

For the Love of the Family Ministries

*Missionaries to America's Forgotten Mission Field, the Family
What Should We Teach Our Children About Sports?*

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One of the questions that comes up all the time here at For The Love Of The Family is, "What about sports for my children?" I do feel some creditability in talking about this subject. In 1973, I was drafted out of high school, as the 78th player taken in the 1973 free agent draft by major league baseball. I was drafted as a pitcher by the San Francisco Giants. I was the first player drafted from Indiana. So, in 1973 I was the best high school baseball player in Indiana and one of the best in the country.

The purpose of this article is to help Christian parents have a Biblical understanding of sports and what purpose if any they should play in our children's lives. We live in a sports crazed society! Many parents have the idea that their child is the next great sports star on their favorite team. The facts are that most children that play in youth sports today will never play professionally or even be close to it. Thousands of dollars get spent on travel, equipment, fees, and other items. In fact, many parents will spend money on these items and if necessary neglect paying their bills.

After playing professional baseball, I managed a 14 and 15 year old Babe Ruth All Star baseball traveling team. We traveled all over the Midwest and played every Wednesday, Saturday, and Sunday. We also practiced two evenings a week. So, the dedication required for this task by the athlete, coach, and parent was complete dedication of time to the task at hand. What was the task? To play baseball as much and as often as was possible at a high quality championship level. To give my child every opportunity to reach the great American sports dream.

Many children who are involved in sports today dedicate their lives at an early age to such tasks. Many programs have "off season work out plans" as well.

How does what I described above play into the life of the Christian home? Is it possible to walk with

God and dedicate my life and my child's life to the kind of hours described? What should my priorities be as a Christian parent? What should my child's priorities be?

All of these are good questions that need to be answered for the Christian home.

The average Independent-Baptist home today is filled with all kinds of activities with sports as a part of it. We do not want our children to miss out on a thing! After all, we don't want to turn them away from God! Have you ever wondered that maybe, the activities that are even church-related might be turning them away from God? The number of children today who grow up in a Christian home and go on to serve God is not good. The statistics are alarming with up to 80 percent of the children not going on to serve God.

What did I learn from playing sports? In high school, I played basketball, baseball, football, and ran track. I was pretty good at all of them. I learned team work, the desire to be the best I can be, dedication to practice, certain forms of discipline, and above all else to win! Some of those things were not bad and served me well later in life. However, some of the things I learned were not good. It was the great coach of the Green Bay Packers, Vince Lombardi who said, "If it is not important to win, then why do they keep score?" Winning is a very important thing in our society. After the age of nine, I never stepped on a baseball field to do anything but win. I was driven to succeed and to beat the other guy at all costs!

Most young people today are taught at an early age that winning is everything. The competition to succeed is huge. So, what does the Bible say?

The goal of every Christian parent in life should not be to rear a "good kid" or have students who are excelling academically, are great athletes, and so forth. The goal is to equip our children, these young saints "for the work of the ministry" (Ephesians 4:12, Mark 10:45). Our goal as Christian parents is to train them to stay on the road of usefulness to God. If, in the end, they are unusable to Christ, they are not handling life spiritually and wisely, both they and we have failed.

With the above statement as my goal as a Christian, what do I need to teach my children about sports?

1. Any activity I am involved should come under the guidelines of I Corinthians 6:19-20, "What know ye not that your body is the temple of the Holy Ghost which is in you, which ye have of God, and ye are not your own? For ye are bought with a price: **therefore glorify God in your body, and in your spirit, which are God's.**" **So, the Biblical goal of my life is to glorify God.** Can I do that and play sports? The answer by most Christians would be, "Why sure I can." Really?

