

Soaring With Eagles (Teamwork - Chapter 11)

n/a

Ready:

"Do not be mismatched with unbelievers. For what partnership is there between righteousness and lawlessness? Or what fellowship does light have with darkness?" -2 Corinthians 6:14

"When you choose your friends, don't be short-changed by choosing personality over character." -W. Somerset Maugham

Set

When Steve Fitzhugh picks his friends, he does so very methodically, carefully and selectively. There are certain qualities he looks for in people, and he takes an almost formulaic approach to all potential relationships. And he teaches others to do the same.

For instance, Fitzhugh says the primary quality of a close friend is that he or she is like-minded in his or her faith. The individual must have accepted Jesus as his or her Savior and must have made a long-term commitment to following Him. But that's just the beginning of Fitzhugh's laundry list, which also includes trust, confidence and character.

"I don't have to watch my back with them," he says. "They're confident enough in themselves to encourage my success. I don't want to hang around someone that's hatin' on me. I want to hang around people who want me to be a champion. I don't want anybody around me who's looking for opportunities to bring me down. I want somebody who's looking for opportunities to build me up and encourage me to be a success."

Fitzhugh doesn't take his choices lightly, because he hasn't always had much of a choice at all. Growing up in Akron, Ohio, the former NFL safety with the Denver Broncos didn't get to pick his family, his neighborhood or his environment. His world was punctuated by drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, physical and verbal abuse, and the divorce of his parents when he was about seven years old. Fitzhugh lost his 60-year-old mother to a cancer linked to her 40-year smoking habit.

"I saw all of the bitterness and animosity of a broken family," he says. "I saw siblings with a ton of potential have their opportunities short-circuited because of their bad decisions. I have a brother, Chuck, who was an outstanding basketball player but got kicked out of school four times and the last time for good."

"When my brother Raymond was 18," Fitzhugh continues, "he was one of the best running backs in the state of Ohio and was offered full scholarships by colleges all across the country. But he fell victim to crack abuse and died at the age of 41."

Amid all the darkness, a ray of sunshine finally broke through and gave Fitzhugh the chance to make a decision of his own. When he was 12, his sister started attending church with a boyfriend who eventually left for a Bible college. Wanting some company, she asked her little brother to tag along. That was in January 1975.

Six months later, sometime in June, Fitzhugh was riding home from church with his sister, and she asked him if he had ever accepted Jesus in his heart.

"And I said, 'No, I haven't,'" he recalls. "So my sister prayed the prayer of faith with me as we sat there in the driveway. And the rest is history. That was the first time I found out there was a plan. It just changed everything, because somewhere deep in my mind, I knew that life as I was experiencing it wasn't the way it was supposed to be. When I found out God had a plan for my life, it was an 'ah-ha' moment for me. I jumped onto it and held on to it, and it revolutionized my life."

Fitzhugh now had the strength to say no to drugs and alcohol. He was able to avoid trouble at school and steer clear of the distractions that had beset his parents and siblings. And even when Fitzhugh's sister fell away from God and stopped attending church, he was determined to stay the course.

"I rode the church van every Sunday by myself until I graduated from high school," he says. "I can count how many times I missed on one hand. I wanted to be what I was supposed to be doing. Part of it was discipline, and part of it was the fact that I didn't want to end up where the rest of my family was. They didn't have the plan. I had the plan. I wanted to know more about the plan. I wanted a healthy relationship with Jesus Christ. I wanted everything God had for me, and I knew that whatever was going to happen was in His hands."

Fitzhugh's commitment to fellowship with other believers and his hunger to know God sustained him throughout his high-school career and carried over to his college days, where he met regularly with various ministry groups on the campus of Miami University of Ohio. He avoided the trappings that so many young athletes fall into and remained faithful to righteous living.

"I can't tell you that I was an alcoholic, and I can't tell you that I was strung out on drugs," Fitzhugh says. "But because of the commitment I made to Christ, the Word of God became a boundary for me. Instead of pulling me out of drama, it kept me from being caught up in drama. It kept me from using steroids. It kept me from getting drunk every weekend. It kept me from becoming a sex maniac. It kept me from manipulating women. The Word of God set boundaries of character for me, and that's how I was able to navigate through high school and college and even the NFL."

Fitzhugh says his relationship with Jesus also made him a better teammate. He now understood that biblical teamwork required Christ-centered confidence and humility. And although he learned the value of teamwork growing up as a three-sport athlete, it was his experience at Miami University of Ohio that turned that knowledge into wisdom.

