

WOULD JESUS WIN YOUR GOLD MEDAL?



It's difficult not to have some thoughts or opinions about the Olympics since there is 24/7 coverage of the games in Tokyo. Leading up to the Olympics, the debate was all about COVID and whether the games should even happen with the pandemic outbreak in Japan. The coverage then went to the high expectations of the American athletes and their pursuit of excellence (i.e. gold medals). But since Simone Biles removed herself from competition

(Congratulations, Simone, on your courageous routine on the balance beam winning the bronze medal.), the news has quickly pivoted to the mental health of the athletes. In the midst of these Tokyo Olympics, the focus is now on who has met gold medal expectations or even who has not medaled as expected. It appears as though Americans have been spoiled by previous successes and now defines the individual athletes and teams solely by what hangs around their neck - the gold medal or bust.

This begs the question. based on the reading from John 6:35-51, **would Jesus win your gold medal?** Where do you set the gold medal bar for excellence when it comes to your relationship with God - receiving what you want from God or trusting God to give you what is best? What do you nurture the most - your physical, emotional or mental health or your spiritual health? Do you define life as "having all that the world has to give" or "what only God gives"? The Olympic conversation gives us a great transition to talk to the world around us in terms of what defines the individual/team and what is the goal of our lives. You are encouraged to [read this entire story](#) for your own spiritual health and the well-being of those around you in need of what Jesus alone gives.

Who does Jesus think He is anyway?

If you want to cut someone down to size, a phrase that will do that quicker than any other is: Who do they think they are anyway? The phrase leads the hearer to see the person as ordinary, nothing special, run-of-the mill, incapable of anything extraordinary. When Jesus said that He is the Bread that came down from heaven, the people grumbled, "Who is He kidding. He's the son of Joseph and Mary down the street. He's not from heaven. He's flesh and blood just like the rest of us."

Whether you have watched the Olympics intently or just heard the daily reports, how have you reacted to the athletes who have spoken out about the overwhelming stress of competing in the Tokyo games? Does talking about "mental health" in the context of the greatest athletes in the world make them "too human, too ordinary" for you? When we see each athlete walk into the arena in the opening ceremonies, do we place these athletes on the level of superheroes?

Does talk of their mental health make these athletes out to be merely flesh and blood like the rest of us?

Does “flesh and blood” humanity seem too limiting for you?

The Olympic coverage includes stories about the individual athletes detailing their journey to the Olympics from humble beginnings to their extraordinary training. Their “human story” is to inspire every other human who dreams of being an Olympian to know that “their own story” could be an Olympic dream come true. But is that only true if they have one, two or more gold medals hanging around their necks? When you consider the vast number of Olympic athletes who march in the opening ceremonies, you should also consider that the vast number of the athletes consider it a great accomplishment just to be marching in that group. They know that their chances of winning a medal are very, very slim. Athletic competition by nature tells us that some athletes/teams will be winners, but far more will have their dreams dashed. Do you let the winning of a medal define each athlete? Do you consider the weight of every fan’s expectation that each athlete (especially from your own country) reach the level of superhero rather than merely a “flesh and blood” human? NBC’s Olympics host, Mike Tirico, noted in a commentary that Biles’ story and the focus on mental health didn’t fit into society’s desire for instant results and a willingness to criticize athletes who don’t live up to expectations.

It certainly isn’t right that the topic of “mental health” makes the human flesh appear limited and weak. It’s not just the “mental health” that is limited and weak but our physical, emotional and spiritual health as well. Every aspect of our human flesh IS limited and weak. That’s what sin does - every single human is tainted by the sin one inherits by nature and the sin of every thought, word and deed.

The crowd saw Jesus’ humanity as limiting, but through it we have a Savior who understands exactly what we need. Do you remember your catechism question - Why was it necessary for our Savior to be true man? Christ had to be true man in order to act in our place under the Law and fulfill it for us (active obedience) and be able to suffer and die for our guilt because we failed to keep the Law (passive obedience). We so often talk about Christ’s death and resurrection - but just as important was His life. He lived the perfect life we could not live and He died the atoning death we could not die. And He did it in flesh and blood just like the rest of us, except without sin. As we confess our sin - the sin we inherited in the flesh at conception and our daily sinful acts of thought, word and deed - we not only receive the forgiveness of sin but also the righteousness of Christ that He lived! We hear in Hebrews 4, “For we do not have a High Priest who is unable to sympathize with our weaknesses, but we have One who in every respect has been tested as we are, yet without sin.”

We care for our physical, emotional and mental health - but what about our spiritual health?

We already know from John 6:22-35 that the Bread of Life is superior to the manna bread that God gave the Israelites, for it's bread for the soul and one's spiritual health. Furthermore, Jesus declared the Good News that the Bread of Life is given to man as a divine gift and not a result of his own efforts. In John 6:35-51, Jesus further tells His hearers that he who eats this bread will live forever. And while the people had expressed desire for such bread, you don't exactly see them falling over themselves to worship Jesus when He reveals that *He* is that Bread. This is so because the sinful heart of man does not receive the Gospel of Christ joyfully with open arms. It questions the Lord and is disappointed because Christ Jesus is not someone we can mold into whoever we want Him to be. But it is interesting to observe how Jesus' words are treated in our day, when health, fitness, and nutrition are given so much prominence.

