

The Christian View of Sports (To the Parents)

by Alex Marini

The Christian view of sports should be done in a way that honors God and does not distract from spiritual pursuits.

Duration: 1:29:37

Scripture: Matthew 7:21, Philippians 1:3, James 1:27

Topics: "Idolatry", "Spiritual Discipline"

Description

In this sermon, Brother Alex discusses the Christian view of sports and emphasizes the need for the church to reevaluate its relationship with sports. He shares his personal background in sports, highlighting his involvement in various sports throughout his life. However, he argues that sports can become an idol and a danger to one's spiritual strength. He challenges the notion that participating in church sports teams or serving as a coach or referee equates to serving the Lord, stating that true service to God involves visiting the fatherless and widows and keeping oneself unspotted by the world. He also acknowledges that while the Bible does use sports to illustrate spiritual truth, it does not justify an unhealthy obsession with sports.

Transcript

Hello, this is Brother Denny. Welcome to Charity Ministries. Our desire is that your life would be blessed and changed by this message.

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These messages are offered to all without charge by the free will offerings of God's people. A special thank you to all who support this ministry. I've asked Brother Alex Marini to have a message for the congregation this morning.

It's a few weeks back that I heard that Brother Alex had been invited by the Lancaster Conference Mennonites to bring a message to them in their winter Bible schools, or I'm not sure what they call it, on a Christian view of sports. And I knew that he had written a little book about physical fitness and things like this for homeschooling families. Well, I had no idea how clear the lesson on a Christian view of sports was

until Bible school week we had here, or a week the youth came together from several places and we had a week of teaching here all day long and then every evening preaching.

And a slot opened up and we needed a speaker in one of the sessions during the day and I invited Brother Alex to come and share with the youth a Christian view on sports. And I'd never heard it, but I'd have to say I repented right in my seat. As I listened to his presentation, my mind went back to old homeschool gatherings where we had picnics and things like that and I remembered playing volleyball and baseball and, you know, I come from the world and I learned those things very well and I remembered how much I enjoyed winning.

I mean, I was in it all the way. I wanted to win this volleyball game and I played with all of my heart that way. Well, in my Christian maturity I did learn how to lose, so it didn't look too bad to everybody else.

I just played with all my heart, but I wanted to win. As I listened to the lesson, I repented. And the next time we get together to play a little volleyball, you'll see a different person, I assure you, than you did in the past.

But as I heard the message, I thought, surely the rest of us need to hear this message. I so appreciated even on Friday, going to the Bill Gothard's all-day minister seminar, that he laid the same thing on all the pastors that were there, pleading with them to take another look at sports, telling them that it's an idol in America and it's a danger and it'll sack us of our spiritual strength. So with those things in mind, with the desire that we all wholly follow the Lord, we ask Brother Alex to have a lesson on a Christian view of sports.

God bless you, brother. Good morning. I greet you in Jesus' name.

I believe this is a message that the church desperately needs to hear, and I'll be glad to take this message any place God opens the door for me. I'd like to begin with a very brief explanation of my background, just so that you can understand how I came to my views of sports. As far as sports is concerned, I've been involved in sports for about 30 years of my life.

Throughout my school years, starting out as a little boy playing little league baseball, then all through my school years I played sports. All through high school and as a senior in high school, I was playing three sports a year. After I graduated from high school, I joined the Army and I played sports in the Army.

I also got heavily involved in martial arts then, which I continued for 15 years. After I finished my time in the Army, I went to college, majored in physical education, and I was also on a gymnastics team in college. After I graduated, I worked in a YMCA in New York as a physical director, where I was teaching, coaching, even administered a basketball league there, and also ran the Boston Marathon in those days.

From there, I taught in a public school as a physical education teacher, and since then I've spent many years in Christian schools, teaching phys-ed, coaching sports, building sports programs, and right now I'm teaching phys-ed at Faith Mennonite High School in Kinzers. So I've been involved in every aspect of sports, from player to coach to referee to league administrator. Now, as an athlete myself, I was no superstar.

I did well in some things. I was captain of my track team in high school, but I was second string in football and third string in basketball. So I've also experienced the whole spectrum of athletic success, from total failure to some success.

So all of that is part of what gave me my views of sports. But I've also been very influenced by my religious background. I grew up in a Catholic family in Massachusetts.

Never saw a Bible. Can't remember ever seeing a Bible in my whole boyhood days. Never heard the gospel one time.

In fact, I never even met anyone who openly spoke of being born again or having any kind of a personal relationship with Christ. That was just unheard of in my community. And so I basically lived as if God didn't exist, and sports was my only real interest in life.

Well, I mentioned that after I finished high school, I joined the army, and it was there that I met the first born-again Christians that I had ever run into. And I did begin seeking God in those days and was seeking salvation. I wanted to know the truth about God.

Well, I don't have time to go into all the details, but eventually I did come to the real issues concerning salvation, and I saw that I was indeed a sinful man. Of course, most people would have considered me to be a pretty good guy, you know, because in the world, if you don't commit murder and if you don't rob banks, that makes you basically a pretty good guy. But I came to see that I'd been guilty of crimes worthy of death in the sight of God.

I'd been in rebellion against His authority all of my life, and I deserved His wrath. I agreed with Him that I deserved His wrath. I had no excuses for my sins.

There was nobody else I could blame, and there was nothing I could do to make up for my sins. I was guilty and condemned. And I was driven to the cross.

Where else does a guilty, condemned sinner have to go except to the cross? And at the cross, I begged God to have mercy on my soul. And Scripture testifies that while I was in rebellion against God's authority, the Lamb was slain in my place. While I was in waging war against Him, the wrath that I deserved fell on the Lamb instead of on me, and God's wrath passed over me, and I was forgiven, and I was born again.

And because He did that for me, I want to live for Him, and I want to die for Him. Well, at that point, I didn't really know how to live for God, because I had no Bible knowledge at all. So I just sort of followed the example of the typical American Christian that I was associating with at the time.

And I lived the same basic lifestyle as the typical American Christian, and quite frankly, I didn't have to change my lifestyle a whole lot in order to do that. I fit in real well with typical American Christianity. But after about 12 years of Bible study, because I did discipline myself right from the start to study the Bible, and I read a chapter every day without fail.

So after about 12 years of reading my Bible, and also I'd been teaching in a Christian school for about 6 years up to that point, it suddenly dawned on me that the typical American Christian lifestyle does not line up with the Bible. And my lifestyle didn't line up with the Bible. And even though I was real busy with all kinds of church and school-related activities, because at that time I was a deacon in the church, and I was teaching in the school and coaching all the sports, and I was the groundskeeper for the building, and I was the janitor, and I was the bus driver, and the snow shoveler, and the building repairman, you know how it is in a small Christian school, you do all those things.

So I was just busy, busy, busy with all kinds of church and school-related activities, but I couldn't find a whole lot of those activities in the Bible. And I did come across all kinds of things in the Bible that I was not doing. So I was beginning to question everything at that point.

Well, right about that time, God arranged for us to meet some very different people. Some people that had a much more biblical perspective of Christianity than we did. They were people of the Anabaptist background.

And I'd never heard of Anabaptists before. But we had an unexpected visit from Brother Dan Mast and his wife Martha, and Dick Paulseen and his wife Marge. They had come to visit a friend of theirs that they knew in Massachusetts, and our friend thought that we might like to meet him, because he knew where we were at spiritually at that time.

So he brought them over. And we spent the whole evening with them. And in that one evening, my wife and I knew that these people have a much more biblical perspective of Christianity than we did.

And their lifestyle is a whole lot more biblical than ours too. And so they invited us to visit. You know how Dan is, hospital go like that.