Do you remember I said earlier that we played every Wednesday evening and Saturday and Sunday? I got saved in November 1974. I realized that almost immediately that my sports life and my Christian life were in conflict. Why? Because I should be in God's house on Wednesday and Sunday, Hebrews 10:25. I wrote the San Francisco Giants a letter telling them I had gotten saved and I wanted to be an obedient Christian. Therefore, I was not going to play professional baseball any longer. You say, "Wow are you nuts?" No, I know that the guys I played with and the rest of the teams we were involved with, and I did not know of one Christian who was an obedient Christian. A few professed to be saved, but their life, associations, and desire did not show it. They were nominal (name only Christians at best).

The atmosphere was one of drinking, immorality, and drugs. This was not now what I wanted or

needed in my life. **The goal of my life Biblically is to glorify God!**

It is always interesting to me that the Christian parents in our church that allow their children to play organized sports, are all for you preaching about faithfulness until it comes to their children being involved. I have heard the following more than once, "If we don't let them participate they will be turned off to God. After all they are here all the time!" Did you notice that the parent does not think it is important to hear God's Word? The priorities of their life are wrong! "It is not going to hurt just this one time." That is a lie from Satan. A baseball game is more important than hearing God's Word and God's message for my life? I counsel many parents who have lost their children. I know that you folks out there can say, "Well, I know a preacher's child that turned out not serving the Lord." Well, I can tell you about them too, many of them who are not serving or living for God. In more than thirty years of ministry I have seen a pattern develop. Several years ago I was called by another pastor who asked me to visit his son who lived near our church. He told me his son was away from God and he was greatly concerned. I agreed to visit his son. I went to the home and the son had a huge room with a pool table and several friends over. They were all drinking beer and using improper language. I introduced myself and the son invited me in. We talked for a minute and I asked if we could meet and talk (in my mind, at a better time). He really was not all that interested, but he agreed to meet me. At the second meeting, I shared his father's concern. He laughed and told me a story about being involved in high school sports. He was a wrestler. He wanted to wrestle and asked his father for permission to participate in wrestling. The problem was the wrestling meets were on Wednesday night. This meant the son had to miss the prayer meeting night. The son continued to talk to his father about it and his father said it would be okay to miss just the Wednesday nights that wrestling was involved and that would be it. A pattern of unfaithfulness started. Because of a lust for the things of the world and a father who waffled in his convictions, he lost his son. This young man told me that after that he had no respect for what his father had to say. His son knew this was a compromise and he wished his father had stood for what was right. Just think folks, a pastor lost his son spiritually because he failed to have his son do what he preached to others they should do. The father showed an inconsistent pattern in his life.

Hebrews 10:25 "Not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together, as the manner of some is; but exhorting one another: and so much the more, as ye see the day approaching."

2. To raise children who are going to walk with God, I have to teach them to set right priorities.

Many Christians today are on the way side because they have idols of the heart. Train up a child in the way he should go: and when he is old, (departs the house) he will not depart from it. Proverbs 22:6

My son, give me thine heart, and let thine eyes observe my ways, Proverbs 23:26.

James 1:13-17, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God: for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man: But every man is tempted when he is drawn away of his own lust, and enticed. Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death. Do not err, my beloved brethren. Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning."

After several years of counseling people concerning their spiritual needs I have found the great need is to deal with the idols of the heart. Every spiritual problem is a problem of the heart. The reason we have many issues in our lives is because our heart wanders. Every child in rebellion is because their heart wanders. So, will a child's heart wander who has dedicated his life to youth sports? The sport can easily become an idol of the heart. There is no Biblical change in the life of a Christian unless we get specific about idols of the heart. God has given us a tremendous mechanism. When we get saved,

the Holy Spirit comes to indwell us. God engages us in the heart, inner man, or mind which are all synonymous in the Scripture.

II Peter 3:18, "But grow in the grace, and in the knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. To him be glory both now and forever." When the Holy Spirit convicts us of sin, it means God wants us to change that behavior of our life. It is not enough to just confess the sin to God. I have to repent of the behavior and "renew" or change my mind through God's Word. Remember the goal of every Christian's life is to honor and glorify God, I Corinthians 6:19-20.