We check labels on almost everything we buy—often under doctor's orders—the calories, sodium, trans fats. And don't forget the carbs! We are finally more sensitive to the hurt caused by words and actions - enough to rightly call them verbal and physical abuse. Through the lives of Olympians and athletes around the world, we have become sensitized to how mental health impacts our total well-being. We become obsessed with monitoring everything that we and our children take into our bodies, but such vigilance is lacking when it comes to what we take into our souls. We've been trained to beware of certain foods because they contain things that elevate one's cholesterol or risk of cancer. From early ages, our children are taught the dangers of drugs, tobacco, and alcohol. We're finally free from the stigma of mental health that we're willing to speak up and speak out. But we don't practice the same discernment with things that affect the soul.

Toleration of error is really intolerance of the truth. Those who say that doctrine and teaching do not matter are in effect saying that it doesn't matter what you use to feed your soul. They are expressing that they have no desire for the Bread of Life, who is the true Bread for the soul, as opposed to the bread that only sustains the body. To put it another way, if you're giving a glass of water to a man dying of thirst, are you willing to allow that water to be laced with cyanide? Of course not, because even the most minute dose of that poison is deadly. Only pure, life-giving water will help this man. It's no different in matters of faith. The food for our souls also is to be pure and untainted with the lies of the devil. And keeping our minds and souls on the straight and narrow way is no easy task, especially when one's time spent with God is only an hour a week.

There is no one here who only eats once a week. Our bodies must be nourished and strengthened several times a day. But do your souls receive such care? If not, then you underestimate the power of the devil to lead you away from the Lord's sheepfold. The first thing he does is prompt you to base your faith not on Christ and His gifts, but on your own efforts and feeling. He leads you to shift your focus from the objective truth that Jesus lived the perfect life for you, died for you and gives you the forgiveness of sins in the means of grace, to the subjective feelings that proceed from your own heart. When he does this, your own feelings work against you, and you notice that you don't feel any different after you haven't been to

church for a couple of months. But while you might feel fine, your soul nonetheless is languishing in starvation. For salvation comes by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone as revealed in Scripture alone. And God, in His mercy, has given us objective means, that is, means outside of ourselves and our feelings, through which that saving grace comes to our souls. And as we remember from our Catechism and as we teach our children, these means are Word and Sacrament.

Many athletes struggle with the mental anguish of being alone.

In the past week, we have heard some powerful testimonies from some high-profile athletes. Simone Biles said, "I have to put my pride aside. I have to do what's right for me and focus on my mental health and not jeopardize my health and well-being." Michael Phelps commented, "Mental health over the last 18 months is something people are talking about. We're human beings. Nobody is perfect. So, yes, it's O.K. not to be O.K." Do you get the feeling that these athletes who compete at the highest level actually feel very much alone in their journey? In Tokyo, these athletes have had to compete in nearly empty arenas separated from their support network - their family, friends and significant encouragers.

I was once told of a young man in a marathon race who kept falling farther and farther behind the other runners. Suddenly he looked as if he were talking to himself and his legs began to move with a steady stroke. He began to pick up speed. By the time he reached the finish line he had passed all the other runners and had won the race. Afterwards, when someone asked him why he was talking to himself, he replied, "Oh, I wasn't talking to myself. I was talking to God. I was saying, 'Lord, you pick them up, and I'll put them down.'" We are not created to "go it alone". But many competitors feel as though it's them (all alone) against the world.

In contrast to this alone feeling, Fellowship of Christian Athletes, has adopted "The Competitor's Creed." This creed confesses that the Christian athlete depends and fully relies on the presence of Christ. The Christian athlete is defined not by their competition but by their Maker. While many competitors are driven by medals, trophies and rings, athletes who sign the Competitor's Creed commit to playing for so much more. Victory? Of course. But it's redefined. Victory is found in an eternal relationship with Christ who is victorious over sin, death, the grave and the evil one. The Competitor's Creed goes like this:

I am a Christian first and last.

I am created in the likeness of God Almighty to bring Him glory.

I am a member of Team Jesus Christ.

I wear the colors of the cross.

I am a Competitor now and forever.

I am made to strive, to strain, to stretch and to succeed in the arena of competition.

I am a Christian competitor and as such, I face my challenger with the face of Christ.

I do not trust in myself.

I do not boast in my abilities or believe in my own strength.

I rely solely on the power of God.
I compete for the pleasure of my Heavenly Father, the honor of Christ and the reputation of
the Holy Spirit.

My attitude on and off the field is above reproach—my conduct beyond criticism.
Whether I am preparing, practicing or playing; I submit to God's authority and those He has
put over me.

I respect my coaches, officials, teammates and competitors out of respect for the Lord.

My body is the temple of Jesus Christ.

I protect it from within and without.

Nothing enters my body that does not honor the Living God.

My sweat is an offering to my Master.

My soreness is a sacrifice to my Savior.

I give my all—all of the time.