So we went out and stayed for a whole month with the Mast family in Ohio. And it had quite an effect on us. We went to their church service.

You know, it was Holmes County Christian Fellowship. They just had a little fellowship. I don't know, five or six families at the time.

It wasn't real big. And we went to their church services, and it was nice, you know, but it wasn't that spectacular. And we went to their prayer meeting, and it was nice, but nothing that impressive.

But the thing that we were impressed with was their youth group. Because where we had come from, you know, here I was teaching in a Christian school, and our youth group and our students in our Christian school, I mean, you could hardly find one that had a heart for the Lord. It seemed like the only thing they cared about was feeding the flesh.

You know, television and movies and sports and parties and sports cars, and that's all they were interested in. Well, this youth group in Ohio, when they got together, all they did was spiritual things. I mean, they'd spend an evening in prayer or Bible study, or they'd go to the nursing home and visit the sick, or they'd go to Christian Aid Ministries and pack food, and they'd go to the prison and visit the imprisoned and sing and preach, and they'd go do street meetings.

And that's all they did was spiritual things all the time. And they never did parties, and they weren't into any sports and all that nonsense. Well, I was impressed.

I mean, we didn't believe it was possible to have teenagers like that. We'd never seen any like that. And even from the experts, like Dr. Dobson, I remember hearing him.

A mother called him up, complaining, Oh, Dr. Dobson, my children, my teenagers, they just don't have any interest in spiritual things. We can't get them motivated in these things. What can we do? And his only counsel was, just survive the teenage years.

Just survive. That's the best you can hope for, is just to survive it. And we thought, yeah, I guess that's true, because as we looked around, that's the best we could hope for too, is just survive the teenage years.

But here we saw, wow, it is actually possible to have godly teenagers. We were really impressed with that. So, that drove me back into the scriptures, and I started out all kinds of things.

And I finally came to realize what our problem was. I finally realized that I had been born and bred in downtown Laodicea. As I read the description of the Laodicean church in Revelation chapter 3, my church, and I myself, fit that description perfectly.

You know how it says, you're neither hot nor cold, you're lukewarm. Well, that was us. That was a perfect description of us.

And then it says, you say I'm rich, and I'm wealthy, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and thou knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. Now, I had to ask, well, why does God call them poor? Because I'd done some study about Laodicea, and they were a wealthy community. They were a seaport, and they were very wealthy as far as earthly wealth is concerned.

But God called them poor. And of course we know that the way we get treasure in heaven is through doing the Father's will, good deeds and that sort of thing. So it's very evident that the Laodicean church, even though they had all kinds of wealth, it was evident that they spent their time, and their energy, and their resources on self, on enjoying life, on good times, on making more money.

And they didn't have time for the Father's work, you see. They didn't have time for evangelism, and visiting the sick, and visiting the imprisoned, and feeding the poor. But they thought that their material wealth was a sign of God's blessing, you see.

Oh, but we're rich, we're wealthy, we have need of nothing. Surely this is God's blessing on us. Surely this is God's approval on us.

And they didn't know. You see, that's the classic sign of Laodicean Christianity. They don't know.

They think everything's fine. And they don't know that they're wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked. Well, when I read that passage, I said in my heart, that is my church, and that's me.

It's a perfect description of us. And it wasn't just my church, because the Baptist church down the road, they were the same. The Methodist church down the road, they were the same.

They're all the same. Across the nation, they're all the same. And it wasn't just my Christian school that had ungodly teenagers.

They were all the same. Every school we went to, because I was coaching all the sports, you know, we had interaction with other schools. And I drove the bus, and took my players to different schools for competition.

And, you know, you can sense the spirit of the school as soon as you walk in the building. The first thing you see right in front of you as you walk in, the front doors, there's a great big trophy case. You know, and you see the stuff that's on the walls, we're number one, and stuff like that.

You know, you can sense the spirit of a school as soon as you walk into it. They're all the same. We live in the Late Eastern Age.

You know, this is the terminal, I believe, the terminal period in the history of the world. Well, when I realized these things, I spent some time on my face, repenting, and begging God again to have mercy on my soul. And I determined in my heart that I'm going to live by the Bible.

And I'm going to seek God's heart on every issue of life. I'm not going to read the Bible anymore to try to find out how much liberty I have, and how much I can get away with and still make it to heaven. But I'm going to read the Bible to find out that thing that is most pleasing to my God.

And I'm going to spend my time doing the specific things that the Bible says that Christians are supposed to do. And I'm going to raise my family in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Because God had turned my heart to my family.

So right away we started homeschooling. Of course, now that didn't go over too well. Here I was teaching in a Christian school and homeschooling my own.

Some of my fellow teachers had a hard time with that. And we started making changes. My wife put on a head covering.

Now remember, this is in Massachusetts. High fashion, style setting, Massachusetts. Nobody wears a head covering in Massachusetts.

So she was the only one. But she stood. Bless her heart.

I mean, it wasn't so hard for me because, you know, I could dress like this, and you don't look too weird in Massachusetts, but for a woman to put on a cape dress and a head covering, you know, she stuck out like a neon light there. But she stood. And we made other changes.

We started dressing modestly. We started, well, she got rid of her jewelry, her makeup, her high heels. We got so radical we even got rid of our television.

I was pretty radical. I mean, when my students at school ever found out that we didn't have a TV, they said, Mr. Marini, you don't have a TV. How can you live without a TV? What do you do? So we quit going to movies.

We quit going to amusement parks. We quit going to the beach. We quit going shopping for entertainment.

And I quit coaching sports. We just didn't have time for all those things because we gave ourselves to the specific things that the Bible tells us that Christians are supposed to do. And right along with that, there were a whole bunch of other issues like non-resistance.

Now, at our church, you know, once you get outside of Anabaptist circles, nobody believes in non-resistance. And at our church, I mean, it was preached from the pulpit that, you know, America needs to be armed to the teeth. And we Christians need to support our national defense and build up our military and protect our rights and our freedoms and stand up against those dirty communists.

And that's the way it came across from the pulpit. But I suddenly saw non-resistance all over the Bible. But nobody else could see it.

Nobody, not one single soul. Issues like divorce and remarriage. Right in our church, the elders of our church performed weddings of divorced people.

And I'm like, wait a minute. Jesus said this is adultery, we can't do this. But nobody else could see it.

Nobody, not a single person. And there were theological issues like the false doctrine of unconditional eternal security. Nobody could understand why I couldn't buy that doctrine.

Though I point out passage after passage after passage that contradicted it, nobody could see it. Nobody could understand how I could believe that it would be possible for a Christian to lose his salvation. Well, we stayed for about two years and I tried to change the system.

I learned the Martin Luther lesson. Systems don't change. I did some writing on the things that I saw.

I wrote papers, I wrote booklets. I did some teaching and preaching, both in the school and in the church. And just about every bit of it was flatly rejected.

They called it radical, outdated, judgmental, extreme, legalistic. You know, anytime you talk about obedience, that's legalism. Self-righteous, dangerous, embarrassing.

The daughter of our head elder, who at one time was our friend, she said she'd be embarrassed for anybody to know that we went to her church, just because we looked so weird. Somebody else even accused me of preaching plain folkism. And so my wife and I became total oddballs in our church.

We were all alone. And we knew that we would have to get out and find some fellowship someplace, or else we'd lose our children for sure, because we had two young children at that point. And we knew, you know, being a school teacher, I'm all too familiar with the power of peer pressure, we knew there would be no way that they would accept our values and our lifestyle and our view of the scriptures, when they ever found out that we were the only ones who didn't have a television.

And all their Christian friends had television. And we were the only ones who didn't go to the beach. And all their Christian friends went to the beach.

