

Living a Paradox (Serving - Chapter 1)

Ready:

Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.

Matthew 5:16

Set

One of the hardest obstacles for some people to overcome when it comes to accepting the Bible as infallible truth is the pervasive presence of paradox. The inclusion of these seemingly contradictory statements often plays tricks on the logical mind, even though the truth behind them can always be substantiated by neighboring Scriptures or by concepts revealed in more distant parts of God's Word.

Most of these paradoxical statements can be located in the four Gospels, where Jesus confounded the religious leaders of His time. For example, in Matthew 11:29-30, Jesus tells us that we can find rest in working for Him. In Matthew 19:30, He says that the "first will be last, and many who are last will be first" (*NIV*).

Another one of Christ's more prominent paradoxes can be found in Matthew 16:25, where Jesus tells His disciples, "For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life because of Me will find it."

But spiritual paradoxes don't just exist in the Bible. There are living, breathing examples of this concept that can be readily found in the world around us.

Take for instance Tony Dungy. As head coach of the Indianapolis Colts, he has consistently turned conventional wisdom on its head. Consider the fact that Dungy always gets his players' attention without raising his voice or swearing. He's also a highly successful NFL coach and an equally successful family man.

And then there's Dungy's curious belief that to be an effective leader, one must actually be a servant to those he is leading. Dungy got this paradoxical idea from Matthew 20:26-27, where Jesus teaches that "whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first among you must be your slave."

"Ever since I've been in a leadership position, my focus has been the model of Christ as the servant-leader," Dungy says. "There are different ways to lead, but I've always felt that it's better if other people follow me because they want to follow, not because I've been put up there as the leader and they have to follow. To do that, you have to earn people's trust and their respect, and the way to do that is to show them you are there to help them. As coaches,

that what's our job is—not necessarily to win a championship, but to help all the players, everyone in the organization, do their job as well as they can. That really is serving.”

In an age when players work tirelessly to gain the approval of their coaches in order to earn starting positions and playing time, Dungy is a rare breed. He doesn't relish the role of leader as a means to attain self-gratification or a propped-up sense of respect. Instead, Dungy truly sees himself as a servant to his players and his coaching staff. His main objective is to make everyone around him better at what they do.

“To me, Christ's model really was the best,” Dungy says. “I really try to, number one, be a role model and serve my team spiritually. I want to teach them as much as I can about football and how to be better players; but I also want to help them be good people, do well in the community and do well after football. So I try to present those things to them so that they can see that football isn't the end of the road. Therefore, I am hopefully serving them as individuals, serving their families and also serving them by giving everything I have to make them the best players they can be.”

Colts' linebacker Tyjuan Hagler is certainly a believer in Dungy's methods. Hagler, also a professing Christian, has thoroughly enjoyed playing in Indianapolis since his rookie season in 2005. Hagler, a member of the Dungy-led Super Bowl XLI championship team, sees the serving nature of his coach even in the small things—such as Dungy's consistently laid-back demeanor and his approach to teaching through respectful personal interaction.

“I don't like it when coaches yell at me and cuss me out,” Hagler says. “I like the coaches like him that just talk to you and break things down, like what you did wrong and what you need to do to correct it. I respect him so much for his coaching style, and I've got to thank God for bringing me to this team and Coach Dungy because that's the kind of coaching I respond better to.”

Dungy was exposed to the concept of serving at a very young age. In fact, he was raised by two parents who exemplified such a lifestyle through their strong commitment to education in Jackson, Michigan, where Dungy was born and raised. Dr. Wilbur and CleoMae Dungy set a standard for their son that was further solidified by other close family members.

“[My parents'] attitude toward their jobs was that they were really helping people learn,” Dungy recalls. “My grandfather was a minister, and I had two uncles who were ministers. That was their chosen way of serving and helping people understand the gospel and really doing it for other people's benefit. So I think I got to see that very early on just by watching my family.”

