

Sports Parables: Connecting Sports Enthusiasts to
Meaning Beyond the Games they Love

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Chapter 1

Devotionals

For Parents:

When Jesus was asked by his disciples why he taught using parables in Matthew 13, he responded that to those who listen, they will be given understanding and knowledge, but to those who don't listen, they will lose even what minimal knowledge they have received. These parables served as Jesus's main teaching tool to launch his kingdom here on Earth. They divided crowds full of people into the faithful followers and those who sought to be entertained.

Often even Jesus's closest disciples did not understand many of Jesus's teaching right away. But their desire to learn, apply, and unlock truth through asking questions and following Jesus unlocked understanding within their hearts and changed their lives eternally. This second group that Jesus acknowledged above heard the same message as the first group, but the key difference lied in the fact that they did not actually listen. They heard these challenging teachings of Jesus, and instead of seeing what could be gained through changing their hearts and ambitions to reflect His, they looked upon all their things and desires of this life as of greater value.

In giving this book for your child, friend, or loved one, you have likely rightly decided

that knowing God is the type of treasure that is worth a forfeiture of everything that we have including our own lives. You seek to cultivate and encourage this same faith within the life of your loved one, to teach your children while they are young to follow the Lord so they will not depart from this as they grow. This is a much harder task than many of you anticipated, as the Bible often does not seem as engaging or relevant to your children. Yet, we know that the Bible is God's word given to us, so that we can know who He is and why we were created. Your child needs to be taking in God's word daily to be connected to the source and sustainer of life, and to find out for themselves who God is and why He is worthy of our lives.

This devotional book is intended to serve as a tool to augment God's word, and to unlock understanding in a relevant, engaging way in the same way that Jesus taught in parables over 2,000 years ago. Many of your children might struggle to recount biblical scripture but would never waver when asked to discuss their favorite sports team or professional athletes. They grow up dreaming of being professional athletes and seek to emulate professional athletes on the court. This daily devotional will seek to tap into your child's sports knowledge to approach stories of biblical characters, better understand who God is, and explain the Bible's key teachings.

Each day will include a quote or sports event connecting that day to the date on the calendar and will launch off this topic into the day's biblically themed message and Bible reading. This devotional book is intended to augment your child's Bible reading and make the Bible's messages come to life in the eyes of your children. Through this time, seek to engage with your child by reading along or further explaining the biblical passage's connection to the sports story to be actively involved in the life of your child's faith. This book will hopefully serve as a way for sports minded parents to connect with their children through sports in a Godly, edifying way. Sports stories and athletes covered will primarily be from the present-day professional sports of baseball, basketball, football, tennis, and golf.

For Kids:

If you are reading this book, it means that you have a loved one or friend within your life who cares deeply about you and the path you take in this life. For many of you, reading the Bible may be something that you only do in church, and to be honest, it may not seem that relevant or exciting to you. I was in the same position as many of you in my pre-teen and teenage years until I went off to college. Playing and watching sports ranked as the greatest priority in my life, and I idolized many of my favorite professional athletes.

This devotional book seeks to build off your passion of sports to help you develop something so much greater and fulfilling in your life. The New Testament writer Paul considers a relationship with God worth giving up everything else in his life for. My hope for you is that through this book you will grow in your personal relationship with God through reading these devotionals connected to God's word. These devotionals are meant to serve as merely the tip of the iceberg in your daily time with God as they often include only one verse from the Bible. Just like in your sports practice, your spiritual growth will be greatly dependent on the time you invest in honing your craft. However, unlike sports, your spiritual growth and relationship that you develop with God will not be dependent on your athleticism, income, or family. God desires a personal relationship with you because you are his creation, and there is nothing that you can do to separate yourself from God's love.

