

WINNING AND LOSING

Superbowl Sunday is coming up! After that we'll have March Madness, then there'll be the NBA championships, and then we'll have baseball season and the race to the pennant and the World Series. Then it'll be football season again and we can all get depressed. To fill in any dead time along the way there'll be golf tournaments, tennis tournaments, NASCAR and, for those whose taste runs to the bizarre, WWF SMACKDOWN! Let's face it: sports is our national religion and winners are the gods we worship. We've even built shrines to them at places like Cooperstown and Canton and decorated them with icons and relics of our gods: the bat used by Hank Aaron to hit his 500th home run; the jersey worn by Rocky Bleyer when he caught the pass that won the Superbowl. Names like Joe DiMaggio, Rocky Marciano, Jim Thorpe and Willie Mays have magic for us for one reason and one reason only: they were winners—and we worship winners. There is no pantheon of also-rans, no temple where losers are worshiped. As a matter of fact it's just the opposite: one of the most demeaning things we can say about someone is that they are a loser. We don't even pity losers—we just forget them.

Our society is not unique in this regard. Athletic competition—and the worship of winners and contempt for losers that it breeds—goes back to the dawn of history. The Greeks had their games in which the victors received crowns of victory—as a matter of fact Paul refers to them in his *Letter to the Philippians*. The Mayans held games after which members of the losing team were thrown into pits so that the spectators could watch them swim around until they drowned. The Romans had their Circus Maximus where gladiators fought to the death and Christians were forced to fight lions with their bare hands for the amusement of bloodthirsty crowds. Ever since the fall, man has had an insatiable desire to see people exalt themselves by defeating one another in contests, by becoming winners at the expense of losers. The value of this enterprise is never questioned, except, of course, on those occasions when fans become overexcited and join in the competition by hurling objects at one another or beating each other up. But even after those mishaps, it doesn't take long for us to get back to business as usual. We all just take it for granted that winning, as Vince Lombardi famously said, is not everything—it's the only thing.

It is no wonder, then, that ancient Israel expected the coming Messiah, her deliverer, to be a winner. Actually there were two schools of thought about how the Messiah was going to win. One group of rabbis believed that he would come as a warrior prince like David who would lead Israel to victory over her enemies and establish a new world empire. The other group expected Messiah to come as a divine judge who would punish Israel's enemies for their wickedness and reward Israel for her supposed faithfulness. Whichever expectation proved right, Israel would be the winner and her enemies the losers. Therefore the Israelites were deaf to Isaiah's proclamation that Messiah would come neither as a warrior prince nor a judge, but as a suffering servant who would be "despised and abhorred." In other words, as what the world calls a loser. Israel didn't want to hear that and we don't like to hear it either.

But in today's *Old Testament* lesson from Isaiah, that's exactly what we do hear—from the servant Himself. "*Despised and abhorred by the nation,*" he laments, "*I have labored*

to no purpose; I have spent my strength in vain and for nothing.” (Isaiah 49:4, 7) Later, Isaiah says of him: “He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.” (Isaiah 53:3) Can this be the Messiah? God himself declares that it is so: “Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.” This is the Messiah alright, for “messiah” means “the chosen one.” And when he comes it will be as the Savior not only of Israel, but of the entire world, as God also says: “It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.” (Isaiah 49:1-7)

Now there can be no doubt as to who this servant is: he is Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world, the Savior who came to bear men’s sins to the cross and take them with him to the grave. Jesus, the loser of all time, who entered no competitions, won no trophies, ran no company, accumulated no wealth, and died naked and penniless. Jesus, whose gifts of healing earned him the hatred and contempt of his own people; whose first sermon in his home town almost got him thrown off a cliff; who was hounded from town to town, plotted against by his professional colleagues, targeted for assassination by the religious leaders of his day, betrayed by one of his closest friends, and then tortured and killed to appease a mob that was howling for his blood. Paul summarized Jesus’ life very simply: *“He made himself nothing.” (Phil. 2:7)*

That’s not the kind of career that gets your picture on the cover of *Fortune* or *Newsweek* or *Sports Illustrated*. Though He was the Man of all time, he would never have been selected to be *Time Magazine’s* “man of the year.” Magazine covers are reserved for people who have made something of themselves—not people who have made themselves nothing; people who have earned the world’s respect rather than their contempt. People who have won rather than lost at the game of life. And so all our lives we are driven to win. When we are kids we want more toys than anyone else. When we’re teenagers, we want more friends and a cooler car than anyone else. When we’re adults we want bigger houses and more prestigious jobs than anyone else. And then at the end, when we go to our graves toyless, carless and houseless, we are just as dead as the losers who had nothing. And what difference has all our winning made?

