

Addison Dunayer

Dr. Howell

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### Worshipping God through Sport

Imagine an innocent, young boy sitting in the stands, watching his older brother's baseball game. As his older brother hits a ball out of the park, the younger brother is intrigued by his older brother's desire to win and enjoyment of the game with his friends out on the field. After seeing this, the young boy is so proud to be his brother and strives to emulate the things that his older brother does right, and to avoid the things that his older brother does wrong. This classic example exemplifies the purity of sports. The younger brother marvels at his older brother's ability to exercise his competitive nature, enjoying not only the company of others but also his own self, and simply glorying in the moment. This purity is often distorted, though, when selfish gains begin to interfere with the true purpose of sport. This distortion is especially shown in professional sports where many athletes fall prey to vanity and egotism as a result of their aspirations for wealth and fame. Even though many modern athletes seem to get everything they have ever dreamed of, many of them do not find true happiness. Take Tom Brady, for instance: despite winning multiple Super Bowl championships and gaining all the material wealth that comes with being an illustrious NFL player, Brady says that "there's gotta be something greater out there for [him]" (Schorn). What could it be that Brady, who seemingly has it all, is missing? He is, in football terms, fumbling the true purpose of sport. The true purpose of sport is found in our approach to it. We should approach sport as a way in which we worship

God, either as a fan or an athlete, by celebrating the likeness of God in our bodies, in an exemplary manner, for the purpose of glorifying God.

The idea of celebrating the likeness of God in our bodies is foundational to worshipping God through sport. From that foundation, we will examine what it means to be exemplary in sport, both on and off the field. All of this culminates in the glorification of God; this final piece will be examined in a general sense, and then will be further clarified in two ways. First, by considering sin's distortion of the glorification of God, in both fans and athletes; second, by surveying how both fans and athletes can best glorify God in their respective roles in sport. Suitable definitions of sport and worship are vital to this argument for the true purpose of sport.

Sport is a type of play. In Lincoln Harvey's book, *A Brief Theology of Sport*, he goes in depth about the nature of play. He says that "play is autotelic" in that "it has its own (*auto*) purpose (*telos*), enjoying a relative independence from the rest of life" (Harvey 69). In other words, play is something that stands alone in its true purpose. For instance, when someone plays a game of Tic-Tac-Toe with a friend, they do not draw a circle in a space with the intention of edifying their souls. They do it because drawing that circle in a space to get three in a row is the aim of the game. Harvey later refers to Robert K. Johnston's definition of play, which states that play is

"a free activity standing quite consciously outside 'ordinary' life... but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained from it. It proceeds with its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner" (Harvey 69).

However, sport is rarely (if ever) actually played on that level. Once again, this is a result of the corruption of the ideal of sport. Nevertheless, sport, in its purest form, still involves this definition of play; in the realm of the sport itself, we participate to achieve the end of whatever the game might be.

Using Johnston's definition of play, one may conclude that sport falls in the category of play. Allen Guttman clarifies this by stating that sport is "a regulated, physical contest that serves its own ends" (Harvey 70). By participating in these physical contests, we are celebrating our bodies that have been made in the image of God. Harvey agrees with this notion, but he makes a clear distinction between sport and worship. Harvey says that the definition of sport cannot be classified as a form of worship because "worship celebrates who God is" while "sport celebrates who we are" (Harvey xvi). While both of these statements about sport and worship are true, I believe that they are actually compatible with one another. Since we are called by God to worship in everything that we do, we can celebrate God by celebrating the bodies we have been given through playing sports. It may seem odd to consider sport a form of worship; however, worship does not necessarily have to be the specific acts of praying and singing that we commonly consider "worship." Worshipping God is essentially bringing glory to Him. In order for us to bring glory to God, we must direct the purposes of our actions toward that end. Harvey claims that to worship God, you must be doing something that solely celebrates who God is with no ulterior motives. The compatibility between sport and worship is made clearer if we take "ulterior motive" to mean a primary driving force in an action that is contrary to what God desires for us. For example, participating in a sport for the sake of boosting your own ego would not be directed towards worshipping God. This does not mean athletes are to avoid personal excellence. Obviously, to truly worship God, the athlete must excel in his or her sport to the best of their ability because this allows the athlete to bring glory to God through the imitation of God's excellence. Nevertheless, proper intentions are essential to avoid the pitfalls of ego. Rightly ordered motivation in sport requires recognizing that our bodies are made in the likeness of God and sport allows us to exercise our bodies in a celebratory manner.

