

***Question: Sports have become such a powerful influence in American society that one could almost call it fanaticism. What do you think Jesus would say about this?***

Jesus never directly addressed the subject of sports during his earthly ministry. However, some of the New Testament letters do compare the Christian life to that of an athlete running a race (Acts 20:24; Galatians 5:7; 2 Timothy 2:5; 4:7-8; Hebrews 12:1). Although this does not give a complete endorsement of sports, the comparison of Christian life and ministry to athletics does suggest that sports are not sinful in and of themselves.

But there is a problem when that which should have complete commitment gets moderate attention and that which should be in moderation gets full commitment. When this happens and sports receives greater commitment than Christianity, sports appear to have become a religion. If churches received only half of the commitment in time, money and effort that some sports fanatics give to sports, churches would seldom be in need of anything. Just think about the huge amounts of money that will be spent on the Super Bowl and surrounding events this weekend. This event is the talk of the nation, even among church people.

We also need to consider the way involvement with sports affects family life. While the average father may spend only five minutes a day in meaningful conversation with his children, many fathers spend hours each week watching games on TV or in a sports arena. The wives and children of these men soon learn that they must never interrupt dad during his football, basketball or baseball game. The Bible calls on Christians to “walk circumspectly, not as fools but as wise, redeeming the time, because the days are evil” (Ephesians 5:15-16). Wise stewardship should not only include careful use of money and time, but also of opportunities to do good to our own families.

Different problems arise when some parents get so absorbed with sports that they insist on their children’s participation in them—even when they are not athletically inclined or adept. Further, too often children have been embarrassed by the public conduct of their parents at their sporting events. These fanatical parents not only provide poor life models for their children but also can cause the children to have serious

emotional problems. When children cannot live up to the athletic expectations of these parents, they often feel like total failures in life.

Two passages from the Bible bring some balance to this issue. In 1 Corinthians 9:25 the apostle Paul says that those who run the races of this life do it to get a crown that will not last but those who serve our Lord do it to get a crown that will last forever. This long range perspective should help determine our priorities in life. Sometime later, the apostle Paul wrote, “For physical training is of some value, but godliness has value for all things, holding promise for both the present life and the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8).

The U.S. boycotted the 1980 Olympics in Moscow because of the Russian invasion of Afghanistan. Many were outraged, claiming that the lifetime dreams and hopes of many athletes were destroyed. However, one thoughtful young athlete later confessed that he had focused so much on being physically fit that he had cut off friendships and had done little to develop intellectually. He also admitted that athletics had become his religion and had crowded out time he could have given to God. He was honestly thankful the Olympics had been cancelled because it made him aware of the transient nature of athletic fame. He also felt freed from a psychological bondage to sports that had kept him from more important concerns.

I do not believe Jesus would oppose sports but that he would object to allowing sports to interfere with godly and eternal values and priorities. We must keep first things first (Matthew 6:33).

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