

The next time you watch a game, listen to how the sportscasters talk about the star players. Often they compare how these players resemble former greats of the game. Maybe the resemblance is in the athlete's speed, power, or agility or their ability as a team leader. The image you have of a former superstar helps you to recognize the ability of the player you are watching in action.

Images help us understand and make sense of things. The Bible says we are created in God's image meaning we are a visible reflection of God. That means we resemble Him. For the first five days of When God was creating the heavens and the earth and everything in them, He saw His creation as 'good' but on day 6, well that was something else. Out of a handful of dust, which by the way, He created, He formed man in His image. This was a creation unlike all other parts of His handiwork – a unique being with a soul and capable of communicating, one with an intellect and a conscience, a creature able to form relationships, one having emotions, able to make choices. But this time, God saw His creation as 'very good'. Because we are made in His image, this helps us in understanding who God is and what He is like.

Sadly, that image was soon marred by sin when Adam and Eve chose to disobey God. But that isn't the end of the story because God sent His Son Jesus to save us from our sinfulness. Jesus was the perfect visible representation or image of God. We can learn about God by learning about Jesus.

What images come to your mind when you think about what Jesus was like? Well, we know He was compassionate because He healed sick and hurting people and cared about those who were outcasts or that others didn't like. We know He put others' needs before His own because He often kept preaching and healing even though He was tired. We know He was patient because He didn't fuss at people like His disciples when they made mistakes. We know He was forgiving because He didn't fight back or retaliate against the people who were opposed Him and tried to hurt Him. But most of all, we know He was obedient to God because He was willing to go to the cross .

Because we are created in God's image, we have the ability to reflect or resemble God when we play sports. We can be compassionate towards those who make a mistake during play by encouraging them and cheering for them. We can put other's needs before our own when we give up playing time or a position and even by recognizing when others have made a good play. We can be patient by not criticizing other players or maybe an official when they make a mistake or when they may not have as much skill or knowledge of the game. We can be forgiving when someone does something against us in a practice or a game by not trying to get back at them or make them look bad. We can reflect God's image in our obedience to parents, coaches, and officials by doing what they ask even if we don't understand or don't like what they are asking us to do.

Sometimes people will say you remind them of someone like a family member or someone else they know. Maybe it is because of your looks or maybe your habits or how you do things. The image they have of you is based on the way you resemble someone else. Think about the fact that you are created in God's image. Because of that He will give you opportunities to reflect Him in ways that are 'very good'.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What does it mean that I am created in God's image?
- What do I know about God that might help me understand what He is like?
- What would reflecting God's image look like while playing sports? At school? At home?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Why is image so important?
- How much of my image reflects God's hand on my life?
- In what ways am I reflecting God's image to my family? Friends? Co-workers?

Every member of Team #1 came to the game full of anticipation each with the attitude: We are a team. We will work together to achieve our goal of a win. When there are differences we will remember the only way to achieve our goal is to work together. Players on Team #2 also came filled with anticipation, each with the attitude: I am the best player on the team. I want to be recognized for my contribution to the game. Other players need to follow my lead. If both teams were equal rivals, which do you think would be most likely to bring back the trophy? Why?

You answered, Team # 1 – the team committed to working together in unity. Our scripture verse for this week says it is pleasant when God’s people live in unity meaning they are joined together in agreement. Jesus was the best example of unity because He was in unity with God. God’s mission was His mission. God’s plan was His plan. God’s ways were His ways.

Unity requires sacrifice but there is also great reward. Jesus left His home in Heaven to come to earth and be the sacrifice for our sins when He died on the cross. For those who put their trust in Him as Savior, the reward is the promise of eternal life in Heaven.

In Istrouma Sports, we strive to play with unity. Sometimes that may require sacrifice. It may mean giving up play time to give another player an opportunity to be in the game. It might mean letting a teammate play your favorite position. You may have to sacrifice your ideas about how to play your position when your coach is trying to teach you how to play that slot better. Or, you may have to sacrifice making the score when another player has a better opportunity or is in a better position. It might mean giving up your right to respond in an angry way to someone who has hurt you. You may have to sacrifice being in the spotlight in order to give credit and encouragement to another player. More than anything, playing with unity means we have to sacrifice what we want in order to pursue what is best for others.

Rewards come with unity. Players find themselves enjoying practices and games when they work together. Teams find they can accomplish more in the time they are together. Players are better able to learn their positions and focus on achieving both personal and team goals. When we play with unity, it is easier to love our teammates and even our opponents. It becomes easier to forgive others when they have wronged or injured us. Playing with unity makes those involved want to stay committed to the sport and to the team. Playing with unity helps us to leave behind bitterness and focus on self. A team playing with unity finds it easier to support others going through tough times. Playing with unity, simply speaking, is ‘pleasant’ and best of all - God is pleased when we make the effort to play that way.

