

Winning at the game of life: We all need a coach

Message for Sunday, November 20, 2016
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Psalm 127:1-2; Matthew 11:28-30; Romans 12:2 and more

Children's Message: Matthew 7:21-29, Jesus astounds people by teaching with authority and power.

You've had a couple of months now to be in school, to get to know your teachers. I'm curious: what is a really great teacher like? What does a great teacher do that makes her or him special? It may be one of your present teachers, or it may be someone else.

Write down all their answers on a flip chart. How well does Jesus fit this description? He listened, he was patient, he enjoyed having fun, he knew what he was talking about, he believes in us, he speaks the truth. I think Jesus was the greatest teacher of all!

Message: "Winning at the game of life: We all need a coach"

I'm using sports and games as a metaphor for life. This is the last of this series, and today I'm looking at the coach.

In 1958, the Green Bay Packers were the worst team in American football. Their record that season was one win and ten losses. Morale among the players was in the toilet, and the team was close to bankruptcy. That's when they hired this fellow who had been the assistant coach with the New York Giants to take over as their head coach. His name was Vince Lombardi.

During the nine years that Lombardi was their coach, they were national champions a record five times. Lombardi is regarded as the greatest football coach in history. In fact, the Super Bowl trophy is called the Vince Lombardi Trophy

In playing the championship game in one of the early years, they were on the nine yard line and ready to score the winning touchdown, but the clock ran out. They lost.

When the players returned to training camp the next summer, they expected the coach to fine-tune some of their plays to help them win that season. Instead, Lombardi held up a pigskin and said, "Gentlemen, this is a football." Remember, these were professional football players, who had been just a minute away from being the greatest team in the nation, and yet he taught like it was kindergarten. Over the coming days and weeks, he went over all the fundamentals: how to run, how to block, how to tackle. That year they won the championship.

Similar to that, the greatest ever basketball coach was John Wooden of UCLA. He was even more extreme in going over the basics of the game. At the first practice every season, he spent the first half hour teaching players how to put on their socks and shoes! "If there are wrinkles in your socks or your shoes aren't tied properly, you will develop blisters."

Following the leadership of their coaches, those teams won more games and championships than ever: before then or since then. The point is: we all need a coach to lead us.

You can have lots of talent, but if you don't have the right coach to show you where to improve, and to organize the team to work together, you are not going to win. In the same way, you and I can't win in the game of life if we don't have the right coach to show us the best way.

Psalm 127:1-2, New Living Translation:

Unless the Lord builds the house, the work of the builders is useless. Unless the Lord protects the city, guarding it with sentries will do no good. It is useless for you to work so hard from early morning until late at night, anxiously working for food to eat, for God gives rest to his loved ones.

This Bible passage tells us: no matter what you do in life, if God is not the centre of it, if God is not the foundation of it, if God is not directing it, that activity will be worthless, it will be meaningless. Whether you are building a business or a family, build a career or build a relationship—whatever it is you are trying to do, if God is not at the heart of it, it's a waste of time and energy.

I want to challenge you to make God the head coach of your life.

1) God wants to be your coach

Ecclesiastes 3:11, New Living Translation:
God has made everything beautiful for its own time.
He has planted eternity in the human heart.

In every human heart, there is an awareness that there is something more, and there is a longing to connect with that something more. That something more is God.

The problem is that we try to satisfy that longing with other things: with our jobs, with other people, with alcohol, and so on. It's like trying to fit a square peg in a round hole. It just leaves us feeling empty. God says to us, "Let me be your coach. Let me lead you to a life with meaning and fulfillment."

Here's how Jesus put it:

Matthew 11:28-30, New Living Translation:
Jesus said, "Come to me, all of you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you. Let me teach you, because I am humble and gentle, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke fits perfectly, and the burden I give you is light."

2) God wants you on his team

One of the coach's jobs is to be on the lookout for new players to recruit for their team. The professional teams have fulltime scouts who do that job, but in the smaller teams it's the coach. They're looking for the best talent to be on their team.

There's a book titled *Selling the Dream: How Hockey Parents and Their Kids Are Paying the Price for Our National Obsession*. It's written by Jim Parcels and Kim Campbell, two people who make their living in the hockey world. They analyze the odds of a kid from Ontario making it in the NHL. They took a sample of 30,000 minor hockey players, and followed their careers. 48 were drafted by an NHL team; of those 48, 39 actually signed contracts with the NHL team. Of those 39, only 32 actually played in an NHL game (the others never made it past the farm team), and only 15 of those players played more than one full season. Finally, of that 15, only 6 played the minimum 400 games to qualify for the NHL Player Pension. [After five full seasons of 80 games per season, a professional

hockey player's body is pretty beat up. Those who make it that far can retire with a full pension.]

