



Christian Reflection

A Series in Faith and Ethics

Focus Article:

📖 Sports in the Christian Life
(*Sports*, pp. 19-27)

What do you think?

Was this study guide useful for your personal or group study? Please send your suggestions to Christian_Reflection@baylor.edu.

Christian Reflection

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Sports in the Christian Life

Sports, physical exercise, and recreational activity contribute to our development as spiritual beings composed of body and soul. Today as sports take on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally, they are becoming a new field for twenty-first century Christian mission.

Prayer

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Responsive Reading:

God, we cannot race through this journey alone.

We need each **other**.

God, we cannot sustain ourselves throughout this race.

We need each **other**.

God, we cannot finish this race on our own.

We need each **other. Amen.**

Meditation

Part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue – the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal. The apostle Paul naturally reached for that image when he called the congregation at Corinth to more virtuous living.

“Athletes exercise self-control in all things,” he observed, arguing that Christians should exercise a similar kind of discipline in their life together in pursuit of a different, “imperishable” kind of victory.

Reflection

A contemporary Christian perspective on sports should have deep roots in Scripture and tradition, writes Michael Kerrigan, C.S.P. The Apostle Paul used sports metaphors to explain the virtues of Christian disciples (see Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a; and 2 Timothy 4:7). To describe our commitment to Christ, he combined images of running a race, boxing, and training for an athletic contest (1 Corinthians 9:24-27).

Early Christian theologians resisted two exaggerated viewpoints on sports in the ancient world. The Greco-Roman “cult of the body” promoted physical attractiveness and placated the pagan gods, but downplayed the spiritual significance of sports. On the other hand, a Gnostic tendency emphasized the spiritual by downplaying the significance of the physical body, seeing the soul as “trapped in a body and yearning to be set free.” In this context, Christians “stroved for an appropriate balance between the physical body and spiritual soul,” Kerrigan notes. “By the early third century Tertullian advised Christians to shun such athletic competitions altogether, but Clement of Alexandria coined a phrase to nuance a Christian understanding: ‘physical activity, yes; cult of the body, no.’” Later the Church criticized the increasing brutality of medieval tournaments. “Yet the idea that sport could be a useful means, under certain conditions, of achieving the overall education of the human person remained firm,” says Maria Aiello, a specialist in sports law.

Drawing on Scripture and tradition, Kerrigan highlights these features of a contemporary Christian perspective on sports:



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- ▶ *Our dignity as human beings is grounded in our being created in the image and likeness of God, a unity of body and soul. God gives each of us varying talents, including athletic ones, to develop in loving service to God and others.*
- ▶ *We must remember that the body is an instrument for a full human life, not an end in itself. For instance, when we try to “win at any cost,” we reflect a “cult of the body” that downplays the spiritual dimension of athletic competition.*
- ▶ *The discipline and personal sacrifices necessary for athletic success mirror Christian asceticism that teaches us “to deal positively with balancing human passions, intelligence, and will.”*
- ▶ *Sports can teach us, as athletes and fans, important life lessons about respecting honesty, integrity, and fair play, and developing skills for dealing with adversity.*
- ▶ *Sports can enrich the social dimension of our lives. “Learning how to play as a team member shifts the focus from ‘me’ to ‘we,’” notes Kerrigan. “Rather than individual success, the importance of contributing to a group effort is emphasized.”*
- ▶ *Nevertheless, our sports and athletic competitions are in need of redemption. Not only are we tempted to win at all costs, we tend to “commercialize sports so that athletes and spectators are reduced to commodities, exploited for financial gain (by team owners, corporate sponsors, and so on), and not respected for their human dignity.”*
- ▶ *Thus, athletic competitions are opportunities to witness to Christian faith. “Christian athletes must live ‘in the world’ of contemporary sports, but not ‘of that world,’” Kerrigan concludes. “Christian athletes can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity.”*

Study Questions

1. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, how does the Apostle Paul deploy sports metaphors to describe commitment to Christ? What virtues of a disciple are highlighted in Galatians 5:7; Philippians 3:14; 1 Timothy 6:12a; and 2 Timothy 4:7? Do sports today still provide good analogies for faithful Christian living?
2. How did early Christians avoid extreme views – the ancient “cult of the body” and Gnosticism – on the body and sports? Are there similar views that we should avoid today?
3. “Sports are taking on an increasingly large role in popular culture internationally,” Kerrigan observes. “As a social phenomenon characterized by globalization and instantaneous Internet communication, sports can overcome social classes, cultural differences, linguistic barriers, and geographical boundaries among peoples.” Discuss how sports have crossed boundaries in recent decades. How does this international character of sports present new opportunities for Christian mission?
4. Discuss some ways of witnessing for Christ with integrity through sports. Consider some improper, manipulative, or unhealthy ways. What makes the difference?

Departing Hymn: “We Give Our All to Christ”

† “Good Sports,” *The Christian Century* (5 April 2005), 5.

Sports in the Christian Life

Lesson Plans

<i>Abridged Plan</i>	<i>Standard Plan</i>
Prayer	Prayer
Scripture Reading	Scripture Reading
Responsive Reading	Responsive Reading
Meditation	Meditation
Reflection (skim all)	Reflection (all sections)
Questions 1 and 4	Questions (selected)

Teaching Goals

1. To examine the roots in Scripture and tradition of a contemporary Christian perspective on sports.
2. To review the Pauline use of sports metaphors to interpret and commend Christian virtues.
3. To consider how sports are becoming a new field for Christian mission.

