



Team Huddle Devotions for 2015 – 2016

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Unfading Glory

Featuring Stephen Barrett
NCAA Champion

Like any other competitive athlete, wrestlers have dreams that help them push through the difficult times. For some, it might be as simple as winning the next match. For others, it might be a much higher goal of winning a championship. And with winning comes a certain level of glory.

Whether it's a physical prize, like a trophy or a medal, or an emotional reward, such as praise from others or fame and notoriety, the allure of that glory can have a strong pull on any athlete's life. Stephen Barrett knows all about it. He achieved the highest level of competitive greatness within the college ranks when he won the 1977 NCAA individual title in the 142-pound weight class at Oklahoma State University.

And then, he learned a harsh reality about personal glory: it eventually goes away.

"I always felt like I could be happy the rest of my life if I won the national championship," Barrett recalls. "But by the next morning, that happiness was gone. I'd worked so hard for that championship and it didn't change my life at all."

Barrett began thinking about what was really important in life and ultimately realized that there was deeper joy in using his talents for God. After wrestling for a sports ministry's international traveling team, he became a full-time missionary and eventually moved to Russia, and then to Mongolia, where he trains and disciples wrestlers.

The Apostle Paul had a firm understanding of what Barrett and so many other athletes have experienced. He too had been tempted to accept praise for his contributions to the Early Church, but ultimately gave way to the truth he wrote about in a letter to the Christians in Corinth:

"All athletes are disciplined in their training. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize." (1 Corinthians 9:25/NLT)

There's nothing wrong with winning. In fact, right before Paul explains the difference between earthly and heavenly rewards, he encourages the readers to "run to win!" (1 Corinthians 9:24/NLT)

But winning is meaningless if there is no eternal significance attached to it. Barrett realized this truth and transferred his personal pursuits into God-focused pursuits. Be excellent in what you do. Go for the prize. Then, regardless of the result, use the opportunity that He has given you to impact others with the life-changing Gospel of Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the competitive goals that you have set for yourself? Which of those goals have you accomplished and which are you still striving to reach?
2. How important is *winning* to you? How do you usually feel immediately after a victory? How do you feel immediately after a loss?
3. Go back and read 1 Corinthians 9:25. Have you ever experienced the reality of the fading prize? What was your emotional response when you realized that the excitement was going to be short-lived (surprised, disappointed, depressed, etc.)?
4. How would you define the phrase “eternal prize?” Have you set that as a goal in your life, and if so, how often do you think about attaining it?
5. In what ways might you be able to use your athletic career as a way to impact others for Christ? Are you doing those things now? If not, what do you need to do that will allow you to better experience the “unfading glory” that people like Steven Barrett have experienced in their lives?

Closing Prayer



Endless Supply

Featuring Tervel Dlagnev

Two-Time NCAA Champion; U.S. Olympian; Pan American Games Gold Medalist

As athletes, there are a lot of things we need.

We need practice. We need training. We need nutrition. We need coaching. We need time. We need energy. We need focus. We need strength. We need endurance. We need patience. We need perseverance. We need dedication. We need confidence.

We need a lot of things, and there never seems to be enough.

Sometimes, the thing we need the most, however, is the one thing we give the least attention: a relationship with God.

Tervel Dlagnev was born in Bulgaria. His family immigrated in 1990 as the Soviet Union was falling apart. They wanted to escape the hard times that were ahead. Because of his family's commitment, Dlagnev was raised in the United States and had all of his physical needs met. But Dlagnev's father was an atheist who had been raised in a culture where the government regulated religion. Therefore, Dlagnev was never exposed to the Christian faith in a significant way.

One of Dlagnev's high school teammates first exposed him to the gospel at a national tournament. It was the first time he had been told that he had a deep, spiritual need. Then in college, a group of believers surrounded him and watered the seed that had been planted.

"They took me to a lot of Bible studies and that's when I started to understand the character of God," Dlagnev recalls. "The Bible also revealed *my* character and why I needed a Savior. After my freshman year, I gave my life to Christ."

Dlagnev realized that he didn't just have physical and emotional needs as an athlete. He now understood that he had also spiritual needs and only a heavenly Father could fulfill them. The apostle Paul talked about our human needs and reassured us that we have a faithful provider.

"And this same God who takes care of me will supply all your needs from His glorious riches, which have been given to us in Christ Jesus." (Philippians 4:19/NLT)

The key word in that passage is "needs," which is very different from our "wants." Sometimes what we want isn't what we need. And sometimes what we need isn't what we want. But thankfully, God knows the difference and makes provisions based on what is absolutely best for us in every situation we might face. "For me, God has put that to the test," Dlagnev adds. "When I fell just short of making the Olympics in 2012, I had to rely on the fact that He is sovereign.

What happened was absolutely in His plan and it was for my good. God will give you what you need. He's always there for anything.

Sometimes I try to control things and that's when I stress out. I'm most content when I'm taking time to pray and I'm seeking His face for answers."

We all have needs, whether our pride will allow us to admit it or not. God has an endless supply of strength, grace, love, forgiveness, patience, and peace. The quicker we own up to our inadequacies and call out to Him for help, the quicker we allow Him to be the perfect provider that He wants to be in our lives.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things you need as an athlete? How does the absence of those things negatively impact your competitive success?
2. What are some of your everyday physical and emotional needs? Who meets those needs for you? Have you ever experienced a time when those needs were left unfulfilled? Explain.
3. How would you define the concept of spiritual needs? At what point in your life did you realize you had spiritual needs? Where have you gone to have those needs met?
4. Go back and read Philippians 4:9. Is the concept of God as your provider something you've easily embraced or something you've struggled to believe? Explain.
5. What are some needs that you haven't always trusted God to supply? What do you need to do today that will allow God to be the number one provider in your life?

Closing Prayer



Humility vs. Pride

Featuring Brandon Slay

Olympic gold medalist

We hear a lot about pride within the athletic world. For example, we are told to take pride in our training, or to take pride in our accomplishments. Sometimes the word “pride” is even used in the way we approach our team activities and can become a motivator or inspirational tool.

In that regard, the word “pride” seems to be relatively harmless and can even be considered virtuous.

But unfortunately, that’s not always the case. Author CS Lewis, noted that pride, in its original form, is actually a destructive emotion within us that seeks to “exalt ourselves above” other people. It indicates an inflated sense of importance and usually spawns selfish behavior.

Brandon Slay knows all about that kind of pride. Although he went to a Christian school through sixth grade and his grandmother took him to church three times a week, he never developed a genuine relationship with God.

“In high school, I got addicted to myself and to success on the football field and on the wrestling mat,” Slay says. “Sports became my god. I believed that Jesus died on the cross, but He wasn’t the most important thing in my life. Success and being a world champion mattered more than anything else.”

After moving to Colorado Springs to train for the U.S. Olympic team, Slay slowed down long enough to realize that he was heading down the wrong path and potentially towards a future predicted within the wise words of King Solomon:

“Pride goes before destruction and haughtiness before a fall.” (Proverbs 16:18/NLT)

“It was about 1999 when I realized I was a phony Christian,” Slay recalls. “I wasn’t living what I said I believed. The Holy Spirit, through God’s Word, and some people around me helped me realize that having an attitude of humility frees you up. Before then, I was putting all my eggs in one basket. Suddenly, winning the gold medal wasn’t the most important thing anymore.”