Dungy also learned early on that serving isn't some complicated and perhaps even scary process that includes traveling to third-world countries or forsaking one's dreams for a life dedicated to full-time ministry. Instead, he has always had a balanced view of what being a servant truly entails.

“When I think of serving, I think of using the talents that the Lord has given you to help other people,” Dungy simply states. “We always talk about using our talents for a purpose, but if you use them to help other people, I really feel like you're a servant.

“I just feel like I have that responsibility to model serving to others,” he adds. “Some of the volunteer work I do, the charity work, is very satisfying; but it's satisfying because you feel like you've helped some other people—whether it's visiting a prison or a jail, whether it's helping

out with Big Brothers or a Boys and Girls Club by giving someone an example. That part of it is important, and getting your satisfaction comes from feeling like you've helped someone, especially a young person.”

That desire to help young people—especially young athletes—is a primary reason behind Dungy’s lifelong support of Fellowship of Christian Athletes (FCA). He has seen time and again how one little spark can change another individual’s outlook forever. Dungy believes that the ministry of FCA provides an invaluable opportunity for coaches to point young people toward Jesus. As far as Dungy is concerned, there is no better union than the one between athletics and ministry.

“I love the Bible, and the Bible really talks about how working for the Lord and athletics go hand in hand in a number of places,” Dungy says. “Paul uses so many athletic metaphors because it’s so fitting. It’s hard work. It’s not easy. You need determination. You have to be physically tough. You have to be mentally strong. And that to me is the image that I get of us as Christians and how we should be working for the Lord.”

Dungy has served as a mentor in numerous organizations, such as Big Brothers, the Boys and Girls Club of America, All Pro Dad and, of course, FCA. But it’s that daily routine of teaching his players both football skills and life skills that he continues to find most rewarding. And from experience, he knows just how important that relationship can be over the length of an athlete’s career.

“So many players that we have,” Dungy says, “when we ask them who the guiding force in their life was if they didn’t have a dad, if they didn’t have a mom who got you going, they all say it was a high-school coach or a junior-high teacher or someone in their life when they were growing up. It’s a tremendous thing to be able to not only impact these players on the field in their sport but also impact them as people.

“Because of that responsibility of shaping these players spiritually as well as athletically, I think it’s so important that we as coaches feed ourselves spiritually. We all go to clinics. We all go to camps. We understand our sport. But we need to understand what God wants us to do and to stay focused in our life so that we can not only tell our players what to do, we can show them. I think that’s so critical.”

When Dungy shares his philosophy on mentoring as part of the coaching process, he’s not just reading from the pages of the latest bestseller on leadership, and he’s not bringing a belief that he conjured up over years of experience. Instead, Dungy brings to the table a tried-and-true method of relational leadership that was modeled over 2,000 years ago by the ultimate servant-leader.

“Jesus had quite a few disciples, but there were 12 guys that He really poured Himself into,” Dungy says. “Everything He did was to make those guys the best team they could be. At times, that involved teaching. At times, it involved Him being the example. At times, it involved one-on-one talks. For me, it’s the same thing. I want my players to know that I’m not the one trying to be up front and get all the rewards of our business, but I’m really there to make them the best team they can be. That’s going to involve working as hard as I can, spending hours studying the other team to get our game plans ready, and doing everything I can for them so that they can play well. But it’s more than that. It’s being involved, being there for them, being a sounding board for them and trying to help their families out. Anything that can help them get better at what they do, I’m here to provide that.”

And that brings us back to this mind-boggling concept of paradox. Dungy’s desire to serve others as a means to draw attention to his faith appears to send a conflicting message. But he takes his cue from Matthew 5:16, where Jesus says, “Let your light shine before men, so that they may see your good works.”

If you end the Scripture there, it obviously seems a bit odd that Jesus would encourage His followers to serve others just to get attention. That’s why it’s imperative to finish (and then digest) the rest of that verse, which goes on to say, “And give glory to your Father in heaven.”

