute sacrificing His life so we might gain life. We have great reason to recognize Him and to celebrate all that He has done for us.

Devotion Prayer:

Dear Father,

We are so grateful that you were willing to sacrifice Your Son for us. Thank You for sending Jesus to this earth to die on the cross for our sins and wrongdoing. Thank You that You allowed Him to be our substitute, so we did not have to pay sin's penalty. Help us to recognize Your great gift to us and to celebrate the fact that we can have eternal life with You if we acknowledge Jesus and accept Him as our Savior.