At the 2000 Olympics, Slay gave his best and won the coveted prize, but thankfully, he was ready to handle the notoriety and international attention. Instead of getting caught up in the hype, Slay chose to adopt a new approach that the apostle Paul taught about in his writings to the early Christians in Philippi.

“Don't be selfish; don't try to impress others. Be humble, thinking of others as better than yourselves.” (Philippians 2:3/NLT)

For Slay, that meant resisting the temptation to stay atop that proverbial gold medal stand. He knew that keeping the glory for himself would ultimately destroy him.

“Reaching your Mt. Everest won’t fulfill you,” Slay says. “And not reaching it won’t destroy you. It’s just a thing. It’s just an accomplishment. It’s just a climb to the top. Yes, you can enjoy the view and it’s pretty when you get up there, but eventually you have to come back down. You can’t stay at the top of Mt. Everest for more than 30 minutes. You’ll die due to oxygen deprivation. The same is true in our lives. Eventually you have to step down from that platform. If you don’t, spiritually, you will die.”

That doesn’t mean we don’t give our best and use the gifts that God has given us. In fact, it’s just the opposite. We should give everything we have and compete with excellence. Our talents and abilities are meant to bring *Him* glory and allow others to see the work that *He* has done in our lives. Jesus modeled this attitude when He came down to earth from the heavens.

“He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal’s death on a cross.” (Phil. 2:8/NLT)

That’s what humility looks like when put into action. And in the battle against pride, humility wins every time.

Discussion Questions

1. In what ways have you as an individual athlete or with your team used the word “pride” in a positive way?
2. What are some ways that pride can become a negative part of an athlete’s life? Have you ever struggled with pride? If so, give some examples.
3. Brandon Slay talks about how we can die spiritually if we try to keep the glory for ourselves. Explain what you think that might look like in an individual’s life.
4. What are some ways that Jesus modeled humility during His time on earth?
5. What are some areas in your life where you need to follow Jesus’ example and allow humility to defeat any pride that you might be harboring in your heart?

Closing Prayer



Unstoppable

Featuring Jim Gruenwald

Two-Time U.S. Olympian; Pan American Games Bronze Medalist

We've all seen it before—those incredible winning streaks on which athletes or teams can sometimes go. It can happen in every sport and within the high school, college and professional ranks. At times, it might seem like they are unstoppable, like there's nothing that can keep them from reaching the top or that somehow destiny might be involved.

But even the most elite competitors and the most dynamic dynasties eventually see their run come to an end. It's almost impossible to sustain that level of success in today's sports world. There are simply too many challengers striving for the same goals, and the margin between success and failure is razor thin.

Jim Gruenwald has been on both sides of that coin. He has gone through seasons where he felt unstoppable and he was abruptly stopped short of his goals. Prior to the 2004 Olympics, Gruenwald was having a solid year when during the semi-finals of the world championships he dislocated his left shoulder in a match against Armen Nazaryan, one of the great Greco-Roman wrestlers of our time.

“It was the first time in my career I had not finished a match,” Gruenwald recalls. “I was done. That crushed me and I started sobbing.”

The doctors told him it would take at least a year to recover. The national tournament was six months away and the Olympic Trials were not long after. It didn't look good.

Gruenwald was fast tracked to the operating table 10 days later. He was in a sling for six weeks. With the situation out of his control, Gruenwald prayed.

“If you want me on this next Olympic team, then God, You're in control.”

He kept praying and did what the trainers told him to do. And then, a week before nationals, the surgeon came to him with some surprising news:

“Jim, I don't believe I'm doing this, but I'm going to clear you to wrestle.”

Gruenwald didn't just wrestle. He captured his second national title and had only one point scored on him throughout the entire competition. It was one of those unstoppable moments that all athletes long to achieve. But Gruenwald immediately recognized that it was nothing to do with him and everything to do with a higher purpose.

At the Olympics, Gruenwald finished in 10th place. It wasn't a great tournament. He didn't get what he wanted out the experience, but he got what he needed.

“If God wants something done, there's nothing that can stop it,” he says. “It helped me as a believer. I learned to rely on God and I discovered that He still answers prayers and He still performs miracles.”

There are many instances in the Bible where God showed us His unstoppable power. It can be found in epic stories such as Noah and the great flood, Moses and the Red Sea, David and Goliath, Daniel in the lion's den, and in many great Israelite battles.

“The Lord of Heaven's armies have spoken—who can change His plans? When his hand is raised, who can stop Him?” (Isaiah 14:27)

Even Job, a man who was relentlessly persecuted and tested realized that God was ultimately in control of everything:

After all he went through, Job said to God, **“I know that you can do anything and no one can stop you.” (Job 42:2/NLT)**

And there's no greater story of divine triumph than the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ, which gave us victory over sin and death.

God has empowered us to be victorious overcomers. That doesn't mean we'll never lose a match and that doesn't mean we'll always end up on top. The same is true in our Christian walk. We will certainly have troubles in this world, and it will never be a completely smooth, carefree path. But God has a plan for each of us, and as long as we follow Him, that plan cannot be derailed no matter how hard the enemy may try to stop it. After all, we have the Creator of the universe on our side, and He is, at His very essence, the ultimate unstoppable force.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever experienced a long season of success? If so, did you at times feel like you were unstoppable?
2. Have you ever felt the opposite and that something was keeping you from achieving your goals?
3. What do you think it means to have God on your side? Can you describe a time when you felt that way in your athletic career? What about in your everyday life?
4. Has there been a time when reading a Bible story gave you courage and helped you push through adversity? How do you think the story of Jesus on the cross and His resurrection should empower you to stick with the plan that God has laid out for you?
5. In what areas do you need to put your trust in God and rely on His unstoppable power?

Closing Prayer



Trusting God

Featuring Quentin Wright

Two-Time NCAA National Champion and Four-Time All-American

Trust is something we are asked to give on a daily basis. It's a precious commodity we are asked to share with our family, our friends, our coaches, our teachers, our spiritual leaders, our local authorities, and our medical professionals. Most of the time that trust is well placed. But sometimes, our trust in others is sadly broken.

When it's just you on the mat, staring down your opponent, trust often comes down to a very personal question: "Do I trust myself?"

On the mat, you can't rely on anyone else but yourself. You have to trust your instincts, trust that you put in the right amount of conditioning and practicing, and trust that you have the skills and athletic ability to be successful.

Quentin Wright once found himself in a worst-case scenario. Following his first NCAA championship at Penn State, he had a rough year. He tore three ligaments in his shoulder and missed a significant part of the season. Usually confident in his body and what it could do on the mat, Wright's trust in his own body was shaken.

But rather than give up, Wright decided it was time to put his trust in the only place where it can be 100 percent secure.

"I kept working hard and trusting in the Lord," he explains. "Every time I'd ask Him what was going on, He would say, 'Be patient and press on.' Everyone around me had given up, but God knew what I had on the inside and all I had to do was keep doing what He made me to do. I gave it my heart and soul and kept trusting Him."

When Wright's own physical ability let him down, he had two choices: give up the fight or trust God for the strength to get through it. He chose to trust God and rely on His strength to fight through the injury. Despite a mediocre regular season record, Wright went on an impressive winning streak and captured the national title.

"It was all because I was patient and I listened to God and trusted Him," he adds. "I knew He was going to see me through. I knew He had good things ahead of me, and He provided."

