

Don't You Wish Life Was A Game?

Introduction:

If you don't know me very well, you might not know that I love sports. When I was younger I used to play almost everything going. Sports got me through High School. Still today I play and coach basketball. I watch hockey, basketball, football, underwater crocheting... And today is the SuperBowl – the most watched, one-day, sporting event in the world. At the end of the day, one team will emerge victorious; one team will go home defeated. But regardless, next spring most, if not all, of those players will show up at training camp to get ready for next season, and hopefully a trip to the next SuperBowl. Life's not always like that. Often there are huge consequences when we blow it.

There are however, a lot of analogies that we can make between sports and real life, and I love to do that on SuperBowl Sunday. I have been involved in pastoral ministry for almost 30 years now. In that time I've seen many people come and go in the various churches which I have had the privilege of serving. The level of frustration is often very high in my area of ministry because, while you can see people at risk, and you can warn them, the decisions are ultimately up to them. Many simply don't make it; they fall away. It's very much like coaching a sports team. There are some who put in the effort to train, to learn the plays, to discipline themselves; there are others who only do it when they feel like it.

I've seen Jesus' parable in Luke 8 about the Sower lived out many times. He said that this relationship between the preacher and the hearer is a lot like a farmer who is sowing his seed in the spring. In those days seed was sown by hand; the farmer would walk through his field and fling the seed from a pouch around his waist. Some seed would fall along the worn path that he walked on, and it would be eaten by the birds as it lay there. Some fell on rocky ground, and even if they started to grow, they would lack for moisture and shrivel up and die. Other seed would fall among thorns and weeds, which grew up and choked the life out of the plant. But some seed would fall on good soil; would take root and would prosper.

Jesus explained that those along the path are those who hear, but the devil quickly steals the seed before it can take root. There are many who hear but choose rather to believe the lies that the devil feeds them. Those on the rock are those who hear the Word and respond but, because they never get rooted, they shrivel up and die when times get tough. Those that grew among thorns are those who believe, but over time they allow life, and jobs, and worries and pursuit of things to distance them from God. Listen to how Jesus describes the last group. It's recorded in Luke 8:15, "*But the seed on good soil stands for those with a noble and good heart, who hear the Word, retain it, and by persevering produce a crop.*"

As we begin the message this morning, which of these categories would you fall into? Are you here to let the Word go in one ear and out the other? Are you here for appearances, or do you really want to hear from God? - Prayer.

We're talking today of what it means to be a follower, a disciple of Christ. The reason that this is important is because of what I shared with you earlier. Many hear the Word. Many start the race. Many sign up for the team. Many intend to do the right thing. Many want to serve God. This message will hopefully tell us the difference between those who start well, and those who finish well. Let's look at our Scripture for the day and see what we can learn.

I want to look at Matthew 4:23 - 5:1-2. "*Jesus went throughout Galilee, teaching in their synagogues, proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and healing every disease and sickness among the people. News about him spread all over Syria, and people brought to him all who were ill with various diseases, those suffering severe pain, the demon-possessed, those having seizures, and the paralyzed; and he healed them. Large crowds from Galilee, the Decapolis, Jerusalem, Judea and the region across the Jordan followed him. Now when Jesus saw the crowds, he went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to him, and he began to teach them.*" – Matthew 4:23 – 5:2 Repeat.

What do we see in these few verses? We see three people or groups of people in this section of scripture.

1. The Crowd

In Jesus' life we often see the crowd. He gathered them because He was an exciting person to be around. He taught as one having authority, the Scriptures say. To teach, in this sense, means to cause somebody to learn. He didn't just stand up in front of a crowd with a blackboard and talk for a while. He actually caused them to learn something.

He impressed the people with what He was saying. He preached about the good news of the kingdom. This was a group of people who were under oppression. They had waited their whole lives for some positive change. Now here comes Jesus, telling them that the Kingdom of God is at hand. It was a message of hope. People like hope, people need hope. If you can give people hope, you'll get a crowd.