Essentially, when participating in a sport, we celebrate the beautiful, physical bodies that we have been given that are made in the image of God. To clarify, being made in the image of God means that all humans are made in the likeness of God, and participate in His qualities. The natural, physical abilities that we have been given to use our bodies to run and jump allow us to participate in things that bring us joy like sports. But what is it that shows us that our bodies are so important? The simple answer is: the resurrection. Christ's rising from the dead and ascension into Heaven – body and soul – shows us, as hylomorphic beings, that both the body and the soul are essential to us as humans and both are redeemed by God. We have a body and a soul that are used in specific ways for us to achieve salvation. As Harvey puts it, when we play sports, we “are expressing [our] deepest identity as the ones freely loved into existence by God” (Harvey 88). By expressing this identity, we are liturgically celebrating our God-given bodies. Daniel Johnson, a professor at Shawnee State University, extends this idea further in an unpublished essay by claiming that “sports and games are valuable mainly by virtue of the fact that they enable participants to exercise their natural powers” as well as “their natural capacities or to actualize their natural potentials or potencies” (Johnson 1). In other words, one of the main purposes of sport is to use the natural, physical gifts that God has given us in a way that can help us realize the natural, physical potential of our bodies that are made in the image of God.

Inherently, sport compels us to strive to realize this potential because of its competitive nature.

Innately, humans have this competitive nature that often shines through when they are watching or playing sports. But, how can a Christian possibly love his neighbor and still want to pummel the competition? Essentially, Christians who are exercising their competitive natures in sport should not do it to an extent that they are straying away from the purpose of sport. Johnson provides a very helpful solution to the problem by saying that the most virtuous competitor

desires their own excellence, appreciates the excellence of their opponent, and desires to push their opponent to be better. Scripture supports this when it says that we should “do nothing from rivalry or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others” (Philippians 2:3-4). Thus, a true Christian competitor should strive to compete not only for their own personal improvement, but also for the betterment of their peers. Thus, Johnson’s “natural potential” is broader than just our own natural physical gifts. It includes our ability to worship God through pushing our peers to not only excel on the field, but most importantly to excel off the field by being a Christian witness and a godly example.

We can worship God through sport by being wholly exemplary. By wholly exemplary, I mean setting a Christian example on and off the field. Christian athletes should strive to set a good example in every facet of their practice. Athletes should aspire to be the best that they can possibly be by putting in the time and effort so that they can continue to celebrate their beautiful, God-given bodies. When they put forth the time and effort, fans and other athletes witness and aspire to emulate their successes through their own hard work in their respective fields and endeavors. In being wholly exemplary, athletes ought to be good sports who engage their teammates and opponents respectfully for the betterment of all. As Christians, we are called to “set the believers an example in speech, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Timothy 4:12). When we fail to set a good example for those around us, we are not faithfully worshipping God as we should. LeBron James, a household name who has dominated the world of basketball for years, is an excellent role model for his fans. However, despite being an exceptionally respectful and professional man on and off the court, he often fails to serve as a Christian witness. During many of his post-game interviews after a big win, LeBron frequently likes to say, “I want to give

thanks to the man above.” As a Christian, your initial instinct might be to say, “Hooray, LeBron James believes in God!” However, someone who is Muslim or Jewish could say the same thing LeBron says! Therein, we see, lies the problem. Even though, in the case of short post-game interviews, LeBron brings attention to God, he never speaks further on his faith besides the acknowledgement of a God. This is not an issue unique only to LeBron James, though. Many do not share their faith extensively with their fans because they do not want to see it tarnish their image. The mainstream media exacerbates this problem by encouraging anyone with fame to keep their faith to themselves and only talk about something that makes headlines on tomorrow’s news. Athletes, understandably, want to be liked in the minds of fans and spectators.

Unfortunately, they believe they have to stay away from sensitive topics like religion to broaden their fan base because they do not want to be disliked by the people who disagree with them. Not all athletes succumb to this pressure. Tim Tebow, for example, is extremely vocal and persistent about his faith. He has adamantly stated many times that his ultimate calling is faith in Christ as opposed to being a professional athlete. As a result, many people who do not agree with his beliefs look at him as the laughing stock of the world of sports. What Christians need to realize, though, is that the way that Tim Tebow uses his talent and fame as a means by which he can help bring others to Christ is what God calls us to do. Granted, Tebow is not perfect, he is sinful like all of us. However, the way in which he uses his fame from being a tremendous athlete as a platform for evangelization is truly exemplary. By being exemplary as an athlete and in his faith, he is also able to be an example of other good things that most people would not associate specifically with the Christian faith. For example, being well-mannered and respectful is not something that solely lies within the realm of Christian morals, but it does bode well in terms of the way in which fans perceive the athlete. If an athlete was very arrogant and disrespectful when

talking about their faith, it would be difficult to convince people to consider Christianity. Many people have a moral compass that would not tolerate that kind of arrogant behavior and would perhaps cause them to associate Christianity with immoral behavior. Unfortunately, when athletes behave like entitled imbeciles, their conduct is often instilled into the fans who love to watch them soar above the rim and catch touchdown passes.