It would be most unusual for someone to want to sign up to be part of a team where in-fighting, bickering and arguments are found. Or worse, a team where every player focused on self and wasn’t willing to sacrifice their wants for the good of the team. That is not God’s design for our lives because He desires opportunities for us to learn how to play sports differently. As it was for Jesus, it may require sacrifice on our part, but a tremendous reward waits for those who strive to play in unity.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What does it mean to play sports with unity?
- Are there sacrifices you might have to make to have unity on your team?
- What would be the best reward of playing on a team that played with unity?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- In a world where sports are idolized, why is it important for your child to learn to play sports with unity?
- What ways can you model unity in your home? At work?
- What is the most awkward thing for you in striving toward unity at home? At work?

Everybody loves the story of the underdog. Like teams starting last in the ranking and reaching the top of their league by the end of the season. Was it by chance they went from underdog to top dog? No – If you asked them, they would tell you it came because each individual player devoted serious energy and effort and work in striving together as a team to get there.

In the Bible we learn how Jesus' followers were a most unlikely group of misfits, outcasts, and underdogs that included uneducated fishermen, tax collectors, those with crippling diseases and disabilities, and a few other shady characters. They were prone to arguing. They selfishly asked for prominent positions in Jesus' kingdom. They wanted the kingdom, and they wanted it now. Not exactly a team that you would think would make a difference. But make a difference they did. After Jesus' death and resurrection, this group of 'unlikely' personalities devoted serious energy and effort striving together to bring the gospel to their world and ours. So, what would striving together look like as your team plays this season?

Striving together means having a common priority. Your team may be made up of players who are very different from each other – some with lots of athletic skill and some with very little, some with experience playing, and some aren't even sure what the rules of the game are. The differences are diminished when there is a common priority. You might say winning is the priority, but Jesus said our first priority should be to seek God first in everything we do. That is done when a team honors Him in prayer times before and after games, by learning the weekly scripture memory verses and by thanking Him that He is for them whether they win or lose. They seek Him first as they leave the outcome of the game in His hands.

Striving together means patience and forgiveness will be present. Instead of getting angry with a teammate who makes a mistake during a game we encourage them. When someone fouls a team member and keeps them from making a good move or play, they don't retaliate. They are patient with teammates who are learning how to play the game or who are building their skills to play better. When an official makes a poor call that unfairly penalizes our team they forgive them and recognize that everyone makes mistakes. They calmly wait their turns without arguing or complaining.

Striving together means selfishness will be squashed. Everyone on the team is recognized as valuable. No one player is seen as more important than any of the others. Players willingly give up playing time or a favored position they want for themselves if it means giving teammates opportunities they might not have otherwise. They don't insist on getting the credit for good plays or scores but acknowledge the effort of their teammates in achieving success. Team members won't demand their own way when it comes to how plays should be implemented or when team decisions are made.

Striving together isn't always easy. Especially when there are differences among those who are doing the striving. We need God's help and strength in order to let Him have first priority and to put others ahead of ourselves. But, when we do strive together in God's power what a difference we can make!

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What are the benefits of striving together with your teammates and coaches?
- What is hard about striving together with your teammates and coaches?
- What are things you can do to strive together with others?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Why is it so hard to strive together with others in your family? At work?
- Who do you find it hardest to strive together with? Why?
- What would need to change in your life in order to strive together with others?

In any given year, there are approximately 600,000 team sports-related injuries. Ouch! If you add up all of the injuries in the all the other types of sports, the numbers are in the millions. And this is just in physical casualties. It doesn't take into account the suffering athletes might experience with the loss of income or even being benched.

Jesus wasn't kidding when He told His followers in this world there would be trouble. In the past 3 years, we've had our share of trouble and then some! A global pandemic. Suffering. Businesses closed, jobs lost, finances strained or ruined. More suffering. Natural disasters decimating homes and the environment. Even more suffering. Anxiety, worry and stress. We are overwhelmed by suffering.