Even the church had organized outings at the beach. And we were the only ones where my wife wore a head covering. And nobody else wore a head covering.

It was scoffed at. It was laughed at. We knew they'd have a real hard time accepting our values and our view of the scriptures if we stayed there.

And we knew that the only place we'd be able to find any like-minded fellowship was among the plain people. Those of the Anabaptist background. Because it sure seemed to me like the Anabaptist way of life was the closest thing to biblical Christianity on the face of this earth.

Now, we didn't know a whole lot of plain people at that time except, you know, the Holmes County Fellowship. But they did introduce us to Charity Christian Fellowship. And so we visited.

And we were so blessed to find a whole church full of people who believed what we believed. Who wanted to live the way that we wanted to live. Located right here in Lancaster County.

Lancaster. Is that how you say it? Right here where practically everybody is of the Anabaptist background. So we've been here three and a half years now or so.

And we're very happy about our move. We love living here. We're kind of privileged to live in this area.

And we have no regrets whatsoever about our move. But we do have some concerns. I'm so grieved to see the direction of the plain people.

Because I see the plain people just throwing away the biblical lifestyle that was handed down by their Anabaptist forefathers and making a mad rush toward the same legacy in Christianity that we left behind in Massachusetts. I see the plain people throwing away the head covering or else reducing it to an ornament. I see the plain people throwing away modest dress and wearing worldly fashion clothes and wearing cosmetics and high heels.

I see the plain people throwing away spiritual disciplines like prayer, meditation, Bible study, family devotions and involvement in good deeds and evangelism. Totally throwing away evangelism. I can't get over that because the Anabaptist forefathers they went to the stake to preach the gospel.

And even as the flames licked up at their feet they kept preaching. But today it's left up to the TV preachers, the ones who have no life behind their message. If anybody ought to be preaching the gospel it ought to be the Anabaptists.

The Anabaptists are the only ones with a life behind their message. But I see them throwing away all these things and replacing them with television. Right, in Mennonite homes.

I was shocked to find out that Mennonites have televisions in their homes. Going to the movies, going to amusement parks. Mennonite youth groups going to amusement parks.

I couldn't get over that. I see plain people throwing away non-resistance. Throwing away separation from the political arena.

I see plain people accepting divorce and remarriage. I see plain people putting women in positions of authority in their churches. And I see plain people collecting baseball cards.

And I see plain people reading the sports section in the newspaper. And buying season tickets to the Phillies. And I see plain churches all wrapped up in church sports leagues.

And I see plain schools supported by plain churches all wrapped up in inter-scholastic competitive athletics. Mennonite school against Mennonite school. Mennonite church against Mennonite church.

I couldn't believe when I saw all those things. I am concerned about the direction of the plain people. You see, sports is just one aspect of the Laodicean lifestyle.

It's just part of the package. So let's take a look at sports and we'll see how well it fits in with Laodicean Christianity and how it does not fit in with Biblical Christianity. Let's begin with some definitions just to get a sense of the word sport.

I looked up the word sport in my concordance. And some of the definitions of sport, the way the Bible uses the word, it means to delight self. Sport means laughter, derision, or play.

Sport means to mock. It means to live in luxury. Well, then I looked it up in my dictionary.

I have a great big two-volume set dictionary that gives very lengthy definitions. So I'll just give you a few of them. Sport means that which amuses.

It means diversion or pastime. Sport means a spirit of jesting or railry. It means mockery, an object of diversion.

Sport means one who lives a fast, gay, or flashy life. Sport means to amuse oneself, to play, to frolic. Sport means wanton dalliance.

Now, I didn't know what that word meant. I had to look that one up. Wanton dalliance.

You know what that means? It means to trifle away time. That's what sport means, to trifle away time. And sport means a particular game or play pursued for diversion, especially an outdoor or athletic game.

So, I've been asked to give a Christian view of delighting self, play, living in luxury, mockery, amusement, pastime, frolic, jesting, railry, wanton dalliance, trifling away time. Do I need to go any further? No, we really need to talk about sports leagues, competitive athletics, where it's church against church and Christian school against Christian school. Now, there's a big difference between competitive athletics and recreational games, and I want to bring this out right here.

Recreation, or re-creation, is defined as refreshment of body or mind. Now, everybody needs to be refreshed. We all get burned out, we all need to be refreshed somehow, and we'll all seek some form of refreshment, okay? Either whether we take a nap or whether we take a walk or whether we sit down and have a glass of lemonade on a hot day, we will all seek some form of refreshment.

So, I believe that an occasional recreational game is one good way to be refreshed. Now, recreational games are either non-competitive or they're very mildly competitive. You know, it's like your backyard game of volleyball, where nobody really cares who wins and you can laugh about your mistakes.

You don't have any leagues and there's no set teams, no first string, no bench warmers, there's no set playing positions, you don't have any practice sessions for it, there's no championships, no trophies, and even the rules are loose or just rearranged just to suit your situation. I have no problem at all with an occasional recreational game that is just for refreshment. But there's a world of difference between recreational games and competitive athletics.

Now, in competitive athletics, as far as winning is concerned, I guess Vince Lombardi said it the best. In case you don't know who he was, he was coach of the Green Bay Packers, professional football team in Wisconsin, and he brought the Green Bay Packers all the way from a crummy team and brought them right up to the championships. And he's hailed as one of the greatest coaches of all time, and he made a statement that he's famous for, about winning.

He said, winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing. Now I know that everybody pretends, well, it's not whether we win or lose, but it's how we play the game.

Isn't that sweet? Everybody pretends, especially Christians, we all pretend that that's the attitude, but we all know that that's not the real attitude. We all know that the real attitude is, winning is the only thing. And so it causes us to do a whole bunch of things in competitive athletics that we wouldn't do in recreational

games.

You see, that's what makes the big distinction, is the attitude about winning between recreational games and competitive athletics. Because competitive athletics, because the only thing is winning, therefore, you can't laugh about your mistakes in competitive athletics like you can in a recreational game. I mean, you play a recreational game, you miss the ball, so what? Everybody laughs.

You laugh, everybody else laughs. In competitive athletics, you dare not crack a smile on the athletic field if you make a mistake. Now, it's alright to get mad.

You can jump up and down and curse and cuss and be angry, that's alright. But don't you dare smile. Don't you dare laugh about it, because it's dead serious, because winning is the only thing.

And that's why in competitive athletics, you've got to have set teams, and you've got to have organized leagues and strict rules, and you've got to have professional, highly trained, qualified referees so that you can make sure and have a good competition, and there'll be no question about who won the game. Because winning is the only thing, you see. And in competitive athletics, you've got to have a first string.

You've got to get your best players out there and put them in their best positions. How are you going to win if you don't do that? You know, in a recreational game, everybody just plays all over the place, and nobody cares, because it's just for fun, see, just for recreation. But not in competitive athletics.

And in competitive athletics, you've got to have bench warmers. We can't afford to let those crummy guys play. We might lose if we let them play.

Now, you know, we recognize they'll be frustrated, they'll be embarrassed, they'll be humiliated, they'll feel like losers, their spirit will be crushed. I spent enough time on the bench to know just how that feels. But, hey, we've got to win this game.

We might not win if we let them play. Because winning is the only thing, see. And you've got to have practice sessions.

Now, a lot of the Mennonite schools, they don't allow after-school practice, which I'm glad to see. So instead, they devote their entire physical education program to preparation for games. So that phys-ed is out the window.

That's not what phys-ed is. Phys-ed, physical education, is not preparation for competitive athletics. It's supposed to be primarily for physical fitness.