The scripture says that He healed the disease and sickness among the people. There was substance to this man, He didn't just talk; He backed it up. People in pain found relief; those who were demon-possessed were delivered. The paralyzed were healed, those having seizures were cured. Let me tell you, that kind of a man can draw a crowd.

But a crowd is not always a great thing. Crowds are not very personal, are they? A crowd is kind of a faceless group. Crowds don't think for themselves either. There's a group mentality that kind of takes over. People follow a crowd, and crowds follow events, whether good or bad. You'll get a huge crowd to see a good sporting event, but you'll also draw a crowd to stand and gawk at a schoolyard fight. Jesus gathered a crowd at His triumphal entry into Jerusalem; they yelled "*Hosanna! Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord.*" He also gathered a crowd the day of His trial outside the palace, made up of a lot of the same people. They yelled, "*Crucify Him! Crucify Him!*"

Crowds are fickle. They go with what's hot. They like the fads; the latest thing. If they're just a crowd, they're quick to turn on you though. Anybody who's been in High School in the last twenty years knows what that's like. Crowds are great as long as they like you, but if you become unpopular, head

for cover.

Jesus had a crowd! They were coming from everywhere. All these people came on foot or mule. They wanted to see Jesus, thousands of them. But I have a question for you to think about this morning. If there were thousands of people gathered around Jesus here, and if He later fed 5,000 men, plus women and children on one occasion, and 3,000 on another, why is it that when Jesus ascended into heaven His church only numbered 120?

I'll tell you why; there's a big difference between the crowd and the committed, that's why.

2. The Committed (Vs. 1-2)

The Word says in Matthew 5:1-2, "*Now when He (Jesus) saw the crowds, He went up on a mountainside and sat down. His disciples came to Him, and He began to teach them...*" Let me quote this section as translated in *The Message*: "*When Jesus saw His ministry drawing huge crowds, He climbed a hillside. Those who were apprenticed to Him, the committed, climbed with Him. Arriving at a quiet place, He sat down and taught His climbing companions...*"

Picture the scene. Thousands of people have gathered to see this miracle worker. Jesus looks around and sees them all, and He starts climbing a mountainside. The books tell me that this hill was probably somewhere between 2-300 feet up. But as He climbs, notice what happens, the crowd thins. Why is that? Now it's work. It's not fun anymore. It's easy to stand around down in the valley with the crowd and be a part of all the excitement. But climbing the hill takes something different, it takes commitment.

Listen. Here's why there's no crowd up the mountain - you can't drift up the mountain, you've got to work for it. You don't drift into a commitment to God - it takes hard work. Who does it say that Jesus taught here? It says He taught "*His climbing companions.*" Why them? Listen to this quote from Ken Blanchard: "*There's a difference between interest and commitment. When you are interested in doing something, you do it only when it is convenient. When you are committed to something, you accept no excuses.*"

Why these guys? Jesus had called them, and they left everything to follow Him. These are the committed. They heard the call of God. They didn't argue; they didn't debate; they didn't even hold a family conference. They saw something in this man that was different. They weren't sure what it was but something that Jesus said rang true in their hearts and when He said, "*Come with Me,*" they left it all to follow Him. It's called commitment.

You can have a touch of God, the milk, in the valley; but if you want the meat, you've got to climb with Him. "*Small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.*" – Matthew 7:14. What did these guys have that the crowd didn't have?

Courage

Why courage pastor? It takes guts to make the kind of commitment that they did. John Maxwell describes courage as "*The power to let go of the familiar.*" These men had to have courage to let go of all that they were in order to embrace all that Jesus had for them. You see, Jesus call has two parts. The first is a call to let go of the things that now have a hold of us. The second is a call to embrace all that He has for us. The problem with many who call themselves Christians is that they want to grab hold of all the good things God offers and still hold on to the sin that would destroy them. Jesus said "*You can't serve two masters.*" John White says, "*True courage does not consist in the absence of fear but in doing what God wants even when we are afraid, disturbed, and hurt.*" It takes courage.

