

Super Bowl Sunday has become America's unofficial holiday. I bet there will be a lot of people calling in sick for work tomorrow morning! As a matter of fact, some people have even suggested that the Monday after the Super Bowl should be made a national holiday. The Super Bowl is the premier sporting event for most people who live in the United States. The price for tickets for this afternoon game ranges from \$4,000 to \$14,000 per seat. People start planning weeks in advance for their parties this evening where they will eat, it is reported, more snacks than on any other day of the year. So, there goes some people's New Year's resolution to lose weight.

It has also been said that more Americans watch the Super Bowl than any other TV program. In fact, this year is estimated that over 152 million fans are expected to watch which is almost half the population of the United States. It will be broadcasted in 232 countries and territories, and in 34 different languages. It is also estimated that advertisers will pay over \$7 million for 30 seconds to promote their product. Now some of you may be like my wife Judy who enjoys the commercials more than the game itself. The revenue for the entire event is estimated to be over \$10 billion; that's enough to fund the startup of a small country or to make a small dent in our national debt. This is truly a national event.

Now some Christians may think that sports is probably the biggest idol in the lives of a lot of people. But many Christians like me follow sports – I love college football and basketball and professional baseball. It has been said in the South where I grew up that football is a religion. As most of you know, my favorite teams are the Clemson Tigers and the Atlanta Braves. Now I personally don't believe that sports are bad. As a matter of fact, I believe that we as Christians can learn some important lessons from sports fans.

Have you ever studied the origin of the word "fan?" The word "fan" is a shortened form of "fanatic." A fanatic is "one who is unreasonably enthusiastic or overly zealous, going beyond what is reasonable, having an irrational attachment to a position or cause." A fan, however, is "one who is enthusiastic about a sport, pastime, or performer." You can see by these definitions that there is a fine line between the two, with the difference possibly only being in the eye of the beholder.

I heard a story about a devoted football fan. Jack received a free ticket to the Super Bowl from his company. Unfortunately, when Jack arrived at the stadium, he soon realized that his seat was in the top row in the upper corner of the stadium. He was closer to the Goodyear Blimp than to the field. About halfway through the first quarter, Jack noticed an empty seat about 10 rows off the field, right on the 50-yard line. So, he decided to take a chance and made his way to the empty seat. As he sat down, Jack asked the gentleman sitting next to him if anyone was

sitting there. The man said: "No, help yourself." Very excited over the new seat, Jack said to the man: "This is incredible! Who in their right mind would have a seat like this and not use it." To which the man replied: "Well, actually, the seat belongs to me. I was supposed to come with my wife, but she passed away. This is the first Super Bowl we have not attended together since we got married in 1979." "That's really sad," said Jack, "couldn't you find someone else to take the seat - a relative or a close friend?" "No," the man replied, "They're all at her funeral right now!"

Now think about it, wouldn't it be great if Christians had the same enthusiasm and passion for Jesus Christ as fans do for their favorite football team? What if we demonstrated the same devotion to the Lord that the fans of the Chiefs and Eagles will do for their teams today? What would happen, if every Sunday was celebrated like a Super Bowl Sunday?

Of course, sports is not something new to the world. Believe or not, we Americans did not invent it. For example, sports played a major part in the lives of people back in the ancient biblical times. And as we have discussed before, the Apostle Paul was one of the most noted sports fans in the Bible. Paul frequently used sports terms in his writings. When you read his letters, you see enthusiasm, passion, and determination. Something that I know that both coaches will emphasize to their teams before the big game this afternoon. Listen to one of Paul's writings taken from the fourth chapter of 2 Timothy, the first 8 verses and pay attention to his enthusiasm, his perseverance, and his firm belief that his efforts and his life have not been in vain.

Read 2 Timothy 4:1-8

Can't you just hear Paul pouring out his heart in this passage as he looks back over his life and ministry. No one told Paul it would be easy; it was a fight and at times it felt like a marathon, but Paul kept the faith and finished what God had called him to do. He gave it all that he could and now he has no regrets. I guarantee you that all coaches tell their players almost the same thing – give it your best and leave it all on the field so that when the game is over, no matter who wins, you will have no regrets. Paul is telling us Christians the same thing; live life to the fullest; give it your best and have no regrets. Now with Paul's words on our mind, let's see what we can learn from sports and football fans in particular about being better Christians and living our daily life as God intended.

First, sports fans are faithful – they don't conform! It's easy to tell which team most sports fans pull for. We wear hats, shirts, jerseys, sock, and even underwear with the logo of our favorite team on them. Some fans have even been buried in the jersey of their favorite team. There was a commercial a while back on ESPN, that's the sports network for you non-sports fans, about the fans of the University of Alabama Crimson Tide. Throughout the commercial

Alabama fans say good-bye to each other by saying “Roll Tide.” In the last scene at a graveside ceremony, they are burying a fan and the preacher ends the committal service by reaching out and touching the casket and saying “Roll Tide!”