Bible Reference: Genesis 17:19

In the summer of 2016, Kevin Durant's free agency decision loomed as the most impactful decision of his basketball career. Durant since being drafted second in the 2007 NBA draft, had blossomed into one of the league's top players with an MVP award, several scoring titles, and an NBA finals appearance all with the Oklahoma City Thunder. Yet, Durant lacked an NBA championship which lead himself and many basketball pundits to question his legacy.

Durant decided to leave Oklahoma City for a dominant Golden State Warriors team that in 2016 posted the greatest regular season record in NBA history. Golden State would go on to win the 2017 NBA title against an overmatched Cavaliers team giving Durant the championship he thought would finally secure his legacy. But according to Steve Nash, this championship did not fix Durant's problem. "He thought a championship would change everything and found out it doesn't. He was not fulfilled." In a similar way to how Durant's shortcut of joining a great team led his first NBA championship to feel empty; God was not pleased with Abraham and Sarah's attempted shortcut to have a son through which God would honor his covenant (Sportress of Blogitude, 2019).

Genesis 17:19 says, "But God replied, "No—Sarah, your wife, will give birth to a son for you. You will name him Isaac, and I will confirm my covenant with him and his descendants as an everlasting covenant." God had promised to make Abraham a great nation if he would be obedient; however, Abraham and Sarah decided to bear a son through their maidservant instead of the way God intended. Both Abraham and Kevin Durant found a shortcut to fill the void within their life, but both were confronted with the reality these voids are only filled when done so in an obedient, fulfilling way. Abraham's descendants became a great nation beginning with the birth of his son Isaac. Will Kevin Durant will ever realize the void within his life is something only God can fill?

Bible Reference: 1 Samuel 17:18

Scottie Pippen is perhaps the greatest basketball sidekick of all time, who alongside Michael Jordan won six NBA championships with the Chicago Bulls. He ranked 21st on ESPN's 2020 listing of the NBA's top players of all time but has the most unexpected ascension of any player on the list. Unlike most top players who were recruited by the top basketball college basketball programs or drafted straight from high school, Pippen was offered no basketball scholarships out of high school. He was only 6 feet 1 inch tall and 150 pounds in high school, and he headed to NAIA basketball team Central Arkansas as an equipment manager.

While Pippen began as the team's equipment manager, several players quitting the team his freshmen year allowed Pippen to play. Later on, Pippen's physical growth to 6 feet 7 inches and improvement in skill unlocked a player who became an All-American his junior year and the 5th pick in the 1987 NBA draft. Pippen's childhood friend Ronnie Martin said, "Scottie always knew he was gonna make it to the NBA," Did anyone believe him? "Not really." Pippen's self-belief and ascension share similarities with Biblical character David who too was sent to take care of others before his remarkable success (Vulture, 2020).

1 Samuel 17:18 says, "And give these ten cuts of cheese to their captain. See how your brothers are getting along and bring back a report on how they are doing." David, a young shepherd, was sent by his father to bring supplies to his brothers who were among the Israelites cowering in fear as Goliath taunted them. David was the only Israelite willing to fight Goliath due to his belief in God to deliver him but was counted out by everyone else. David's reliance on God would enable him to grow from a young shepherd boy to a giant slayer who would become Israel's greatest king. While, Scottie Pippen's success is associated with his self-belief, David relied on the God of this universe to deliver him. Who will you put your trust in to deliver you?

Bible Reference Psalm 30:5

Lauren Holiday was one of the best female soccer players in the world during her playing career from 2007 to 2015. She served as an integral part of the dominant United States women's soccer team from 2008 to 2015 winning 2 world cups and 1 gold medal during this span. She was MVP of the United States NSWL league in 2013 and was named U.S. Soccer Female Athlete of the year in 2014. She is perhaps one of the few athletes in the world whose athletic accomplishments would eclipse her husband, Jrue Holiday's basketball achievements.