The word "lust" or "lusts" in Scripture is an interesting word. In James 1:14, "But every man is tempted, when he is drawn away of his own **lust**, and enticed." It is the word for strong, overwhelming desire. In essence, what I call a **demand lust. Something that you have to have. Something that controls and motivates behavior. In essence, an idol of the heart.** Children are born with certain natural desires for food, drink, etc. They are not born with a desire for certain sports, music, designer clothes, etc. Those things come along with the environment in which they are raised. However, our children are born with a sin nature and a desire "to go their own way," Proverbs 14:12, 14, 16:25. One of the great failures of the modern Christian home is the training of our children spiritually to live for and serve the Savior and not to go "their own way." We do not train our children because we have failed to see the point of James 1:13-14. Obviously, we cannot train our children if we do not understand that we cannot live for our own lusts, "go our own way." Galatians 5:16, "This I say then, Walk in the Spirit and ye shall not **fulfill the LUSTS of the flesh.**" Unfortunately, this is where the problem lies for the contemporary Christian. We desire to live for the lusts of the flesh. Therefore, our children do as well. It is interesting to me that the Bible tells us that each of us has our own special lusts, actually designer lusts. In essence, these are things that I like and want. (Certainly sports are in this picture big time today.) Mine may be different from yours. Ephesians 2:3 calls these "the desires of the mind." Ephesians 2:3, "Among whom also we all had our conversation in times past in the lusts of our flesh, **fulfilling the desires of the flesh and of the mind;** and were by nature the children of wrath, even as others." You see we all have our own "desires of the flesh and mind." In essence, designer lusts. We design our own lusts, the idols of the heart, Ezekiel 14:3-7. Folks, sports can be an idol of the heart and in most cases is.

James 1:13, "Let no man say when he is tempted, I am tempted of God for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth he any man." Who is responsible here? We are. Who is not responsible here? God is not. What is the end result of this? James 1:15, "Then when lust hath conceived, it bringeth forth sin: and sin when it is finished, bringeth forth death." Notice it says if you do not deal with it, it becomes a sin of your life. The end result is death. The word here for death means destroyed or destruction. Many of God's people are destroyed because they do not deal with their demand lusts. This certainly happened with Israel in the Old Testament, Hosea 4:1-8. Hosea 4:6, "My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge..."

Many of God's people are destroyed because they do not deal with their strong demand lusts or idols of the heart. In fact, by allowing sports or anything else to be more important than walking with God will lead to destruction spiritually. The first thing I want to do in counseling with someone is to find out what the idols of the heart are. I generally find this out by asking them what makes them happy? If I ask the child in the Christian home what makes you happy and they say, "Basketball" then we know where their heart is. Any answer except glorifying the Lord in my life will lead me to what is controlling their life and what the spiritual issues are. Of course, the idols of the heart are selfishness in their purest form. I also ask them what do they want to accomplish in their life? When they give an answer, I ask them what that means to them. We then can find the idols of the heart because they will

tell me what they are. Almost all of it deals with living for themselves or going their own way. Of course, they do not understand why they are having the problems they are having. Every spiritual problem is a matter of a heart problem. Changing behavior from an idol of the heart to having a real spiritual relationship with God and having long term change in our life has to be done Biblically. When I show someone I Corinthians 6:19-20, and ask them if the behavior they are doing glorifies God, they generally answer no. We have then identified one of the idols of the heart and generally there are more than one. The person is struggling with any type of spiritual relationship and home relationships because of it.

We then show them Proverbs 5:21-23, that if he will not Biblically change the cords of their sins will bind them tighter and their life will only get worse because of their failure to glorify God in their life.

