

Boldly Go (Integrity - Chapter 7)

Ready:

And who will harm you if you are passionate for what is good? But even if you should suffer for righteousness, you are blessed. Do not fear what they fear or be disturbed, but set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you.

1 Peter 3:13-15

Set

To achieve any kind of success in life takes a certain measure of courage and boldness. This is especially true for the athlete who must believe in his or her talents and abilities enough to chase after a lofty set of goals.

Jon Kitna is certainly no exception to that rule. As the Detroit Lions' starting quarterback, he has come a long way, thanks mostly to an uncanny confidence in his ability—even when most others failed to recognize what the scrappy athlete had to offer. And it's that same confidence—a confidence that he developed growing up on the unsavory east side of Tacoma, Washington—that Kitna believes has allowed him the opportunity to be a unifying force in every locker room he's ever occupied.

"I think it goes back to my upbringing," Kitna says. "I was brought up in a very diverse situation and went to a Boys and Girls Club in first grade, so I can relate to a lot of different types of people. So maybe that's one thing. I don't only feel comfortable in one kind of setting; I feel comfortable in a lot of different settings. And in a locker room, there are a lot of different settings in there."

But there's more to it than just life experiences that help make Kitna a natural fit in just about any situation. His strong commitment to Bible study and prayer has allowed him to see people through God's eyes. Kitna looks to Paul's writings in 1 Thessalonians 5 for much of his inspiration on how to interact with others, including admonitions to "be at peace among yourselves" (v. 13); "comfort the discouraged, help the weak, be patient with everyone" (v. 14); and "always pursue what is good for one another and for all" (v. 15).

"You have to treat everyone with patience and love," Kitna says. "And I try to remind myself all the time, you meet people who sometimes are hard to get along with or maybe someone who's not necessarily easy for me—they don't fit *my* personality type. I've got to remember that God loves them the same way He loves me. And so I try to do the same thing."

Another revelation that Kitna has clung to is the concept that boldness is fortified by a solid foundation of integrity. In fact, it's his belief that a life of integrity and character open the door

for believers to be bolder about their faith.

But it hasn't always been that way for Kitna. At Lincoln High School in Tacoma, Kitna was a star athlete in football, basketball and baseball. He was driven to excel in all of his competitive pursuits. That drive pushed him far enough to gain a spot playing for Central Washington University. As a freshman in 1992, he was so far down the depth chart that he had to beg the receivers coach for a football he could toss around during practices. Kitna's determination eventually paid off, and by his sophomore season, he was the starting signal caller.

Life as the proverbial Big Man on Campus came with its perks, and Kitna openly admits that early on in his career at Central Washington, he took full advantage of everything afforded to him. According to an article by David Fleming, written for ESPN.com, Kitna spent most of the 1993 season drinking, swearing, fighting, shoplifting and sleeping around on his girlfriend, Jennifer. After she found him in bed with another woman, he made the decision to get back into church and allow God to straighten him out once and for all. He and Jennifer were married 10 months later, and the couple has never looked back.

Another huge part of Kitna's spiritual growth came through the ministry of Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He says that the man who led him to Christ was an active speaker around town. Kitna would go where the man was speaking whenever he could, just to listen because he was "enthralled" with God's Word. Now, almost 15 years later, Kitna sees an even greater need for ministries such as FCA to help train young athletes about godly integrity.

"We're seeing an epidemic at the professional level of people who have been successful in athletics but have no idea how to be successful in life," Kitna says. "And we've got it backward. We always say that if the pros weren't doing what they were doing, then the kids in high school wouldn't be doing what they are doing. But I say that's wrong, because once they get to the pros, it's really hard for them to change patterns, behaviors and habits. But if the coaches can take these kids at the high-school level and teach the character of that person instead of just who he is as the player, then what's going to happen is he'll go to college, and he'll look and he'll gain more character. Then when he gets to the pros and he gets success and he gets money and he has all this power and these things, he's got the character to go along with it. And then he'll be a good model for those kids back in high school."

Kitna doesn't just support the concept of reaching out to young people with his words. He follows through with his actions. Kitna started a ministry at Remann Hall in Tacoma and regularly recruits teammates to join him in hanging out with troubled teens. He also donates tickets to Lions' home games to the Boys and Girls Club and takes time to meet with the kids afterwards. It's for the express purpose of teaching true character—Christ-centered integrity—that Kitna faithfully creates his own ministry opportunities and backs up those within the ministry of FCA.

"[What FCA is] doing in the high school and college levels is really where it's at," Kitna says. "Because that's where you're gonna get kids to change. And I just encourage things that they're teaching. Be bold. Be strong. And teach these kids boundaries. Teach them what the Bible says. If we know what the Bible says, then we have to make a choice, and if the Spirit's in you, you'll make the right choice."

