

Laying It On The Line (Excellence - Chapter 11)

n/a

Ready:

"Therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, I urge you to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God; this is your spiritual worship." -Romans 12:1

"Whatever you do, don't do it halfway." -Bob Beamon

Set

Mixing faith and athletics has always been a tricky proposition. Some believe the two are inseparable, while others don't think God has—or even cares to have—a place in the sports world.

In 2001, the folks at Catholic Supply decided to throw their opinion into the public arena by releasing a series of statuettes that depict Jesus playing various sports (baseball, golf, tennis, hockey, and so forth) with adolescents. These figurines quickly became a big hit but also took plenty of shots from the media and the entertainment world—in particular from Conan O'Brien, who regularly included them in innocuous comedy bits on his late-night talk show.

One of the most interesting pieces in the series shows Jesus—in a white robe and with sandals on his feet—playing football with two boys. As He hands the ball off to one young athlete, the other has Jesus wrapped up and ready to tackle. The depiction raised some interesting philosophical questions about Christ's nature—questions that NFL quarterback Jon Kitna has heard on numerous occasions.

"Some people say, 'How would Jesus play football? It's too violent a game. He wouldn't have played.'" Kitna says. "That's not true. Jesus would have been the most intense guy! He would have knocked people down, but then He would have helped them up and would have probably given them some Scripture along with it to encourage them."

While some may scoff at Kitna's assertion, he is emboldened by passages in the Bible that encourage believers to live with a paradoxical combination of singular focus and reckless abandon. "There's a right way and a wrong way to play the game," Kitna says. "You just try to play it the right way—within the rules, and within the biblical confines of how you're supposed to approach your craft. So as a quarterback, I think that's the best way to lead."

Perhaps that's why Kitna has never been accused of being soft because of his faith. "No, that's never happened to me," Kitna says. "I mean, I'm sure people might think that because Christians kind of get that stigma, I guess. But I think when people see me play, that's not one of the things that they say about me."

One of the things Kitna would like people to see is that he fulfills his role on the team by displaying a steadfast attitude of excellence that reflects the character of Christ. He strives to live out Jesus' words in John 12:32, where He tells His disciples, *"If I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all [people] to Myself."*

Christ goes on to explain that His followers must allow His light to live inside them: *"While you have the light, believe in the light so that you may become sons of light"* (v. 36). For Kitna, this means doing his best to be excellent during times of preparation and times of competition. The last thing he wants is for nonbelievers to see him as flaky and lacking in substance.

"You know, I think a lot of times as Christians we want to say, 'Well, God will handle it,'" Kitna says. "Yeah, God does make things happen. But He also relies on us to handle what we can handle. He gives us abilities, and we have to do what our job is here on earth. And He takes care of the circumstances we can't control. He takes care of those things. And so, for me as a quarterback, I mean, it would be nice for me to just say, 'Oh, I can just throw the ball anywhere, and if God wants it completed, He'll get it completed. If He didn't want it to be intercepted, it wouldn't get intercepted.' That's not reality. The reality is that I have a job to do. I have to do everything as if unto the Lord. I have to submit to the authorities placed above me. And those are all things that I try to incorporate into my life and in the way that I play football."

Kitna has also come to understand the unique relationship between adversity and excellence. It's a truth that is often hard to swallow but when embraced can bring amazing results in the long run. In 2 Corinthians 12:7-10, Paul used a moment of extreme transparency to teach the Early Church this very principle:

To keep me from becoming conceited because of these surpassingly great revelations, there was given me a thorn in my flesh, a messenger of Satan, to torment me. Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong (NIV).

This Scripture was especially real to Kitna during the 2006 season, when his Detroit Lions suffered through an excruciating 3-13 season. "That season grounded us that year and grew our roots deeper," Kitna recalls. "I felt like it was a pruning process for us as a football team. And we had a lot of new Christians. And success can kind of be a bad thing for a new Christian, because then they just kind of tend to float. But when you don't have a lot of success, especially in this league, as a Christian you start to really learn what God's character really is and how much He really loves you. And then you become grounded and rooted. And then when you have the success that I think God is bringing our way, now we're already rooted. Now we're already solid. We have that solid foundation."

That experience also reminded Kitna of the truth found in 1 Peter 5:6-7: *“Humble yourselves therefore under the mighty hand of God, so that He may exalt you in due time, casting all your care upon Him, because He cares about you.”*

Excellence also requires the ability to overcome any obstacles that stand in the way, not letting them slow the pace. Oftentimes, those roadblocks come in the form of doubters—people who intentionally or unintentionally distract us from that pursuit. Kitna, however, sees those individuals as opportunities for evangelism.

“You’re always going to have those who don’t believe—the skeptics,” Kitna says. “But I say that [Satan] can try to use that all he wants, but really, that promotes great conversation. And that’s growth. If we all believe the same thing in there, there would be no growth. But since there are varying levels of belief in the locker room, that promotes growth. It helps us have to learn about others’ beliefs so that we’re not blind to the fact that there are other beliefs out there. But then it also helps for us to have to know why we believe what we believe, so we can answer those questions.”

Whether the pursuit for excellence is in athletics, academics or personal ministry, Kitna always comes back to the basics. As the early Christian author Lactantius once wrote, “God, who is the Eternal Mind, is undoubtedly of excellence, complete and perfect in every part.” Therefore, following the example of His Son is undoubtedly the best way to achieve excellence and reach others in the process.

“The great thing is that if you do things as Christ did, all you’ve got to do is preach the Bible,” Kitna says. “You don’t have to argue with anybody. Just tell them what the Bible says. If they have a problem with it, then they have a problem with what the Bible says, not you.”