Before the Group Meeting

Distribute copies of the study guide on pp. 10-11 and ask members to read the Bible passages in the guide. Distribute copies of *Sports (Christian Reflection)* and ask members to read the focus article and suggested article before the group meeting.

Begin with a Comment

Describing Pope John Paul II as “the ideal Christian spokesperson” on the topic of sports in the Christian life, Michael Kerrigan notes that he was an avid hiker, skier, and swimmer. He had a swimming pool installed in the Vatican and often slipped away for skiing vacations during his long papacy (1978-2005).

In an address to athletes in 1987, the Pope spoke with great warmth and understanding about sports as a window upon our nature as human beings. He said, “Sport, as you well know, is an activity that involves more than the movement of the body; it demands the use of intelligence and the developing of the will. It reveals, in other words, the wonderful structure of the human person created by God, as a spiritual being, a unity of body and spirit. Athletic activity can help every man and woman to recall the moment when God the Creator gave origin to the human person, the masterpiece of his creative work” (quoted in *Sports*, p. 23).

Prayer

Invite members to share their personal celebrations and concerns with the group. Provide time for each person to pray silently. Conclude by asking God to give the group discernment as you prayerfully study the role sports should play within our Christian discipleship.

Scripture Reading

Ask a group member to read 1 Corinthians 9:24-27 from a modern translation.

Responsive Reading

The leader begins and the group reads the lines in bold print.

Meditation

Invite members to reflect on the meditation during a period of silence.

Reflection

This study, which highlights some of the resources in the Pauline epistles and church tradition for developing a contemporary Christian perspective on sports, might serve as a stand-alone overview of Christian reflection on

sports today. However, if you use it in conjunction with other study guides for the *Sports* issue, focus on some of the these elements in Michael Kerrigan's discussion that are not covered in other study guides: the internationalization of sports, opportunities for Christian witness through sports, or the need for a balanced view of sports that avoids the two extremes of denigration and adoration of the human body.

Study Questions

1. "Part of the charm of sports is that they offer a compelling image of virtue—the spectacle of human talents channeled toward a goal," we read in the meditation. In 1 Corinthians 9:24-27, Paul mentions self-control, for sometimes we must restrain our desires for pleasure in order to remain focused on more important goals. He alludes to staying focused on one's primary goal (like a long-distance runner) in Galatians 5:7 and Philippians 3:14; we might call this virtue perseverance through difficulties and distractions. The image of enduring (or, fighting through) difficulties recurs in 1 Timothy 6:12a and 2 Timothy 4:7.

These texts do not say that the *goals* of discipleship and athletic competition are similar. They claim that we need virtues of will power—like courage, patience, self-control, and perseverance—to remain faithful to our commitments in the face of difficulties and distractions.

2. Michael Kerrigan describes the Greco-Roman "cult of the body" as treating sporting events as "primarily ritual celebrations to idols. Developing the physical body, promoting attractiveness, and placating the gods were emphasized while the spiritual significance of sport was downplayed." Early Christian theologians resisted this view in two ways: they refused to elevate the ancient games to cultic significance, but they also emphasized the spiritual and moral effects of participating in and observing athletic competitions. They avoided an opposite Gnostic tendency to separate the soul from the body and devalue physical activity. While some theologians like Tertullian urged Christians to shun cultic athletic competitions altogether, Clement of Alexandria coined a phrase to nuance a Christian understanding: "physical activity, yes; cult of the body, no."

Are these two extreme tendencies present today? Kerrigan suggests, "The shortsighted view of 'winning at all costs' reflects a 'cult of the body' in which the spiritual dimension is downplayed with the primary emphasis given to immediate results to succeed." Members might mention that the emphasis today on physical beauty (even when it is athletic beauty) is not entirely healthy. Some sports events elicit extreme devotion from spectators, almost like a religious cultic ceremony. Archbishop Stanislaw Rylko writes, "sport has become, in every respect, a surrogate for religious experience. It is a paradoxical fact that, in our secularized society, sports events have taken on the character of collective rituals, fraught with emotion. Stadiums and gymnasiums are like temples to this 'new religion'" (quoted in *Sports*, p. 65). On the other extreme, we may be tempted like the Gnostics to reduce the gospel to "saving people's souls" rather than caring for their fully human lives, body and soul.

3. While he admits that "sports have been used in various ways to promote national ideologies, political agendas, and economic gain," Kerrigan thinks the *international* spread of sports has been positive. Baseball is popular in Japan, American football is catching on in Europe, and soccer is commonly played in the United States. Encourage members to discuss how sports can provide a common interest among citizens, immigrants, and travelers, and to consider the roles this cultural understanding might play in sharing the gospel.
4. Kerrigan says "Christian athletes [and fans] can be role models of sportsmanship, fair play, discipline, and integrity." They can stand up to pressures to "win at all costs" and to commercialize sports in ways that reduce athletes and fans to commodities. Ask members to describe coaches, athletes, and fans who have witnessed to Christian faith. Then consider some improper forms of witness, such as triumphal display of faith that suggests God's favor on a particular team, or "cashing in" on athletic celebrity with an immature witness before church groups, etc. How can your congregation help coaches, athletes, fans develop an authentic witness to God's love in Christ and resist self-aggrandizing religious behaviors?

Departing Hymn

"We Give Our All to Christ" is on pp. 56-57 of *Sports*. If you choose not to sing the hymn, you may read the hymn text in unison or silently and meditatively as a prayer.