I do not give up. I do not give in.

I do not give out. I am the Lord's warrior—

a competitor by conviction and a disciple of determination.

I am confident beyond reason because my confidence lies in Christ.

The results of my efforts must result in His glory.

LET THE COMPETITION BEGIN. LET THE GLORY BE GOD'S.

Please know this: I'm not saying that the Christian athlete doesn't battle with mental issues. Far from it. The Christian athlete doesn't always win the gold medal. They struggle as sinful human beings. They have limits. Sometimes their dreams are dashed in defeat. But the Christian athlete isn't defined by wins and losses in the athletic arena. And the Christian athlete begins competition with one important foundation: They aren't alone in the journey. Immanuel - God with us - is with them in the midst of it all. That makes an eternal difference. Christian athletes make the commitment, with God's help, to have their entire lives bear witness for Christ.

In 1 Kings 19:1-8, Elijah couldn't do it alone. No matter how strong a Christian you are, no matter how strong your faith. How easy it is for fear and despair and discouragement to get the better of us. How easy to feel abandoned and all alone. How easy to lie down in our own little corners and, like Elijah, tell God, "Take my life. My life is hopeless. Life and all its burdens are just too much to handle." But such words show that WE are trying to do it on our own, and relying on our own strength, our own intellect, our own words, our own ingenuity, our own wisdom and might. For if life is too much for us, it is not God's strength that has let us down... it's because we've (once again!) struck out on our own, through the wilderness, only to find out that the journey is too great for us. We can't do it alone.

But we try because the world tells us that we should be able to. Don't be weak, be strong! You're an elite athlete, you've got this! God didn't create and design us to journey alone. Sin separates. His grace restores and redeems us for the journey. The Good Shepherd goes with

us every step of the way. When it comes to both our physical and spiritual lives, we can't do it at all. We need the Bread of Life that only God gives. The bread that is no mere bread, but the bread which will see us through this life, through the wilderness, to our heavenly home. The only Bread which raises us up to eternal life.

So, would Jesus win your gold medal?

Who does Jesus think He is? He is the only One who will raise us to life! Come, all you who are weary and heavy laden, and He will give you rest. (Do you think some Olympic athletes need these words right now? Or maybe someone at work, in your golf league, right next door?) The Bread of Life will strengthen you in faith and draw you closer to Himself. He promises to forgive you your sin and remember it no more. And He sanctifies you with His gifts, that you might live a Christian and God-pleasing life. In so doing, He empowers you to live in the way that Paul described in Ephesians 4:17ff: putting away all bitterness, and wrath, and anger; being kind to one another, tenderhearted, forgiving one another as God in Christ has forgiven you! Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children. And walk in love, as Christ loved you and gave Himself up for you. Receive with thankful hearts the Bread of life—the bread imperishable, the bread indestructible, the bread immortal. For when you eat the Bread of Life by believing in the Lord Jesus and with repentant hearts confess your sins and receive God's forgiveness, you then already have the promise that Jesus gave you—everlasting life. Heaven will not be yours *someday*, but it already is yours now. Bread is to hunger what Jesus is to the soul.

Thanks be to God - Jesus is worthy of our praise, our thanksgiving, our very lives. He wins our gold medal because our lives are defined by Him for eternity. Our sinful flesh tends to grumble at God for one thing or another. We complain that God isn't fair or that we somehow deserve better. But our souls receive the nourishing Bread of Life that makes an eternal difference - now and forever. The Olympics give us so many *connection points* to share and discuss the Gospel - mental health, the answer to what defines each person, along with feeling isolated, discouraged and alone. They are all answered with the Bread of Life Himself - Jesus Christ.

One of the most difficult parts of sharing the Gospel is: where do I start? The crowds grumbled at Jesus and were even irritated at Him. Jesus used that as a connection point to share, "*Your fathers ate the manna in the wilderness and they died*" (John 6:49). In other words, you gave Moses a gold medal for leading the people when they were fed with manna. But they all died. Jesus connected with them with this gold medal winning Gospel: "*I am the Living Bread that came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever. And the bread that I will give for the life of the world is My flesh*" (John 6:51). The Olympic conversation gives us a great transition to talk to the world around us in terms of what defines the individual/team and what is the goal of our lives. It's found in Jesus! If the gold medal is the standard for excellence, only God is perfect. God has given us so much more in the Living Bread from heaven – He is our Immanuel. Boldly invite others to find healing, restoration, comfort and peace in the words

of Psalm 34:8, "*Taste and see that the LORD is good; blessed is the man who takes refuge in Him.*"

The Evangelization Team would love to hear about your *connection points* for sharing the Gospel. The joys and challenges of this year's Olympics have given us many points to share the healing, saving, satisfying gifts found only in Jesus. **What are some connection points you have found helpful in sharing the Gospel?** Share them with us at the email evangelizationteam@englishdistrict.org We are so blessed to share with a hurting and broken world this simple prayer: God, give us this Living Bread for our daily journey home to You. Have a great week discussing the Olympics - and some gold medal Gospel as well.

In Christ Alone,
Pastor John Diener
Galatians 2:20