But Jesus didn't leave us without hope when trouble knocks on our door and suffering comes in and makes itself at home. In our scripture verse this week, He promises He would give us His peace in troubling times. Jesus was no stranger to suffering Himself. He experienced bone-weary days meeting needs, hatred, and rejection even by those closest to Him, and underwent excruciating agony on the cross. We see in the Bible when He needed peace He made time to pray to His Father and hear what God had to say to Him. One way we can have His peace when we are suffering is by praying and finding out what God says in His word, the Bible. For example, God tells us when our hearts are hurting or there are problems just too big for us to handle, He wants us to cast or throw those cares onto Him because He cares deeply for us. We can tell God what the hurt is and then hurl it onto Him assured that He stands ready, willing, and able to help us.

When we have a need that overwhelms us and we don't know how or even if we are going to make it, God's word reminds us that He will make provision for that need. Rest assured, He has greater resources than we have, resources way beyond anything we could ever imagine. With all the assets of heaven at His fingertips we can have His peace and be confident that His supply will be sufficient – beyond all we can ask or think of.

When we need direction or just don't know what to do about a problem we can ask Him for wisdom and direction. His word tells us that we can trust in Him with all of our hearts, and we don't have to try to figure everything out. We just acknowledge that He is God, and we are not. When we admit to Him we don't know what to do but He does, then we can have His peace. We have His promise that He will give us the direction we need.

For times when our hearts are on anxiety or worry overload, He tells us to pray about our problem. The Bible tells us to ask for His help and then thank Him for His help even before help arrives. Though it might be hard, we are to thank Him for what He can and will do in our situation. When we do that, His word tells us we can have His peace – a peace beyond what we can understand even in our most anxious, worrisome moments. We can have peace because Jesus was the ultimate overcomer. He overcame the impact of sin on the world when He refused to give in to its temptation. He overcame the power that sin has over humans by dying on the cross to pay sin's penalty. And He overcame death and was raised back to life. When we place our trust in Him as our Savior we can have His peace even in trouble. Through suffering and hardship, He gives us His peace as we talk to Him and look to the promises He has given us in His word.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- Have you ever had a time where you experienced trouble or suffering?
- How did you handle this?
- What are some promises God has given us in His word when we are suffering?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- How do you handle times of trouble or suffering?
- Are there promises from God that have helped you during times of suffering?
- Why do you think we sometimes wrestle with finding God's peace in the middle of suffering?

The ball is thrown, and everyone watching holds their breath as it flies through the air toward its target. Soaring on the right trajectory they swell with confidence that nothing will stop it in its course and assure victory for the team. In the last seconds of the game and just a few inches shy of a successful catch, the ball drops short of its mark. Whether inches, feet, or miles, it doesn't matter because now it is 'game over.'

Afterward, the coach then has the job of assessing what went wrong – what was broken. Maybe it was because the player lacked ability. Perhaps the player was not strong enough to get the ball to its target or didn't understand what he or she was supposed to do in these situations. Maybe he or she lacked the skill necessary. The coach also has to evaluate whether the player missed the mark because his or her attention was not in the right place. Was he or she distracted by the crowd? Did the presence of the opposing team's players cause the player's attention to be diverted? Were they preoccupied by anything other than getting the ball to where it needed to go? Then the coach would need to consider the player's attitude. Was it an issue of not following directions, being lazy or indifferent? Did the player try to be a hero rather than turning the ball over to a teammate in better position to score?

Whatever the reason for those broken areas, the coach doesn't kick the player off the team or leave no hope they will ever play again. No, they devote time and energy building the player's ability to get stronger and sharpen their skills. They teach them strategies and plays that enable them to play their position better. Coaches also work on helping the player focus their attention on what their responsibilities are. They spend time showing them how to avoid distractions from other players or the crowd. They help the player work on broken attitudes detrimental to themselves and the team while reinforcing the good ones.

The Bible talks about another kind of brokenness. Not a brokenness in how we play a sport, but a brokenness caused by sin which means doing things our way instead of God's way. Our memory verse for this week tells us we have all sinned and that we fall short of the mark which is God's holiness. It doesn't matter if we are really, really good people and miss the mark a by a little or if we are not-so-good people missing the mark by a mile.

The good news is that God doesn't kick us off His team or leave us with no hope. He sent His Son Jesus to come to earth and die on the cross to pay for our sin because He knows we aren't able to do that on our own. Its like a coach that sends in a substitute when a player can't do the job. God sent Jesus as our substitute because He knows we will never have the ability to be good enough to pay for our sin.

