

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

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***March Madness, Quidditch, and the Meaning of Life***

*1 Corinthians 9.24-27 and 4 Maccabees 17.11-16<sup>1</sup>*

Russ Dean, March 18, 2007



And so, it has begun, again. It may be the most intoxicating of all great sporting events, because it lasts not just a few hours, nor even a weekend – if you count all the pre-game hoopla that surrounds, say, the Superbowl. It even surpasses the two weeks of motor-mania that culminates in the dizzying Daytona 500. “March Madness” is the sporting event to end all sporting events, and “madness” because it imprisons the attention of this nation for an entire month. First comes the build-up to the conference tournaments, and a first weekend of “paralysis by television.” And there’s hardly time to regain one’s sanity or priority, one’s emotional ballast from the celebration of victory or the agony of defeat, before the pairings are announced and the endless discussions of “bracket-ology” begin. We’ve just finished that frantic week, in which each of sixty-four selected teams is scrutinized in nauseating detail, every angle of every strength and every miniscule weakness is investigated and editorialized or broadcast or blogged for a nation

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<sup>1</sup> The Apocrypha is a collection of works written/collected in the “intertestamental period.” They provide stories and insights of Jewish life in the time between our Old and New Testaments. Though they are not considered canonical by most Protestant Christians, they are given equal authority as scripture by the Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches. The context of today’s text is a gruesome setting of torture in which the second-century (BCE) Greek tyrant, Antiochus Epiphanes IV, who had captured Jerusalem and defiled its temple by sacrificing a pig on the altar, offers the meat of this cooked pig to nine faithful Jews. Eleazar, a priest, and then seven sons and their mother, are all offered a chance to save their lives, simply by eating this pork. In faithfulness to their ritual law, however, all nine refuse and are subsequently subjected to a host of inhumane tortures before they die. The text gives testimony to the power of faith, and these verses serve as a summary of the prior chapters, setting the events in the imagery of an athletic contest, which is why I chose them for today’s sermon. *Truly the contest in which they were engaged was divine, for on that day virtue gave the awards and tested them for their endurance. The prize was immortality in endless life. Eleazar was the first contestant, the mother of the seven sons entered the competition, and the brothers contended. The tyrant was the antagonist, and the world and the human race were the spectators. Reverence for God was victor and gave the crown to its own athletes. Who did not admire the athletes of the divine legislation? Who were not amazed?*

still itching to follow the bouncing ball. During this week, in sports-nuts everywhere, you can detect a hazy, hung-over-but not-(yet)-absolutely-passed-out stupor that comes from that incurable addiction to see just one more game of basketball!

According to one internet website on sports gambling, ten percent of Americans (more than 30 million people) place bets on the National Collegiate Athletic Association's national men's basketball tournament. Though much of this is through the completely tame "office pool," the FBI reportedly estimates that we now win (and lose) more than two-and-a-half billion dollars on this obsession.<sup>2</sup> In addition to this astounding figure, the Chicago firm, Challenger, Gray & Christmas, places the loss of productivity in the American workplace at more than \$1.2 billion.<sup>3</sup> Instead of working, apparently, lots of Americans call in sick, or keep an eye peeled on an office set or their computer.

Thursday afternoon I called from my office into the hallway, "Michael, any word on the Davidson game?" "Yeah... they lost" he said, and then he gave me their score along with about six more. Curious at how he knew this, I walked into his office to find his computer monitor covered with a half-dozen little windows, updating all of the real-time games every thirty seconds. (Of course, Michael was working diligently between each of those 30-second updates!)