Often the meaninglessness of winning becomes apparent long before the end. Dr. Larry Crabb tells of fifteen female CEO’s of Fortune 500 companies who were asked if their success had made them happy. All fifteen said that they would trade everything they had for one good relationship. One good relationship. Shouldn’t that tell us something? Shouldn’t that give us cause to examine the proposition we hold to be axiomatic: that winning is more important than anything else? That it’s “the only thing?” Shouldn’t it prompt us to consider the possibility that loving others and being loved by them might be a worthier goal than seeking competitive advantage? That good relationships just might be more important than figuring out who won and who lost? That serving other people might bring us more joy than defeating them? Or, for that matter, worshipping them?

Winning has become our national idol and like any other idol it needs to be demolished. Most of us aren’t even aware of the fact that we have idols but we do, and they are our worst enemies. For one man it may be the idol of rising to the top of his company—or any company. And so he sacrifices everything—his time with his family, his physical and emotional health—maybe even his integrity—to that idol. And then suddenly he’s fifty

years old and he realizes that he's not going to make it to anywhere near the top. In fact he may not even be able to hold onto the job he has. And nobody cares about all the time he spent away from his family and all the crow he had to eat to get to where he is—which isn't much of a place to be anyway. The world can seem very bleak to that man. Or what about the woman who has done everything imaginable to preserve her youthful looks and begins to realize that she's just sweeping water uphill: time and age are going to win the battle no matter what she does. These are real situations that people find themselves in every single day. You see, our idols don't just sit there and accept our worship—they turn on us and devour us. In the end they reward us with the only things they have to give—despair and death.

But they can't do a single thing to us that we don't let them do. And idols have two mortal enemies. Their first mortal enemy is the truth—the truth that God gives us through his Word, prayer and worship. Their second mortal enemy of idols is love: the love that we receive from God and from our brothers and sisters in Christ that empowers us to count the needs of others as more important than our own needs. Loving others in truth and action—all the time trusting God for the strength to persevere in doing so. In other words, a living, breathing faith in Jesus Christ, the suffering servant of God, the Lamb of God Who is the way, the truth and the life.

God offers us a relationship with this man of sorrows, this one who was “...*despised and rejected among men*” and had “...*no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*” (Isaiah 53:2) We can take him or leave him: he has given us that option, but if we take him, we take on his journey as our own. It's a very different kind of journey than the one the prince of this world offers you. He invites you to hop on board a train filled with the pleasures and promises of all the glory his world has to offer. But you won't like the final destination, because it's a hell-bound train.

Jesus beckons you to travel down a narrower road, a road that has few luxurious lodgings and at times brings trials and even persecution. But each day you travel it you will be able to discern your destination a little more clearly than you could the day before. And that destination is a place of indescribable joy, a place of pure truth and beauty and love, a place of justice and righteousness and peace—a place the Servant Himself has prepared for you to live forever with Him and the Father.

And when you look back you'll discover that the trip was not so hard after all: your yoke was easy and your burden was light, your present troubles were not worth comparing to the glory which awaited you every step of the way.

And then you'll be able to see clearly what you knew by faith all along: that what the world called winning was losing and that by losing everything for Him, you came out the biggest winner of all.

Amen.

Isaiah 49:1-7 The Servant of the LORD

49 Listen to me, O coastlands,
and give attention, you peoples from afar.
The LORD called me from the womb,
from the body of my mother he named my name.
² He made my mouth like a sharp sword;
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me a polished arrow;
in his quiver he hid me away.
³ And he said to me, “You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will be glorified.”
⁴ But I said, “I have labored in vain;
I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity;
yet surely my right is with the LORD,
and my recompense with my God.”
⁵ And now the LORD says,
he who formed me from the womb to be his servant,
to bring Jacob back to him;
and that Israel might be gathered to him—
for I am honored in the eyes of the LORD,
and my God has become my strength—
⁶ he says:
“It is too light a thing that you should be my servant
to raise up the tribes of Jacob
and to bring back the preserved of Israel;
I will make you as a light for the nations,
that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth.”
⁷ Thus says the LORD,
the Redeemer of Israel and his Holy One,
to one deeply despised, abhorred by the nation,
the servant of rulers:
“Kings shall see and arise;
princes, and they shall prostrate themselves;
because of the LORD, who is faithful,
the Holy One of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Matthew 7:13-14

¹³ “Enter by the narrow gate. For the gate is wide and the way is easy that leads to destruction, and those who enter by it are many. ¹⁴ For the gate is narrow and the way is hard that leads to life, and those who find it are few.