To Biblically change this behavior we then go to Ephesians 4:22-24 and show them they have put it off and then put on the new and change takes place by renewing their mind (changing their thinking about it to God's thinking about it). The only way to make long term Biblical change in a person's life is to change their thinking to God's thinking. If we change their thinking to God's thinking, then we can change their behavior. Not until. When a person tells me the idol of the heart, I then take them to the passages of Scripture that deal with it. I ask them to read it and tell me what it means to them. The answers are always very revealing. I am always amazed at the power of God's Word to change a person's life if it is shown directly to them and they are seeking to know God's truth from it. I should not be surprised because I have seen it work over and over. However, the person now must be willing to change and apply what God's Word says for their life. God does not have the answer for them if they are not willing to apply His Word to their life.

James 1:16 gives us a warning about this. "Do not err, my beloved brethren." In essence, do not miss this. I am convinced that many of God's people have missed this. They do not see or understand the importance of dealing with this or training their children to deal with it in their lives. Galatians 5:16-25 gives us another explanation of this principle and the consequences involved in not understanding it.

II Corinthians 5:9, "Wherefore we labour, that whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him." Notice the word "accepted". My goal in life is to glorify Him. The word "accepted" means well pleasing or glorify. The word glorify means to give the right opinion of God.

1. My goal in life is to glorify God.
2. I please God by being like Jesus Christ.

Matthew 3:17, God the Father speaking of the Lord Jesus Christ, "in whom I am well pleased." It is the same as II Corinthians 5:9 "accepted" when talking about us.

Romans 8:28-29, tells us to "be conformed to the image of His Son." God knows I will not be perfect, but He does expect me to be changing, II Peter 3:18. Folks, there are only two choices on the shelf: Pleasing God or pleasing self. If you are determined to live for yourself and the idols of the heart, then life gets hard. Everything is a chore spiritually and in every other way. The person is lead by their emotions. They are "feeling" oriented. They are lead by their self pleasing habits. We cannot please God and live that way. Unfortunately many of God's people live there and wonder what the problem is with their children, marriage, and their relationships.

Hebrews 11:6, “But without faith it is impossible to please him: for he that cometh to God must believe that he is, and that he is a rewarder of them that diligently seek him.”

Proverbs 13:13-15, 29:1, “Whoso despiseth the word shall be destroyed: but he that feareth the commandment shall be rewarded. The law of the wise is a fountain of life, to depart from the snares of death. Good understanding giveth favour: but the way of transgressors is hard. He that being often reproved hardeneth his neck, shall suddenly be destroyed, and that without remedy.”

Let me ask you today. Do things seem hard to handle in your life? Are your problems overwhelming? You are going to have to deal with the idols of your heart.

Hebrews 11:25, “Choosing rather to suffer affliction with the people of God than to enjoy the pleasures of sin for a season.” Dealing with these things is a choice. When I understand that this is God’s way for my life, it is an easy decision. People who are led by their emotions and are not dealing with the idols of the heart, every spiritual decision is a hard decision. In fact, every decision is a hard decision. Doing right is definitely a hard decision for them. What they participate in is a hard decision for them.

Galatians 5:17, “...so you cannot do the things that you would.” As an example a Christian knows they should be faithful in the house of God. What is the command in Hebrews 10:25, “Not forsaking...” This becomes a hard decision for people led by their emotions and are living for the idols of the heart. They do not see it as important. They are conflicted because they are not dealing with their demand lusts. Every spiritual decision is a hard one. They do not want to do it. They do not understand it is sin and God will allow them to be destroyed if they continue that behavior. The person who deals with their idols of the heart are principled people **who are leading their life by the Word of God.** Life gets easier, Matthew 11:28-30. Mark 7:21-23, “For from within, out of the heart of men, proceed evil thoughts, adulteries, fornications, murders. Thefts, covetousness, wickedness, deceit, lasciviousness, an evil eye, blasphemy, pride foolishness: All these evil things come from within, and defile the man.”