By Kitna's senior season at Central Washington University in 1995, he had led the Wildcats to the NAIA National Football Championship. He finished his career with 99 touchdowns, completing 58 percent of his passes for 12,353 yards. Despite the stellar performance, Kitna

was not invited to the 1996 NFL Combine; however, teammate Jamie Christian (and cousin to Dennis Erickson, Seattle's coach at the time) helped him set up a workout day with the Seahawks. Erickson was impressed with Kitna's accuracy and signed him as a free agent.

Kitna ended up playing for the Barcelona Dragons of the now-defunct NFL Europe. He finished the season as the MVP runner-up and claimed the World Bowl MVP title after throwing for 401 yards and two touchdowns against the Rhein Fire in 1997. Two years later, he had fought his way to the starting spot in Seattle before leaving as an unrestricted free agent and signing with Cincinnati, where he earned the 2003 NFL Comeback Player of the Year award but ultimately lost his starting job to number-one draft pick Carson Palmer.

Kitna joined the Detroit Lions as an unrestricted free agent in 2006 and not only earned the starting spot but was also named team captain. In his first season, he set team records for completions and attempts and became just the second passer in Detroit history to throw for 4,000 yards. More importantly, his teammates began to embrace him as a spiritual leader as well.

"People are very perceptive, so you have to be yourself," Kitna says. "You can't be somebody you're not. I've seen guys try to fake being a leader. I've seen guys try to be rah-rah guys who weren't. I've seen guys try to be tough guys and all that, but that's not who they were. People see right through that and say, 'I'm not going to follow that.' They know that when times get tough, you won't be who you are right now. They're not going to follow that."

This unlikely hero also recognizes that in addition to his on-the-field leadership skills, his courage to share Christ with others has likewise increased over the duration of his career. Kitna says that it all boils down to living with integrity, which comes from the ultimate source.

"I think you become bolder the more you read the Bible," Kitna says. "And my pastor says this back home all the time. He says that most people don't believe the Bible because they don't know what it says. Most people don't read the Bible. Most people don't understand what the Bible really says. They don't really understand who Jesus was."

One example that Kitna sites is found in Romans 12, which talks about God's mercy and the sacrifice that Jesus made on the cross, which in turn requires believers to become "a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God" as an act of "spiritual worship" (v. 1). "What do I have to be afraid of?" Kitna asks. "I've been saved from an eternity in hell, so what do I have to be ashamed of? It's mind-boggling to me because sometimes I am timid, or I am intimidated by certain situations. I think, *You know, maybe I shouldn't say anything. I don't want to rub anybody the wrong way.* That's ridiculous. What I have to put up with in the locker room or in certain situations on the field—if I have to put up with some of the things that *they* say or some of their opinions, some of what they have to say, you know what? They can hear what I have to say too."

Despite Kitna's solid year in 2006, the team still struggled and finished 3-13. But behind the scenes, things were changing dramatically. Team unity was improving, and several players made commitments to Christ. That led to an even more vocal stance among the Christian players. It wasn't always popular with their unsaved teammates, but Kitna says that didn't stop him and his fellow believers from speaking boldly and honestly.

"I think that we should speak the truth," Kitna says. "In the locker room, we try to speak the truth. We don't go around pointing out things to everybody, but if they want to ask a question,

what they're saying is, 'I want to know the truth. I want to know what the Bible says.' And ultimately, that's what every person really wants to know. What *is* the truth? And as I look at Jesus' life, He was one that always saw the good in somebody *around* the bad. And I always remind myself, *What have I been forgiven of? Where would I be if it were not for Christ?* And when I do that, it's a little easier for me to be in the locker room and handle situations that come up."

Heading into 2007, the Lions had high hopes for a big turnaround. Kitna was so confident, in fact, that he predicted during preseason press interviews that his team would win 10 games. Early on, Kitna looked as if he might be a prophet, as the team started out 6-2. But a disappointing follow-up (including 6 consecutive losses) resulted in a 7-9 season.

Kitna then found himself under fire for a wide array of circumstances. The team's failure to secure a winning record—much less make it to 10 victories—allowed naysayers the opportunity to take swipes at Kitna's outspoken Christian beliefs. He also suffered through an embarrassing bit of bad publicity when he attended a team Halloween party dressed semi-naked in a costume along with his wife who was dressed as a fast-food drive-thru attendant. The couple was poking fun at defensive line coach Joe Cullen, who in August 2006 had driven naked through a drive-thru window at a fast-food restaurant. Kitna admitted in hindsight that he had made a poor decision.

