

## **INTROUCTION**

I begin by quoting the Father of the Protestant Reformation, Martin Luther. 500 years ago, Luther declared, *"If you preach the Gospel in all aspects with the exception of the issues which deal specifically with your time, you are not preaching the Gospel at all."* That's so true. Preachers need to bring the implications of Jesus and His gospel to the most significant issues that their hearers face. If they don't, they aren't preaching Jesus and His gospel at all.

If I asked you what those most significant issues are, what would you say? Some of you would say sports and you'd be right. Sports is one of the most dominant parts of American life and that's what I'm going to preach about today – specifically, what Colossians 3:17 tells us about it.

## **USE SPORTS IN THE NAME OF JESUS**

Let me ask you a few questions. How many of you play a sport, either organized or pickup? How many of you have children who play an organized sport? How many of you follow a sport? How many of you have a favorite team? What is it? Yankee fans, stand up!

Your answers show that sports is, to one degree or another, part of our lives or the lives of people we know. So, as disciples of Jesus who desire to make Him Lord of everything, we need to bring the gospel to it.

Paul does just that in Colossians 3:17. He commands, *"Whatever you do in word or deed, do all in the name of the Lord Jesus."* The words "whatever" and "all" mean everything that we do. "In the name of Jesus" means in the character of Jesus, as He would do it if He were in our place. So, the command is to always do everything that way.

That everything of course includes how we use sports. Three people in the past year have asked me this question. Is Jesus a Yankee fan? Another said that Jesus isn't but the devil sure is. Anyway, in light of verse 17, a better question would be, "Would Jesus be a fan at all and if so to what degree?" That's because his concern and command is this.

Use sports in His name, as He Himself would if He were us.

As His disciples, we take that command seriously and want to obey it. But we have to do something before we can - develop a theology of sports. We can't act correctly unless we first of all think correctly. So, we need to develop a theology of sports. Let's do that right now.

## **PLAY**

Our theology of sports begins with fun. Fun is one step down from joy. C.S. Lewis said that joy is the serious business of heaven. But fun is the serious business of earth. Joy in fact, as a fruit of the Spirit, often turns into fun. A parent, for instance, who is joyfully adoring his baby one minute is making silly faces and noises at him the next. That's nothing more than joy turning into fun.

Now, there's one activity more than any other within which fun operates. That activity is play. Play and fun are comrades. People can play at a variety of things, one of which is sports. When everything is said and done, that's what sports is. It's people playing for fun. So, to develop a theology of sports, we need to develop a theology of play.

Let me ask you an insightful question. What is the one experience on earth that is most like what we'll experience in heaven? The answer is "play." Play is in fact what Peter Berger calls "a signal of transcendence." That simply means that it provides us with brief touches of eternity. It's a crack in time and space that temporarily enables us to taste heaven itself. All of you have experienced that I'm sure.

I know I have. I remember my first college home run. It was an inside the park one since there wasn't a fence. Anyway I tore around the bases like a madman, running as fast as I could. For fifteen seconds or so, there was no past or future for me - only the exhilarating present. Time dropped away and the rest of the world didn't even exist as I ran the bases. There was something mystical, transcendent, about those seconds that I'll never forget as long as I live.

That experience of mine illustrates what play really is. It's a

rehearsal for heaven. As the great G.K. Chesterton said it, *“Earth is a task garden; heaven is a playground”* and he was right. Playing now prepares us for the playground of heaven. It’s a tune-up for the joy and fun that we’ll someday have in our full life with the most joyful and fun loving being in the universe, God Himself.

Now, that helps us understand how we should use sports. Since it’s only a form of play, we should use it in a way that makes it fun and a taste of heaven. That’s what Jesus would do if He were us and going back to verse 17, so should we. That is our theology of sports. We should use it in a way that makes it fun and a taste of heaven.

## **NO NEUTRAL GROUND IN THE UNIVERSE**

The problem is that many people don’t use it that way. Just ask my wife about “the ping-pong incident,” for example, and see what she says. My worst mood in our marriage was when I lost the championship game in our seminary ping-pong tournament. Carl Sovine beat me and I was in a rotten mood for a week because he did. Playing ping-pong in those days was anything but fun and a taste of heaven to me. But I’m not the only one. Many if not most people today don’t use sports as Jesus would.

And Colossians 3:17 reveals the reason for that. Inherent in this verse is a profound implication that all of us need to understand and remember. There is no neutral ground in the universe! Every square inch and split second of it are claimed by God and counter-claimed by Satan. Everything that we do is a challenged activity in the spiritual realm. It is a battleground for God’s reign and for Satan’s. God’s kingdom and Satan’s struggle for supremacy in it.

That supernatural struggle has an inevitable consequence. That consequence is that there is the potential for misusing everything. We can take even the best things that God gives us and use them wrongly to Satan’s pleasure and delight. Think of food, drink, rest, sleep, exercise, laughter, work, television, joking around, and sports. We can spoil each of those things by twisting its right enjoyment into crookedness. Satan

is then glorified and God demeaned when we do.