So, if sports fans are so enthusiastic about representing their teams and will even lose their voices cheering for them, why are Christians so shy about being a witness for Jesus Christ? Some fans of the Atlanta Braves and Florida State Seminoles will even do the “tomahawk chop” in a crowded mall to show their team spirit, but many of us have trouble even inviting a neighbor or friend to church or discussing our faith with a close friend or loved one. How many of us hide the fact that we are Christians when we walk outside this building and enter the work place or grocery store?

As Jesus was preparing to return to His Father in heaven after His work here on earth was done, He left us with these words from Acts 1:8 – “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” Christ calls each of us to witness for Him, to wear His colors proudly. We do this by living our daily lives in such a way that all those around us know that the love of God exists in us. We also witness by sharing what Jesus Christ has done for us and what our personal relationship with Him means to us. So, here’s a question for us this morning - do we reflect the love of God by how we live in our daily lives?

The football coach of my Clemson Tigers is Dabo Swinney. Dabo is a devoted Christian who practices his faith every day. As a matter of fact, an atheist and agnostic group called the Freedom from Religion Foundation have filed several complaints against him. One of their representatives stated that “there was a whole lot of praying going on at Clemson.” Can you believe that? Wouldn’t it be nice if that was said about other organizations and even some churches, that there’s a whole lot of praying going on there? Dabo stated in a newspaper article: “I’ve never been bashful about telling people I’m a Christian; that’s just who I am. I can’t come to work and not be a Christian.”

Billy Graham once said that “people go to a football game and shout their heads off, or go to a circus and cheer act after act. They become enthusiastic about everything conceivable, but when it comes to spiritual matters, they think that we are supposed to become solemn and wear black, and never have a good time or enjoy a religious event.” Like I have said before, some Christians walk around looking like they have been baptized with vinegar. Now when their football team scores a touchdown, the fans get excited and happy; however, in reality, this excitement and happiness is only temporary. But when Jesus Christ comes into your hearts, there should be an everlasting joy that is exhibited in our daily lives; it should be visible. Here’s something that the world does not understand, being a Christian is really fun and our personal relationship with the Lord is something that should be treasured and definitely enjoyed. Jesus is the One who makes life worth living; He’s the One who puts real joy into life!

Sports fans are also loyal – they don't switch teams! If you enjoy sports at all, then you have probably heard of the term "bandwagon" or "fair weather" fans. These are the so-called fans who switch from one team to another depending on their record of wins and losses. They always want to be on the winning side. But true fans make fun of these fickle individuals. Most fans choose their loyalties based on their parents or childhood experiences, or where they live or went to school. Once they become the fan of a certain team, the bond is set for life for the true fan. Win or lose, that's their team. It's been said that the blood of a true Clemson fan runs orange.

As a matter of fact, for years I told Judy that when it was my time to go, I wanted to die from a heart attack after Clemson scores the winning touchdown in the National Championship Game. My only concern was that when I met Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates, he would be wearing the colors of the other team. Well, on January 9, 2017, Clemson scored the winning touchdown in the last seconds to defeat Alabama to win the National Championship. Immediately, my phone starting ringing off the hook with calls from my brother, my sons, and best friend to see if I was still alive.

In the sixth chapter of the Gospel of John, we read about some of the disciples and followers of Jesus who were deserting Him. They had heard some of Jesus' teachings that were too difficult for them to accept; so, they switched teams. As Jesus watched them walk away, He turned and asked the Twelve if they wanted to quit also. To which Peter made that great reply: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of real life, eternal life. We have already committed ourselves, confident that You are the Son of the Living God." They remained loyal and hopefully we will too!

When you really stop and think about it, every good and blessed thing in our lives is due to our personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Once we accept Him as our Lord and Savior there should be no going back or doubts about His love for each one of us. Here's the ultimate truth; we are on the winning team, and we have the best coach ever. No matter what life throws our way, Jesus will stick closer to us than a brother and will see us through all the ups and downs of life; you can bank on that. So don't be a fair-weather fan; don't switch teams; put your faith and trust entirely in Jesus.

Finally, sports fans are passionate – they don't give up! Passion for their teams is a distinguishing characteristic of the true sports fan. True fans will never give up until the gun sounds at end of the game. They never stop believing in their team no matter what the score. Now some teams at times will give their fans more misery than excitement, and having been a Clemson fan all my life I can relate to that, but we continue to support our team no matter what the score or outcome. The Chicago Cubs baseball fans are the best example; their motto

for years has been – “wait until next year.” Some of the greatest sports stories are about those who did not give up in the face of great adversity.

In the third chapter of Philippians, Paul uses another one of his sports examples telling us to forget what lies behind and to press on to the prize for which God has called us. In other words, don't give up, keep going, and walk in faith. Just like there will be shifts in the momentum during the football game this afternoon; during our walk with the Lord, there will also be ups and downs in life; there will be times of joys and times of trouble. But the Bible reassures us that the Lord will always be there for us. We can rest on the assurance of Romans 8:28 that promises: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him.”

In closing remember one thing, you are on the greatest team in the history of the world, Jesus Christ's team; and because of that you will always be a winner; we will be victorious in the end – the Lord guarantees it! So let's act like winners; let's learn from sports fans; let's be faithful; let's enjoy the game of life; let's be loyal; and let's be passionate about our relationship with the Lord. And above all, let's never forget that God loves us and we are on His team! Amen