Out of 30,000, only 6 make hockey as a career. That's a fiftieth of one percent! That's what I mean when I say coaches choose only the very best for their team.

But God wants you on his team.

Ephesians 1:4-5, New Living Translation:
Long ago, even before he made the world, God loved us and chose us in Christ to be holy and without fault in his eyes. His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into his own family by bringing us to himself through Jesus Christ. And this gave him great pleasure.

God chose you to be on his team before you were even born. You are a first round draft pick. God looks at you and says, "That is going to be a great player!"

The only question is: will you accept God's invitation to be on his team?

3) God helps you get in shape

When I was coaching basketball in school, one thing we did every practice was the "suicide drill." All the players line up at the end of the gym. When the coach says "Go," they run to the foul line, a quarter of the way down the gym, turn and run back to the start. Then, without pausing, they run to the halfway line, and back again. Then to the foul line at the far end, and back again. And finally all the way to the other end of the gym and back again. It's an exercise for building stamina, speed and agility. Part of the job of the coach is to get the team in shape. When the big game comes, if the team isn't ready, there is no way they're going to win.

God, our coach, wants to get us in shape. After you start following Jesus, God expects there to be a change in the way you live. Your attitudes, your behaviour, the way you relate to other people are all going to change.

Here are a couple of Bible verses about this.

Isaiah 64:8, New Living Translation:
Lord, you are our Father. We are the clay, and you are the potter. We are all formed by your hand.

Romans 12:2, Good News Bible:

Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind. Then you will be able to know the will of God—what is good and is pleasing to him and is perfect.

Yes... but *how* does God work in our lives?

Through our relationship with him. I have a tool which is useful in transferring a shape from one object onto paper. You press this tool against the object, and it will conform itself to the shape of the object. Remove the tool, and it holds the shape.



In a similar way, as we spend time with God in prayer, in reading the Bible, and in actually *doing* the things God wants of us—that is, not just reading about them or thinking about them—as we practise following Jesus, we find that we become more like him.

4) God puts you in the game

A good coach doesn't just get you in shape, make you practise all the plays, and then leave you on the bench during the game. The good coach sends you into the game so that you help the team to win.

God's primary purpose for your life is to love: to love God, and to love other people. And as we love other people, as we rub shoulders with them, they will see Jesus in us. Or at least, that's what they should be seeing.

Matthew 5:14-16, New Living Translation:

You are the light of the world—like a city on a mountain, glowing in the night for all to see. Don't hide your light under a basket! Instead, put it on a stand and let it shine for all. In the same way, let your good deeds shine out for all to see, so that everyone will praise your heavenly Father.

Bill was a wino who lived on the street. He was known to the police, and had a reputation as a lost man for whom there was no hope. However, a church had a mission outreach for street people, where they provided food and shelter, as well as worship services. Bill had heard the gospel message before, but this one night he was so moved by the story of Jesus that he gave his life to the Lord. His life was truly transformed. He lost the desire for drink, and it was replaced by a love for others, especially other winos.

He became the most caring person at the mission. He spent his days there doing whatever needed to be done. There was never anything he was asked to do that he considered beneath him. Whether it was cleaning up vomit left by some sick alcoholic or scrubbing toilets used by men who had left them filthy, Bill did it all with a heart of gratitude. He could be counted on to feed any man who wandered in off the streets, undress him and tuck him into bed when he was incapable of taking care of himself.

One evening after the preacher delivered his message to the usual crowd of solemn men with drooped heads, one of them came to the front and kneeled to pray, crying out for God to help him change. The drunk kept shouting, "O God, make me like Bill! Make me like Bill! Make me like Bill!"

The preacher leaned over and said, "Wouldn't it be better if you prayed, 'Make me like Jesus?'"

After thinking about it for a few seconds, the man looked up and asked, "Is he like Bill?"

Next Steps:

- Let God be your coach. Or, in traditional language, surrender your life to God. You can work out by yourself, and even practise some of the plays in the Playbook (the Bible), but if the coach is not directing your life, then it's just a game. It's not the real thing.
- Get in the game. Be an agent of God's love—not a secret agent, but a public one!