But that goes out the window, because we've got to have practice sessions if we're going to compete, if we're going to win, because all the other teams are practicing. So you've got to tie up at least your phys-ed classes, or else, once you get outside of Mennonite schools, then everybody practices after school. You've got to tie up all your afternoons or your evenings or your Saturdays, and many times all of those things get tied up, practicing, because you can't win if you don't.

But you don't find people practicing like that for recreational games. And you've got to have championships, you've got to have trophies, you've got to find out who's the greatest, and you've got to give public recognition to the ones that are the greatest. That's what it's all about, isn't it? Well, Christians give all kinds of arguments as to why we just have to have competitive athletics in our churches and in our

schools.

So I'd like to take a look at a few of these arguments. Argument number one. Sports provides competition.

And everyone knows that competition is good for us. It makes us do our best. It's a good motivator.

Well, it's true that competition is a good motivator. It does make us strive to do our best. But what is it that Christians are supposed to be striving for? Athletic stardom? Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 9, verses 24 and 25.

1 Corinthians 9, 24 and 25. Know ye not that they which run in a race run all, but one receiveth the prize, so run that ye may obtain. And every man that striveth for the mastery is temperate in all things.

Now they do it to obtain a corruptible crown, but we an incorruptible. Now this is one of the few times when the Scripture actually specifically talks about competitive athletics. And look what Paul says here.

They do it to obtain a corruptible crown. Who's they? They are unbelievers. Those who have nothing else to strive for in this life except the corruptible rewards of this life.

But we strive for the incorruptible. Who's we? We, the children of God, who are supposed to be striving for incorruptible rewards in heaven. So yes, competitive athletics does make us strive to do our best, but we're striving for the wrong thing.

And Scripture gives no place for Christians striving against one another. Competition is an anti-Christian thing. Intrinsicly, it's anti-Christian, just by definition.

Here's a definition of competition right out of the dictionary. Competition means contention of two or more for the same object or for superiority, rivalry, or contending emulously, enviously, or with jealousy. That doesn't sound real Christian to me.

I can't help but think of the disciples. Remember when a reasoning arose among the disciples as to which of them was the greatest? Now what did Jesus do? Come along and say, well, all right, we'll just settle this thing once and for all. We'll set up a contest here, and we'll have official rules, and we'll have official judges, and we'll give trophies to the winners? Not quite.

I mean, he put that whole thing to rest just like that. If you want to be the greatest, then be the least. So quite the contrary to striving against one another for superiority, Christians are supposed to esteem one another more highly than ourselves.

We're supposed to work together with one another in a cooperative effort for the cause of Christ. We're not even supposed to compare ourselves with one another. 2 Corinthians 10.12 says, For we dare not make ourselves of the number, or compare ourselves with some that commend themselves.

But they, measuring themselves by themselves, and comparing themselves among themselves, are not wise. Are not wise. Is a competitive athletic event anything other than two people or teams comparing themselves among themselves to see who's the best? God says it's not wise.

We need to understand what comparisons do to us. Remember Lucifer from Ezekiel 28. He was the anointed cherub.

He was perfect in beauty. He was perfect in his ways. And the Bible says that he was full of wisdom.

Full of wisdom. How could one who was full of wisdom end up becoming so foolish as to think that he could be like the Most High if he was full of wisdom? It was because of comparison. Comparison corrupted his wisdom.

That's what it says in Ezekiel 28.17. It says, Thine heart was lifted up because of thy beauty. Thou hast corrupted thy wisdom by reason of thy brightness. What did he do? He looked at himself, he looked at all the other angels, and he outshined them all.

And because of his brightness, it corrupted his wisdom, and he thought more highly of himself than he should, and he thought that he could even be like the Most High. Totally corrupted his wisdom because he compared himself with the other angels. He became puffed up.

Comparisons corrupt wisdom, and they make proud fools of us all. That's why Paul says, But they measuring themselves by themselves and comparing themselves among themselves are not wise. Because comparisons corrupt wisdom.

Let's turn to 1 Corinthians 4, verses 6 to 7. 1 Corinthians 4, 6 and 7. And these things, brethren, I have in figure transferred to myself and to Apollos for your sakes, that ye might learn in us not to think of men above that which is written, that no one of you be puffed up for one against another. For who maketh thee to differ from another? And what hast thou that thou didst not receive? Now, if thou didst receive it, why dost thou glory as if thou hadst not received it? Okay? That's the result. That's the fruit of comparing ourselves with one another.

We're always going to be puffed up and think more highly of ourselves than we ought to, and glory as if we manufactured our greatness. If we have anything above somebody else, it's only what God has given. In addition to all that, it's also necessary to lay aside a whole bunch of biblical principles just to compete.

Just to compete, we have to do that. Because in competition, my victory depends on your failure. I can't win unless I make you lose.

Again, that's not Christian. For non-resistant Christians? That's why in my physical education class at school, I've removed every competitive element possible. Well, to begin with, we spend most of our time on physical fitness, just maintaining God's temple, but we do have some time for games, but we don't have any set teams, and there's no set playing positions, and I don't keep score.

See, that way nobody ends up superior than the others. And not keeping score has some other good effects, because I don't have to be a referee when I don't keep score. Because nobody tries to cheat then.

You've got nothing to gain when you can't win, when there's no score. There's no motive to cheat then. So I get to play instead.

And we just play and we're refreshed. And we have no fights, there's no anger, there's no bad feelings, no boasting, no discouragement. And we're just refreshed, and it's forgotten, as soon as it's over.

And we don't have to lay aside biblical principles in order to do it. But you see, in Laodicea, nobody minds laying aside biblical principles in order to play, to compete, or to do anything else for that matter. Now you may say, well, isn't competition a natural instinct? Well, yes, it is a natural instinct.

And it needs to be repented of, just like so many other natural instincts. And I know everybody argues, well, but competition is a necessary part of life. It's something that God built into life.

You know, business is competitive, right? No, I don't believe that. I don't believe business has to be competitive. I mean, we have a whole bunch of dairy farmers in this congregation.

Do you guys have to cut each other's throat to make it in business? To sell your milk? No. We have a whole bunch of people that sell lawn furniture. Do you guys have to strive against one another for superiority in order to make a living? I don't believe you do.

I mean, people do do those things. Business certainly can be, and often is competitive, but I don't believe it has to be. And some will say, well, but isn't competition a good motivator? Well, sure, it's a good motivator.

But as Christians, aren't we supposed to be motivated out of love? If it's motivation to do well that we want, then we better let love be the motivator, because as far as I can see in Scripture, that's the only acceptable motive, and anything else is a filthy rag in God's sight. Next argument. Sports provides good Christian fellowship.

Good Christian fellowship. I hear it all the time. What is fellowship anyway? I think of the modern picture of fellowship.

What do we commonly think of when we think of fellowship these days in typical American Christianity? The church where we come from in Massachusetts, whenever we spoke of fellowship, it meant, well, after the church service, everybody hung out in the back of the building talking about the Red Sox game, or the Celtics game, or telling hunting stories, or fishing stories, or telling jokes. That's what we called fellowship. The word fellowship comes from the Greek word *koinonia*, and it means common sharing.

So let's take a look at the Bible and see how the Bible uses the word fellowship. Let's turn to 2 Corinthians 8.4. We're going to see a very different picture of fellowship than what we commonly think of these days. 2 Corinthians 8.4. Praying us with much entreaty that we would receive the gift and take upon us the fellowship of the ministering to the saints.

Fellowship of the ministering to the saints. Common sharing of ministry. Meeting the real needs of hurting people and sharing the burden together.