But we reverse that by doing everything in the name of Jesus. We take the good things that God gives us and use them as Jesus would if He were us. That in turn glorifies Him and demeans Satan, which is our call.

Do you realize what that means? It means that sports is not neutral ground. On the contrary, it's a battleground of God and Satan. Satan has managed to turn sports in America into two things that it shouldn't be. And He is capturing the persons and lives of millions of people, including Christians, in the process. Let's examine both of those things and our proper response, as disciples of Jesus, to them.

## **SPORTS AS RELIGION**

First, Satan has turned sports into a religion.

As I was growing up in the late 50's and early 60's, preachers often warned us that sports was a threat to our religion. When I was in college, my sister, brother-in-law, their children, and I skipped church one Sunday morning and went to see a Reds game in Cincinnati. The next Sunday our preacher jumped all over us and told us that sports was threatening our commitment to Jesus. That's what preachers said back in those days. It's a threat to our religion.

But times have changed haven't they? The role of sports in people's lives and even their communities has grown dramatically. It has now reached such a level of importance in people's lives that it's no longer a threat to their religion; it is their religion. I'm serious in saying that. A religion is that which ultimately concerns us and demands our greatest commitment, that which controls our behavior and conditions our capacity for sorrow and joy, that which defines us. In those terms, sports has become a religion for millions of Americans today. They give enough of their time, money, energy, and concern to it that it truly is their god.

Examples abound. I have a casual non-Christian friend who is an avid Red Sox fan and "avid" is actually an understatement. His wife casually told me in his presence and seriously so that he loves the Red

Sox more than her. He then didn't object to her saying it because it's true. He actually cares more about the Red Sox than he does his wife.

But it isn't just non-Christians is it. Several months ago, I attended the funeral of a long time Christian I knew who was an avid Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers fan. It was easy to tell that he was because Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers throws were draped all over his casket. At his memorial service, the pastor and others gave eulogies. All but one talked first and most about his love for those teams. Each then added in passing that he loved Jesus of course most of all. Any thinking person would have concluded this from what was said. He cared more about the Indians, Browns, and Cavaliers than he did about Jesus.

Don't make sports a religion. Jesus certainly wouldn't if He were us and neither should we. We should give it only the time, money, energy, and concern that He would if He were us. All of us need to assess whether or not we're doing that. We should ask and answer questions like these. Do I talk more about sports than I talk about Jesus? Do I have more passion for sports than I have for Him? Do I give more of my time or energy or money to sports than I give to Him? If the answer to any of those questions is "yes," then we're using sports wrongly. We need to repent and begin to use it rightly. We need to arrange sports around Jesus not Jesus around sports.

## **SPORTS AS WINNING**

Satan has turned sports into a second thing that it's not. He's turned it into winning. So many people think that winning is everything. Some say, and I was one of them, *"If it isn't whether you win or lose but how you play the game that counts, they why do they keep score."* Many if not most people equate sports with winning.

One of the reasons for that is ego needs they have. They need to feel worthy and think that winning or their children winning makes them

worthy. Or they need feel accepted and think that winning or their children winning makes them accepted. Or they need to feel superior and think that winning or their children winning makes them superior. They have ego needs and think that winning will fill them.

There's a major problem with that though. It robs sports of the very purpose for which God made it – to give us fun and a taste of heaven. My rotten mood after that ping-pong tournament is a case in point.

So let's not use sports wrongly. Let's use it as Jesus would if He were us instead. Let's get our fun from the playing and not the winning. That's the essence of sports. It's the playing, not the winning.

In his work *The Perfect Game*, G.K. Chesterton explains this far better than I ever could. He tells about playing a game of croquet with a man named Parkinson who took it far too seriously. Listen to what Chesterton told him because he did and this is priceless: *"'Oh, Parkinson, Parkinson!" I cried, patting him affectionately on the head with a mallet, 'how far you really are from the pure love of the sport – you who can play. It is only we who play badly who love the Game itself. You love glory; you love applause; you love the earthquake voice of victory; you do not love croquet. You do not love croquet until you love being beaten at croquet."* Wow! That's a million dollar insight. We do not love baseball or racquetball or tennis until we love being beaten at baseball or racquetball or tennis.

My point is that the purpose of sports isn't in the winning. It's in the playing. It's in the games themselves and the fun of participating in or watching them that we find their divine purpose. That's how Jesus would use sports if He were us and so should we, as playing not winning.

## **CONCLUSION**

I close with what I told my wife after the funeral service that I told you about. I said and seriously so that after I die, I don't want to be remembered as a baseball player and Yankee fan. I want to be remembered as a familiar friend of Jesus. Well, there's only one way that

I will be and it's this. It's if I do everything, including using sports, in the name of Jesus!