King Solomon, the wisest man who ever walked the earth, had this to say about the topic:

**"Trust in the LORD with all your heart; do not depend on your own understanding."
(Proverbs 3:5/NLT)**

People that we trust sometimes let us down—even those closest to us. We can also let ourselves down and cause distrust within our own hearts and minds. But if we truly believe that the Bible is God’s Word, we can take comfort in knowing that He will *never* let us down. Our Heavenly Father will *never* break our trust. We can *always* count on Him—even in the most difficult times when placing complete trust in Him doesn’t always make sense.

And if a life of peace and purpose is the goal, then trusting God is something we should all do on a daily basis.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are the people you trust the most? Has someone you trust ever let you down? If so, how did that impact your ability to trust people moving forward?
2. During competition, what are some of the things that you need to trust in order to be successful? Have you ever lost trust in your ability (physically or mentally) during the course of your athletic career? Explain.
3. In general, do you find it easy or difficult to trust God? More specifically, in what areas do you find it easy to trust God? In what areas do you find it more difficult to trust God?
4. How do you think trusting God in all areas of your life might help you get through challenges and difficulties? Is that something you’ve already experienced? If so, explain.
5. If you have trouble trusting God, what are some things you can start doing today that will help you build a more trusting relationship with Him?

Closing Prayer



Obedience

Featuring Jose Campo

National Wrestling Hall of Fame Coach

The United States military has been built upon two very simple, but bedrock principles—respect and obedience. When men and women join the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines or Coast Guard, they are automatically expected to show respect for their superiors. And that respect is then translated into obedience, no questions asked.

Great teams are built upon that same concept. The ones that respect their coaches, obey the rules, and follow instruction will have a solid foundation for success. The teams that resist that authority will struggle to meet its goals and may run the risk of complete failure.

Jose Campo faced some very harsh consequences when he strayed from those principles as a high school athlete. As a child, he saw his father Jose Campo Sr., a legendary wrestling coach from New York, as the ultimate authority figure. He obeyed his every command out of love and respect. But as he got a little older, Campo decided he was smart enough to make his own decisions. That led him to take some shortcuts in his career that eventually led to some serious health problems.

While competing at West Point, Campo dealt with injuries that ended his days as a wrestler. He strayed even further from his father's example when he was caught in an embarrassing cheating scandal and was expelled from the academy. That led Campo into a life of drug abuse and shame.

But thankfully, he accepted Christ and turned his life around. Campo followed in his father's footsteps and became a coach, got involved in FCA, and started telling his story. His message to young athletes is about the importance of obeying God.

“God placed a dream in your heart,” Campo says. “You have to follow that dream and not do things to try to please your dad or anyone else. Your first responsibility is to please and obey Him.”

Campo's story is a cautionary tale for what can happen when we don't respect and obey those in authority over us. There are many more examples that can be found throughout the Bible including many in the Old Testament that involved the Israelites. In every instance, whether it was one of the kings or the nation as a whole, grave consequences such as famine, enslavement, and mass destruction were the result of disobedience. This was duly noted in an apostolic letter to one of the early Christian churches:

“But if we disobey God, as the people of Israel did, we will fall.” (Hebrews 4:11b/NLT)

Paul wrote something similar to the church in Ephesus:

“Don’t be fooled by those who try to excuse those sins, for the anger of God will fall on all who disobey Him.” (Ephesians 5:6/NLT)

So why is obedience so important?

In a family, parental rules are there to protect their children. In the military, authoritative rules are there to prepare the soldiers for battle. On a team, a coach’s rules are there to help the athletes reach their fullest potential. In all cases, the rules are often a way to shield us from harmful situations.

That is certainly the case with God’s commands. Even though we sometimes view biblical rules as a hardship, they are in reality guidelines that will protect us and, when followed, open up the door to His blessings.

But that shouldn’t be our primary motivation. Much like our relationship with our parents or with our coaches, there’s something much greater that should fuel our desire to obey.

“If you love me, obey my commandments.” (John 14:15/NLT)

Obedience isn’t always easy. It requires an attitude of surrender, which that tends to go against our human nature. However, if we truly love God, we will do what He asks us to do, and we’ll find ourselves much better off than if we were to go our own way.

Jose Campo knows this to be true. So do the Israelites and countless others who learned the hard way that disobeying God will cause nothing but trouble whereas obeying Him will keep you on the right path.

Discussion Questions

1. As a kid growing up, did you find it easy or difficult to obey you parents? Can you recall an instance where disobeying your parents caused you a lot of trouble?
2. What are some rules that are meant to protect you? Have you ever faced the consequences of breaking one of those rules?
3. What kind of relationship do you have with your coach? How much do you respect him or her and how does that impact your ability to obey their rules and follow their instructions?
4. What are some of God’s commands that you’ve had trouble obeying? What about those commands make them difficult to obey?
5. Go back and read John 14:15. Why do you think love is such an important part of obedience? What are some tools that you think might help you more effectively and consistently obey God’s commands?

Closing Prayer



Redemption

Featuring Jose Campo

National Wrestling Hall of Fame Coach

Redemption. ... That word has strong connotations within the realm of competitive athletics. It's usually something we find ourselves seeking after a tough loss or when we fall short of our goals. But when it comes to sports, redemption is only as important as we allow it to be in our hearts and in our minds.

In life, redemption can be much more serious. The need for making things right can often be tied to a significant mistake that we have made or the desire to repair a damaged reputation.

For Jose Campo, his deep longing for redemption was connected to both. Campo grew up following the footsteps of his Hall of Fame wrestling coach father Jose Campo Sr. He started wrestling when he was three years old and dreamed of winning a high school state title. But Campo failed to follow the example of his father's great pupils.

"I started looking for shortcuts when I was in ninth grade," he recalls. "I used diuretics and I was bulimic. The lifestyle choices I was making hindered my success. I spent more time on the wrestling mats than anyone, but I was never a champion."

After high school, Campo went to West Point where his brother was the captain of the wrestling team. His career was cut short, however, due to three major surgeries. That wasn't the worst of it. Campo was also involved in the largest cheating scandal in West Point history and was expelled. Rejected and ashamed, he left New York for California and spent eight years as an unemployed drug addict.

"I had no self-esteem," Campo says. "I was the worst sinner of all. How could I be the son of the greatest wrestling coach in New York history?"

During those dark times, Bobby Antonacci, one of his father's great wrestlers, visited Campo in California and brought with him a powerful message:

"There's a God in Heaven who will not only forgive you, but He will use the mistakes that you've made so you can help turn around other people's lives."

Campo took Antonacci's words to heart and gave his life to Christ. He cleaned up and worked his way back into the sport. After stops at Yale and Southern Connecticut, Campo became a high school coach including 17 years at Mt. Carmel High School in San Diego. In 1993, he was named California Wrestling Coach of the Year and more recently was named to the National Wrestling Hall of Fame making him and his father the first father and son to be inducted.

There's a story in the New Testament to which Campo can wholeheartedly relate. Found in Acts 9, we read about a man named Saul who was persecuting the early Christians. While traveling one day, a great light from Heaven blinded him and brought him to his knees. After hearing from Jesus, Saul repented and went on to become one of the greatest evangelists in church history.