Another key to obtaining excellence is honest assessment followed by a Spirit-led prioritization of everything in your life. Otherwise, distractions will get you off the narrow path, leaving you grasping at those proverbial straws. It’s not always been an easy task for Kitna, but he can honestly say that the process has made all the difference in the world.

“You have to look at your life and look at yourself and ask, *What helps me be my best? What helps me stay focused on doing my best and doing my job to the best of my ability?*” Kitna says. “Anything that doesn’t fit in that box, you can’t visit those things. The enemy’s always trying to distract us. He’s coming to steal, kill and destroy. But we have to stay focused, so you have to know what fits in your box. For me, it’s faith, family and then football. And if I get that order mixed up, it will always fall apart for me. If I put football before my faith or if I put football before my family, no matter how good of a football player I am, it’s not worth it for me to lose my faith or to lose my family. It’s not worth it.”

Prioritizing everything in your life makes it much easier to stay focused on both the earthly goal of excellence as it pertains to bringing glory to God as well as the heavenly goal that is yet to come. As the apostle Paul writes in Philippians 3:14, *“I pursue as my goal the prize promised by God’s heavenly call in Christ Jesus.”*

“If I can just focus on my relationship with Christ, He takes care of all the other stuff,” Kitna says. “He makes me such a better person that it takes care of my marriage, it takes care of my kids, it takes care of me as a football player in my job. But when I start focusing on my job, then I start to become less of a person in all those areas.”

Kitna’s intense pursuit of excellence also demands accountability from those who are closest to him. That starts at home with his wife, Jennifer. Kitna credits her for much of his success in life, thanks to her uncanny ability to keep him moving forward.

“My wife is a prayer warrior,” Kitna says. “She loves Jesus. And she is just always on her knees praying for her husband. She knows the daily grind and the pressures and the scrutiny that you go through playing in this league. When I come home, she’s always willing to let me just pour my heart out—if I’ve had a bad day or whatever it may be. But at the same time, she’s one who will tell me, ‘You’re wrong in this situation. You should have done this differently.’ And I always listen to her very closely, because I had somebody mentor me one time say that our wife is like the Holy Spirit for us. And they have a way of being intuitively in tune with situations that not everybody can see.”

Another teammate in Kitna’s spiritual journey is Lions’ team chaplain Dave Wilson. During the 2007 season, for instance, Kitna met with Wilson every Saturday night for a time of discipleship. He experienced great growth throughout that year, which strengthened him as he pushed ahead toward excellence.

“There are some things that as the quarterback of a football team you go through,” Kitna explains. “The enemy is real and the spiritual battle is real. So Dave would help me work through those things. But he was just awesome in the way that he lays his life down all the time to serve guys in the locker room. He’s a model servant on the road. He goes on all our road trips. He’s always helping out, picking up dirty laundry, picking up our tape and our garbage on the floor in the locker room and cleaning it up. He serves. He just has a great amount of love. He’s standing on the sideline. He’s praying all the time. He’s praying for the team. He’s just interceding all the time.”

So many athletes today find themselves doing the exact opposite of what Kitna has embraced. They run from accountability and try to rely on their own strength. As far as Kitna is concerned, however, excellence on those terms is nearly impossible.

“That’s why Dave Wilson is huge,” he says. “That’s why all my teammates are so important. We encourage each other. One time I was encouraging another player to get into the Word and into prayer every day; and he was like, ‘I haven’t been able to get in that.’ And my question to him was, ‘Would you come out onto the football field without your helmet on?’ He answered, ‘No, of course I wouldn’t.’ And I replied, ‘Well, why would you go into life without praying, or go into your day without reading God’s Word?’ That’s like not putting on your armor. That’s like not putting on your helmet. You’re going to lose.”

Kitna is part of a core group of players who text each other every day with Scriptures and prayer requests. They also convene for what he calls covenant conference calls every couple of weeks, during which they ask each other brutal accountability questions. This is yet another part of Kitna’s path to excellence.

“We try to hold each other accountable,” he says. “That’s the biggest thing, asking all these

accountability questions. That's the way to do it. If you try to do it on your own, you'll lose every time—every single time.”

Kitna hates to lose on the field. But he also understands that losing off the field in the game of life has eternal ramifications and requires a much greater level of purposeful intensity. It is that understanding that drives him to adhere to the mindset of Paul, who wrote these words in 2 Timothy 4:6-8 not long before he was martyred for the sake of Christ's Gospel:

For I am already being poured out as a drink offering, and the time for my departure is close. I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith. In the future, there is reserved for me the crown of righteousness, which the Lord, the righteous Judge, will give me on that day, and not only to me, but to all those who have loved His appearing.

Paul's words make clear why excellence to Kitna is wrapped up in his unquenchable desire to be like Christ and is never defined by any temporary glory the NFL can offer. “The most important thing,” Kitna says, “is to live my life with Christ set apart as Lord of my life.”

Go

1. What kind of sports or games do you think Jesus would have played when He was a boy? What kind of competitor do you think He would have been?
2. Read John 12:32-36. What do you think Jesus meant when He told His disciples, “If I am lifted up from the earth I will draw all [people] to Myself”? What does being “sons of light” have to do with living a life of excellence? How can applying that to athletics or other areas of your life impact others?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 12:7-10. What are some possible explanations for the thorn in the flesh that Paul talks about in this passage? Can you share a weakness that you consistently have been faced with in your pursuit of excellence?
4. Read 1 Peter 5:6-7. Why do you think humility is required before God can “exalt you in due time”? What are some ways that you have been humbled in your life? Can you describe a time when an embarrassing situation gave you the opportunity to share Christ?
5. As a football player, Jon Kitna lays it all on the line. He says this requires spiritual accountability. Who are some people you rely on for accountability as an athlete? As a Christian? How does that accountability help you give your all on and off the field?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 5



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