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PROLOGUE

ARE YOU READY?



Corinth was a sports town. Every two years, the Isthmian Games were held just outside of the prosperous city. In ancient times, this major sporting event ranked only behind the Olympics in terms of prestige and importance, attracting athletes and delegates from throughout the Greek-speaking world.

When the apostle Paul founded the church at Corinth, he lived there for 18 months. We don't know if Paul attended sporting events, but he was certainly aware of the Corinthians' interest in the Games. When writing to the church a few years later, he used an athletic analogy to make one of his most crucial points. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, he writes, "Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize."

This wasn't the only time Paul utilized sports imagery. Nor was he the only religious leader to use secular illustrations to make theological points. Jesus often told parables about farming, money, family and mundane matters. The Lord knew

his audience would better understand and retain the message if he spoke in the language of the people.

In today's culture, Americans love football. Without question, the sport has overtaken baseball as our national pastime. From the blistering heat of late summer to the dead of winter, millions of fans attend youth, college and professional games. Countless others watch gridiron action on television, participate in fantasy football leagues and compete in office polls. A plethora of radio and television shows, web sites, newspapers and magazines allow enthusiasts to monitor their favorite teams and players. The NFL Network even broadcasts 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

Americans also enjoy playing this game for entertainment. In our backyards. In flag football leagues. On video screens. Incredibly, first week sales of Madden '07 exceeded \$100 million!¹ Even the classic board game, Electric Football (remember the buzzing sound), has enjoyed a resurgence in the past decade.²

Thanks to the Internet, ESPN, NFL Network and other resources, football has become a year-round passion for a growing number of fans. These folks follow the NFL Draft, watch Scouting Combine performances, monitor free agent activity, and scrutinize roster and position battles during training camp. And that's just for the NFL!

I'm one of these fans. Since my childhood, I've cheered for my alma mater, the Penn State Nittany Lions. But my biggest passion is the New Orleans Saints. I never miss a game and regularly follow the team throughout the year. I live in Virginia, so I'm very thankful for the Internet and DIRECTV's "NFL Sunday Package."

Throughout my life, I've always considered football as an enjoyable hobby. But while completing graduate courses in seminary, I discovered a surprising benefit to my interest in the sport. I found myself using football analogies to explain

Biblical concepts. In class after class, professors and fellow students would hear me say, “It’s like in football when....”

Eventually, I figured I could write an entire book of devotionals. Yet I wondered if combining football and faith was appropriate. Was it perhaps irreverent or even cheesy? Then I remembered the traditions of Jesus and Paul and realized this makes perfect sense!

HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

This book features 20 chapters that explore important and practical aspects of the Christian faith. Why twenty? In the NFL, each team plays a minimum of 20 games per season: four pre-season contests and 16 regular-season games. You can read one chapter each week throughout the season, starting with your favorite team’s first pre-season outing (you’ll even get a bye week!). Alternatively, begin when the regular season starts and continue through the Super Bowl.

Of course, you can read this book as quickly as you’d like. You may also prefer reading during the off-season, especially if you struggle with “football withdrawal” when the season ends. Whatever your approach, I encourage you to reflect on the “extras” included at the end of each chapter. These include:

Personal Journal. Use this space to jot down key ideas or thoughts you want to remember. At the end of the book, I’ll encourage you to revisit these pages and determine if follow-up is necessary.

Important Verses. These Biblical passages relate to the weekly topic. Consider memorizing verses that strike a chord. Memorization of Scripture is an excellent way to imprint God’s Word on your mind and heart.

Extra “Film” Study. Great football players typically work harder than their opponents. Superstars like Peyton Manning and Ray

Lewis are well-known for putting in long hours in the film room. By identifying the subtle tendencies of their opponents, they gain an edge during games. With this in mind, I include extra Biblical readings that reinforce or expand on each chapter's theme. Additional study questions and exercises can be found at www.faith360.org.

Football Trivia. In several chapters, I include interesting statistics or trivia related to some part of the message. There is not any theological significance to this information—it's merely included because you are a football fan!

KEYS TO THE GAME

Early in most football telecasts, the broadcasting crew identifies “keys to the game” or “keys to victory.” Examples include:

- Win the turnover battle;
- Keep Vince Young in the pocket;
- Score touchdowns (not field goals) in the red zone;
- Slow down Michigan's pass rush.

The “keys” usually sound simple, but a lot goes into making them a reality. Take the last example. To slow down a ferocious pass rush, the offense must rethink its blocking schemes. Tight ends or running backs may need to “stay in” and protect the quarterback. The offense might want to utilize more quick passes, play action fakes, draw plays, and even shuffle passes. Of course, players must execute their assignments and effectively make adjustments during the game.

While success hinges on the implementation of a myriad of details, the identification of broad goals is important. Overall objectives help players and coaches remember the critical success factors likely to influence the outcome of the game.

In our Christian journeys, Jesus provides similar “keys to the game.” Let's pretend that ESPN's Suzy Kolber has obtained an

on-the-field interview with Jesus before a pivotal game. “Coach,” she asks, “What have you stressed to your team?”