It takes courage to commit ourselves to the kind of change that Jesus calls us to. But listen, if Jesus was satisfied with us the way that we were, He never would have called for us to repent, now would He? To repent means to change. The Scripture teaches us that we are being changed step by step into His image. It is a work of the Spirit. As we yield to Him He works at those areas in our lives that don't look like Jesus. He calls us to be like Him!

This is not a downhill coast. It's a struggle. The language of the New Testament is militaristic for a reason. "*We wrestle not against flesh and blood...*" "*The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but mighty through*

God to the pulling down of strongholds...” “Fight the good fight of faith; lay hold on eternal life...” “We are more than conquerors through Him who loved us...” Paul said, “...I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me. Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

- Philippians 3:12b-14

Sounds kind of like a speech you'd hear in a football locker room before the big game doesn't it? Can you embrace these Scriptures today? Are they a part of who you are? Are you a spiritual adult? Or do you even know that there is a battle going on?

Hear me. God is calling a people who are committed. God is looking for champions. He's looking for people who are willing to look to do something with their lives that will last forever - people who can be relied upon. It's like a story I read of a football player - a lineman. Coach Bo Schemnechler tells about the third game of the 1970 season. His University of Michigan Wolverines were playing Texas A & M and they could not move the ball. All of a sudden, Dan Dierdorf, their offensive lineman – who was probably the best in the country at that time – came rushing over to the sidelines. Fed up with the team's performance, he yelled at Schembechler in front of everybody on the sidelines.

“Listen coach! Run every play over me! Over me! Every play!” And they did. Michigan ran off-tackle six times in a row and marched right down the field. Michigan won the game.

Vince Lombardi, former coach of the Green Bay Packers, said this. *“I've never known a man worth his salt who in the long run, deep down in his heart, didn't appreciate the grind, the discipline. I firmly believe that any man's finest hour - this greatest fulfilment to all he holds dear - is that moment when he has worked his heart out in a good cause and lies exhausted on the field of battle - victorious.”*

The other hangers-on abandoned Jesus when He started talking about commitment. Do you remember what Jesus said to His hand-picked twelve? He asked them, “*Will you also leave?*” What was Peter’s reply? “*To whom shall we go? Only you have the words of eternal life.*” What was Peter saying? In that statement he was acknowledging that yes, it is difficult being a follower of Christ, but it’s also the only way to go.

That’s the point that all of us have to arrive at within our own spirit if we’re going to do anything. It’s the point where we recognize the difficulties; we see the battle lines drawn; but we stand up and say, “*I cast my lot with Him.*” Christ is the third character in this drama. We have the crowd; we have the committed; but we also have the Christ.

3. Christ

He is the secret to success. The disciples climbed with Him and He taught them. They committed themselves to Him and He began the work of changing them from a rag-tag bunch of fishermen, tax collectors and political activists into the nucleus of a church that shook the world. We could consider Him the greatest coach in history. At one point His team fled in terror at the thought of being identified with Him as He headed for the Cross. But the end of their earthly story finds them walking in His steps, all of them but John dying a martyr’s death. What was the secret? Listen to what the Jewish leaders said of them in Acts 4:13, “*When they saw the courage of Peter and John and realized that they were unschooled, ordinary men, they were astonished and they took note that these men had been with Jesus.*” Isn’t that the whole thing right there?

What do you want out of life? Do you want to live or just exist? To know Him is the highest calling. The Apostle Paul wrote, “*I want to know Christ and the power of His resurrection and the fellowship of sharing in His sufferings, becoming like Him in His death, and so, somehow, to attain to the resurrection from the dead.*”

Hear me today. So often people look at pastors and say “*You’ve got it all together. You’ve got all the answers.*” Wrong! I’m just a fellow struggler - just like all of you. But if I’ve learned anything at all in this world that is

worth anything it is this. Pursuing Christ is the secret to success. Have you failed, come back to Christ. Do you want to succeed, climb with Him.