In that situation, Kitna was reminded of how precarious one's integrity can truly be. He also knows that there are pitfalls lurking around every corner that force him to stay on guard and to keep his emotions and attitude in check. "I know what God has told me," Kitna says. "I've seen God working in my past. But you can have a bad practice or there might be something a coach says to you, and the enemy will just use that and start throwing those flaming arrows—just throwing those accusations at you, trying to get you to doubt your destiny, to doubt that God has a plan for your life. And in this game, it can change every day.

"Early on in my career, I didn't recognize spiritual warfare," he adds. "I didn't really know about it. So I didn't recognize it, and it took a pastor back home when I was playing with the Seahawks to teach me about spiritual battles. There're times when you'll go to the line of scrimmage and the enemy's telling you that 'You're gonna throw an interception here.' All the time that happens to me. 'You're gonna fumble this snap.' And so those are battles that you're fighting all the time. . . . If I'm a child of God, that's not natural for me to think that way. That can only come from the enemy."

One of Kitna's biggest weapons in this spiritual battle is the Word of God. In particular, he uses the victory prayer found in Psalm 35: "Oppose my opponents, Lord; fight those who fight me. Take Your shields—large and small—and come to my aid" (vv. 1-2). David later writes in verse 9, "Then I will rejoice in the Lord; I will delight in His deliverance."

"[Satan's] attacking all the time," Kitna says. "He's trying to tempt you into doing things that might destroy your marriage. In this business, there's lots of ways that you could stray. And last year, he attacked this team. All these guys were getting saved, and their marriages were getting better. They were coming to know the Lord, and [Satan was] attacking their marriages, trying to divide their marriages. And I remember a time last year walking out of the building, just screaming to myself, 'Devil, bring it on, because my God is bigger than you! And Jesus Christ is bigger than you!' And I've been taught how to pray offensive prayer and just praying in the name of Jesus, that He comes against the spiritual warfare."

But ultimately, Kitna's ability to be bold with his faith is only as strong as his foundation of integrity and character. It's the same way for all of us. With integrity comes respect, and with respect comes people's attention. Others may not always agree, but they will at least give men and women of great character the chance to be heard.

And as it says in 1 Peter 3:13-15 (one of Kitna's favorite Scriptures), "Do not fear what they fear or be disturbed, but set apart the Messiah as Lord in your hearts, and always be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you."

"The most important thing is to live my life with Christ set apart as Lord of my life," Kitna says. "If I set apart Christ as Lord of my life, then I don't have to go and beat people over the head with it; they'll come to me and ask questions. Because that's what the rest of the verse says: Be prepared to give an *answer* for the hope that you have when people ask you questions. And then do it with gentleness and respect. . . . But at the same time, it doesn't give me an excuse not to be bold and preach not what Christ has done for me, but what the cross means to *everyone*."

If there's one thing Kitna understands about the character of Christ, it's the fact that He was bold. When Kitna reads chapters two and three from the book of Revelation, he sees a bold representation of Jesus talking to the different churches—giving them commendation but also giving them a healthy dose of rebuke and instruction.

And as far as Kitna is concerned, it's that balance between discipline and grace—rooted in a solid foundation of truth—that he also hopes to achieve in his life as a father, a husband, a professional athlete and, most importantly, a follower of Jesus.

"A lot of people misconstrue who Christ really was," Kitna says. "They want to say He was just loving and just totally accepting of everyone. And yeah, He *did* love everyone, but He did not accept everything that everybody did. He told you the truth."

Go

1. Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-23. What are some of the admonitions in this passage that might directly impact your leadership skills? Can you describe some specific situations where adhering to one of these teachings might make the difference between success and failure?
2. Kitna talks about how the relational elements found in FCA helped him develop spiritually. What are some of the organizations with which you are involved? What are some of the benefits—both practical and spiritual—that accompany that kind of fellowship?
3. Kitna believes that "you become bolder the more you read the Bible." In what ways can a strong knowledge of God's Word increase your boldness when sharing your faith with others? What happens to your boldness when you aren't as confident in your biblical knowledge?
4. Kitna says, "[God] allows some times of trial, some times of hardship to develop a testimony." Can you think of a situation in your life that helped you to develop your testimony? How did that platform allow you to glorify God?
5. Kitna talks about how integrity will draw people to us but also says we should be bold when given a chance to share the gospel. Do you agree with his assertions? Read 1 Peter 3:13-15. What does this Scripture tell you about fear? What are some ways that

you can “be ready to give a defense to anyone who asks you for a reason for the hope that is in you”?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 3



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