In 2016, life changed completely for the Holiday family when Lauren at six months pregnant was diagnosed with a benign brain tumor. The tumor brought strong Christians Lauren and Jrue to rely and trust in God in the midst of Lauren's suffering and uncertainty. Lauren's pregnancy went as planned, and one month later, her tumor was successfully removed. After her recovery Lauren said, "I'm reminded that joy does come in the morning. Maybe not the next day, maybe not even the next month but it comes." The joy Lauren experienced after her suffering is based on the idea David expressed in describing the surpassing joy God brings after our sorrow (ABC News, 2017).

Psalm 30:5 says, "Weeping may last through the night, but joy comes with the morning." In this verse, David describes how the events of this world may bring us pain and suffering, but our God gives us an eternal joy that overwhelms our short-lived pain on Earth. God created us to be perfect and for there to be no shame or pain, but the sin of man brought consequences like death and suffering into this world. Yet, we as Christians know that even if our pain and suffering last our entire lives on Earth, we look forward to a day in heaven when there will be no more sin or pain. Like Holiday, during our pain and suffering we must surround ourselves with God's word and truth to reflect not on the pain we are currently experiencing but, on our God, who will rescue us. Do you share in Lauren's hope for God to deliver you from your pain?

Bible Reference: Jonah 1:8

Tiger Woods's greatness at the sport of golf has left few to question what his purpose in life is. He appeared on national TV at the age of two for his golfing prowess, won his first golf tournament at the age of four, and won his first major at the age of twenty-one. Woods dominated the PGA tour from 1997 to 2009 winning 10 PGA Tour Player of the Year Awards over this span, and 14 major titles total.

However, after the death of Woods's father Earl in 2006, his success on the golf course declined while his personal life began to unravel. Woods missed his first major cut at the U.S. Open in 2006 and his focus began to shift away from the golfing ability he had been given to pursuing SEAL training in memory of his father's career. His desire to be like the SEALS led him to pursue physical conditioning and tactical training to replicate SEAL training. He no longer wanted to bear the world class golfing ability God had given him, but instead he just wanted to be like everyone else. Like Tiger Woods, Jonah received a greater calling on his life to announce the need for repentance to Nineveh, but instead Jonah fled in the opposite direction (ESPN, 2016b).

Jonah 1:8 says, "Why has this awful storm come down on us?" they demanded. "Who are you? What is your line of work?" Jonah disobediently sailed on a ship to Tarshish, and the storm God brought led the soldiers to realize that Jonah was the cause of their troubles. Jonah did not want to be the one to bring a message of repentance to the corrupt nation of Nineveh, but his desires to blend in with the rest of the world led God to bring Jonah into the belly of a whale to teach him obedience. Tiger Woods winning the 2019 Masters and Jonah helping save Nineveh both demonstrate it is never too late for God to use our obedience to the gifts he has given us.

Bible Reference Micah 6:8

Maya Moore is one the best female basketball players in the world. She is a four-time WNBA champion, two-time Olympic gold medalist, and a former WNBA MVP despite missing the past two seasons of her prime. Moore's passion for ministry and criminal justice reform have led her to step away from the game she loves at the age of 28 for something greater.

Moore met Jonathan Irons in 2007 during a visit to the Jefferson City correctional center in Missouri. Irons was arrested in 1997 at the age of 16 for charges of burglary and assaulting a homeowner with a gun which led to a 50-year prison sentence. Moore has focused these last two years on helping to prove the innocence of Irons, championing his case, and providing support for his defense team. When Irons was proven innocent and released from prison in March of 2020, Moore said, "It is so sweet to see the redemption that came from stepping away and giving what I had to this case." The Godly obedience and sacrifice Moore displayed to prove Iron's innocence compares well to what the prophet Micah describes of God requiring from us (Athletes in Action, 2019).

