

Today begins one of my favorite times of the year. They call it “March Madness,” as sixty-eight college basketball teams are put into this single-elimination tournament, and in the process creating these brackets that can be printed off and filled out by absolutely anyone from the die-hard fans to those who pick winners based on team colors and mascots, all in hopes of winning immense amounts of money. It is said that come this Thursday and Friday, when the tournament kicks into full-gear, that those two days are the least productive work outputs for employees across the country for the entire year.

It is dubbed “March Madness,” because of the drama that television production companies thrive in creating. It’s David versus Goliath. It’s miraculous buzzer-beater shots. It’s players’ unbelievable recoveries from injury. It’s stories of men emerging from impoverished circumstances. It’s Cinderella stories recrafted every year. And, of course, it’s all just sheer madness that millions of people care enough to watch and act as if it is a life-and-death situation if a certain team wins or not. And, yes, I will be one of the guilty party tuning in and hoping beyond hope for an Ohio State miracle run, but that’s beside the point.

It is also the perfect opportunity for people to buy tickets for just the right seat with the common camera angles at a sporting event in mind and

create these massive signs in hopes that their message will get on live television and be seen by millions of people all at once. It wasn't all that long ago that John 3:16 made frequent appearances at the perfect spots behind goal posts in football and just above home plate in baseball, and just to the side of the backboard in basketball. It was, by far, the best advertisement of Scripture in television history.

Except, we must wonder, what exactly do they pull off anyway: the people holding the big, bold John 3:16 sign? Are they hardcore Christians trying to convince the whole crowd in the stadium and the entire television audience to finally come around and confess Jesus Christ as their personal Lord and Savior? Are they just trying to give some hope in people's lives filled with uncertainty and despair? Or are they reminding us fans that no matter what happens, no matter who wins, even if, God forbid, Ohio State can't pull it off every time on the court; what truly matters, in the end, is that God loves the world. That the only result that matters for athletes, officials, coaches, families, fans and everyone else, for that matter, is what happened on the cross and three days later. *That* is what wins us all the victory for eternity.

“For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.” It is a

wonderful verse overwhelming with hope, almost the encapsulation of the entire Christian faith in one short-and-sweet sentence. Except, what then are we saying for those who don't believe? Ask all the Christians watching on television as that title for the Christian fight song is displayed on a poster-board, and you'll get just as many different answers with just as many different reasonings, life experiences, interpretation of Scripture, and on and on.

Do we just...hope for the best for those people? Do we try to do our part in Bible study conversations about the fate of all humanity, but then just go on about our lives without a single worry since we're, evidently, taken care of for eternity anyway? Do we really think it matters, after all, as if it should affect how we carry ourselves as Christians? Or do we, at least, worry that those "other Christians" are going to manipulate those words of hope in order to guilt-trip people to turn to Christ or else face eternity in a not-so-pleasant place?

But if this whole March Madness thing brings anything at all to this particular faith discussion table, it is that more and more of these players are not coming from the best of circumstances. Not all of them are coming from this country anymore either. Many are from places where Jesus' name is never

spoken. They're coming from the most intense poverty, some of whose families can't even read the Gospel of John, let alone the rest of the Bible. Some grow up with the only stories ever heard are ones of violence and fear, no "good news" of any sort. What do we say about the children who never get out of such places? What do we say about those people who die before even hearing Jesus' name uttered from anyone's lips at all? What about those who will never reach a national basketball stage, not even a church or any house of worship, any place of hope whatsoever? Do we dare say God cannot reach those places too?

As much as Christians have clung to John 3:16 for ages, I find even greater news in John 3:17: "Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him." I know we can talk about this in Bible studies and sermons and around dinner tables until the end of time and still not know for sure. But I have this feeling that when Jesus made the trek with the cross on his back, I have this feeling he had the whole world in mind all the way to the end and beyond. Nothing less than the entire world, the entire world that God has had the most adoring love for ever since the beginning and will never, ever leave it behind. And for that

greatest news for the whole world, we most certainly give thanks to God
indeed! Amen.