That's one aspect of fellowship according to the Bible. Let's turn over to Philippians 1, verses 3 to 5. I thank my God upon every remembrance of you always in every prayer of mine for you all making requests with joy for your fellowship in the gospel from the first day until now. And then go over to Philippians 2, verses 1 and 2. If there be therefore any consolation in Christ, if any comfort of love, if any fellowship of the Spirit, if any bowels and mercies fulfill you my joy that you be like-minded having the same love being of one accord of one mind.

Okay, so here we have common sharing of the faith in the gospel and common sharing of the Spirit. Having the same love, being of one accord and of one mind. That's another aspect of fellowship according to the Bible.

And then go to Philippians 3, and verse 10. That I may know him and the power of his resurrection and the fellowship of his sufferings being made conformable unto his death. The fellowship of his sufferings.

Common sharing in Christ's sufferings. What a different picture of fellowship than what we typically think of. Where do we ever get this idea that sports is fellowship? In 1 John 1.7 it says that if we walk in the light as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another.

It does not say if we play softball together we have fellowship with one another. But if we walk in the light, then we have common sharing of the faith and common sharing of the ministry and common sharing in the sufferings of Christ. That's what Christian fellowship is all about.

And then when we gather together, then we build up one another in that faith. And we encourage one another in ministry. And we share the burden of the ministry together.

And we support one another while we're suffering for Christ. Because when we preach the gospel, we're going to suffer for Christ. If we're preaching the gospel according to Christ, we're going to be persecuted for that.

There's going to be a share in the sufferings of Christ for that. Because it's an offensive message to the world. And it says all who will live godly in Christ Jesus shall suffer persecution.

And so we need Christian fellowship to support one another through that suffering. Just because a bunch of Christians get together and have a game of baseball, that is not Christian fellowship. It might be baseball fellowship, common sharing of baseball, but it's not Christian fellowship.

But you see, in Laodicea, baseball fellowship has replaced Christian fellowship. Next argument. Sports provides a healthy rivalry between churches and schools.

Healthy rivalry. Whoever convinced us that rivalry between Christians can be healthy? Let's go to 1 Corinthians 3.4. Interesting how we keep having to turn to 1 Corinthians as we talk about a Christian view of sports. The most carnal church.

The letter to the most carnal church in the Bible. 1 Corinthians 3.4 For are ye yet carnal? For where is there is among you envying and strife and divisions? I'm sorry. Okay, we'll go on to verse 3 and 4. Envyings and divisions.

Are ye not carnal? Walk as men. For while one saith, I am of Paul, and another, I am of Apollos. Are ye not carnal? So according to the Bible, rivalry is carnality.

I see this all the time in both churches and schools that have competitive athletics. One says, well, I play for this team and I play for that team and I play for this school and I play for that school. That's carnality.

The Bible knows nothing of healthy rivalry between Christians. Rivalry is sin. In Laodicea, when students look forward to an upcoming game, they'll make statements like, we're going to kick their butts.

Healthy rivalry. Kick whose butts? Your Christian brother at the other Christian school, you're going to kick his butt? Non-resistant Christians. And just to show you where rivalry ends up, back where I used to teach in Massachusetts, we had a game with another Christian school, basketball game, and at the beginning of the game they brought out their cheerleaders to give us their welcoming cheer.

I was so impressed with this cheer that I wrote it down. Now remember, this is a Christian school. They said, we're going to put you down.

We're going to rub you out. We're going to show you what it's all about because we're rough. We're tough.

We're the saints and that's enough. We're the best. We can't be beat.

We'll trample you under our feet. Isn't that a sweet Christian greeting? Healthy rivalry. Now I know not everybody carries it to that degree, but that's where rivalry will take you.

And then after the game, the Christian school newspaper headlines read, Saints Slaughter Crusaders. I've just had to break up too many fist fights at Christian school athletic competitions to think there can be anything healthy about rivalry. Now in Laodicea, they think that's healthy, but biblical Christians see rivalry as sin.

Next argument. Sports provide a wholesome outlet for our young people's time and energy and it keeps them out of trouble. Who ever convinced us that spending our free time and energy on sports is the best way to keep out of trouble? How come we have free time to begin with? I'll tell you why.

Because we're not doing the specific things that God says we're supposed to do. The Bible says we're supposed to be redeeming the time. But in Laodicea, we trifle it away.

Involvement in competitive athletics totally violates principles of stewardship of time. If you think of all the time spent practicing for games, traveling to games, playing the games, traveling back home from the games. I mean, where I used to teach in Massachusetts, where I was coaching, I mean, we'd have games that were two hours away.

I mean, we'd leave before school was out and we'd get back at midnight. When you think of all the man hours, all the people on that bus and my own that we ate up on all that competitive athletics. I mean, when I look at what the Bible says about stewardship of time, that scares me to death.

And this thing of reading about sports or going to watch sports, being a spectator at sports, as far as I'm concerned, that's a double violation of the principles of stewardship of time because you're trifling away time reading about somebody else trifling away time or else watching them trifling away time. So, it's a double violation. Now, we all know what we're supposed to be doing as Christians.

This is no secret. Prayer. God told us pray without ceasing.

He did not say play without ceasing. Bible study. God told us study to show thyself approved or workman who need not be ashamed accurately handling the word of truth.

He did not say study to show thyself a star, a player who need not be ashamed accurately handling the bat and ball. Good works. God told us we are his workmanship created for good works.

Created for good works. He did not say we're his workmanship created for good times or good games. Christian fellowship.

God told us and let us consider one another to provoke unto love and to good works not forsaking the assembling of ourselves together as the manner of some is but exhorting one another and so much the more as you see the day approaching. But in Laodicea we've rewritten that one to read and let us compete against one another to provoke unto love of good plays not forsaking the practice sessions as the manner of some is but psyching one another up and so much the more as you see the championships approaching. Evangelism.

God told us go ye therefore into all nations and make disciples teaching them to do all that I have commanded you. He did not say go therefore into all nations and make ball players teaching them to ignore all that I have commanded you. God has given us more spiritually oriented things to do than we're ever going to have time to do.

We really don't need sports to occupy our free time and energy. I had to think, you know, did you ever hear of anybody on their deathbed saying oh, if I'd only spent more time working on my foul shot for basketball if I'd only spent a little more money on my baseball card collection to complete it if I'd only studied the batting averages of the professional baseball players a little more when we hold competitive athletics up to eternity kind of loses its significance real fast, doesn't it? Next argument. Sports draws bigger crowds for youth groups.

Good argument. It's true. It's true.

With most youth groups if you do spiritual things you'll probably only get a handful to show up for the meetings. But if you do sports and entertainment and you know things that appeal to the flesh well, you'll get a big crowd. It works.

It's true. It's true. Whoever convinced us that it's better to have a big crowd of people doing unspiritual things than to have a small crowd of people doing spiritual things? Whoever convinced us that the church is supposed to change its program in order to keep or attract carnally minded people? Or to keep from losing people? Did Jesus ever change his program because he was scared of losing people? I mean, he said some hard things to the crowd.

And the crowd left. I mean, there were thousands of people following him. He said some hard things and the whole crowd walked away.

Now, did Jesus go running to his disciples and say, Oh no, boys. We've got to change the program. We've got to do some carnal activities to get these people to stay around.

No, no. He didn't do anything like that. After the whole crowd walked away Jesus turned to his disciples and he said, And will you leave also? He didn't seem real concerned about crowds.

He just spoke the unadulterated truth. And he did the Father's will. And he wasn't about to compromise one bit in order to keep anybody.

Jesus preferred to have a measly handful of true converts than to have big numbers of unspiritual followers. You know, the ones that were tagging along just because they had their bellies filled. And what did that measly handful of true converts end up doing? They turned the world upside down.