Saul later became known as the apostle Paul and wrote a significant portion of the New Testament. His letter to a young man he was mentoring has provided great hope for people like Campo and anyone who is in need of redemption.

“This is a trustworthy saying, and everyone should accept it: ‘Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners’—and I am the worst of them all. But God had mercy on me so that Christ Jesus could use me as a prime example of his great patience with even the worst sinners. Then others will realize that they, too, can believe in him and receive eternal life.” (1 Timothy 1:15-16/NLT)

There are some things we can do to attain redemption with our fellow man. We can change our ways and work to make things right. But ultimately, redemption is all about what Jesus did on the cross. The word “redeem” in the Bible literally means to “buy out of slavery”. Jesus’ death on the Cross paid the price of God’s wrath against sin. The blood of Christ was the price God paid for our “redemption”, which bought us out of slavery to sin and its eternal consequences. It is only through God’s saving grace that we can truly be free of our sinful past and experience the fullness of life that God offers to us.

And that’s incredible news for every single one of us.

Discussion Questions

1. Can you describe a moment in your athletic career where you felt like you needed to redeem yourself?
2. Have you ever felt like you messed up really bad? How important was it for you to make things right and/or repair your reputation?
3. Who are some other people you can think of who have messed up, but were able to find redemption in man’s eyes through their actions?
4. Go back and read 1 Timothy 1:15-16. How might embracing Paul’s message help you deal with a past mistake you’ve made or a mistake you might make in the future?
5. Is there something for which you currently need to ask forgiveness from God and/or someone else? How do you think being redeemed through His saving grace might help you experience the fullness of life and become the person that He created you to be?
6. Would you join me in prayer today, and seize this moment to ask God’s forgiveness, and to surrender your heart and life to Christ? Let’s pray. Repeat silently after me as I pray out loud:

Closing Prayer: Dear Lord, I recognize that I have rebelled against you many times in my life, and have sinned against you. I acknowledge that You are holy and I need Your forgiveness. Jesus, thank you for dying on the Cross, to pay the penalty for my sin. I now ask You Lord, to forgive me, and to come into my heart. Help me become the kind of person that you want me to be. Thank you for coming into my life. In Your Name, Amen.



Total Commitment

Featuring Casey Cunningham

NCAA Champion; Pan American Silver Medalist

The sports world has no shortage of clichés attached to the concept of effort. This is certainly no different within the wrestling community where phrases like, “All In,” “Give 110%” and “Embrace The Grind,” are often used to challenge athletes to make a total commitment.

It’s true. For an athlete to get the most out of his or her talents and abilities, a total commitment is required to disciplined training, focused practice, and competitive excellence.

Throughout his wrestling career, Casey Cunningham was the epitome of a totally committed athlete. At Central Michigan University, he worked tirelessly en route to an NCAA championship and All-American honors.

But before he achieved those incredible accolades, Cunningham first had to answer some nagging questions about the purpose of his commitment. Ultimately, it was an ACL injury right before the conference tournament during his redshirt sophomore year that forced him to dig deep into his heart. In the process, Cunningham discovered that he had allowed his athletic career to take the place of something much more important.

“Wrestling was my god,” he explains. “When that was taken away from me, it made me step back and reassess my life.”

His epiphany (realization) led to a conversation about faith with a former coach who had stepped away from wrestling to focus on his spiritual life. That night, Cunningham accepted Christ and everything changed. He felt like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. As he began reading God’s Word, the scriptures started to connect with his heart.

Cunningham rearranged his priorities and put God at the top of the list. He remained intensely committed to wrestling but now had divine motivation and a divine source of strength to help him follow through.

Now an assistant coach at Penn State, Cunningham has that same level of commitment, only this time, his new purpose is to have a positive impact on the lives of his athletes.

“You need to understand that God has a plan for you as an athlete or as a coach,” he says. “This is where He wants you right now and you need to be committed to give your best no matter where that might be.”

Being totally committed can be tough, but it doesn’t have to be a burden. In the Old Testament, men and women of God were often asked to walk difficult paths, but they were never asked to walk alone. **“The eyes of the Lord search the whole earth in order to strengthen those whose hearts are fully committed to him...” (2 Chronicles 16:9/NLT)**

Staying committed is all about our obedience. God is looking for men and women who will be totally committed to following Him. Doing what God asks may not always match up perfectly with our desires at the moment, but if we trust God, He will give us what we need to take the next step forward. Just as an athlete must discipline himself to eat right, train hard, get rest, and listen to his coaches, a follower of Christ must discipline himself to read the Word of God on a daily basis, pray, worship the Lord, and listen to Godly people in his life.

The Apostle Paul wrote: **“Now everyone who competes, exercises self-control in all things. However, they do it to receive a perishable crown (a reward that will not last forever); but we do it to receive an imperishable one (an eternal reward)” (I Cor. 9: 25).**

Paul was saying that following Christ takes the same kind of commitment and sacrifice that it takes to be a great athlete. Being committed and faithful to God is an important part of building your relationship with Him. God knows our hearts. He knows if our motivations are pure or impure. When we do it His way, He will reward our commitment with the strength we need to complete the task at hand. Following the Lord is not always easy, but nothing good in life comes easy.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things that challenge your daily focus and your dedication? What do you do to try to combat those things?
2. What is your number one motivation for being committed to your athletic pursuits? Have you ever questioned your motivation? Explain.
3. Go back and read the first part of 2 Chronicles 16:9. Imagine God searching the earth. What do you think He sees when His eyes look at you and your commitment to your sport and to your faith?
4. How often do you ask for God’s strength as an athlete, as a student, and as a follower of Christ? Does your prayer make a difference? Explain
5. How can you get to know God better? (Suggestions: By spending time with Him, reading His Word, talking to Him in prayer, gathering with other believers to worship God and grow in your faith at a solid church, and sharing your faith with others.)
6. What are some areas in your life where you need to be more committed to God? In what ways do you think that commitment will help you fulfill the purposes for which you have been called?

Closing Prayer



Spiritual Discipline

Featuring Stephen Barrett

NCAA Champion

Wrestlers are very focused and disciplined individuals who understand the importance of key elements such as training, conditioning and diet. Former NCAA champion Stephen Barrett can relate. He pushed his body to the limit in pursuit of agility, endurance and quickness so he could accomplish his goals and achieve greatness.

But after winning the 1977 NCAA individual title in the 142-pound weight class at Oklahoma State, Barrett realized there was something missing in his life. That revelation led him into a relationship with Christ and a commitment to full-time sports ministry. The self-control that Barrett once exercised to discipline his body eventually became the driving force in his spiritual growth.

“If you want to be a great wrestler, you’re not going to do it by sitting on the couch, eating chips and watching TV during practice times,” Barrett says. “It’s the same thing with spiritual discipline. It’s not something that’s easy. It’s intentional. You’ve got to be thinking about it every day.”

Now living in Mongolia, Barrett works with athletes who are willing to go to great extremes in order to reach elite levels of competition. His challenge is to make them understand how much more important it is to have that same focus and determination when it comes to being a champion of the faith.