And there is more good news - when we ask Jesus to be our Savior or the Boss of our life, God will invest time and energy to help us focus our attention on Him and His plan for our lives. He will help us concentrate on things that are good and avoid the distractions of things in the world that can be harmful to us or to others. He will also help us reshape our attitudes, so we are more like His Son Jesus. He'll work with us to replace attitudes that are selfish and self-centered with those focused on loving, helping, and serving others.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What are the things you are able to do as a player on a team? Not able to do?
- Why are attention and attitude important in your playing?
- What causes us to miss the mark of God's holiness?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Have you ever had a time when you 'missed the mark'?
- What does God say about our ability make ourselves acceptable to Him?
- Why do people resist God's offer of salvation through Jesus' death on the cross?

In the commercials, Mom pinches her nose holding up her little athlete's dirty socks responsible for stinking up the place. She frowns at the once white jersey now covered with grass stains. The uniform pants lay in the laundry hamper caked with enough dirt to plant a vegetable garden. Then with a smile, she tosses them in the washing machine along with a laundry pod. Her mind fills with images of the soon-to-be sparkly clean sports gear magically making her world so much brighter.

Now, you aren't a pair of stinky socks or a dirt and grime-crusting uniform, but how you play sports or do any other thing creates an image or a picture of who you are on the inside.

Is your image one where grungy attitudes show up through wanting your way in every way? Is it more important for you to be a team star, or a team player? Is there a foul attitude of not wanting to put in the hard work to be a better player and teammate? Is your thinking soiled by thoughts of anger and retaliation when you may have been wronged or your team loses? What about your image shown in the words you speak? Are you smeared with unkind speech that hurts or injures another player or their reputation? Do your words lack the luster of kindness and graciousness to a teammate or opponent who is discouraged? Is your image one where smelly behavior like being disrespectful permeates everything you do during practices, games, or other activities?

But good news! God is not content to leave us with a bad image. He wants us to glimmer and shine with the same image of His Son, Jesus. When we trust Jesus as our Savior He gets down to the work of cleaning up our image meaning He brings it back to reflect His image. He scrubs our attitudes until they shine with respectful obedience. He scours out selfishness replacing it with willingness to put others ahead of ourselves. He disinfects our hearts till they gleam with thankfulness and gratitude for all of the good things He has given us like sports. He power-washes our thoughts so that we think about things that are good, and true, and honorable. He deep soaks our minds with His word and prayer helping clean our words until they shine with love and compassion.

But the best news is we don't have to clean ourselves up – God does that. He started our cleaning treatment by sending His Son Jesus to die on the cross for our sin. When we ask Him to forgive us for the things we have done that are wrong and to come into our hearts and be the Lord or Boss of our life He removes all of the stain that sin deposited in our lives.

Then He begins the process of sprucing up our image where the grungy parts are. As we try to get to know Him better and do the things He asks us to do, we are restored. Just like a sports uniform, we may get dirty again slipping into grimy attitudes, cruddy thoughts, or unwholesome words. But He is always ready to forgive us when we ask Him when those stains start to appear. When we repent or turn away from those things and turn to Him, He forgives us leaving us clean and refreshed.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What kind of image do your friends and family have of you? Why?
- In what ways is your image like Jesus' image?
- Are there things you can ask God to help you improve in your image, so you are more like Him?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Why is it important that we reflect God's image?
- Why do we struggle with conforming to or reflecting God's image in our homes? Work? Play?
- What needs to happen in my life, so my image reflects God's?

Following the traditional Gatorade bath, the coach, swamped by television announcers, reflected on his team's victory. In great detail, he describes the caliber of players he led – they were the best of the best. No other team in his coaching history was more skilled. No other team in the league was more powerful or equipped with the capacity to get to the top. No other group of players was more worthy or deserving of the winner's title. Praising their effort, determination, and depth of talent he raises the game trophy – the symbol of the glory due his team.

In our world, and especially in America, sports teams and individual players are often glorified. To glorify or give glory to something or someone means we express praise and honor and distinction. Sometimes athletes seek glory for themselves, but as you are playing this season, God wants you to learn how to play for His glory. God is worthy of glory because He is the Creator of all of our world. He is deserving of glory because He is our Redeemer who sent His Son to pay the penalty for our sins. And God is worthy of glory because He is a good, loving, and benevolent Father giving us good things.

What would it look like if we learned to play for God's glory? Well, it starts with praising Him for who He is and for everything He does for us. During your team prayer time you have opportunities to give Him praise. You can praise Him for the love and mercy He shows us when He forgives us when we sin. You can praise Him for His power and ability to hear your prayers and answer them. You can praise and thank Him for the kindness He shows through the blessings He gives you like your family and friends.

You can play for God's glory by being obedient. When you do what your parents or coaches tell you, you give God glory. Following instructions from the coaches or game officials even if you think they aren't being fair, gives God glory. God gets glory when you immediately obey and do everything asked of you without grumbling or questioning those in authority over you.