They spoke the unadulterated truth just like he did. They did the Father's will just like he did. And they were persecuted.

They suffered. And they were martyred just like he was. But they turned the world upside down in the process.

And what do our big numbers of Laodicean converts end up doing? Instead of turning the world upside down we end up standing on our heads right along with the rest of the world. This might sound kind of radical and maybe even a bit harsh, but I think it's about time some churches lost some people. I think it's

about time some youth groups lost some people.

What did the apostles say when they lost some people? Oh no, we better change the program? No. No. They said they're not with us because they were not of us.

They're not with us because they were not of us. Whoever convinced us that we're supposed to keep things unspiritual so that we can keep those who are not of us. All we're doing is extending a formal invitation to the enemy to come in and sow tares among the wheat.

Let them go and let the church get down to doing the Father's will. Next argument. Now wait a minute.

I've been playing sports for years and I turned out all right, didn't I? I mean, I played on the church softball team and I played on the church basketball team for years. And as an adult I don't know why I'm serving the Lord as coach of the team and serving the Lord as a referee for the games. And I've given money to the Lord to buy new uniforms for the team.

And I got a dozen trophies, championship trophies on my mantel at home. And I'm a good Christian, aren't I? I turned out all right, didn't I? No. No, you didn't turn out all right.

If your idea of serving the Lord is coaching sports and refereeing sports, you didn't turn out all right. If your idea of giving money to the Lord means buying uniforms for the sports teams, you didn't turn out all right. If your idea of fellowship and redeeming the time means sports, I'm sorry, you didn't turn out all right.

If your thinking has become so spotted by the world and so perverted that you can see nothing biblically wrong with competition and rivalry between Christians, you didn't turn out all right. It's really interesting to note all the religious people in the Bible who thought they turned out all right. I think of the Jews in Malachi where over and over again they make statements like, what have we done? Surely you don't have a case against us, God.

Surely we turned out all right. And all God does throughout the whole book of Malachi is curse and condemn them. I think of the foolish virgins in Matthew 25.

After they finally went out and bought some oil, they come back knocking, Lord, Lord, open to us. Surely you're going to let us in. Surely we turned out all right.

No, I knew you not. You didn't turn out all right. I think of the goats in Matthew 25.

Lord, when did we see you hungry or naked or sick or in prison and didn't minister to you? Lord, there must be some mistake here. Surely we turned out all right. No, depart from me, ye curses.

You didn't turn out all right. I think of the surprised ones in Matthew 7. Lord, Lord, have we not done many wonderful works in thy name? Surely we turned out all right. No, I never knew you.

You didn't turn out all right. And of course we have the Laodiceans in Revelation 3. But Lord, we're rich. We're wealthy.

We have need of nothing. Surely this is a sign of your approval. Surely we turned out all right.

Laodiceans always think they turned out all right. No, you're wretched. You're miserable.

You're poor, blind. You're naked. I'll skew you out of my mouth if you don't repent.

You didn't turn out all right. Not everyone that saith Lord, Lord, shall enter into the kingdom of heaven. But he that doeth the will of my Father.

Pure religion and undefiled religion before God and the Father is this. To visit the fatherless and widows in their affliction and to keep oneself unspotted by the world. Now, if that describes you, then you turned out all right.

Next argument. Well, the Bible uses sports to illustrate spiritual truths, so it must be okay. And it's true.

The Bible does use sports to illustrate spiritual truths. 1 Corinthians 9 says, you know, run that you may obtain just like an athlete. And strive for the mastery just like an athlete.

And be temperate in all things just like an athlete. And bring your body into subjection just like an athlete. In Philipians 3 it says, press on toward the mark just like an athlete.

And in Hebrews 12 it says, lay aside every weight just like an athlete does. He's not saying to be an athlete. He's saying to be as devoted to Christianity as athletes are devoted to their sport.

There's no question about it. Sports does serve as a perfect model for Christianity because sports is an all-consuming religion, idolatry religion, just like Christianity is an all-consuming religion. From the beginning it was tied with religion.

Just to give you a little bit of history, this is how the Olympics started. This is straight out of the encyclopedia. In the year 776 B.C., a religious festival was held by the ancient Greeks to honor their chief god, Zeus.

Athletic games were the main part of the festival. The site of the festival was Olympia, Greece. The Greeks decided to hold the Olympian games every four years at the sanctuary of Zeus.

Well, we don't worship Zeus anymore. Instead, we worship the sports that were held in his honor. And we worship sports heroes.

And we worship athletic success. All of those things have a higher place than God. Therefore, they are an idol in our society today.

Sports is one of the biggest idols in our society today. And even among Christians, I mean, I've heard Christian school students make statements like, I live for basketball. I go to this Christian school to play basketball.

That's direct quotes from some of the students in my school. I've heard Christian athletes make statements like, giving their testimony, you know, well, you know, when I was young in school, I was a real loser and a washout and I did crummy in my grades and everything. But then I got into sports and it gave me something to live for.

I don't know what else to call that except rank idolatry. We're not supposed to live for sports. We're supposed to live for Christ.

We're not supposed to go to Christian school for sports. We're supposed to go there to learn about Christ, if that's where you're going to go. Christians don't often admit to the idolatry of sports, especially in Laodicea.

But the world does. Even the world acknowledges that sports is an idol. I came across an article in U.S. News & World Report about the Super Bowl.

It says, in little more than 10 years, the national TV audience swelled past 100 million. Commercial advertisers paid \$1 million for just a minute of their attention. The new holiday evolved into something like a secular holy day of obligation known as Super Sunday.

So here we call, we have a secular magazine written by a secular writer calling Super Sunday a secular holy day of obligation. How is it that the world can plainly see the idolatry of sports, but Christians can't see it? It's just one more case where the sons of this age are wiser than the children of light. Christians gather on their holy days to worship their God, and sports fans gather on their holy days to worship their God.

Let's look at sports fans. Let's take the name fan to begin with. You know what the word means? It means fanatic.

Look it up in the dictionary. Fan is short for fanatic. So if you call yourself a sports fan, then you're calling yourself a sports fanatic.

Christians read about Jesus. Sports fans read about sports. Christians talk about Jesus.

Sports fans talk about sports. Christians study the life of Jesus. Sports fans study the lives of their sports heroes.

Christians praise Jesus. Sports fans praise their sports heroes. Christians dream of the day when they'll meet Jesus face-to-face.

Sports fans dream of the day when they might meet their sport hero face-to-face. Christians get emotional about Jesus. Sports fans get emotional about sports.

Christians have fellowship around Jesus. Sports fans have fellowship around sports. Christians want to be like Jesus.

Sports fans want to be like their sports heroes. Whatever Christians do with Jesus, sports fans do the same thing with sports because they worship sports just the way a zealous Christian worships Jesus. It's got the same place in their heart.

If you took a sports fan and converted him to Christianity, and if he had the same zeal for Christianity that he had for sports, he'd be one dynamite Christian. Let's look at the athletes themselves as they pursue athletic success, the idolatry of athletic success. Compare a zealous Christian with an athlete who's pursuing becoming the greatest.

Christians must bring their body into subjection. Athletes have to bring their body into subjection. Christians must forsake other pursuits.

Athletes must forsake other pursuits. Christians must lay aside every weight. Athletes must lay aside every weight.

Christians strive to obtain a crown. Athletes strive to obtain a crown. Christians seek immortality.

We seek to be recorded, have our names recorded in Christ's hall of faith. Athletes seek immortality and to have their names recorded in the Sports Hall of Fame. Christians are willing to sacrifice their lives for the sake of Christ.

Athletes are willing to sacrifice their lives for athletic success. And that's documented. Because they covet athletic success.