These are some of the things God wants to change in our lives. You have to have your thinking changed or renewed by God’s Word to change the heart. **You have to understand the importance of dealing with the idols or lusts of the heart.**

Maybe by reading this article today you now understand better why your behavior has been the way it has been. Why you are not having victory in your life or an area that you have prayed and asked God to forgive you for, but nothing has changed in your life. You are living in defeat, depression, and discouragement and you do not understand why God does not change this. God will not change it until you follow what He has instructed you to do from His Word, Ephesians 4:22-24.

Do you know though there is great hope for you? God through His Word truly desires to change your life and give you victory over the idols of your heart. You can start that transforming process today, Romans 12:1-2. Do not give up and live in defeat, discouragement, and depression. It only destroys you, and your family. May God help you today to understand the wonderful and powerful changes that can take place in your life, through the understanding of dealing with the lusts (idols of your life), Romans 6:11-13, “Likewise reckon ye also yourselves to be dead indeed unto sin, but alive unto God through Jesus Christ our Lord. Let not sin therefore reign in your mortal body, that ye should obey it in the lusts thereof. Neither yield ye your members as instruments of unrighteousness unto sin, but yield yourselves unto God as those that are alive from the dead, and your members as instruments of righteousness unto God.”

Can I participate in sports and serve God? The answer to the question is what are your priorities? We need to guard our life at all times and not let anything including sports become the God of our life. Many parents today do not understand how the devil works in their lives and the lives of their children.

3. My relationship with God is the most important thing in my life. Did you know everything else can be taken away from you in your life except your relationship with God? The responsibility of the parent is to get the heart of the child and keep it. Many times the issue that causes a child's heart to wander is a parent who is a dictatorial parent without right priorities or an angry parent who did not get the heart of the child. **Every spiritual problem is a problem of the heart, Ephesians 6:6.**

The problem is the child's heart is lost by the parent. Many times the parent does not know that until the child is ready to leave the house (18) or right after they leave the house. The parent has told the child what to do, with an angry spirit, or compromised with numerous areas as I pointed out above. Let me point out here that ungodly anger has no place in the home or life of a Christian. (There are 47 different passages of scripture that deal with this telling us not to be angry or have an angry spirit), James 1:19-20, "Wherefore, my beloved brethren, let every man be swift to hear, slow to speak, slow to wrath. **For the wrath of man worketh not the righteousness of God.**" Proverbs 22:8, "He that soweth iniquity shall reap vanity; and **the rod of his anger shall fail.**" The child has a mechanical relationship with God, but not a real one. They are not spending time with God and letting God speak to their heart. However, the end result is you lost their heart. When the heart is lost, it then gets hardened, and then it can be stolen from you by another person or something.

I find that most Christians are not aware of this Biblical truth. **Never heard of it!** Proverbs 23:26, "My son, give me thine heart, and let my eyes observe my ways." When I talk about this many pastors just are not aware of it as well. The parent has to get the child's heart and keep it. Much of what has gone on today is mechanical, activity oriented, Christianity, and the child sees no power in that and they do not have a real relationship with God. They go through the motions, (they attend church, memorize scripture, go to a Christian school, numerous youth group activities, sports, programs, are home schooled, etc.) but do not have an intimate, personal, passionate relationship with God.

Christian parent, Satan is sneaky, deceptive, and desires to destroy your child. He will use anything he can to get your child's heart to wander. Sports in America are certainly a big part of it. My friend, as one who counsels hundreds about this issue, understand this is a spiritual battle. Make you life decisions based on what God's Word says. Be on guard, and remember the devil will use the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life in your life and your children's lives. It is a wise parent who will be on guard about their child's participation in sports or anything else that can steal the heart. Many parents do not realize what stole their child's heart until it is too late.

Finally, sports like everything else in life have to be dictated by what God's Word says. Can you play and glorify God, have a right heart, and keep your priorities right? You must make the choice in the light of God's Word, not your fleshly desires.

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