

Significance in Sports Ministry

For the last fifteen years I've watched various sports ministries, including the one which employs me, with alternating feelings of excitement, gratitude, disappointment, dismay, wonder and dilemma. A number of factors lead to these conflicted feelings and questions. One of the hardest questions I've asked myself follows.

Is ministry with the highest profile and among those with greatest influence more significant than ministry with the most obscure and least influential? Is my ministry with an American college football team more significant than my work with a rural junior high girls basketball team? I'd like to think that the answer is simple and obvious, but our actions and attitudes often betray our true values.

This becomes magnified when we gather sports chaplains and leaders in sports ministries together. Often those who serve with the highest profile teams are given the spotlight and the microphone while those who work with the less prominent sports programs are relegated to the corners of the room and given little thought or consideration. Sadly, we sometimes fall prey to the world's way of elevating the powerful and prominent while neglecting the gift of God in the simple and obscure.

Do we really think that the ministry which occurs among Division III female tennis players is less significant than that which happens among the players and coaches of the Division I BCS national champions? I would hope not. If so, we stand in direct opposition to James chapter 2:1-4, "1My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism. 2Suppose a man comes into your meeting wearing a gold ring and fine clothes, and a poor man in shabby clothes also comes in. 3If you show special attention to the man wearing fine clothes and say, 'Here's a good seat for you,' but say to the poor man, 'You stand there' or 'Sit on the floor by my feet,' 4have you not discriminated among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts?"

There is no doubt that the more high profile coaches and players whom we serve have a greater "platform" for the sharing of their faith and that is certainly

the ethic which drives some of our ministry with them. Let's be very careful with that approach. We may find ourselves using the player or thrusting him into public declarations which don't match his level of commitment. We've all seen those who are quoted in the news one week, sharing their faith or thanking God for a victory, only to see the same player's name come up in a police report in the same newspaper for driving under the influence the following week. In this case, his profile neither serves him nor the Lord's Kingdom very well.

In my own ministry station, I sit in the middle of this continuum. Our area university and its sports program is considered "mid-major" and thus neither among the elite nor among the least powerful. When leaders of sports ministries gather, I see my colleagues from all points along the spectrum and am often saddened by the perceived pecking order. Even in our roles of service to Christ's Kingdom we place ourselves in rank according to the prominence of our programs or the most recent season's record. For some the perception seems to be, "That team just won a national championship, their chaplain must be doing a great job." This is foolish and diminishes each one involved.

Let's be sure to value all those whom we serve in the way Christ Jesus does. Let's be sure to see the significance in each heart and to value each encounter, regardless of the relative prominence of the person. Your ministry with the twelve year old novice competitor is of equal significance to your service of the highest profile professional of your acquaintance. I certainly would and I imagine you would do well to recall James' challenge, "My brothers, as believers in our glorious Lord Jesus Christ, don't show favoritism."

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