In his letter to Timothy, the Apostle Paul explains it this way: **“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/NIV)**

For the follower of Christ, spiritual discipline is required to have the kind of abundant life described in John 10:10. This is particularly true when it comes to daily Bible devotion and prayer time. Paul encourages us to **“pray continually,”** (1 Thessalonians 5:17/NIV) or in other words, follow the Holy Spirit and daily live in an attitude of communication with God. David gives another great piece of advice when he proclaims, **“I have hidden your word in my heart that I might not sin against you.” (Psalm 119:11/NIV)**

In both instances, the spirit of prayer and a consistent commitment to Bible study, spiritual discipline requires the same kind of daily dedication that winning wrestlers give to their sport. Like Barrett has discovered years after his championship run in Stillwater, Oklahoma, the rewards that come from living for God are far greater than any medal or trophy can offer.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some things you do on a daily basis to stay in competitive shape and to give yourself the best chance to succeed on the mat?
2. What areas of your physical training do you find the most difficult to maintain? Explain.
3. Go back and read 1 Timothy 4:8. What are some benefits of physical training? What do you think Paul means when he says, “godliness has value for all things?”
4. How would you describe your current commitment to spiritual discipline? All in? Inconsistent? On hold? What are some things that are keeping you from consistent prayer and daily Bible devotion?
5. What do you need to today that will get your spiritual discipline back into shape? How do you think your daily life will be impacted when you make that commitment?

Closing Prayer



Total Surrender

Featuring Brandon Slay

Olympic gold medalist

Tapping out. It's the absolute last thing any wrestler ever wants to think about doing. Giving up during a match is the kind of nightmare scenario that will make the most competitive among us wake up in a cold sweat at 2 o'clock in the morning.

Tapping out is admitting defeat. Tapping out is giving up because the other opponent has outmatched you or overpowered you. Even worse, tapping out sometimes means you've been injured and can't physically continue.

It might surprise some people, but U.S. Olympic gold medalist Brandon Slay faced a similar situation that could have ended his career before it had barely begun. At the age of six, Slay followed his athletic father's footsteps and decided to give wrestling a try. That first year, he finished with a dismal 0-20 record. Slay very easily could have tapped out and quit before achieving that greatness that was before him.

But while training for the Olympics, Slay realized that, in at least one circumstance, tapping out might not be such a bad thing.

"My grandmother was an amazing Christian influence in my life, but when I went to wrestle at Penn, I lived a rebellious lifestyle and didn't take a stand for God," Slay says. "When I moved to Colorado Springs, my life really slowed down. I did some soul searching and learned about other religions. If I was going to do down that path of seeking God, I wanted to know what other religions believed."

After several months of exploring other faiths, Slay came to an understanding of how Christianity was different. It was the only religion that had a Savior.

"All I had been trying to do was save myself," he says. "But I needed someone to die for my sin and my rebellion. I needed someone to pay for that wage of sin. When I realized that, I was finally able to completely surrender my heart to Jesus."

It was Jesus Himself who taught this truth during His ministry on the earth.

"If you cling to your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life for me, you will find it." (Matthew 10:39/NLT)

Slay is no different than anyone else. We too are looking for salvation and purpose and hope. But so often, we look inward for those answers or we seek those things out through relationships, physical and emotional pleasure, or material gain. Eventually, the things that we hold onto will vanish and only what matters to God will remain.

Spiritually speaking, tapping out is the best decision you can ever make. It's admitting to God that you can't do it alone. It's giving up your dreams in exchange for even greater dreams that He has for you. It's telling Him that you're outmatched and confessing that you can't live without Him. Tapping out means letting go of the temporary things of this world and allowing His eternal Spirit to take residence in your heart and guide you the most fulfilling life possible.

Tapping out. Fully surrendering to God. It's the absolute *best* thing a follower of Christ should ever think about doing.

Discussion Questions

1. Have you ever had to tap out during a match? If so, how difficult was that decision and how long did it take you get over the disappointment?
2. Go back and read Matthew 10:39. What are some examples of a situation where someone might lose their life (or struggle in their relationship with Christ) because they clung too tightly something?
3. In your own words, how would you define the concept of finding your life because you gave it up for Jesus?
4. Do you feel like you've fully surrendered your heart to Christ? If not, what do you think is keeping you from doing so?
5. What are some things that you need to give up so that you can be a more effective follower of Christ?

Closing Prayer



All For God

Featuring John Peterson
Olympic gold medalist

As athletes, we have a lot of reasons for doing what we do.

There are the physical benefits we gain from training and staying in shape. Then, there are the emotional benefits that inherently come from athletic activity such as confidence and self-esteem. And of course, there are the material benefits that often motivate us such as trophies, championships and notoriety.

There's one common thread that runs through all of those things: at the end of the day, they all point back to you.

During his collegiate career, John Peterson came to that hard realization. Despite the fact that he had given his heart to Christ when he was 12 years old, he found himself making wrestling more of a god in his life.

"I was gaining my significance and my sense of who I was more from wrestling than I was from Christ," Peterson admits.

The emptiness Peterson was feeling led him to take another look at the sermon that led to his salvation as a pre-teen. It was based on one of Jesus' more challenging teachings:

"Everyone who acknowledges me publicly here on earth, I will also acknowledge before my Father in heaven. But everyone who denies me here on earth, I will also deny before my Father in heaven." (Matthew 10:32-33/NLT)

Then, Peterson looked at the Apostle Paul's letter to the church in Colossae: **"Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people." (Colossians 3:23/HCSB)**

So what did Peterson do next? He started pursuing his sport in a way that honored God. Peterson, along with his brother Ben, decided to use wrestling as a platform to tell others about Jesus. He did so while competing in two Olympic Games and two World Championships, and has continued to work "for the Lord" as a coach.

"God created us for His glory, not for our own," Peterson says. "When we seek to get the pats on the back from what we accomplish, we put undue pressure on ourselves. God didn't create us to have that kind of pressure. He created us to honor Him. So when I pursued pleasure in Him, it took the pressure off. I could enjoy wrestling in a whole different way."

And that brings us back to original point. How is it possible to glorify God in a world where individual and team success is intrinsically built into the very fiber of what we do as athletes and coaches? How can we do everything for Him while receiving the personal benefits that can come from competition?

Doing it all for God goes against human nature. We are all born into this world with pride and selfishness. That's why living out Colossians 3:23 is all about surrender. It's about understanding why we're really here. It's about seeing the big picture and recognizing that anything we might gain from our athletic pursuits is temporary and will be long gone when this life on earth is over.

The greatest rewards are found in a relationship with God and are gained when we honor Him in everything we do—and that ultimately means wrestling for Him too.

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the reasons why you wrestle?
2. What are some other benefits that might come from participating in the sport? How many of those are personal benefits and how many are beneficial to others?
3. From your experience, how can human nature dictate our motivations to compete and be successful? Are those areas with which you've personally struggled? Explain.
4. Go back and read Colossians 3:23. How do you think that scripture might apply to your wrestling career? How might it apply to other areas of your life?
5. What are some things that you can do today that will help you pursue your wrestling career with an "All For God" attitude?

Closing Prayer



Who You Are

Featuring Chase Pami

2-Time NCAA All-American

“Who are you?”

That question can be simple or complicated depending on the context in which it is being asked. It might require nothing more than a basic response for the purpose of identification. But there’s a much deeper interpretation of the question that, if gone unanswered for too long, might cause us to struggle with the core of our very beings.

Chase Pami started asking that difficult question at a young age. He was in the fourth grade when a challenging church play led him to his first real experience with God. Pami accepted Christ, but didn’t completely surrender his heart until four years later.