In other words, there is a greater purpose to serving than simply to help others. That is certainly a big part of the equation. God is, after all, a compassionate and caring God. But ultimately, we are to engage in a lifestyle of serving as a way to draw attention to God’s mercy and grace and bring glory to His name. Even then, there is yet another purpose for serving that is often overlooked.

“I do think it’s important for us to benefit other people, to help other people,” Dungy says. “But I do think that in every station of life, we need role models. We, as Christians, need to model Christ and to show our young people what life is all about. Life is not all about taking, getting, receiving, taking advantage of opportunities that are presented to you, but life is also helping.”

Jesus Himself proved this concept to be true during His ministry on Earth. As He healed the sick, fed the hungry, set the captives free and shared the message of eternal life with the masses that followed Him from town to town, Jesus did so knowing that His disciples were taking mental notes of everything He was doing.

“[Jesus] did some things in the course of His ministry strictly to show the disciples why He was here, what His mission was; and He said, ‘Let this be an example to you,’” Dungy says. “He washed their feet so that they would understand what He was doing, why He was doing it and what they were supposed to do as well. So I think that role modeling was an important part of His ministry.”

Not only did Jesus model serving for His disciples, but He also modeled serving for every generation to follow. His actions were intended to set off a chain reaction of selfless living among those who have chosen to bear the name of Christ. And for Dungy, that means being concerned with the physical and emotional needs of every athlete on the Colts’ roster.

“It’s a big part of it, to show your players that you’re really here to make them better players,” Dungy says. “I tell them that all the time. That’s our job as coaches. It’s nothing more than to help them get better. Yes, there are some personal benefits that we’re going to get out of it;

but really if we're in it for the personal benefits, we're in it for the wrong reasons. You're a coach to help your team and your players grow. When you see guys grow and you see players get better on the field—you see them mature and gain confidence and all those things—that's where you get all of your satisfaction: from knowing that you have helped someone."

The light that shines before men through the witness of a servant like Dungy can't be contained by the walls of a football locker room. Jesus explains in Matthew 5:14 that "a city situated on a hill cannot be hidden"—and neither can the servant's light as it literally radiates the love of God to everyone within that individual's sphere of influence. Such is the case with the highly influential Coach Dungy.

"[Tony] lives out two great biblical commands—to love God and to love others," ESPN senior NFL analyst Chris Mortensen confirms. "There is no hypocrite in him. I can't say that about many people. I can't say that about me. . . . But every time I speak with Tony or I'm around him or I hear of other people's experiences with him, the more I want to be like him."

Despite the high praises that Dungy receives on a seemingly daily basis, his spirit of humility wards off any temptation to take even the shortest of ego trips. But he can't deny the joys that accompany a life of serving—especially when the fruits of his labor are born.

"For me, the biggest blessing comes down the road when someone says, 'Gee, that was really helpful to me,'" Dungy says. "It might not come right away. I know with the players, sometimes it comes 12 years later; and you're visiting with someone and they say, 'What happened in 1996 really made an impact on me, and here's how it helped.' There's no better feeling than that."

But according to Dungy, even more important than the blessings of serving is the call that every believer has received through the undeniable example of God's Son. "Christ said that [serving] was His mission," Dungy says. "That should tell us something."

Go

1. In what ways is Tony Dungy's life a living example of serving? Can you think of some other people, famous or not, who provide similar examples? What attributes do they possess and display? How do those people inspire you?
2. Who are some examples of serving in your life? How have they had an impact on you? How might others say that you are an example?
3. Read Matthew 5:16. What do you think Jesus meant when He said, "Let your light shine before men"? How do you think your good works can bring glory or attention to God?
4. Tony Dungy says, "Life is not all about taking, getting, receiving, taking advantage of opportunities that are presented to you, but life is also helping." Why do you think so many people in government, athletics, entertainment and society tend to live opposite of what Coach Dungy is suggesting?
5. What are some ways that you can be an example to your classmates, your teammates, your coworkers, your family members or your friends?

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Bible Reference:

Matthew 20



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