"I played outside linebacker, and in college the competition was much stiffer and the goals

were much loftier,” Fitzhugh says. “I had to make sure that no matter what, the quarterback or the toss sweep didn’t get outside of me. I had to trust the defensive tackle that if I came up to contain, then he was going to be able to do his part. That’s when I realized just how valuable it is to do your part—and do your part well—for the success of the team.”

Fitzhugh was learning invaluable lessons about spiritual teamwork as well. The temptations in college were much greater than anything he had faced in high school, and it took a band of Christian brothers—he and his four dedicated suitemates—to brave the battlefield together.

“We needed each other to encourage and build each other up, so we could be what God had called us to be,” Fitzhugh says. “We would do that in different ways. Some days we would have a Scripture for the week and if we ran into one of our suitemates, we had to be able to recite that Scripture. It was built-in accountability. We were holding one another up. We knew each other’s struggles, and it was important for us to help each other get through this thing as strongly as we could.”

After his college career, Fitzhugh spent two years in the NFL, playing with the Denver Broncos. While there, he was nicknamed “Priest.”

“I was a man of God and I wasn’t ashamed about it,” he says. “That was just how I rolled.”

Upon retirement from professional sports, he turned his attention toward ministry and got involved with Fellowship of Christian Athletes in the Washington, DC, area, where he currently resides with his wife, Dr. Karen Broussard-Fitzhugh, and daughters Nicole and Siona. Fitzhugh’s relationship with FCA grew into a partnership, and today he serves as the national spokesman for One Way 2 Play—Drug Free, which spreads a drug-free message to high schools, colleges and juvenile detention centers across America.

Fitzhugh is also the founder and executive director of PowerMoves, a national youth organization that uses athletics, academics and the arts to inspire young people to succeed.

When he speaks to teenagers and young adults, one of the key points he focuses on is the importance of friends and surrounding yourself with people of character who will become your teammates for life.

“I don’t know if it’s because I’m getting older or if I have less tolerance,” Fitzhugh says, “but there is so much drama in the world, and most of that drama comes about when you’re hanging around folks you don’t need to be hanging around.”

Not only does this apply to friendships, but it also applies when it comes to choosing a spouse—the person with whom you will spend the rest of your life. It’s a principle that Fitzhugh can back up with personal experience.

“When I was searching for a wife, I had a little test question I would ask anyone I was dating, just to see where her head was,” he reveals. “I would just casually, nonchalantly ask, ‘What’s your ultimate goal in life?’ That seems like an innocent question.

“I had young ladies say they wanted to get their law degree or they wanted to be a doctor, but that wasn’t what I wanted to hear,” Fitzhugh continues. “When I asked that question to the lady I married, she paused and said, ‘My ultimate goal in life is to live a life that will be pleasing to my heavenly Father.’ Now, I can marry somebody like that. And the reality is, that’s how I choose who I’m going to hang out with. There are some people who use certain

kinds of language and have certain behaviors and attitudes that I choose not to enjoy downtime with. I don't want to be in situations where they're going to push me in directions I don't want to go."

The Bible is full of similar advice. Proverbs 22:24-25 tells us, "Don't make friends with an angry man, and don't be a companion of a hot-tempered man, or you will learn his ways and entangle yourself in a snare." The apostle Paul takes it a step further when he says in 2 Corinthians 6:14, "Do not be mismatched with unbelievers." And in verse 17, he reminds us of God's admonishment to "come out from among them and be separate."

Choosing godly friends isn't about taking the fun out of life, as so many young believers are often fooled into believing. Rather, God's desire is to protect us from the dangers that come from spending too much time with people who are going in the opposite direction of righteousness and have no interest in seeking after His will for their lives. The negative effect of disobeying this principle is something Fitzhugh has seen time and time again in the lives of young people and adults alike.

"If I can hang out with your good friends for a few minutes, I will then be able to come back to you and predict all of the things in life you'll accomplish or all of the things in life you should stop dreaming about because it isn't going to happen as long as you're rolling with them," Fitzhugh says. "We are very impressionable beings. It's so important who we decide to spend time with. The wrong company can corrupt good morals."

There's an old Japanese proverb that says, "When the character of a man is not clear to you, look to his friends." This also rings true with Fitzhugh, who often uses professional athletes as examples of what happens when poorly selected friends end up derailing a train loaded with potential and promise.

"There are so many great athletes who have made horrible decisions," he says. "I wonder how many of them made horrible decisions because they were someplace they shouldn't have been with people they shouldn't have been hanging with. Very rarely does somebody just get up and say, 'I'm going to go rape, pillage and plunder.' There's always somebody saying, 'Come on. Let's go over here and have some fun.'"

