

Trophy Kids and the Great Commission

By: David E. Prince, PhD

The Youth Association Football program in Keller, Texas, recently made national headlines because of a decision that many onlookers found scandalous. What brought media from major metropolitan cities and national news organizations to investigate the actions of a youth football program of a small city in Texas? They had the unmitigated audacity, in the eyes of many, to stop giving out participation trophies. According to the leagues vice president the action was to fight the pervasive and unhealthy sense of entitlement that children grow up with today.

Leave it to independently minded Texans to stand up and defy the spirit of the age. But I am troubled that a youth football program in Texas has to lead the way by voicing what biblically minded Christians should have been saying all along. The Bible is far from silent on sports and athletic competition (Gen. 30:8, 32:24, Ps. 19:3-6, 2 Sam. 2:14, 1 Cor. 9:24-27, Phil. 3:13-14, Gal. 2:2, Eph. 6:12, Heb. 12:1-4). In fact, the Apostle Paul uses the language of athletic competition as one of his three primary metaphors (together with warfare and agriculture) for talking about the Christian life (2 Tim. 2:4-7). All three are physically demanding and require self-control and self-restraint for success.

Paul was undoubtedly a sports fan (he probably attended the Isthmian games), and it seems he could not think about the spiritual battle of Christian living without pointing to the obvious parallels drawn from his interest in athletic competition. Throughout these allusions, it does not seem to occur to Paul that one would ever compete in an athletic contest without trying to win: “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it” (1 Cor. 9:24). In fact, he has no desire to “run aimlessly” (1 Cor. 9:26). For Paul, sports involve agony, strife, discipline, self-control, hard work, focus, intensity and a desire for victory—just like the Christian life.

Paul makes it clear that the eternal reward of an incorruptible crown is far more important than winning a corruptible crown on an athletic field, but his point only makes sense in light of the appropriate desire to win on the athletic field (1 Cor. 9:25). A child who doesn’t care if they win in a sporting contest and one who cannot lose without throwing a fit both have troubling character problems that ought to be addressed by Christian parents. Self-centered rage is not a spiritual virtue, but neither is weak-willed apathy. Christian parents must defy the spirit of the age by teaching children cruciform ambition, “So, whether you eat or drink, or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God” (1 Cor. 10:31). Playing sports heartily, as for the Lord (Col. 3:23), will often be visible in sweat, bruises and occasionally blood.

Though not keeping score and handing out participation trophies in children’s and youth sports is often passed off as a Christian idea, the root of this kind of thinking is found in modern psychological theories and not the Bible. In 1969, Nathaniel Branden published an article entitled “The Psychology of Self-Esteem.” He argued that feelings of self-esteem were the key

to success in life, and his notion became the foundational presupposition in education and child rearing for a generation of Americans. When this theory is applied to children, praise is detached from any actual achievement. In *NurtureShock: New Thinking About Children*, Po Bronson and Ashley Merryman conclude that the result of this thinking is a generation of American young adults who feel better about themselves though they achieve less and fear challenges.

If feelings of self-esteem are the key to success in life, the thinking goes, then every child must be told they are a winner, and handed a trophy, even when they lose. A few years ago, my oldest son's middle school football team lost a game by about 40 points. When they announced the score after the game stating who had won and who had lost, a mother of a player on our team leaned over the rail and yelled, "Don't listen to that! You didn't lose. You are all winners. You are winners," to which I could not help but to respond, "Not tonight. Tonight they're big losers." Everybody is not a winner and Christian parents ought to be willing to fight for our children's right to lose.

There are grave implications for nurturing children in this type of self-oriented flattery culture where no one ever loses and everyone gets a trophy. The Bible relentlessly kicks the legs out from under our misplaced self-esteem and calls us to humble Christ-esteem. There's a danger in telling children, "All that matters is that you participate, play nice, have fun and feel good about yourself." The danger is that they might believe it. Sports do not build character; they dramatically expose character and provide Christian parents and coaches with a valuable opportunity to develop Christian character. Our culture says, "Believe in yourself" and Jesus says, "deny yourself and follow me." No one can do both.

Nice children who just want to have fun and who have been consistently rewarded for intentional underachievement with a trophy are being cultivated in a worldview that is antithetical to self-sacrificial Christian discipleship. An entitlement mentality is at odds with the gospel message and God's promise; it is "through many tribulations we must enter the Kingdom of God" (Acts 14:22). If sports participation simply becomes another vehicle to prop up the notion that our children's desires and feelings are more important than the good of others (the team), we must not act surprised when they someday conclude that their desires and feelings are more important than the good of their family, church and everything else, too. Narcissism, laziness and self-protection are not fruits of the Spirit.

When parents and coaches turn off the scoreboards and hand out participation trophies as though recognizing winners and achievement is unspiritual, sports are stripped of the essence that makes them such a valuable metaphor for the Christian life. The desire to win and receive the prize in athletic competition is the very thing Paul latches onto as a transferable concept for cultivating a single-minded focus on the advance of the gospel (1 Cor. 9:24-27). There are eternal winners and losers (Rev. 3:21), and we are to count the cost, take up our cross and follow him because we know what is at stake. Our task demands courageous, self-sacrificial, Great Commission gospel warriors. And at its best, athletics provide Christian parents and coaches a limited but genuine theater for the examination and cultivation of Christ-honoring characteristics.

When everybody is a winner, nobody wins. When everybody gets a participation trophy, everybody loses. Christian parents and coaches ought to know that better than anyone.