

Why You May Want to Skip Those Sunday Soccer Games

Nearly 12 years ago we had just moved to Tulsa. Our oldest was just six months old. One Sunday morning while headed to church we noticed T-ball games going on. Little kids and their families were missing church for T-ball. As the weeks went by, we noticed that these Sunday-morning sports activities were not a onetime thing but rather a regular Sunday-morning occurrence. Families had developed a habit of going to games and activities. Rather than gathering together as the body of Christ to serve and grow in the local church as a church family, they were in the habit of forsaking the gathering of the brethren for sports. It was upon this observation that the conversations began about how we wanted to raise our kids and what values and standards we would set for our family.

“Let us not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as is the manner of some, but let us exhort one another, especially as you see the Day approaching” (Heb. 10:25).

Maybe it's simply the love of the game or the hope of a scholarship someday or even the dream of their child playing professional ball, but this commitment to sports was an added habit keeping families from church and stealing from what should be most valuable. It reminded me of the Esau syndrome, trading the lifelong gift to satisfy a short term appetite.

“Watch out for the Esau syndrome: trading away God's lifelong gift in order to satisfy a short-term appetite. You well know how Esau later regretted that impulsive act and wanted God's blessing—but by then it was too late, tears or no tears” (Heb. 12:15-17, MSG).

The enemy has already worked to remove God from our public schools. I believe he is now at work to remove families from

the church. He is filling our Sundays with sports and activities that keep us from true involvement and deep connection to our local church family; keeping us from flourishing in the courts of God. I believe we need to stand against this. We need to stand for family time. We need to stand for opportunity for traditional church involvement ... before it's too late.

"Those that are planted in the house of the Lord shall flourish in the courts of our God" (Ps. 92:13).

There is a difference between showing up to a church service and being planted or committed to and involved in the local church. The latter is where you attend the same service each week; where you get to know one another and care for one-another as family; where you use your God-given gifts to serve the local church and operate as the body of Christ. The latter is what God calls us to through His Word and therefor because of that obedience it is where we truly experience growth and fulfillment. This is where "life to the fullest" is experienced.

"The thief does not come, except to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly" (John 10:10).

We love the ending of that verse, but let's not forget the first part of that verse. "The enemy does not come, except to steal and kill and destroy." I strongly believe that part of why many are not experiencing the fullness of the promise of abundant life is because we are not fully plugged into the body of Christ. Through the schemes of the enemy, abundance is being stolen from individuals, from families and from the church.

Finally, my brothers, be strong in the Lord and in the power of His might. Put on the whole armor of God that you may be able to stand against the schemes of the devil. For our fight

is not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this world, and against spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places. Therefore take up the whole armor of God that you may be able to resist in the evil day, and having done all, to stand. Stand therefore, having your waist girded with truth, having put on the breastplate of righteousness (Eph. 6:10-14).

This is not a fight against man or an organization. This is a fight against the enemy, and we must take a stand. One way to do this is to take a stand in our immediate families.

That first observation and conversation started when our first child was just a baby. Long before we were pastors, we created this standard for our own family. We prioritized our family values as follows: God, family, church, hard work, extracurricular/sports. All of our decisions are filtered through those standards. Therefore, if an activity is scheduled during church time, we do not participate. (Before you think we are being legalistic, there are occasional, prayerful exceptions to this, once or twice a year, but not the norm.)

I know we are not alone in this. I also know it is getting harder and harder for many to hold to that standard due to the way youth sports organizations are set up. We as individuals need to prayerfully develop our standards according to scripture and hold to them. As each of us do this as individual families, it will make it a little easier for other families to follow suit. It will also set up a spiritual standard for our children to value God above all other things.

But what started as a personal standard for our family has grown. My heart is for families to live in the fullness of God's love and truth. It starts within my immediate family but it cannot stop there. I need to take a stand for my church

family and my community. If the enemy is truly at work in this area, then I must fight and take a stand for *all* families.

Maybe it's simply by shedding light on the schemes of the enemy and asking others to prayerfully stand with me by holding to that standard within their own families. Maybe it's through taking action even beyond our families and encouraging Christians to get involved by contacting the youth organizations our kids are involved in and make our voice known. What if we take a stand by working with and getting involved in leadership of our local youth sports programs and work with them to create a standard of protecting Sunday mornings from *all* sports activities.

The vast majority of church services are held between the 8 a.m. – 12 p.m. window. If the standard is to not schedule any sports activities until after 1pm on Sundays, we have protected family time and we have protected traditional church involvement.

If this is our standard, we will find a way to make sports activities work around that standard. There is always a solution. All things are possible with Christ. We first must establish our standards and values.