Micah 6:8 says, "No, O people, the Lord has told you what is good, and this is what he requires of you: to do what is right, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God." In this verse, Micah contrasts the tangible things the nation of Israel was willing to give God such as sacrifices of animals with the notion that God places greater importance on the condition of our heart. When we are obedient to God, love mercy, and walk in humility with God we are reminded as Christians of the purposes God created us for in this life to grow closer to God and to bring those around us closer to Him. Moore's greater joy found in helping bring freedom to Irons reflects her Godly desire for justice and mercy. She was willing to sacrifice something she loved in basketball for the greater joy of obedience to God. While being obedient to God may not require you to give something up, are you willing to make the same trade-off in your life?

Bible Reference: Matthew 10:14

The New England Patriots had been the NFL's most dominant team since the year 2000, but the team's success appeared to reach a breaking point early in the 2014 season. They were coming off a dismantling loss to the Kansas City Chiefs in week 4 in which they lost by 27 points. Experts questioned how much time Tom Brady had left as a top-flight NFL quarterback, and whether the Patriot's success marked by perfect execution and fundamental play was ending.

Bill Belichick, the coach of the New England Patriots, in the aftermath of this decisive loss gave a press conference that offered few answers to the team's play or ability to continue to be one of the top teams in the NFL. When asked questions about the team's poor play and Tom Brady's future, Belichick answered time and time again with the phrase "We are on to Cincinnati" in reference to the Patriots upcoming opponent the Cincinnati Bengals. Jesus in a similar manner to Belichick, addresses his disciples to not become so focused on past failures to forget the more important future that lies ahead (NFL.com, 2014).

In Matthew 10:14 Jesus told his disciples, "If any household or town refuses to welcome you or listen to your message, shake its dust from your feet as you leave." Jesus had equipped his disciples with the message they would declare "that the Kingdom of Heaven is near", gave them the authority to cast out evil spirits and heal others, but also advised them on how to handle failure. Although, Jesus desires that everyone comes into a loving relationship with Him and surrender their lives to him, Jesus knew that sometimes His message wouldn't be received in the hearts of its listeners and we as messengers would experience rejection in His name. What matters is not how often we are rejected, but instead that we continue onward in sharing his message again. The New England Patriots ended up winning the 2014 Super Bowl despite their early season struggles. Will you recover from your rejection with the same persistence?

Bible Reference Luke 9:62

When the Charlotte Hornets drafted Kemba Walker with the 9th pick in the 2011 draft, they envisioned this fast point guard with great passing and finishing skills to someday hang a championship banner in their own arena. Walker had just finished leading his team at the University of Connecticut to the 2010 NCAA title gaining the nickname "Cardiac Kemba" for the endurance he showed to carry his team down the stretch. Yet in Walker's first season the Hornets finished 9-56 setting the record for the worst winning percentage in NBA history.

Walker shot only 32 percent from three his first four seasons in the NBA and struggled to score around the rim as defenses packed the paint against him. Walker's new shooting coach in the 2015 season recommended he changed his shooting form to increase his accuracy, but Walker became frustrated when he was not improving. Walker wanted to revert to his old shot, but his coach told him if he did that he would "shoot 32 percent from 3 forever and be a middle of the pack point guard." Walker stuck with his new form and has become one of the NBA's best shooters and point guards as evidenced by him reaching four consecutive all-star games and shooting over 38% from beyond the arc since. In a similar way to Walker, Jesus told his audience that anyone who reverted to their old ways was not worthy of what was to come (ESPN, 2018).

Luke 9:62 says, "But Jesus told him, "Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God." Jesus in this passage commands us to press on with all our heart towards honoring God with our lives. He knows that when we look back, we miss out on our ability to partake in a greater future calling. When we look back, we fail to put ourselves in a position to see how God will use us and take us places we never expected to go. Like Kemba Walker, there will be some growing pains and initial discomfort with God-centered change, but our pursuit of God will never make us regret what we have given up.