We are a sports-obsessed people. We have elevated the professional athlete to the highest rank of honor in our society, making them the role models for our children – even when so many refuse to act like one. A stark look at some of the numbers indicates our madness. 40 million Americans cannot afford health coverage for themselves and their

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<sup>2</sup> <http://sportsgambling.about.com/b/a/257598.htm>

<sup>3</sup> As reported in the Charlotte observer last week.

families this year, but Tiger Woods took home more than 80 million dollars in 2006 because of his ability to hit a little white ball with a club. There are at least 5,000 men, women and children in Charlotte, NC who will have no home, no bed to call their own tonight, but Michael Schumacher will earn about \$219,000 while he sleeps for driving his car in a circle, very fast! In the 2003-2004 academic year, the average salary for North Carolina teachers in grades K-12 was \$46,500<sup>4</sup>, and with only a high school degree on his resume, 28 year-old Kevin Garnett will make that much money playing seven minutes of basketball. Bread for the world estimates that every five seconds a child dies from starvation. In that 5-second period, about the time it takes him to call the defense and take a snap, Peyton Manning will earn about \$7.00 (before being chased around the yard by a bunch of large men wearing tight pants). At that rate and at \$2.00 per loaf, he could buy 23 million loaves of bread with his year's paycheck.<sup>5</sup>

It's March Madness, folks. All year long!

Please understand that I understand capitalism, and that for the most part, I'm grateful for its principles. The truth is, if I were able to make as much impact on the U.S. economy with my preaching as Tiger does by hitting that little white ball, and you paid me accordingly, I'd probably take my check for today's sermon (all \$1,632,653 worth) and put it in the bank., just like Tiger does. I don't begrudge players for taking obscene salaries. And I don't blame an inanimate system which is designed to pay what the market will bear. The system is only a reflection of the people who drive it, so the real madness, which March only magnifies, is the grievous fact that our nation's priorities are

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aft.org/salary/2004/download/releases/SalarySurvey-NC.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> These figures were derived from the annual salaries reported on Forbes.com. Tiger Woods: \$80.3 million; Michael Schumacher: \$80 million; Kevin Garnett \$29.7 million; Peyton Manning: \$42 million.

so grossly out of whack that you and I will pay those salaries (even as we complain or wag our moralistic fingers at those who make them).

I sat in the new Charlotte Coliseum on Wednesday night, watching a handful of almost-teenagers run up and down the court trying to put a ball through a metal hoop, and the mid-court ticket in my hand (which I did not pay for) bore a market value of \$150. That would have paid for 75 loaves of bread, which no doubt would have saved more than a handful of the 1800 children who starved while I was cheering. And you don't have to own season tickets in a Bobcats luxury box, or own a PSL in Bank of America Stadium, to be a part of the madness. If you find yourself donning any piece of clothing this week that is emblazoned with the now-ubiquitous swoosh, you can know that you, too, have contributed to the system that will pay Nike's best-known spokesman more in one year than is earned by all the employees in all the factories in all the world who make those products. All of them, combined, make less in a year than Michael Jordan does!<sup>6</sup>

It is madness. All year long.

We are a sports-obsessed people. We may not be any different from any people who have ever lived. Any where. At any time. It's in our blood.

Thank God for it.

Have you ever seen two squirrels playing up and down and all around the bark of a tree, barking at one another as they go? ("Tag, you're it...") Have you watched two birds dipping playfully in the air, winging their way in directionless arcs, body to body? Have you seen two dogs yipping and yelping, running, chasing, jumping, rolling around

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<sup>6</sup> I read this statistic several years ago, and though I don't have a current citation, I have no trouble assuming that it is still correct.

the yard like wrestling children? Even for squirrels, birds, and dogs the business of surviving one day to the next cannot be all there is to life. When we become obsessed with the almighty dollar, whether we're looking for the next million or the next paycheck, when our jobs become the only horizon in our view, when climbing the corporate ladder becomes the only exercise we take in, when life in all its mundane repetition just gets a little too boring... thank God for March Madness!

Despite all my critique which might sound to the contrary, I'm glad the Carolina Panthers are in town. (I still don't understand why church people can't come to worship and then go to the game, but I do love having the team in town!) I like the excitement of professional basketball and hope Mr. Jordan will use the \$20 million in salary increases he's promised for next season to the team's advantage. (We don't need underpaid athletes on our roster!) I love the night air, the crack of the bat, the seventh inning stretch and the singing of "Take me out to the ballgame..." at the Charlotte Knights' beautiful stadium. And the excitement that NASCAR brings to town, while still curious to me, is mind-boggling. And, like many of you, my family's weekends are filled, mostly, not by watching sports, but by playing them – for sports is life, in so many good ways.