People have always looked up to athletes as models for how to live a successful and happy life, even if the athletes live immorally. People see the incredible things that these athletes can do physically, the fun they have, and the wealth that accompanies it, and they want that for themselves. As a result, people often try to emulate their favorite athletes. Children in the modern world are especially influenced by these athletes because of their ability to easily learn about the private lives of professional athletes with the Internet at their fingertips. Of course, these athletes have sponsors and are supposed to represent them in a good way, so the information is often heavily filtered. At the same time, there are some things that cannot be covered up. If a little boy sees his favorite baseball player get caught using performance enhancing drugs, how do you think that makes him feel? Since the boy thinks highly of his favorite baseball player, the boy would most likely begin to unconsciously think that cheating is not wrong especially if it means that you will be able to succeed. The issue is often further compounded: athletes, once they have been caught doing something illegal or immoral, will downplay their mistakes and not take responsibility for their actions. Professional athletes have agents who flood them with methods to conceal their mistakes in order to maintain their income and image. As a result, athletes often say things like, "I made a mistake, and so now the best thing for everyone is just to move on from it." The athlete is simply trying to avoid backlash from the media by making it seem like whatever they did was not as bad as it seems and that the

best thing for “everyone” (even though it’s really just the best thing for him) is to just move on. “Everyone,” in this response, actually refers to the people who would want to tarnish the athlete’s image in response to whatever act the athlete committed. The athlete is trying to eradicate any kind of negative light that could be shed on them by making it seem like it is best to just forget about it. This is a perfect illustration of what a Christian athlete should *not* do if they were in a situation where they would need to address the media after some type of criminal conviction. As Christians, we are called to not only recognize our sins, but also repent. Therefore, it would be better for a Christian athlete to apologize for and own up to their actions while asking for forgiveness. Ted Kluck, a former NFL player, says that,

“perhaps the most Christian thing we could do, from the stage, is acknowledge our own sin. And as fans, we need to realize our role models are human, sinners just like us, and extend the grace to forgive when they sin and act for their own self-interests. Perhaps the most Christian thing we can do is pray for their ministry with other athletes and their walk with Christ” (Kluck 29).

Most importantly, though, that athlete should make sure that they do not repeat their wrongdoings. If fans see that they have done them again, then the fans see the athlete as insincere and a bad example. Such an athlete would be decidedly not exemplary in living out their faith. As a result of the towering pedestal of sport that puts athletes at the forefront of society, Christian athletes need to realize the impact that their actions have and do their best to imitate Christ by setting a positive example for others, because people look up to them. This begs the question: what is the best way for Christians to set this great example?

Ultimately, the answer to that question is found in Scripture, which states that we are called to glorify God in everything that we do. As the apostle Paul says, “so, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Corinthians 10:31). Therefore, when we participate in or watch sports, our primary intention should be to bring glory to God as in



everything else that we do. When we glorify God, we are being exemplary and celebrating our God-given bodies solely by the fact that our purposes are directed towards His glorification. To clarify, glorifying God refers to our admiration and proclamation of His goodness. The glorification of God can be accomplished in anything that we do as long as we do it for the sake of bringing praise and attention to the One, True, Living God. When we begin to direct the glory to ourselves, we obstruct His glorification.

To worship God, we must avoid selfish motives that blur our true intentions of glorifying Him. As Daniel Johnson states, “sports and games, just like every other human activity and institution in this fallen world, are deeply distorted and twisted by sin” (Johnson 9). Sin often directs our purpose towards self-interested desires that do not bring glory to God. For instance, if someone plays professional basketball for the sake of gaining more wealth or fame, that would entice them to glorify themselves as opposed to God. In the same sense, if someone plays pick-up basketball every morning before work just to fuel their ego, they are also, obviously, glorifying themselves rather than God. Selfish motives plague all of those involved in the world of sports: athletes and fans alike. Fans have a different task at hand because they do not fall prey to glorifying themselves. Rather, they often tend to glorify the athletes.