Bible Reference: Acts 2:42

The Spurs have been the NBA's top franchise since Greg Popovich's first full season as the San Antonio Spurs' head basketball coach in 1997. They have made the playoffs in every season and won five NBA championships over this span. The franchise has been the model of consistent excellence during Popovich's tenure despite annual roster turnover and the retirement of key players. The team owes much of its success to their scouting department for finding top international players like Tony Parker and Manu Ginóbili and the presence of all-time great players like David Robinson and Tim Duncan; however, the most important piece of the Spurs continued success may be the team dinners that have brought the team closer together.

The Spurs when traveling on the road during the NBA season try to stay the night after an away game whenever possible to spend time together as a team off the court. Former San Antonio shooting guard Danny Green described the importance of these team dinners as they "help us have a better understanding of each individual person, which brings us closer to each other – and, on the court, understand each other better." In a similar way to the Spurs' team dinners helping to enable their success on the court, the early church in Acts grew closer together through the breaking of bread together (ESPN, 2019b).

Acts 2:42 says, "They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer." God has created us to live in relationships and community with those around us, and one of the most unifying times we have in our relationships is when we are eating together. This is a powerful time of genuine conversation and friendship in reflecting on God providing for both our physical need for food and for personal relationships. While the San Antonio Spurs team dinners are open to only players and team staff, our challenge is to not neglect showing the hospitality of Jesus in welcoming anyone to eat at our table.

Bible Reference Romans 12:2

Throughout Kevin Love's basketball career, he had always been the best player on his team. He led UCLA to a final four appearance in his lone year of college basketball in 2008. Love was then drafted by the Minnesota Timberwolves with the 5th pick in the 2008 draft and starred as Minnesota's top player. However, while Love was attaining individual accolades such as the NBA's most improved player in 2011 and two all-NBA awards, he was never able to reach the mark of a great player in leading his team to the playoffs.

In the summer of 2014, Kevin Love's career and prospects of winning took a dramatic turn when the Cleveland Cavaliers led by returning player LeBron James acquired Love in a trade. For the first time in his career, Love was surrounded by a top NBA player; however, Love struggled in his first year besides two ball dominant players in LeBron James and Kyrie Irving. Love's average points scored of 17.5 was the lowest mark since his rookie season. During his early season struggles, Kevin Love told reporters that he "wasn't trying to fit in to Cleveland's team but instead trying to fit out." In a similar way, Paul challenges early Christians to not be like the rest of the world, but to instead let God turn them into a new person.

Romans 12:2 says, "Do not conform to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind." Paul told early Christians that although they were from this world, they should seek to be like their father in heaven rather than the people around them. Trying to fit into God's kingdom allows us to glorify him through our obedience, and to know what his desires are for our lives. In February of 2015, LeBron James challenged Love to "stop trying to fit out, but to fit in and be a part of the team's greater success (FanSided, 2015)." God's calling to fit into his kingdom is an even greater role than anything the world can offer as the stakes are eternal. Will you allow him to transform your life for the greater plans he has in store for you?

Bible Reference 1 Corinthians 3:1-2

Lionel Messi is widely recognized as one of the world's top two soccer players over the last decade. He has led Barcelona to 10 La Liga Titles during his career and is widely recognized as the greatest Argentinian soccer player of all time behind only Diego Maradona. Messi played for an Argentinian youth soccer team until the age of 13 until his team refused to pay for the growth hormones needed to help his body develop. Lionel was forced to move to another team to get the treatment he would need to develop into one of the world's top players.

Messi faced the challenging decision of leaving behind his family, friends, and country to maximize his physical growth. When describing his decision to sign with Barcelona, Messi said, "It wasn't difficult for me to move to Barcelona because I knew I had to. I needed money for my medicine to help me grow and Barcelona were the only club that offered." The apostle Paul in writing to the Church of Corinth likewise understood the importance of Christians growing in spiritual maturity and the intake necessary to sustain this growth (The Guardian, 2010).