Recently, we were a part of an incredible youth football program. The standard was no football on Wednesdays or Sundays. Bad weather came and stole practice time. Requests were made to make up that time. The standard was held. Wednesdays and Sundays were protected. When we are willing to protect our values and standards, we will find alternative solutions for scheduling game times and perhaps even cut some things from the program.

The conversations need to begin, and solutions need to be established to protect our Sundays and our families. Phone calls need to be made. Letters and emails need to be sent. Volunteers who hold this value need to step up and get

involved in these organizations so we can make a difference.

I recently began the conversations with a few leaders within a particular sports organization. I was told this is the way it has been for about the past 25 years, and that it is pretty much the way it is across all sports. This just validates my argument all the more of our need for reform of the youth sports programs.

Just because this is the way it has been does not mean it is the way it should remain. In fact, if we take a look back a little further, it has not always been this way. Sundays as a whole and Wednesday evenings were protected across the board. What changed? Our values as a society.

I love youth sports. We are a sports family! I love watching my kids play. I appreciate all the volunteers who work so hard. My husband is one of them. I appreciate the value and work ethic and many character traits that are instilled in kids through sports. I appreciate the opportunity for mentorship and team work and camaraderie. Sports are valuable.

I also believe youth sports can be a great opportunity to be the light in our community to the many who may not come to church or just need a little extra encouragement in our dark world. But we can still do that throughout the week *and* work to protect Sunday mornings so that we “do not forsake the assembling of ourselves together, as in the manner of some.” We can do both and are called to do both!

I believe in the value of regular local church attendance and involvement in the body of Christ. I believe in family time. I believe these two things provide more positive whole person development and have more life long and eternal value than any other thing. These two things are invaluable.

We do not need to sacrifice one for the other. We can continue to have strong youth programs without sacrificing our Sunday-morning family time and traditional church involvement. We

need to value God and family above all else and to set up standards to serve as guards to protect those values, ultimately protecting hearts.

“For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).

“Above all else, guard your heart, for everything you do flows from it” (Prov. 4:23, NIV).

If we create the standard to protect our Sunday mornings, we will find a way to continue to develop quality youth programs within that standard.

I have taken some baby steps in taking a stand within our sports community, and it has not come without resistance. It definitely does not make you the most popular parent or pastor. Taking a stand does not come without work, heartache and even some threats, but I am confident that if we as Christians get involved, God will give us all the wisdom and favor needed as His Spirit moves to bring change.

“His divine power has given to us all things that pertain to life and godliness through the knowledge of Him who has called us by His own glory and excellence” (2 Pet. 1:3).

“And he said to me: ‘This is the word of the Lord to Zerubbabel, saying: Not by might nor by power, but by My Spirit, says the Lord of Hosts’” (Zech. 4:6).

Stand with me. Stand in prayer. Stand your ground within your own families. Stand for your church and community. Let’s not allow the enemy to gain any more ground. He may have tried to take God out of our schools but let’s not let him win this battle of taking families out of church!

Notes for Meetings With Local Leaders

As for my recent conversations with our current sports leaders, I repeatedly said this is not the fault of an

individual or even an individual organization. I am not blaming any one or upset with anyone. It's just time to begin the conversations and look for solutions moving forward.

Lacrosse situation:

As I said to one, I understand there are only so many fields and so many time slots. I understand the scheduling nightmare. Perhaps we need to look beyond the scheduling to other aspects of the program to see what can be adjusted.

For example, a local leader mentioned many wanted double elimination, and they fought for single elimination. This is a great start to minimize the number of games to be scheduled. What else can we do?

Here are options to begin thinking about, but I am sure we can come up with more:

1. How important is the all star game? This is an extra to the program. Not something for all the kids who play. Could this be cut? If not, could this be scheduled at a different time or place? It affects far fewer families, so it is an area to look at. But extras like these should not cause the season teams to have to start earlier to make room for the all star game to fit into the slots. If the season teams started their tournament at 1 p.m. on Sunday, the last game would be around 7 p.m.
2. When we play basketball tournaments, they sometimes adjust the length of game time to make room for games on the schedule. By shaving off one minute or every quarter and one minute off half time, the overall game time is cut by five minutes. Five minutes cut per game over the course of a tournament creates room in the schedule for more games. Perhaps we could look at a similar scenario for lacrosse tournaments.
3. As we look at our values and scheduling, do we also need

to look at statistics, injury and burnout rate, and things like the true development of the athlete and their mechanics? Are we emphasizing too much game time and not leaving enough room for practice, even informal practice of just playing with Dad in the backyard?

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