But even as he grew closer to God, he still struggled as a young athlete to balance his sport with his faith.

“In wrestling, performance often fuels how you perceive yourself,” Pami says. “Your value gets tied up in wins and losses.”

As Pami has matured in his faith, he has come to understand that his athletic career doesn’t define his identity. There are still the emotional highs that come with winning and the emotional lows that come with losing. But now, Pami can rest in a truth that is much bigger than success or failure.

“I’m precious to God,” he says. “He sent His Son to die for me, and that’s what gives me value. My contentment is wrapped up within my identity in Christ and having an understanding of how much He loves me.”

The struggle of personal identity is not exclusive to athletes, although it is something that we in the competitive world do consistently fight against. When asked, “Who are you?” sometimes the first answer is often, “I’m a wrestler,” or “I’m a coach,” as if that somehow is the most important thing that defines our existence.

But over 2,000 years ago, the apostle Paul found that same internal issue to be a key part of most every human being’s battle against the flesh. He wrote about the importance of our identity on many occasions to the early Christians.

“My old self has been crucified with Christ. It is no longer I who live, but Christ lives in me. So I live in this earthly body by trusting in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me.” (Galatians 2:20/NLT)

In another letter, Paul goes as far as saying that not only should we identify ourselves as His children, but that we, in fact, belong to Him.

“He has identified us as His own by placing the Holy Spirit in our hearts.” (2 Corinthians 1:22a/NLT)

Jesus also explained this divine concept during His ministry on Earth.

“But to all who believed Him and accepted Him, He gave the right to become children of God.” (John 1:12/NLT)

It’s okay to identify ourselves by our professions or our athletic pursuits, but ultimately, the most powerful statement we can make about who we are is when we identify ourselves by our relationship with Jesus Christ. It is that relationship that not only provides us a new identity, but also a new way of living and a new hope that we can rest upon in this life and the next.

Discussion Questions

1. In general, what are some ways you might respond if asked the question “Who are you?”
2. What do you think your answers say about what is most important in your life?
3. Do you find it easy or difficult to identify yourself as a Christian or a follower of Christ? Explain.
4. Go back and read Galatians 2:20, 2 Corinthians 1:22a, and John 1:12. What are some key elements found in those scriptures that might help us better understand the value of being called children of God?
5. Which parts of your identity do you need to reprioritize in order to fully embrace your identity in Christ?

Closing Prayer



Trials and Tests

Featuring Steve Goudy

Three-Time Ohio State Championship High School Coach

If winning was easy, everyone would be a champion. But that's clearly not the way it works. Winning *isn't* easy and even those who become champions face adversity along the way.

Take, for example, Steve Goudy and his experience as the head coach at Troy Christian High School in Troy, Ohio. After wrestling in college at Wright State and spending time in the military, Goudy moved back home to pursue a coaching career. He spent 12 years at Milton Union High School before accepting an offer to coach at Troy. His initial inclination was to turn the job down. Goudy wanted to win a state championship and that didn't seem likely at a small private school with no prior success on the mat.

Troy Christian's athletic administration wanted to win a state championship too. They told Goudy that their vision was to "build a platform to share the gospel of Jesus of Christ."

Goudy was sold.

After three years, the program finished as state runner-ups. The following year, Troy Christian won its first of three consecutive championships under Goudy's leadership. But it wasn't easy.

"Everything was coming against us," he recalls. "We felt like the enemy was trying to keep us from getting that platform. During our second title season, we had three starters get injured the week before state. Some of the moms covered us in prayer and we believed that would perform a miracle. And that's what happened. Those kids were healthy going into state."

That was just one of many difficult circumstances the team faced. To help his wrestlers remember why they were competing, he had them wear inspirational t-shirts. In Goudy's first season, the shirts said, "It's Not About Us." The next year, the shirts continued that thought with this message: "It's About Him."

Through it all, Goudy learned to truly appreciate these apostolic words that were written over 2,000 years ago:

"Dear brothers and sisters, when troubles of any kind come your way, consider it an opportunity for great joy. For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow. So let it grow, for when your endurance is fully developed, you will be perfect and complete, needing nothing." (James 1:2-4/NLT)

"We were never promised that we wouldn't go through trials," Goudy explains. "Jesus was

persecuted. Who do we think we are? We're going to go through some things. But not matter what the world throws at us or what the enemy throws at this, God will never leave us or forsake us (Hebrews 13:5). And no matter how lonely we might feel at times, we're never alone when go through those valleys."

In the athletic realm, trials and tests usually involve injuries or difficult losses, but in other areas of life, adversity can present a wide array of physical and emotional difficulties—a family issue, a health concern, the death of a loved one, etc.—can knock us around and sometimes even bring us to our knees.

But later on in that passage, James gives us good news that, if we keep God's perspective on things, the inevitable adversities of life will bring us strength and encouragement.

"God blesses those who patiently endure testing and temptation. Afterward they will receive the crown of life that God has promised to those who love him." (James 1:12/NLT)

The adversity Troy Christian's wrestling faced on its journey to success, taught Coach Goudy's team the most valuable lesson of all: That ultimately, those who "patiently endure testing and temptation" will receive "the crown of life" in Heaven, which the Lord Himself has promised to all who love Christ. In the meantime, we can be assured that any challenge we face—big or small—is nothing we can't handle when we place our trust in God and rest in Him.

Discussion Questions

1. What is the most difficult challenge you have faced in your athletic career? What did you learn from the experience?
2. What is the most difficult challenge you have faced in your personal life? How did it compare to any adversity you've faced as an athlete?
3. Have you dealt with any adversity specifically because of your Christian faith? If so, explain. If not, do you ever anticipate a time when that might be the case?
4. Go back and read James 1:2-4. What are some ways you might be able to find joy while enduring a difficult time in your life?
5. Go back and read James 1:12. How might truly believing and embracing the principle of endurance and blessings help you deal with the trials and tests that might come your way?

Closing Prayer



A Life of Purpose

Featuring Brandon Slay

Olympic gold medalist

When you're in the moment—at practice, in the gym, or on the mat during competition—that's not usually the time we as athletes find ourselves engaging in deep thought, self-evaluation, or contemplative reflection. In the moment, we're most likely focused on the task at hand—getting in shape, improving our skills, or winning the match.

But at some point, a difficult question is bound to come up:

“Why am I here?”

You might already know the answer to that question, but maybe you don't. And that question isn't limited to our athletic pursuits. In fact, it's a question that reaches into the core of who we are as human beings. It's a question that we are compelled to answer at various stages of our lives and amid the daily quest to keep our priorities in the right order.

While training for the Olympics, Brandon Slay was faced with a similar inquiry.

“What do you think your purpose is?” a local pastor in Colorado Springs, Colorado, asked him one morning.

“My purpose is to work out, lift weights, wrestle hard, go win a gold medal, retire from wrestling, get married, have some kids, work until I'm 60, retire, go fishing with my buddies, and then I'll go die,” Slay responded.

The pastor didn't argue with Slay but instead encouraged him to take some time to think about his answer. Thinking about it made him mad. That couldn't be his purpose. There had to be something greater than that.

“At the same time, God was stirring my heart,” Slay reflects. “Since then, I've come to understand that my purpose is to know the Savior and to make Him known. You can still wrestle. You can still get married and have kids. You can work until you retire. You can go fishing with your buddies. But all of those things are secondary to our higher calling.”

