

CHAPTER 1

LET'S NOT THROW IN THE TOWEL:
CAUTIOUSLY CELEBRATING THE
GIFT OF SPORT

[Upon entering Notre Dame stadium]

This is the most beautiful sight these eyes have ever seen.

— DANIEL RUETTIGER, *Rudy* (1993)

SPORT is one of the many evidences of a gracious God. Allow me to explain. Some of my earliest childhood memories happened on the field of play. Baseball, basketball, tennis, soccer, golf and football – as I write those words, a different memory accompanies each of them. A teammate, a game, an emotion, each is associated with those recreational activities. I'm thankful to God that I was not only blessed to be in those moments but that those moments can be relived in my memories.

One of my fondest memories comes from a particular soccer team (or, football to much of the world) I was part of. It came in the second half, as we possessed a fairly substantial lead over our opponent. As our coach began to substitute players to ensure fatigue would not follow us into the ensuing game, we noticed that our opponent made a notable substitution as well. The player that made his way onto the field caught our attention. Not because of his skill, or his speed, or his stature; but because it was apparent to us that this player had special needs.

As the game moved along, we could tell that this young man's Down's Syndrome made basic skills a challenge for him.

TIME OUT

Dribbling a ball, basic coordination, and mental skills were far more laborious for this player. In a real sense, one could easily say that he worked harder than any player on that field, for the challenges he had to overcome to be playing were far greater. The impact this opposing player had on our team was immediate. It was so strong in each of us that we came up with a new objective – *Let him score.*

As the game continued, the ball made its way to this young gentleman at his midfield. As he began to dribble past one defender then another and another, the cheers from his fans began to grow. Before we knew it, he was at our midfield with one more defender to pass. The cheers were louder as he found himself face-to-face with our goalkeeper. As he extended his leg to make the shot, our goalkeeper dove just enough to ensure the ball rolled past his fingertips and into the goal. He jumped up and down, his team was elated and many of our players extended a high-five for his efforts.

Later that week our coach informed us that the coach of the opposing team had contacted him. He thanked him for the kindness our team showed to his player. He said how much it meant to him as a coach but also how much it meant to the team. It turns out that the young boy was so overjoyed he wore his jersey to church the next day.

Of all the teams and all the games I have been a part of, this one remains a memory I cherish. I can remember some excellent wins on our football team. I can remember being the MVP (Most Valuable Player) of a basketball game after making the winning shot (I primarily remember this because I stink at basketball.) I can remember many blessings, but I think it's safe to say they come in second to this one.

You see, that young man lived a challenged life from birth, challenges that only grew with each ensuing year. Most likely, this young man's parents lived a challenged life as well, since the day of his birth when the doctors sat down to have a discussion with them. We can assume his parents noticed the peering eyes of strangers as they walked through supermarkets

filled with people who noticed something was different about their son. Perhaps his parents struggled to find a community for this young boy to thrive in. Most likely, this young man's parents were often overcome with thoughts of the future. Will he outlive us? Who will take care of him? Will he have friends? Can he function on his own?

My team's interaction with this boy's life was brief; we didn't even know his name. We were introduced to him as the whistle blew and parted company as we said 'Good game' in our opposing lines at the end of regulation. However, in that brief moment on that obscure field in a small town in Mississippi, this young boy and his parents were, by God's grace, hopefully left with a taste of heaven. And all of it happened through sport.

Life in the Garden

As we open the Word of God, we don't simply read that things were good, we read that they were '*very good*' (Gen. 1:31). God spoke all things into being and placed man and woman in this perfect existence with everything they would need. '... Behold, I have given you every plant yielding seed that is on the face of all the earth, and every tree with seed in its fruit. You shall have them for food' (Gen. 1:29). But the best part of all was that they were face-to-face with their Creator. Unending fellowship without pain or sickness to hinder their happiness with the most gracious Being in all of creation. In short, it was absolute perfection.¹

Sadly, this existence only lasts two chapters. We are told that a serpent makes his way onto the scene, moving this man and this woman to doubt. You see, God gave and gave and gave to Adam and Eve, but He also set a boundary of protection

1. It is important to point out that fallen humans cannot fully fathom the truth just stated. As J. I. Packer states, 'The act of creation is mystery to us; there is more in it than we can understand... To say that [God] created "out of nothing" is to confess the mystery, not explain it'. *Concise Theology: A Guide to Historic Christian Beliefs* (Wheaton, Ill: Tyndale House Publishers, Inc., 1993), p. 21.

around one thing. ‘...You may surely eat of every tree of the garden’ [said God], ‘but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die’ (Gen. 2:16-17). God gave Adam and Eve all they could ever want, but they were led to focus on the one thing they couldn’t have.

