

Ethics 101: Why ‘Bountygate’ is Morally Wrong

The ‘Bountygate’ scandal, on the surface, seems morally repugnant, since the NFL rules explicitly forbid any kind of non-contract bonuses for on-field performances against an opponent or team. However, when examined beyond the formal logic of the rules, this scandal presents a challenge to our God-given dignity and God’s call to be a peaceable people, bedrock convictions in Christian Ethics 101.

Basic Convictions: Player Dignity and Peace

Just as Wall-Street often chooses a cost-benefit ethic, ‘Bountygate’ put profits and rewards before player dignity and the corresponding rights of safety and health. Payouts of this kind consequentially motivate and determine what in-game acts are good. Debilitating hits are esteemed as praiseworthy and even obligate players who seek to satisfy this performance-based, reward scheme. Instead of acting in a manner consonant with sports’ ideals, namely, skill, honesty, justice and responsibility, the craft of playing football is threatened by extrinsic rewards and eroded by selfish pursuits to injure at any cost. What is truly good is incompatible with these economic pursuits to pay-for-pain. True excellence takes a seat on the bench, when individuals are dominated by such narrow incentives to play. In short, the perpetrators’ narcissistic interests are at variance with sport ideals themselves and the image of God, thus disregarding the equal dignity of other players.

For Christian ethics, the gospel bids us to be a people part of a new order of reconciliation and peace. When purposeful pain is inflicted to take others out, vice is instilled—antagonizing other players and begetting retaliation—which imperils peace. Result: alienation and hostility. The gospel in sports chooses means that embrace not exclude other players. Others are necessary in order for the contest even to exist.

How far is too far? If an action diminishes or marginalizes player dignity, then our actions are morally blameworthy. It may be argued that Gregg Williams’s ethic (and others) was sacrificial—for the good of the team, city and fans—but this ignores others’ welfare, which for Christians our actions must lovingly respect that our neighbors (literally across the line in football) matter, period. Jesus’ ethic incarnates patterns of peace, building covenant community and enhancing others’ God-given worth. ‘Bountygate’ subtracts from others’ worth and erodes the necessary communal bonds for sports to flourish. If the goal is to obtain a win or profit by inflicting harm, then this objective is blind to whether the means are unethical or not.

What is most disturbing about this event is that it is frequently predicated on the perception that sports are war and the opponent is our enemy, so we do whatever it takes to win. This mentality is analogous to Achilles, a war hero in Greek mythology, who embodied a “might makes right” attitude. When applied to sports, what is right becomes an exclusive focus on the specialized task of spectacular, bone crushing hits to eliminate others, foreign to Jesus’ mission of rejecting violence.

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