"People don't plan on crazy stuff happening," he adds. "But crazy stuff happens, and too often it's because we're linked up with people who are going in a different direction. You've got to be able to say, 'Let's go this way' or you've got to cut them off and let them go."

Fitzhugh equates the two types of friends with eagles and chickens. The eagles are those friends who will support one another and build each other up. The chickens are those friends who lack moral integrity and the discipline to consistently make godly decisions. While eagles soar, the chickens stay on the ground, because, quite simply, they don't know how to fly.

"There are too many eagles who don't have the courage to cut off those one or two chickens who are hanging around," Fitzhugh says. "I've experienced that so often with young people and adults who 'woulda, coulda, shoulda,' but there was a chicken in the midst. That's what happened to my brother. My brother had a chicken in his life who kept giving him malt liquor, and he didn't know that malt liquor would take the next 25 years of his life. He was an eagle who never got off the ground."

Many times it's not the obvious temptations—such as drugs, alcohol or promiscuous sexual

behavior—that keep people from reaching their goals in life. Fitzhugh believes that how you live your life usually boils down to simply making a choice between the smooth, wide road that leads to mediocrity or the rocky, narrow road that leads to excellence.

“It’s so attractive sometimes to hang out with the chickens because there’s not much required of you,” explains Fitzhugh. “You don’t have to push yourself. You can stay in the chicken coop and eat chicken feed and stay away from the three-foot chicken fence, but you’ll never soar and touch the sky. You’ll never experience those things. There are a lot of eagles who never soar like an eagle because they spend so much time where it’s comfortable with the chickens.”

Fitzhugh finds personal inspiration to resist the easy way out in Deuteronomy 23:14: “For the LORD your God walks throughout your camp to protect you and deliver your enemies to you; so your encampments must be holy. He must not see anything improper among you or He will turn away from you.”

“God is in my camp, or you can even say, ‘God is in my training camp,’ to protect me,” Fitzhugh expounds. “In other words, He’s watching my back. And He’s there to deliver my enemies to me. So if He’s going to send my enemies to me, I’ve got to bind them up and send them away. Your camp must be holy. You have to make sure there’s nothing wicked in your life, or He’ll see it and turn from you. But the Lord is in my camp. This is God’s thing. He is up in my camp to protect me and to deliver me. He’s on my team, and I have to make sure I’m representing Him on His team.”

In the book of Acts, we find an awe-inspiring team of believers who show us what holy encampments look like and what can happen when a group of individuals decide to soar like eagles and remove the chickens from their midst. It was the Day of Pentecost, and the apostle Peter had just preached a message that resulted in 3,000 conversions to the Christian faith.

Then, in Acts 4:42, we read that the followers of Christ “devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, and to prayers.” After that, many miracles took place and signs and wonders began to follow them; and in verse 47 we learn that “every day the Lord added to them those who were being saved.” In this ultimate example of teamwork, the early Christians worked together as a unified body. They did so by separating themselves from anyone who might desire to pull them apart. They did so by choosing to soar with eagles.

Fitzhugh says the same thing must happen today if we ever want to see positive changes in our personal lives, in our families, in our churches and in our neighborhoods. We can’t be afraid of losing some friends along the way if we ever want to fully realize the destiny that God has planned for our lives.

“It’s a short-term sacrifice for a long-term gain,” says Fitzhugh. “I’m willing to experience the brief disappointment I’m going to have because you’re mad at me because I wouldn’t go with you so that in life I can reach the heights I’ve been designed to reach. We all have the capacity to soar like eagles.”

Go

1. What are the important qualities you look for when choosing your friends? Can you think of a time when having the right friends pushed you to excel or helped you through a tough time?
2. In college, Steve Fitzhugh learned the value of good friends and teammates both on and off

the field. Who are some of your closest friends? How have your friendships played into your spiritual life?

3. Read Proverbs 22:24-25. Besides a hot temper, what are some attitudes or characteristics that you should try to avoid when choosing friends?

4. Read 2 Corinthians 6:14-18. Why do you think the apostle Paul takes such a harsh stance against having unsaved friends? Can you describe a situation where you had to separate yourself from a friend in order to move forward in your faith? How difficult was that decision? What was the end result?

5. Read Deuteronomy 23:14. What do you think a holy camp should look like? Read Acts 2:41-47. What are some things that this group of like-minded friends accomplished? What are some goals that you and your Christian friends have achieved? What are some dreams that you hope to accomplish as you choose to soar with eagles?

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Bible Reference:

2 Corinthians 6



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