The crafty serpent enters into this fruitful seed-bearing garden and plants a new seed, a seed of doubt. ‘... He said to the woman, “Did God actually say, ‘You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?’” (Gen. 3:1). And this doubt was no small thing; it questioned the goodness of this good Creator who had just made all things very good. Unfortunately, this serpent was also *very good* at selling lies, and the man and woman believed him instead of the One who gave them life. Thus, their doubts about God and their disobedience towards Him brought sin into creation.²

Christians believe that the effects of sin cover every square inch of creation – even birth. This is why there are those born with special needs. That young boy from the soccer game displayed many things to us on that field, and one of those things was that we live in a fallen world. His Down’s Syndrome illustrated that creation has been marred by sin. His inability to play like his teammates, look like his teammates, or talk like his teammates displayed the effects of Adam and Eve’s rebellion in the Garden. However, his life illustrated what lies beneath the surface in each of those present that day.

While every player may have looked normal, played normally, and socially acted normally, each of us was broken. The all-star full of pride who played for his own glory, the quick-tempered fullback who played aggressively from a heart of anger, the insecure athlete who placed too much importance

2. ‘[I]t is to be observed, that punishment was not inflicted upon the first of our race so as to rest on those two alone, but was extended generally to all their posterity, in order that we might know that the human race was cursed in their person.’ John Calvin, *Commentaries on the First Book of Moses Called Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1979), p. 172.

on his performance, the jealous parent who wished their son was more of a star, the coach who made the game more about himself than his players. It is true that one player appeared more broken than the others, but the hearts of all present that day were – and still are – poisoned with sin.

Yet, in the midst of all the brokenness, something glorious happened. The broken players, the broken parents, and the broken coaches got a glimpse of what life was like prior to Adam and Eve's rebellion. This 'glimpse' of creation, pre-fall, is something theologians often refer to as *common grace*.

We see this notion of common grace in the Sermon on the Mount when Jesus states that God's good blessings are enjoyed by all of humanity, '... For he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust' (Matt. 5:45b). Common grace are 'those general operations of the Holy Spirit,' says Louis Berkhof, 'whereby He, without renewing the heart, exercises such a moral influence on man that sin is restrained, order is maintained in social life, and civil righteousness is promoted.'³ That glimpse, as was stated, seemed to 'restrain sin, maintain order, and promote civil righteousness.' All at the field that day, partook of God's common grace through His gift of sport.

True Recreation vs. Current Recreation

I am not the first to point out the significance of the word *recreation*. In light of a discussion on the creation and fall of mankind, the word recreation is interesting. In a very real sense our recreation is *re-creating* what has been broken. Therefore, it is not a stretch to claim that that moment on the soccer field was pointing us back to what life in the Garden must have been like. We were re-creating what was broken. Both teams were

3. Louis Berkhof *A Summary of Christian Doctrine* (Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1960), p. 111. Berkhof goes on to say that the effects of common grace are made evident in the fact that, 'The natural man is still able to perform natural good or civil righteousness, works that are outwardly in harmony with the law, though without spiritual value.' p. 112.

unified, all players were celebrating, each parent applauded, joy was shared by all; for that one brief moment we forgot about that player's handicap and shared a special unity. Although fleeting, it was a picture of perfection.

The chances are that those of you reading this were not present at this particular soccer game. However, the chances are that each one of you reading this book has experienced moments like this through sports. Even though many of our glorious sports moments are at the expense of our opponents, a team victory displays a unity that points to the perfection that was present in the Garden.

The truth of recreation displaying this common grace is why movies like *Hoosiers*, *Rudy*, *Remember the Titans*, *Cinderella Man*, & *The Natural* exist. Each of these movies moves us to tears because it touches on this truth.⁴ They are giving us a glimpse of what creation looked like prior to the marring of sin. The good guy wins. The underdog defeats the glory-hungry enemy. The team strives together towards a common goal. All of these truths find their origin prior to the entrance of sin. Unfortunately, these movies are just a glimpse, and a glimpse is fading.