One of the most famous scriptures about the topic assures us that we all, in fact, do have a reason for being on this planet:

“For I know the plans I have for you,” says the LORD. “They are plans for good and not for disaster, to give you a future and a hope.” (Jeremiah 29:11/NLT)

But what specifically *is* that plan?

God uses our gifts and talents to impact the world around us. Therefore, our individual purposes will often look different from one another. But no matter what our individual purpose might be, it should always be tied to the greater purpose—a purpose that we as Christians all share.

“I have made them for my glory. It was I who created them. (Isaiah 43:7b/NLT)

Ultimately, our purpose for anything we do in life—competing, coaching, serving, teaching, working, building relationships, etc.—is to “know God, and to make Him known through our lives”. When we do that, we will find true fulfillment and, most importantly, open the door to sharing the life-changing message of God’s love with those around us.

Discussion Questions

1. How often do you think about the purpose behind your athletic career? Do you feel like you have a good understanding of that purpose? Explain.
2. What are some bigger questions about purpose that you think about on a regular basis? Which ones have you struggled to answer?
3. What do you think is your general purpose in life? What about your specific purpose as it relates to your God-given talents and abilities?
4. In your own words, how would you define the concept of being created for God’s glory? Is this concept something that you find easy or difficult to express on a daily basis?
5. What are some things that you can start doing today that will make Jesus known in your life?

Closing Prayer



Influence

Featuring Ben Peterson

Olympic gold medalist

According to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, “influence” is defined as: “the power to change or affect someone or something.”

Our society often looks at the concept of influence as a privilege usually afforded to people who are famous, talented, wealthy, and popular. It’s true. Some people have bigger platforms than other based on those factors and therefore have a greater level of influence.

But long before he was an Olympic champion, Ben Peterson decided that he would reject the notion that influence is limited to the elite. While in high school, he and his brother John joined the wrestling and football teams and decided they would honor the Lord through their sports. As they became more confident in their faith in Christ, they started sharing the Gospel of Christ with their friends.

At that point, they were just small-town prep athletes from northwest Wisconsin, yet they were already proving that influence has little to do with being well-known, and everything to do with reaching out to those around you. Eventually, the Peterson brothers went to college and developed into elite international wrestlers.

“Before we went to the Olympics, we discussed how we were going to use the platform to share our faith,” Peterson says. “There was a definite desire on our part to be vocal although we were shy in many respects. God gave us simple opportunities to share the Gospel. That prepared us for the time when we would be thrust into a more visible realm.”

Peterson won a gold medal at the 1972 Olympics and a silver medal at the 1976 Olympics. He later coached at Maranatha Bible College for 28 years and continues to run a nationally recognized wrestling camp. Ben Peterson has had some young athletes tell him that they wouldn’t be able to serve God until they have won, but he responds with his personal story.

“Long before John and I ever thought we’d be in the Olympics, we were seeking to be faithful and consistent with our Bible readings and through our fellowship with other Christians,” Peterson says. “Whenever the opportunity came to tell people about Christ, we did that very simply. That’s what young athletes need to do. When you have opportunities to tell other people about Him, just be faithful and give Him honor.”

When Jesus recruited his team—the men we often refer to as the Disciples—he didn’t look for the most famous, popular, wealthy people around town. Instead, Jesus approached a diverse group of men who represented various socio-economic backgrounds. Some were gifted as

writers and physicians, but others were simple fishermen. None of them were particularly notable. Yet, Jesus told them the same thing He tells us today:

“You are the light of the world—like a city on a hilltop that cannot be hidden. No one lights a lamp and then puts it under a basket. Instead, a lamp is placed on a stand, where it gives light to everyone in the house. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.” (Matthew 5:14-16/NLT)

Winning championships and gold medals can certainly afford a platform that will reach large audiences, but just as Ben Peterson discovered, the opportunity to share the love of God with others is not dependent on material success or public acclaim. Don't wait for some award or accolade that may or may not happen. You have the power to influence someone around you right now.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some people that you would consider to have great influence? What are some factors that determine whether or not someone has influence and to what degree?
2. Do you see yourself as someone who has influence? If not, what do you think needs to happen in your life before you can have influence?
3. Considering what you know about the Disciples, why do you think Jesus chose mostly unremarkable men to change the world?
4. Go back and read Matthew 5:14-16. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, “You are the light of the world?”
5. What are some ways that you can use your influence on teammates, classmates, coaches, family, etc., for the sake of the gospel?

Closing Prayer



Authentic Faith

Featuring Kelsey Campbell
2012 U.S. Olympian

There's nowhere to hide on the wrestling mat. Once you step inside the circle and the referee starts the match, everything is instantly out in the open—your strengths, your weaknesses, and your preparation, or the lack thereof. It's just you, the opponent, the referee, the judges, and the fans cheering from a distance.

Perhaps you were hiding an injury. Maybe you weren't as focused in practice that week. Some personal problems might have taken you off your game. And now, everything you've been dealing with in private is suddenly everybody's business. That's when things start to get real.

Kelsey Campbell had a similar crisis during her high school years, but her issues weren't directly related to her athletic pursuits. She was quite comfortable and composed as a competitor. How else could you explain her rapid rise in the national women's wrestling scene in such a short period of time or the fact that she became the first woman to earn a spot on the Arizona State men's wrestling team? On the mat, Campbell has always been the real deal.

Instead, it was her spiritual life where she was struggling with authenticity. She wasn't being real with God.

"I grew up in church, but I was a selfishly ambitious person," Campbell says. "Being a part of a religious group like FCA back in high school was good for business. I was saying the right things, but that didn't mean I was right with God. I had faked myself out and created this image that wasn't an accurate portrayal of who I was on the inside."

Campbell came to a point where she had to be honest with herself and admit that she had been going through the motions. It was in a moment of profound brokenness that she made Jesus Christ the Lord of her life.

"I still have dreams," she says, "But now, my whole motivation is to be faithful to God and to seek and save the lost."

Like Campbell, there comes a time when we have to get real with God. But first, we need to be honest with ourselves and take into account a deep truth that Jesus revealed to the woman at the well in John 4.

"For God is Spirit, so those who worship him must worship in spirit and in truth." (John 4:24/NLT)

That passage should lead each of us to a challenging question: Are we worshipping God in spirit (with our lips) yet not worshipping Him in truth (with our lives)? In other words, are we saying all the right things publicly about our faith, but privately living in a way that doesn't honor God and doesn't follow Christ's example?

If so, then just like the athlete who isn't prepared for a match, we will eventually be exposed for who we really are, and be forced to face the difficult consequences of sin. On the other hand, when we get real with God, He is faithful to forgive us, (I John 1: 9 - 10), restore us back to a right relationship with Him, and allow us to experience the benefits of authentic faith.

**“But thank God! He gives us victory over sin and death through our Lord Jesus Christ.”
(First Corinthians 15:57/NLT)**

Discussion Questions

1. Can you think of a time when you weren't prepared for competition? If so, what caused you to be unprepared and how did that impact your performance?
2. Did you try to hide those issues from your coaches, teammates, family members, or friends? Explain.
3. Would you describe yourself as someone who is open about their life or someone who is closed off and doesn't like talking to others about personal problems? Has that approach helped or hindered your ability to get through difficult times?
4. On a scale of 1 to 10 (one being not honest at all; 10 being completely honest), how would you rank your honesty with yourself as it pertains to your spiritual life? Do you find it easy or difficult to be honest with God about the things going on in your heart? Explain.
5. Do you struggle worshipping God in truth? If so, in what ways do you think that could potentially cause problems? On the other hand, how do you think having authentic faith might have a positive impact on your life?
6. What are some things you need to do today that will help get real with yourself and get real with God?