We give God glory through loving and showing compassion for others. Playing with an attitude of putting others before self really gives God glory. Being forgiving and kind to those who mistreat you or make fun of you when you missed an opportunity to score or make a big play glorifies Him. Making an effort to be patient is a great way to play for God's glory when you are with teammates who may not know the game or who may not be as skilled as you are. Encouraging one of your teammates who made a mistake glorifies God. When you give credit for a great play to a teammate instead of taking it for yourself you give God glory.

You play for God's glory when you refuse to do things that are wrong like retaliating or saying something ugly against a teammate, an opponent or one of the officials. When you make the choice to be honest and truthful especially when it might hurt you give God glory. Choosing not to be jealous when another player is recognized for their effort is another way God is glorified when you play sports. We especially glorify God when we are gracious to the opposing team who beat ours.

We don't have to bring God trophies in order to give Him glory. No title or achievement is necessary in order to glorify Him. Instead, we bring glory to Him when we praise who He is, what He has done and for all that He gives us. When we strive to be obedient and show love to others, we play for His glory. As we work hard to follow His commandments and not give in to sinful behavior or words, we give Him glory. Whatever you do, do it for God's glory!

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- What are some reasons God deserves glory?
- Why is it important to give God glory?
- What are some ways you can give Him glory as you play? In school? At home?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Are there people or things you give greater glory to than God?
- How are you giving God glory? At home? At work? At play?
- What would need to change in your life in order to give God the glory He deserves?

As an act of worship, you wouldn't expect to see players lined up in their positions wearing choir robes lifting their voices to heaven singing the latest praise song. And it would be absurd to see athletes passing the offering plate or basket to take up a collection in the middle of the game. Game announcers wouldn't ask the crowd to stand and read scripture verses instead of naming the team line-up. Nor would you see the players moving through the crowd passing out the bread or crackers and juice for the Lord's supper.

Worship is a demonstration and response to the worth or value of God. If asked what worship looks like, most people's list would likely include things like singing, praying, reading Bible verses, preaching, observing the Lord's Supper, and giving money. It might be unlikely that they would say that playing sports is an act of worship. But it can be.

Playing sports to worship God first begins with recognizing that God is above all. He is the Creator of our world who made all that exists out of nothing. He is holy, and we are not. We worship Him as we play sports by drawing attention to Him and not ourselves. It is worshipping when we don't try to grab glory and capture recognition for ourselves because we did something good in a game or practice. We worship Him when we recognize and accept that He has a higher purpose when we win and when we don't. Making God more important than sports is also an act of worship.

Recognizing that God is above all is the first part of worshipping Him. The other part is responding to His greatness through our attitudes, words, and actions. Wanting to be more like Jesus rather than wanting to be the team star is a way of worshipping God. Developing Godly attitudes towards our teammates, coaches, officials, and even our opponents, worships Him. Using kind and loving words when things don't go our way during a game or when our teammates make a mistake is worshipful. When we ask God to help us control our temper during games and practices we are worshipping Him.

We can also respond to God's worth by recognizing and thanking Him for the gifts He gives us. Sports is one of the good gifts we can praise Him for. We can praise and worship Him by thanking Him for opportunities to learn the sport and develop new skills. We worship Him by expressing gratitude for opportunities to make new friends, learning sportsmanship and how to be a team player. Our worship can be shown through thankfulness for those who work hard to provide us opportunities to play sports. We are even worshipping God when we thank Him for the enjoyment we get through His gift of sports. When we give our best effort in both our play and our attitudes we are expressing worship to God.

After a great play or a score, sometimes athletes raise a finger pointing heavenward. Others kneel with their heads down. For some athletes these might be acts of worship or they might not be. True worship goes much deeper than raising a finger in the air or kneeling with head bowed. Worshipping God through sports comes because we recognize His worth and great value. It comes when we understand He is worthy of our worship because of who He is and all He has done for us. Most importantly, it comes when we realize how much it cost when He sent His Son Jesus to pay the penalty for our sin instead of giving us the punishment we deserve. Worshipping God means we will respond to His greatness through attitudes, words and actions that reflect His image and give Him glory.

QUESTIONS FOR PLAYERS:

- When you think of worshipping God, what do you think of?
- Why is it important to worship God?
- Are there other ways besides sports that you can worship Him?

QUESTIONS FOR PARENTS:

- Why is worshipping God so important?
- How would you rate your worship of God? At home? At work? At Play? Why?
- How can you develop and strengthen your worship of God?