While it is very true that our recreation displays this pre-fall existence, it is just as true to say that our current recreation accurately displays the fall of mankind. For Christians to remain faithful when discussing the subject of sports, we must

4. 'The origin of the doctrine of common grace was occasioned by the fact that there is in the world, alongside of the course of the Christian life with all its blessings, a natural course of life, which is not redemptive and yet exhibits many traces of the true, the good, and the beautiful.' It is also true that the only reason mankind can even notice common grace is due to more grace. Berkhof later says, 'It is due to common grace that man still retains some sense of the true, the good, and the beautiful.' That is to say, if it were not for this doctrine of common grace, mankind would be so blinded by their sin, they would be unaware of what grace was; therefore, they would be unable to recognize what is true, good and beautiful. Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1932), pp. 432 and 442.

be willing to offer critique of something that can be beautiful at times, yet be so ugly at others. To say it another way, sports can move us to tears of joy, but it can also move us to weep and long for the return of King Jesus.

The countless stories of parents physically assaulting coaches and referees, players that have intentionally injured an opposing player, or the players that have sustained life-altering and life-ending injuries, all point to life in a broken world.⁵ Our sports can be so beautiful while also being so brutal. My eyes were opened to this sometime in college as I attended a high school baseball game.

I was working in student ministry and came as a spectator to cheer on one of my students. As I waited for his turn at bat, I sat mouth agape, not from cheering, but from shock. Shock at the mother that berated her son in front of the entire crowd. With every strike her son received, her temper grew. With every strike, her disapproval became apparent. With every strike, the love for her son appeared to wane. As her son finally struck out before the crowd, she screamed: 'Good! I'm glad you struck out! Sit down! You're pathetic.' I was in disbelief.

It was at that moment that my perspective on sports began to shift. I had played sports my entire life. I was a scholarship athlete at a junior college. Needless to say, I loved sports – still do. However, my eyes were gradually opened to the dark side of sports. Rather, should I say, my eyes were opened to the darkness that lies in the heart of mankind and often spills over onto the field. A pastor named Jeremy Treat helped me to see that sports are not the problem, we are.⁶ Sports in and of

5. The story of Mack Breed, the assistant coach at John Jay High School in San Antonio, instructing his players to 'take out' a referee comes to mind. Breed pled guilty to assault. Julia Jacobo, 'High School Football Coach Who Told Players to "Take Out" Referee Pleads Guilty to Assault,' December 14, 2015, <http://abcnews.go.com/Sports/john-jay-assistant-coach-mack-breed-put-18/story?id=35765975>; last accessed March 2018.

6. Jeremy Treat, 'More Than a Game: A Theology of Sport,' *Themelios* 40, no. 3 (2015): pp. 398-400.

themselves are not evil, we are (Gen. 3, Rom. 3). It is our sinful hearts that make a good thing, like recreation, something other than honoring to God. As Dr. David Prince says, ‘When I was younger, I certainly corrupted the gift of athletics by treating it as an ultimate end rather than an opportunity to worship the God who alone is ultimate.’⁷ That night on the ball-field was illustrative of this point.

Keep It Between the Ditches

My grandfather, whom we lovingly referred to as ‘Poppy’, had some pretty clever sayings. I heard one of these on a particular occasion when he loaned me his car. I am very thankful for the car my parents got me – they didn’t even have to provide me with one – but my grandfather’s car was much nicer. No, he did not have a sports car, but it was a later model than mine, and it drove much more smoothly. It also didn’t possess the quirks mine did. For example, there was a point in time when my car would honk every time you turned the steering wheel to the left – I’m not making this up. I finally removed the fuse from my car because the embarrassment of random honks at strangers was too much for my teenage heart to bear. All of this only fed my desire to drive Poppy’s car.

He wasn’t the slightest bit reluctant to allow me to drive it at my request, which gives testimony to his kind and gentle heart. I simply asked if I could drive. Without a pause, he said ‘Sure.’ And as I made my way to the driveway he simply said, ‘Keep it between the ditches.’ In other words, don’t wreck it.

When it comes to a conversation on sports, we need to heed my grandfather’s advice – we need to *keep it between the ditches*. That is to say, we need to avoid extremes. Sports are a great gift, but they are not to be worshiped like many of us do. Sports display life in a sinful world, but they are not to be avoided like the plague. We must avoid the extreme of being too anti-sport

7. David Prince. *In the Arena: The Promise of Sports for Christian Discipleship* (Nashville, TN: B&H Books, 2016). Kindle edition.

that we miss their beauty, while avoiding the extreme of being so pro-sport that we engage without discernment.