Jesus is always looking for climbing companions. I have decided that my life, with all of its past failures and weaknesses will be lived with this commitment - **I will do what it takes to follow Christ**. No ifs, ands or buts; no escape clauses.

One day I was confronted with the awful truth that when He carried that Cross up that road to Calvary it was my Cross He carried. It was my sin that caused Him to have the death sentence imposed upon Him. It was my selfishness that nailed His hands and His feet to a Cross of shame. It was to me that He said, *Take up your Cross and follow Me.*” I will follow Him anywhere. How could I do anything else? How could you? Let our lives be lived In Pursuit of Jesus!

Tom Mullins, a Florida pastor and former football coach, tells the story of a high school football team which he came to coach that had a perennial losing record. Their best-ever year saw them record four wins.

He only had 28 players sign up to play so he went recruiting. He ended up with 100 players at his first practice. With limited equipment he decided to line them up according to how much ability they appeared to have so the best players would hopefully get the best equipment.

Number 100 in line was a young man by the name of Carl Pierce. The coach asked him what position he wanted to play and he said wide receiver. Coach Mullins said that Carl had the physique of a number 2 pencil. After everyone else had gotten their equipment all that was left was what had previously been worn by a lineman who had weighed over 300 pounds. The shoulder pads were huge, and the coach could spin them on Carl's shoulders. His helmet was four sizes too large. When he ran his helmet bounced up and down on his head so that he looked like one of those little dogs people put in the window of their car that bob as you move. The pants were size 40 something, Carl was a size 20 something - there were no belts left. Carl had to hold his pants when he ran and the coach said, to top it off, he was duck-

footed. In practice the poor guy could hardly tackle a practice dummy without losing his pants.

Remarkably, the team started the season with four straight wins. They were in a big game; another win would break the school record for most wins in a season. The game was close, coach Mullins' team was about to kick off again. He looked out on the field and counted only 10 players - they were supposed to have 11. He turned and grabbed his assistant coach and told him to get somebody out there. The assistant spun around and grabbed the first guy he saw and threw him onto the field... It was Carl Pierce.

Coach Mullins desperately tried to call a time out, but the whistle blew and the ball was kicked off. The coach was panicking. Carl's position was right on the end; if he couldn't contain the play and turn it back inside they'd run right around him for a touchdown.

There went Carl, gallumping down the field, holding his pants up; his helmet bouncing on his head. There was a convergence; a big collision - voices yelling "fumble!" Coach Mullins' team started cheering. He yelled, "Who's got it?" From the pile came Carl Pierce's squeaky voice - "I got it, coach!" and he bounced up with the ball in one hand and his pants in the other. He'd recovered the ball on the other team's 15 yard line. They went on to win the game and break the record.

The videotape later revealed that, as Carl was gallumping down the field, the ball carrier ran right into him as he tried to turn upfield. Carl didn't know enough to tackle him and just kept running, knocking the ball loose. Then someone speared him in the back and Carl fell on the ball. He didn't have a clue.

The next day Coach Mullins took him down to the sporting goods store and bought him all new equipment.

Have you ever felt like Carl? Have you ever felt like you really want to get in there and do something, but you look around and everybody is bigger, faster, better than you? Maybe you don't think all of the trappings fit you either?

I know that feeling, I have those moments when I'm not so sure that all the equipment fits either. We can all take comfort in knowing that the Apostle Paul, one of the greatest men of God in all of history felt the same way. He told the Corinthian church that he *"was with [them] in weakness and in fear and in much trembling."* But he also knew the secret to success was not found in his own ability, he did all he could and let God do the rest. That's why Paul recorded the message that Christ had given him in II Corinthians 12:9 *"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*

Sometimes we just need to grab the waistband with one hand and head off down the field, confident that no matter what we face, God is able.