Unlike Broadway Joe Namath, Jesus focuses on the question. Ha, ha.³ “Well Suzy,” He explains, “there are two things. First, love God with all your heart, soul and mind. And the second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. If we do these things, Suzy, we’ll be in good shape.”

Of course, this image is silly; but the message is not. This was how Jesus responded when questioned by a Pharisee in Matthew 22:36-40. These two great commandments summarize the Holy Scriptures and provide overarching goals for all believers.

At the same time, we need additional guidance. Implementation of these principles isn’t always easy or clear-cut, especially in today’s complex world. In this book, we will explore these commands in a variety of contemporary situations.

Well, it’s time to get started. The football is on the tee. The referee has given the go-ahead signal. The crowd is on its feet. Are you ready for some Faith *and* Football?

WEEK 1

CLUELESS FANS



You're no longer relaxing on the couch, eating munchies and sipping a soda. You are anxiously pacing in front of the television set, hoping the defense can hang on and preserve the victory. The announcer's voice fills the room: "It's third and four with 34 seconds to go...Carson Palmer lines up under center...He takes the snap...He's got plenty of time...Chad Johnson is open down the left sideline...It's a perfect throw, touchdown, Bengals!"

Ughhhhhh! For the second time in the game, Palmer connected with his star receiver for a big score. "Number 24 is terrible, I can cover better than him!" you utter in disgust, oblivious to your bulging waistline. It doesn't help your mood when the network shows a slow-motion replay of Johnson's creative end zone celebration.

Let's switch to a different scenario. Your favorite team has trailed all day but finally has an excellent chance to take the lead. The quarterback drops back and decisively throws a bullet...right into the arms of a linebacker. Interception! Game over. "What was he looking at?!"

Sound familiar? Just about every serious football fan has made similar remarks. But there's an old saying, "Appearances can be misleading." It's true in football, too. The reality is fans often don't have a clue when issuing harsh judgments against certain players or coaches. Their remarks are misguided.

Perhaps Chad Johnson was open because the cornerback, the infamous number 24, was expecting "over-the-top" help from the free safety that "bit hard" on a play-action fake. And maybe the quarterback who tossed the beautiful pass to a linebacker made a perfect throw. But the receiver ran the wrong pattern or broke off his route early.

This subject reminds me of Hannah and Eli. Not Eli Manning, but rather Eli the priest. In the first chapter of 1 Samuel (v. 10-16), Hannah desperately wants a child but is unable to conceive. While praying at the temple, tears stream down her face. Her eyes are bloodshot. Her lips move, but words don't come out. When Eli observes Hannah, he blurts out, "How long will you make a drunken spectacle of yourself? Put away your wine."

Oops! Eli jumped to the wrong conclusion about this decent woman. She wasn't drunk; she was in deep mourning. Eli's hasty remarks reveal the timeless relevance of another popular phrase, "Open mouth, insert foot."

Who hasn't made this kind of mistake before? Perhaps you've made unfair assumptions about a friend before knowing the facts. Maybe you arrived at unwarranted conclusions about a neighbor based on an isolated incident. Perhaps you allowed a stereotype to negatively taint your view of a business associate.

Last year, I visited a local water park with my oldest son. The facility included a great toddler's area for small kids. In the midst of happy and frolicking children, an angry woman stood out like a sore thumb. The scowl-faced lady repeatedly barked,

“Don’t do that! Slow down!” at a cheerful girl playing harmlessly in the water.

Now admittedly, I’m somewhat paranoid with my young boy at the pool. But this woman went way overboard. “Lighten up!” I felt like screaming. Instead, I issued a cold glare in her direction. It was then, I realized, I was judging a person I knew nothing about. Perhaps this woman knew somebody who drowned or was severely injured in a water accident. Maybe her husband just left her, and frustration erupted at an inopportune time. Maybe the woman was indeed a nut! Even so, I wasn’t in any position to cast judgment.

Luckily, the lady was too preoccupied to notice me. But when our judgments about other people become known, they are often hurtful or embarrassing. There is little good that can result from hasty conclusions or inaccurate impressions.

Even if we somehow possess the facts, the Bible warns against judging other people. Jesus said, “Do not judge, or you too will be judged...Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother’s eye and pay no attention to the plank in your own eye?” (Matthew 7:1,3). The apostle Paul added: “You, therefore, have no excuse, you who pass judgment on someone else, for at whatever point you judge the other, you are condemning yourself, because you who pass judgment do the same things” (Romans 2:1-2).

If you struggle with this temptation, remember that each of us is wired differently. We have different personalities, upbringings, influences, etc. that affect who we are. Consequently, we don’t always face the same temptations or share identical weaknesses. Just because something is easy for me doesn’t mean it’s that way for you. In fact, you might be making remarkable progress although it doesn’t seem like it by my standards.

In his classic book *Mere Christianity*, C.S. Lewis wrote,