In 1 Corinthians 3:2, Paul writes, "I had to feed you with milk, not with solid food, because you weren't ready for anything stronger. And you still aren't ready." Paul understood that our spiritual maturity mirrors our physical maturity as we begin by taking in simple, spiritual truths with the support of others, and continue until we can support our own growth through taking in God's word on our own. Paul understood that our ability to mature spiritually would determine how close we can come relationally to God and follow in obedience to God's commandments. Like Messi transferring teams to get the support he needed, we as Christians need to take decisive action to enable our own growth in spiritual maturity. Despite Messi's relatively small stature, his body through hormones and training have carried one of the world's greatest soccer players. Are you doing everything you can to enable your own spiritual growth?

Bible Reference: 2 Timothy 2:13

Damian Lillard is coming off a career best season highlighted by leading the Portland Trail Blazers to the 2019 Western Conference Finals. Drafted by the Portland Trail Blazers with the 6th pick in 2012 from Weber State, Lillard has come from an unheralded college program to become one of the best players in the NBA and the face of the franchise. While many other top players have switched teams in hopes of winning an NBA championship, Lillard has double downed on his quest to remain in Portland and win a title.

In a 2019 ESPN feature article, Lillard was asked about his loyalty to the city of Portland despite better chances of winning an NBA title elsewhere. Lillard responded, "I don't think I'm loyal to a fault. I think I'm loyal to the person that I am." Lillard in this quote understands his loyalty isn't a weakness, but instead a defining attribute of who he is. Loyalty is a trait that builds trust and strengthens relationships, and perhaps the most loyal being ever is God (ESPN, 2019a).

In 2 Timothy 2:13, Paul describes God's loyalty to us in this way when talking to his student Timothy. "If we are unfaithful, he remains faithful, for he cannot deny who he is." Unfaithfulness is whenever we break a promise to someone or do not do what we are told, and we as imperfect people often find ourselves falling short of the perfection God created us for. Yet no matter what we do, God remains faithful to us, and stands ready to forgive us and welcome us back if we wholeheartedly ask for forgiveness and turn away from what we have done wrong. God's character is defined by his loyalty, and we as humans being made in his image also exhibit the ability to develop loyalty and obedience within our own lives. We should honor God by imitating his loyalty to us by being faithful and obedient to his will. Damian Lillard's loyalty may never pay off with an NBA title for the city of Portland, but our loyalty to God will bring eternal riches in strengthening our personal relationship with him.

Bible Reference 1 Peter 3:15

Since making his MLB debut in 2001 with the St. Louis Cardinals, Albert Pujols has been one of the league's best players. He helped lead the St. Louis Cardinals to two world series titles, won three MVP awards, and was a perennial all-star until leaving the Cardinals after the 2011 season. He currently ranks sixth all-time on MLB's home run record with over 656 home runs and will be a first ballot hall of famer when he retires.

Yet, when Pujols plays baseball, there is always something more important on his mind that transcends beyond the game of baseball. Pujols seeks to engage opposing players about their beliefs while sharing his faith with opposing players. Pujols asks runners who make it first base, "What is the most important thing in your life?" While the answers of opposing players vary from their job or family, Pujols gets a chance to share with them that God is the most important part of his life. Similar to Pujols, Peter writes about the importance of Christian believers being prepared to share their faith with others and defend the hope they have (Athletes in Action, 2020).

1 Peter 3:15 writes, "Instead, you must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it." Peter addresses the importance of Christians placing God as the driving force of their lives, as well as the importance of being able to support and share the hope we have with others who do not believe in God yet. Our hope as Christians is something that should make us stand out to the rest of the world as our troubles in this life are nothing compared to what our savior Jesus Christ has already overcome. Our worship of God reinforces who He is as well as what he has done in saving us from our own sin, shame, and separation from God. Like Albert Pujols, we should first be willing to share the hope we have when others ask, but we should also be willing to ask others about their hope and priorities in life to bring these thoughts to the forefront of their minds.

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