Everyone who had a coach can tell you why she or he was important to them, and what they learned from their athletic experience. Everyone who played in their youth can tell you the highs and the lows that are burned in their brains. A loss to a Newberry county team when I was in the eighth grade, and the score, 63-27, will probably go with me to my grave! I can still see the look on Derwin Kinnard's face, who was guarding me when I banked in my first two-point basket from the top of the key at the gym at Martha

Dendy Middle School. I can still feel the bitter pain from losing the high school conference tennis tournament to Brian Nutt from Spartanburg. I had him down 5-1 in the third set before the momentum changed in his favor. And I can still feel the adrenaline high of winning a come-from-behind championship match, 6-0 in the third set, to a much better player, one of the Huff twins from Daniel High in Clemson. I still miss the smell of the gym. The camaraderie of team play. I even miss the wind sprints!

March Madness is life! Thank God for it.

In her amazing series on a fictional wizard-boy named Harry Potter, J.K. Rowling packs symbolism into every event and name. This, according to preacher and scholar, John Killinger whose fascinating little book, *God, the Devil, and Harry Potter* documents many of her namings. There's sports mania in Harry Potter, too – for what culture has not had its own March Madness? The game called Quidditch often takes center stage as it enthralles Hogwarts School of Wizardry with its fast-paced excitement and its no-holds-barred competition between dormitories. Killinger says Rowling has named the game aptly, for Quidditch, as with all of our March Madnesses, "...is simply the way things are in their irreducible being, the unadorned, unavoidable... uniqueness of existence."

Quidditch (we might just say sports in general) is the thisness of life!

And because it is so, there is the great tension and ambiguity we find in sports. The excesses. The injustices. The inspirations. The humanity of it all. For every crazed mother who hires a hit-man to assassinate her daughter's cheerleading rival, there are millions of mothers encouraging their children to win well when they can, and to lose with grace. For every adolescent baseball player who beats to death his victorious

opponent with his baseball bat, there are millions of boys and girls who learn the appropriate response to life's victories and life's defeats on the diamond, the field, the court. For every Ron Artest who climbs into the stands to attack his detractors, there are many more like Andy Herr, who will slow down, hold up to finish second when the guy ahead of him mistakenly takes the wrong turn in a 10K race. For every group of fans who have grossly misplaced their priorities, like the Arizona State crowd "who in 1988 taunted Arizona's Steve Kerr with chants of 'P-L-O' after Kerr's father had been assassinated by terrorists in Beirut," there are the millions who cheer for the underdog, and who laugh and "high-five" their victorious competitors when the contest is through.<sup>7</sup>

March Madness is life, a reflection of the good and bad which lies within the heart of every single one of us.

There is much to be said of our addiction to athletics and to our athletes. But at the heart of sport is the challenge to give one's entire being to a something. So Paul can encourage the faithful: if an athlete will exercise complete self control and offer singular devotion for the sake of a wreath of ivy, the equivalent in his day to the NCAA tournament trophy, what will we give when the crown of life is at stake?

Flannery O'Connor once said of faith, "You shall know the truth and the truth shall make you... odd." Such is the prize that awaits those whose theology of living says *the last will be the first* (Matthew 19.30)... *the servant will be the greatest* (Matthew 20.27)... going *the extra mile* (Matthew 5.41) is not in service of our own athletic training, but in the submission of the self to another... Such is the prize that awaits those

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<sup>7</sup> These references come from Rick Reilly's, *The Life of Reilly*, a collection of his editorial columns printed in "Sports Illustrated." The article is entitled, "Too Many Spoilsports," p.25.

who will follow in the Way of one who wore no championship crown, but a crown of thorns, whose intense loyalty earned him not a dime, but cost him his life.

It is March Madness. But the madness of Christ is the only way that leads to real life.

May it be so!