When a fan watches a professional basketball game, sin can distort their glorification of God. The world of sport puts these professional athletes on a tremendously high pedestal where all of the literal and figurative lights are on them. Many professional athletes are egotistical and driven by wealth and fame. Unfortunately, fans still look at the incredibly physically gifted athletes and idolize them. This clearly leads to glorifying the athletes themselves and not God. Consequently, as spectators of sports, we must realize that the athletes are sinful humans who need salvation from God just like everyone else. Fans should not give professional athletes a

“free pass” when the athletes are glorifying themselves or sinning just because the athletes can do extraordinary things on the field, court, or wherever it might be. Additionally, fans should not let the outcome of games affect them to the extent that they often do in today’s world. When our favorite team loses, we often walk into school or work the next morning feeling as if it had just ruined our entire week. When our favorite team wins, we often find ourselves running and jumping around the office or school hallways like Jesus had returned. We need to realize, as Christian fans and athletes, that we should not place so much of our emotion into whether or not our team wins on Sundays. This does not mean that we cannot be passionate about sports, but that we need to take a step back and realize that sport, in any shape or form, is not what defines us. There is a certain filter that we must have not only in sports but in all earthly things. The filter, ultimately, should remind us that we should glorify God in everything that we do, and not direct the glorification towards ourselves or other people. Fans should refrain from idolizing the athletes and support them in prayer. Fans should also serve as a Christian witness to other fans when they are conversing about sports. This could be as simple as communicating to others that you do not support a certain athlete because of their horrific actions off the field. As fans, practices such as these can go a long way in terms of serving as a Christian witness and glorifying God.

As for athletes playing their particular sport, they must glorify God through the pursuit of excellence. Often times, athletes focus on winning whatever game they are playing. While excellence sometimes meshes with victory, the two are not equivalent concepts. Daniel Johnson states that excellence is “the actualizing of a potential” (Johnson 8). In other words, excellence has to do with the athlete competing to the best of their ability in their respective sport. Victory, on the other hand, refers to winning the actual competition. So, these concepts overlap when the

athlete competes to the best of their ability and also wins the game that they are playing. Where they differ, however, is in the fact that, when athletes actualize their potential, that does not necessarily imply that they are victorious. The typical coach's speech to his players where they say, "go out there and give it your all and I will be proud" comes from this concept of excellence. In this case, the coach is not necessarily talking about his desperation for a win, but that his players show him that they are actualizing their natural potential. Confusing excellence and victory can be detrimental to true sport. For example, an athlete who is willing to take performance-enhancing drugs in order to perform a certain way on the field has an ultimate goal of winning as opposed to just going out there and giving his best effort. Johnson goes on to say that "the manifestation of an excellence... constitutes a kind of glory, and in fact the very kind of glory that God seeks in creating the world" (Johnson 8). When athletes play for the purpose of actualizing of their natural potential, it allows them to bring glory to God through the imitation of God.

Glorifying and imitating God may seem like a colossal task. As an athlete, it may seem like it would involve something like thanking God by pointing to the sky after scoring a touchdown. Ted Kluck states that "by thanking God profusely for touchdowns and for the opportunity to play pro football, some Christian athletes unwittingly make the game bigger than God himself" (Kluck 52). In this, athletes often focus their attention on thanking God for granting them the opportunity to play a particular sport and succeed in it rather their focusing their attention on glorifying God. While thanking God for touchdowns is not a terrible thing to do, it is still very self-interested. The key for athletes is not to simply reveal to the public that they recognize God, but to actually live out their faith. In the world of sport, that could involve praying before games, being a good sport at all times, obeying the rules of the game, being a

Christian witness to teammates, or even just glorying in the moment. Ultimately, athletes should examine how they participate in sport and ask themselves whether or not they are motivated by their own aspirations or by the opportunity to glorify God, who gave them the beautiful bodies which perform the athletically wondrous things that draw the attention of so many people.

As Christian fans of sport, we should direct our purposes towards the glorification of God through the realization of the fact that God just might not care who wins the Super Bowl. What He does care about is the physical and spiritual growth and salvation of athletes. God uses the outcome of games often to carry out His plan for the world just like He does with every event in our lives. That does not mean we cannot cheer for our favorite teams and be happy when they win, but that our motivations for cheering for a team or athlete should be rooted in the appreciation of the incredible gifts that God has granted the athletes. God does not care what team people cheer for. Unless, perhaps, we are rooting for athletes who tarnish His creation with their actions and words. What God ultimately wants is for us to see the marvelous things that these athletes can do as persons created by God, in the likeness of God. This should not lead to idolatry of the athletes, but simply to an appreciation of God's creation.

Sports have always had a place of prominence in society. With the emergence of newer technology, athletes have an even bigger spotlight on them. People all around the world can simply take out their smartphones and see what these attention-drawing athletes have said and done. Christian athletes must not get caught up in the self-interested aspirations that sport offers, but focus their attention on worshipping God through sport. Ultimately, athletes are defined by what they do on the field, *and* by how they glorify God. Sport should be a platform for the athletes and fans to worship God as we all are called to do in every situation. I challenge Christian athletes and fans to worship God through sport by being wholly exemplary and by

celebrating the incredible human bodies, made in the image of God, with the intention of glorifying the One who created them.

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