

Franklin Graham Defends Tennis Star Maria Sharapova

Tennis hotshot Maria Sharapova is in the hot seat. The world's highest-paid female athlete failed a drug test at January's Australian Open and is likely to be banned from competition. The International Tennis Federation's anti-doping program mandates a four-year suspension for a positive test.

In the wake of the news, Swiss Watchmaker TAG Heuer stopped sponsoring Sharapova. Nike and Porsche cut ties earlier in the week.

"We're now entering a zero tolerance era for sponsors," Rupert Pratt, co-founder of sports sponsorship agency Generate, told *Reuters*. "It is now seen as not acceptable to 'stand by your man' because of the amount of scrutiny corporates are now under."

This is a bit hit for Sharapova, a five-time Grand Slam winner. According to *Forbes* magazine, she earned \$29.7 million in 2015. But Franklin Graham has a kind word for the athlete, the seventh in the past month to test positive for meldonium. A December 2015 study in the journal *Drug Testing and Analysis* argued that meldonium "demonstrates an increase in endurance performance of athletes, improved rehabilitation after exercise, protection against stress and enhanced activations of central nervous system functions." That would give her an unfair advantage in competitions.

"Tennis star Maria Sharapova is losing sponsors and facing a suspension as a result of a failed drug test—but she has taken full responsibility for making the mistake herself. She is pointing her finger at no one," Graham says. "That's really a breath of fresh air in a day when it seems like everyone tries to blame someone else! Maria said she's been taking this

prescription drug for heart issues, diabetes and low magnesium for a decade, but now it has been added to the list of banned drugs, and she didn't notice that. She was guilty—and didn't even realize it."

Everyone, continues Graham, has broken God's laws. We are all guilty according to Romans 3:23 and the punishment for sin is death (Rom. 6:23).

"Millions and millions of people are living in sin and often don't realize the dire consequences they will face if they don't turn from their sin, ask God's forgiveness, and trust in His Son Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior," Graham says. "The Word of God says, "In Him we have redemption through His blood, the forgiveness of sins, according to the riches of His grace" (Eph. 1:7). That's even better than a grand slam!"