And the Bible says that covetousness is idolatry. Athletes covet athletic success so much that they are willing to sacrifice their lives to get it. There was a poll taken of our Olympic athletes.

Now remember, our Olympic athletes, they're supposed to be the cream of the crop when it comes to athletics. You know, they're the ones that have never been defiled by competing for money. They're the purest of athletes.

And so they took this poll and they asked the Olympic athletes this question. If you could take a pill that would guarantee that you would win a gold medal, but would probably cause your death ten years from now, would you take it? And the majority of our Olympic athletes answered yes. Yes, they're willing to sacrifice their lives on the altar of athletic success.

I've heard of athletes making statements like, I'd die tomorrow if I could win today. Their life means nothing to them. Gladly trade it in for athletic success.

If that's not an idol, I don't know what it is. Covetousness is idolatry according to Colossians 3.5. And if you're striving for the mastery of sports, then you cannot strive for the mastery in Christianity. I tried for many years.

I served that master. But Jesus said no man can serve two masters. For either he'll hate the one and he'll love the other, or he'll hold to one and despise the other.

No man can serve two masters. But in Laodicea we don't believe that. We think we can serve two masters.

According to Jesus, it's either Christ or it's something else. And whatever else is in his place is an idol. Well, let's look at one more argument here.

Sports gives us an opportunity to witness. You know, if you're going to win the world, you've got to be like the world, right? You've got to do the things that the world does, right? To make Christianity appealing to the world. Do the apostles play sports to witness? No, they just preached.

1 Corinthians 1.21 For after that in the wisdom of God, the world by wisdom knew not God, it pleased God by the foolishness of preaching to save them that believe. By the foolishness of preaching. There's no mention of sports there, is there, to save them that believe? Because faith comes by hearing, not by watching nice people play baseball.

It's by hearing, and how should I hear without a preacher? It's the foolishness of preaching that converts people. But you see, in Laodicea, preaching is a little too foolish, so we come up with a better way to save people. You know, we'll just let our baseball game do our preaching for us.

They'll see Jesus in our game. In 2 Corinthians 5.11, Paul says, Knowing therefore the terror of the Lord, we persuade men, and we persuade them by the foolishness of preaching. But in Laodicea, we persuade

men by appealing to the flesh, by offering entertainment and good times.

Jesus said, Take up your cross, and follow me into a life of self-denial, and doing the Father's will. If any man will not deny himself, he cannot be my disciple. But in Laodicea, we say, Take up your tennis racket, and celebrate Jesus with us, and follow us into a life of self-denial? No, self-gratification! And fun, and frivolity, and good old times, and ignoring the Father's will.

Jesus said, Take up your cross, and follow me into a life of persecution. If they hated me, they'll hate you. If they kill me, they'll kill you.

But you don't hear that in Laodicea. In Laodicea, we say, Take up your baseball bat, and follow us into a life of athletic stardom, and cheering fans, and awards banquets. All men speak well of a sports star.

If we win any converts by competitive athletics, the only thing we've converted them to, is Laodicean Christianity. The Laodicean age is an idolatrous age of covetousness, of ease, and comfort, and materialistic pursuit, and food, and fun, frivolity, entertainment, and self-glory. And Christian sports programs are just one manifestation of the Laodicean age.

You know, there was a day when the church condemned sports. There was a day, right from the beginning, the early church fathers condemned sports. Guys like Tatian, and Tertullian, and Clement, they wrote against sports.

They denounced the games of their day, because of the idolatry, and the immodesty, and the brutality of them. Throughout the centuries, Christians have condemned sports. The Puritans in Massachusetts and Connecticut, they banned sports.

They banned it. And almost every major denomination throughout the centuries has condemned sports. In his book, *Sin and Sports*, William Hogan writes, In the pre-Civil War period, Presbyterians, Baptists, disciples of Christ, Methodists, and even certain Episcopal bishops struggled to keep the saints unspotted by the world by repeatedly assailing major sins.

Most of the Protestant denominations also condemned horse racing and the few minor sports that appeared before 1850. Methodists and Presbyterians fired much of the heavy artillery directed against amusement and play. So throughout the centuries, the church has had a strong stand against sports.

And it wasn't until the mid-1900s that the church finally opened its arms to sports. Just a little while after sports became popular in society. You know, that's how it always goes.

We're just one step behind the world, the churches. So it wasn't until the 1950s and the 1960s, that's when the church accepted sports. You know, right about the time when the head coverings went out.

And right about the time when modesty went out. Right about the time when free sex came in. And, you know, the anti-establishment time.

The anti-authority time. The age of liberation. That's when the church accepted sports.

But throughout most of church history, it was condemned by Christians. There was a day when the church was concerned about winning souls. But today, we're concerned about winning baseball games.

There was a day when the world was a battleground for Christians. But today, it's a playground. There was a day when the church was zealous for good works.

The early church was known for their good works. Today, the only thing we're zealous for is good times. See, we got the whole thing backwards today.

We're supposed to be pouring ourselves out in ministry and in good works and in the things that make for godliness. And then once in a while, you take a break from that and you be refreshed and do something to be refreshed. But we've got that whole thing turned around upside down and so that we pour ourselves out for good times and then once in a while, we take a break from our good times and do something spiritual on the side.

And that's where we're at today across the nation with Christianity in general. And so, the Christian view of sports today is exactly the same as the world's view of sports. Christians use the same arguments to defend sports that the world uses to defend sports.

And Christians place the same value on sports that the world does. Oh, you try to talk to a Christian school that's wrapped up in sports programs and tell them that they shouldn't do it, they'll give you 10,000 reasons why sports is absolutely essential to our program. I tried.

Back in Massachusetts, after I built up a sports program there and then I finally came to the truth, I wanted to drop sports and I wanted to replace it with a ministry team. The school board wouldn't let me. Oh, they said, well, that's a nice idea, but you can't just drop sports like that.

It's much too important. And then they went on and on for hours in a meeting of me and the school board trying to convince me how absolutely essential sports is to the development of our young people. And it was then that I knew that I can't stay under this authority.

So today, sports is the central focus in a lot of churches, a lot of Christian schools. I know Christian school students who leave one school and go enroll in another school because the sports program is better. I know of Mennonites who left one Mennonite church and joined another Mennonite church because the sports program was better there.

We're in sad shape today. And many, many Christian youth groups do nothing but sports. Nothing but sports.

Last summer I went to a street meeting in Lancaster City held by the Keystone Youth Group. The Keystone Group, that's the conservative end of the Lancaster Conference. And so their youth group was holding a street meeting in Lancaster and I was invited to go along so I went.

And I was so blessed to see some of my students from the schools where I teach. They were up there and they did it just like we do it in New York City. They were up there singing and then the brothers would get up and they'd preach and they'd give their testimonies, you know.

And they were all giving out tracts and witnessing to people. And I was so delighted to see it. As soon as it was over, I went up and I greeted as many as I could.

I talked to one girl and I shook her hand and I said, Oh, praise God, I'm so glad to see you guys here doing this kind of thing. And she said, Oh yeah, you know, this is really neat. I'm really glad we did this.

She said, You know, this is the first time we ever did anything like this. I said, What? The first time the Keystone youth ever did anything like this? Oh yeah, usually we just play volleyball or something. Play volleyball or something? We're out to lunch these days.

But that's where the church is at today. I praise God that right here at Charity Christian Fellowship we are not involved in competitive athletics as a church. I praise God for that.

But I have to wonder if there might be some among us that kind of have a hankering for those kind of things. For sports and for the whole legacy and lifestyle. I have to wonder if there might be some among us.