‘Sports are a good gift from God, but like all good gifts, sports are corrupted and broken in our fallen world,’ says Prince, ‘Anyone who thinks that sports automatically cultivate good character simply is not paying attention or purposefully ignoring reality. Sports as ultimate turns a good thing into an idol. Idols are almost always good gifts of God that are treated like God – as the ultimate source of satisfaction.’⁸ This is why I say we must *cautiously celebrate the gift of sport*. We must be discerning and cautious of how the human heart can turn good things into ultimate things. That is the aim of this book – to celebrate the good and warn of the bad.

That being said, I would be disingenuous if I didn’t say that I fear the church has swerved into the ditch of pro-sport engagement without discernment. I fear many in the church have embraced the love of sport to such a degree that any criticism may fall on deaf ears and simply be dismissed. Dr. Shirl Hoffman, in his book, *Good Game*, addresses this when he says, ‘Some thought it brash that I would dare criticize sports at all. It was then that I first realized how reticent the Christian community was to think critically about sports or to explore seriously how the sporting culture intersects with the spiritual path Christians claim to follow.’⁹ It is my prayer that you are reading this book because you are attempting to cultivate a heart of discernment towards sports. Whether you are participating in sports or simply a spectator, engage with discernment.

Sports Being Illustrative of a Good God

Earlier I said, ‘Sport is one of the many evidences of a gracious God.’ Hopefully this chapter has illustrated what a good God

8. David Prince, *In the Arena*. Kindle edition.

9. Shirl Hoffman, *Good Game: Christianity and the Culture of Sports* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), p. XIII.

TIME OUT

we serve. As we think back to the Garden, we saw a rebellious Adam and Eve still being loved by their gracious Creator. God would have been completely justified to utterly destroy Adam and Eve at the very moment of their sin, but He didn't. Why? Because He is good and gracious. God warned that Adam and Eve would surely die if they ate of the tree (2:17), but He allowed them to endure. The death God promised was not immediate; it was eventual. That, in and of itself, was gracious. If you think back to our discussion of common grace, this too, was God manifesting His grace by allowing mankind to endure. To quote Berkhof once more, 'The execution of the sentence of death on man is deferred. God did not at once fully execute the sentence of death on the sinner, and does not so now, but gives him time for repentance.'¹⁰

Not only did God not kill them, He also promised that One was going to come to save them. God says, 'I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your offspring and her offspring; he shall bruise your head and you shall bruise his heel' (Gen. 3:15). These rebellious humans who questioned God's goodness had more goodness poured upon them after their sin. Instead of disowning them, God promised that there would be an 'offspring' to come who would utterly destroy this serpent.

And, if a promised deliverer weren't enough, God continued to give Adam and Eve life. But He does not simply provide them with a life filled with drab colors and bland living. He gives them – and us – steak, pineapple, bacon, coffee, cookies, and shrimp. He gives them – and us – not black, white and grey, but red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet, and a thousand other shades of each. He gives them – and us – laughter, joy, and excitement. He does not give them – or us – desert only, but mountains, trees, waterfalls, sun, moon, and stars.

The God of the Old and New Testaments would have been completely just if He had given us nothing; if He left us, if He

10. Louis Berkhof, *A Summary of Christian Doctrine*. p. 112.

LET'S NOT THROW IN THE TOWEL

turned His back on us, if He ended all of creation right then and there. But God, in His head-scratching goodness, gave us more and more ... and more.

God gave us sports. So many fond memories and joy-filled occasions are filled with sports. He did not have to give us anything, He owed us nothing, but He gave us football, golf, basketball, baseball, soccer, volleyball, swimming, tennis and much, much more. Grace gives you what you don't deserve. In many ways grace doesn't make sense. And, sports illustrate the fact that God is gracious.

Sports are a gracious gift from God, but, just like any gift, it must be stewarded in order to be properly appreciated. The purpose of this book is to assist Christians in their enjoyment of God's good gift of sports. In order for Christians to enjoy the good gift of sports, they must exercise the biblical concept of stewardship; a concept we'll unpack more later. Therefore, this book will look at stewardship in six specific ways: stewardship of our identities, time, bodies, money, worship, and the souls of our children.

Since fallen human beings are prone to misuse God's good gifts, we must be calling on the Holy Spirit while we seek to steward the gifts He bestows. If not, the good gifts of God will become what all of His misused gifts become: idols. This is what we will discuss in the next chapter.