Closing Prayer



For the Good

Featuring B.J. Futrell

NCAA All-American; University Worlds Silver Medalist

As athletes and coaches, it's inevitable that disappointments are going to come our way. No one can win every match. No one can win every championship. And sometimes, even worse things than losing can happen such as getting injured, not making the team, or getting fired. In those moments, it's never easy to understand why we are going through a tough time. It's even more difficult to imagine that anything positive might come out of a negative situation.

This is equally true in our everyday life away from the mat. Disappointments, hurts, rejections, and personal losses can often leave us trying to make sense of it all.

For B.J. Futrell, adversity came in some incredibly difficult circumstances that negatively impacted his burgeoning wrestling career. While wrestling at the University of Illinois, he tore the labrum in his shoulder. As Futrell rehabbed that injury, God started to do a work in his life.

“Up until that time, wrestling had become the most important thing in my life,” he says. “It was my identity. When I couldn't wrestle, that's when I realized how desperately I needed a relationship with Him. He showed me that I was created to worship Him and to live for His glory.”

Futrell certainly didn't enjoy being injured. It was frustrating for him to stand idly by as his teammates practiced and competed that season. But God took a bad situation and made something good out of it. Futrell's life-changing circumstance was yet another confirmation of the Apostle Paul's teaching to the Christians in Rome:

“And we know that God causes everything to work together for the good of those who love God and are called according to His purpose for them.” (Romans 8:28/NLT)

Futrell went on to earn All-American honors, but then faced yet another challenging health problem that prematurely ended his senior season. A heart irregularity required surgery and for a time, his career was in question. But this time, Futrell had a much different attitude.

“I had peace in my heart,” he says. “Even though it seemed like a disaster, I had knew that God had a plan for me. I couldn't understand it in the moment, but eventually became clear that He was working for my good in both situations.”

A year later, Futrell won a silver medal at the 2014 University Worlds and was emboldened to continue pursuing his Olympic dream. He refused to allow a setback to knock him off the path that God had prepared for him.

Bad things are going to come our way. That's just a fact of life in this broken world we call home. But we don't have to let those circumstances stop us from fulfilling our purpose. In fact, if we get out of the way and let God do His work, those bad things can be used to get us to where we need to be. More importantly, they can bring even more glory to Him.

Discussion Questions

1. What is one of the worst things that has happened to you as an athlete or coach? How did you deal with that circumstance?
2. When something bad happens to you, how does it usually impact your outlook on life and your enthusiasm for your personal pursuits?
3. Go back and read Romans 8:28. Have you ever experienced this in your athletic career? Explain. What about in your personal life away from wrestling?
4. Are you currently going through a bad situation right now or do you know someone else who is? Explain.
5. How might believing and embracing the truth found in Romans 8:28 help you or someone else get through those difficult times?

Closing Prayer



Follow the Leader

Featuring Heath Eslinger

Five-Time Southern Conference Championship Head Coach

Great teams have great coaches. Successful corporations have great CEOs. Vibrant churches have great pastors. Strong families have great parents. And the list goes on and on. When there is great leadership in charge of any group, good things tend to happen.

But here's the catch.

No matter how great a leader might be, their leadership only matters if it is actually being followed. You might have the greatest coach in the world, but if you don't follow his or her instruction, you won't reap the benefits of their invaluable guidance. You might have great parents, but if you don't follow their example or obey the rules they have created for the family, you will likely find yourself struggling in different areas of your life.

Heath Eslinger has a strong appreciation for great leadership. He was blessed to have Christian parents that raised him with biblical principles. He was also blessed to have committed coaches at various stages of his wrestling career that helped him achieve his goals as an athlete.

But back to the catch.

Eslinger learned that the laws of leadership also applied to his faith. He knew about Jesus from a young age yet never truly followed Him until his senior year in high school. And then in college, Eslinger continued to follow Jesus and experienced a high level of spiritual growth.

"For the time, I was pursuing Christ on my own," he explains. "I had to do that to survive. It was either sink or swim, and I chose to swim."

What he learned during that time was that his ultimate calling was to simply follow Christ.

"When Jesus called His disciples, He always used those two words: 'Follow Me,'" Eslinger says. "Those men dropped what they were doing and obeyed. But so many times we look left, look right, or we look behind us, instead of making that decision to follow and trust Him completely."

It might seem strange that these men would stop what they were doing and immediately follow Jesus. But it was actually a very logical decision based on Jesus' growing reputation as a great teacher, His known association with John the Baptist, and the fact that He had already performed miracles. The disciples knew there was something special about this man and they all responded to His call quickly and without question. Later on, however, Jesus shared with them a harsh reality that perhaps they had not expected. Following Him wasn't going to be easy:

“Then Jesus said to his disciples, ‘If any of you wants to be my follower, you must turn from your selfish ways, take up your cross, and follow me.’” (Matthew 6:24/NLT)

When Jesus referred to a cross, it was both symbolic and prophetic. Crucifixion was a popular form of execution within the Roman Empire. Jesus was telling the disciples that following Him was going to be the spiritual equivalent of taking up a cross and being put to death. Little did they know at the time that Jesus would one day face the same fate in the physical realm.

For some people, the initial decision to accept Christ into their heart is an easy one. Salvation is a free gift and comes with the promise of eternal life. Following Him can also lead to some tough decisions. It might require shedding some things in our life that don't honor Him or taking a path that He chooses for us, not the path we chose for ourselves.

But just like Eslinger discovered, following Jesus will eventually lead us to the exact spot where He wants us to be.

“As wrestlers, one of the things we lack sometimes is trust in the plan,” he says. “When things don't go our way, we begin to have some doubts. The same is true in our everyday lives. You have to continue to follow God and the right situations will present themselves. Don't worry about five years down the road or even a year from now. Be in 100 percent pursuit of God's will today. As you do that, you'll always be in the right place at the right time.”

Following God requires trust and obedience. It also requires endurance and perseverance. That's why Jesus' analogy of the cross can be so difficult for those who have chosen to pick it up and follow Him. It reminds us that walking with Him isn't a walk in the park.

Thankfully, there is always strength in the journey (see **Isaiah 41:10**) and the reward is far greater (and infinitely longer lasting) than anything this world can offer. It might seem tough at times, but wholeheartedly following *the* leader is the best decision you'll ever make.

Discussion Questions

1. Who are some people that you would consider to be great leaders and why? What are some qualities that great leaders usually exhibit?
2. Do you generally find it easy or difficult to follow whoever is in charge? Explain. Are there certain types of leaders you find easier to follow than others? Why is that?
3. How would you have responded if you had been placed in the disciples' shoes and asked to leave everything behind and follow Jesus?
4. When you decided to accept Christ, was it an easy decision or one that took time to make? Explain. Has your walk with Him always been easy or have you experienced challenges along the way?
5. What are some things you might need to lay down in order to fully accept the call to pick up your cross and follow Jesus?

Closing Prayer