I know there's always pressure on us from the world to go that way. There always will be pressure to go that way. So if there are some among us that are leaning in that way, I believe we need to do exactly the same thing that Jesus told the Laodicean church to do.

To repent. In sack cloth and ashes, repent. With fasting and prayer, repent.

The tentacles of Laodicea slide in so easily and so subtly, so undetectably. So if we have any leanings in this direction, we need to change our thinking. We need to wash our brains.

And we need to change our behavior. Our churches, our Christian schools, our youth groups need to stay clear of competitive athletics. And if we already have any involvement in them at all, we need to drop it.

But I have one caution. If we just drop sports and then replace it with some other worldly diversion, you know, like fishing trips or hunting trips or working overtime, some new business venture to add to our millions, or reading magazines or romance novels or partying or television or movies or who knows what. You might as well forget it.

You might as well keep sports if that's all you're going to do. But we need to replace sports. We need to replace it with the things that make for godliness.

I'm really concerned about the direction of the plain people. They just don't realize what they're throwing away. The Anabaptists are the end of the line for biblical Christianity on the big scale.

Anabaptists are the last stand. The whole rest of the world is engulfed in Laodicean Christianity. The Anabaptists are the final remnant, but they're throwing it away fast.

Brethren, let's be careful that we don't throw it away too. Because we could follow the same path very easily. It could happen to us just as fast and just as easily as it has to the plain churches.

Let's be careful to keep the biblical convictions and the biblical practices and the biblical lifestyle that was handed down by the Anabaptist forefathers. Not because it was Anabaptist, but because it's Bible. Let's be careful to hang on to that stuff.

I'm not talking about going back to driving a horse and buggy and plowing tobacco fields with a horse-drawn plow. I'm talking about the biblical way of life that used to characterize the Anabaptists when they were persecuted. You know, the ones who preferred to die rather than disobey God.

I praise God for our youth group. It's such a blessing to have a youth group that is not wrapped up in sports and parties and amusement parks and all that nonsense. It's such a blessing to have a youth group

that when they get together, they go to do evangelism in the city, they go to a nursing home to visit the sick, they go to visit a widow.

One widow, a whole youth group going to visit a widow. I was so blessed when I heard about that. Our youth group going to visit a widow that's not even part of our church.

And they went to visit this lady, one little old lady. You know what that little old lady said about our youth group? After the meeting there, she said, I wish the youth in my church would do things like this. What a testimony.

What a testimony. But we could lose it. We could lose it just like that.

In one generation, we could lose it. You can't put the church on automatic pilot and expect it to keep going in the right direction. I think that's where the... You know, I try to think, where did the Anabaptists go wrong? Where did the Mennonites go wrong? I think this is where they went wrong.

Maybe I'm wrong, I don't know, but this is what I think anyway. But the right direction has to be diligently maintained by all the authority figures in the church. I'm talking church leaders and youth group leaders and Christian school personnel and above all, fathers.

Above all, fathers. The spiritual heads of the household. The priests of the home.

If the fathers don't maintain a right direction, we're going to lose it, just like the Anabaptists have lost it. In one generation, we'll lose it. Think about the fathers, the priests of the home.

Think about a priest. In the Old Testament, when God called the Levitical priests, He told them that their job was to teach the people the difference between the holy and the profane. Because the people didn't know the difference between the holy and the profane.

And He told them to cause them to discern between the clean and the unclean. Because the people didn't have that discernment. They couldn't discern between the clean and the unclean.

Isn't that just like it is with our children? They don't know the difference between the holy and the profane. They can't discern between the clean and the unclean. And as the priests of our home, that's our job.

I work with Mennonite young people every day. And it's very evident to me that the priests are not doing their job. The young people that I work with, they don't know the difference between the holy and the profane.

They don't know the difference between black and white, most of them. And it's not their fault. They're enticed by everything the world has to offer.

And when I speak against these things in school, all they can do is fire back questions like, What's wrong with going to the beach? What's wrong with amusement parks? What's wrong with professional sports? What's wrong with television? What's wrong with movies? What's wrong with kissing on a date? What's wrong with high heels? These are high school seniors asking questions like this. They don't seem to know what's wrong with anything. Apparently, they've just grown up with some list of do's and don'ts, and nobody ever took the time to explain why you do the do's and why you don't do the don'ts.

And it's not enough just to say, because I said so. And it's not even enough just to say, because the Bible says so. That's not enough.

You don't get discernment that way. You don't get solid convictions in the heart that way. You see? But it's the priest's job to cause them to discern between the clean and the unclean.

God does not want submission for submission's sake. God wants agreement, wholehearted agreement. He wants us to passionately love what He loves, and passionately hate what He hates.

He wants solid conviction in the heart. And it's the priest's job to instill that conviction in the hearts of His children. I'll tell you, when this new generation of young people in the plain churches, when they replace the old generation in positions of authority in the plain churches, it's over for the plain churches.

There's going to be zero distinction between the plain churches and the rest of the worldly Laodicean churches. When this new generation of young people are in positions of authority, what's going to keep them from joining the great apostasy that's in progress right now? What's going to keep the plain churches from opening their arms to the Antichrist when he comes? Right along with the rest of the worldly Laodicean churches. If we don't, and this applies to us too, because if we don't maintain a right direction, how are our own children going to discern between the Antichrist and the real Christ? We've got to get discernment in them.

Do our young people know the real Christ? Because if you don't know the real Christ, then you're not going to know the Antichrist. Because he's going to be very deceptive. Do our young people know the real Christ? The Christ of the Bible who was despised and rejected of men? Or do they know some false Jesus who was a good old boy? A superstar that everybody loved? Do they know the Christ who was hated by the world because he testified against it that his deeds were evil? Or do they know some false Jesus who became like the world in order to try to win the world? Do our young people know the Christ who had nothing to look forward to in this life except the cross? Whose very meat was to do the Father's will? Or do they know some false Jesus who was all wrapped up in good old times, and food and fun and frivolity and trifling away time? Do our young people know the Christ who calls his followers to bear his reproach? What's going to keep them from embracing the Antichrist when he comes with all power and signs and lying wonders, so convincing so as even to deceive the very elect? Once this generation of Anabaptist young people end up in the positions of authority in the plain churches, there'll be nothing biblical about the plain churches anymore.

And the same thing could happen to us right here in this church in one generation if we don't diligently maintain a right direction and instill solid convictions in our young people. So what do you do as a father? Well, you're going to have to take charge in your home. And you're going to have to keep your children clear of the things that are going to pervert their minds, like the television and the movies and the sports and the hunting.

And you're going to have to replace that stuff with family devotions, with prayer, meditation, Bible study, so that you can instill genuine biblical convictions in the hearts of your children. And you're going to have to get our children all wrapped up in ministry, too. I'm so blessed to see that it is happening, that we can take our children with us when we do evangelism.

You know, how does a young boy develop a love for hunting? Because dad takes him with him when he goes hunting. That's what we've got to do. We are doing it.

I'm glad to see it, and we've got to keep doing it. We've got to take our children with us when we visit the sick in the nursing home. We've got to take them with us when we feed the poor.

We've got to take them with us when we visit the imprisoned. And we've got to show them what it is to follow Jesus and to bear his reproach. We cannot put the church on automatic pilot and expect it to stay on the right direction.

So let's stay clear of competitive athletics and the rest of the Laodicean lifestyle. Shall we pray? Our Father, we thank you, Lord, for being a God of mercy. We thank you for giving us the right direction.

Father, I thank you that our church has right direction right now. And I pray that we'll never lose it, but that we'll guard it diligently. Father, that we might be a bright shining light in this dark world.

Help us to take these things to heart, Lord. We ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

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