

INTRODUCTION

This is the final message in the series called "The Gospel According to GSPN." The title of this message is, "It's All About Reaching the Goal." Many people who watch ESPN may not know what those four letters stand for: Entertainment and Sports Programming Network. The four letters GSPN stand for "God's Spiritual Playmaker Network."

On a sports team, there are only a few superstars who are the playmakers, but on God's team *every member* can be a playmaker and have an eternal impact.

Today, I'll be talking about football. During the past 6 weeks we conducted a sports poll on our website. We listed the four sports I've highlighted this month, and asked the question, "What is your favorite sport?" 15% of those responding said fishing, that's the same as the 15% who chose golf. Next, 22% said baseball, and a whopping 48% of those who voted indicated that football was their favorite sport.

Now, there may be some of you here today who know more about football than you know about church. You may not realize football and church use some of the same terms. So let me share with you football fans some terms that will help you understand church. In church, "blocking" means someone who stands and talks in front of the coffee pot. A "draw play" is what children (and some adults) do on their bulletin during the service. The "end zone" is the back pews that people fight to get into. "Interference" occurs when a baby won't quit crying during the message. "Offsides" happens when someone sits in the pew that you normally sit in. In church the word "quarterback" is what stingy people give back to God—a quarter! "Illegal motion" occurs when someone leaves the before the service is completely over. The "extra point" happens when the pastor says, "in conclusion" and then keeps talking! And finally, in church, a "long bomb" is when a pastor preaches a long-winded, boring sermon!

Football players have a bad reputation for being dumb, and that isn't always the case, although there is a reason why football players have the reputation. I heard about one defensive lineman who wasn't very smart, but he was smart enough to sit across from smartest girl in math class. On the day before a big game, the math teacher sent to message to the coach saying that his football player wouldn't be eligible to play because she had caught him cheating on a test. The coach was really upset so he went to see the teacher. He said, "Did you see him cheating?" The teacher said, "No." The coach said, "Then how do you know he was cheating then?" The teacher said, "Because his answers and the answers from that smart girl were identical." The coach said, "That could be a coincidence, it doesn't prove a thing!" The teacher showed the coach both tests and said, "Oh really? Look, on question #4 the smart girl wrote 'I don't know' and your player wrote, 'I don't know EITHER.'"

Football players may not be brilliant, but you've got to be pretty smart to play the game, because there is a lot to learn before you can take the field. There is no substitute for mastering the fundamentals of football. Each year at summer practice, legendary NFL coach, Vince Lombardi would start the season the same way. He would gather the team around and hold up a football and say, "Men, this is a football." It was his way of emphasizing that before you learn the playbook, you had to master the fundamentals of the game—tackling, blocking, running, and

receiving.

There are some interesting parallels between football and being a Christian. In the same way, before you can move on to the deeper truths about God, you must begin with the fundamentals—a belief in God; prayer; Bible Study; belief that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. In this message, I want to share with you four ways in which football and the Christian faith are alike.

(1) TO REACH THE GOAL: THE TEAM MUST WORK TOGETHER

Football is a strange game. Coach Bud Wilkenson used to say, "Football is where 22 players on the field are desperately in need of rest in front of 60,000 people in the stands desperately in need of exercise!" Someone else observed that professional football is a strange phenomenon. Where else will you find 60,000 screaming fans that each paid \$100 to sit in a stadium that costs \$45 million to watch players paid \$7 million dispute the possession of a bag of air costing \$35?

A football field is 120 yards long and 53 yards wide—the goal lines are 100 yards apart. There are two goal lines and two sidelines. The purpose of the game is for the offensive team to reach the goal line without going out of bounds. It's also important to try to keep the other team from crossing the goal line—that's defense. In the Christian life, there are goal lines and there are sidelines as well. The sidelines are the boundaries God has placed to keep us from stepping over the line between good and bad. For Christians, the goal line is NOT heaven. Heaven is simply the after-game party! The goal of the Christian life is to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. Let's look in God's playbook, the Bible, and read what Paul wrote about the real goal line: "I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward—to Jesus. I'm off and running and I'm not turning back." (Philippians 2:12-14 *The Message*),

Paul was running toward the goal of knowing Jesus, but he wasn't running alone—he had a team of people around him who were heading for the same goal. The Apostle Paul is the famous one who has churches named after him, but he didn't do it all by himself. He had a team. When you read the last chapters of his letters, he mentions no less than 64 individuals by name that were part of his team.

I've asked several coaches, "What is the single most important element that a team must have to be successful?" The answer I've received most is the word, "UNITY." There can be a team of talented athletes, but if there's no unity, they won't win consistently. On the other hand, there can be a team with-less-than-gifted athletes, but if they are unified as a team, they'll be successful.

One of my favorite football movies is "Remember the Titans" released in 2000. It's based on a true story where Denzel Washington played Herman Boone, an African American coach in Alexandria, Virginia in 1971. It was the first year of integration, and the team was terribly divided. The black players didn't want to hang out with the white players and vice versa. They were even fighting each other. One night Coach Boone took the team for a run in the woods and

he stopped them at an area that is part of the Gettysburg cemetery. Coach Boone said, "If we don't come together right now on this hallowed ground, we too, will be destroyed, just like they were. I don't care if you like each other or not, but you will respect each other. And maybe...we'll learn to play this game like men." The team finally found unity and it made a difference in the whole school.

A team can't win if there's disunity in the ranks. Sadly, there are many churches where the members are fighting and fussing within the ranks. The Bible talks about the value of the "unity of the Spirit." In the book of Acts, the church grew from 120 people to 3,000 people almost overnight. The reason their team was so successful was because they had unity. By the way, do you know that there is a car mentioned in the Bible? Can you guess which one it is? I'll give you a hint—it's a Honda. Give up? The Bible says in Acts 2:1, "the disciples were gathered together in one ACCORD!" Sorry, I know I probably need to be penalized five minutes for that bad joke, but it proves the point that they were together—they had unity. A winning team MUST have unity.

(2) TO REACH THE GOAL: TEAM MEMBERS MUST KNOW AND PLAY THEIR POSITION

On a football team, not everybody can be the quarterback—the backs, linemen, and receivers are just as important for the success of the team. If a player tries to play a position outside his skill level bad things can happen. When I played high school football, our team was so small that many of us had to play both ways—that is, we played offense as well as defense. I was a running back on offense and a linebacker on defense. I also learned one Friday night that I was our third string punter. Our first string punter had gotten sick and he was sitting on the bench. Our second string punter had gotten hurt, and was sitting on the bench. It came to fourth down and our coach hollered, "Dykes, get in there, you're our third string punter!" That was news to me! Like most guys, I had kicked the ball around, but I wasn't much of a punter. Our team used a punt formation in which we had seven guys on the line of scrimmage, and then about seven yards back there were three guys standing to block any defenders who got through. I got the snap and I didn't see anybody really rushing, so I thought, "If I take a couple of extra steps forward before I punt, I'll get some extra distance." But what I didn't know was that when I was taking a couple of extra steps forward, one of our blockers, Andy White, was taking a couple of steps backward. Just as I punted the ball, he moved back and the ball hit him in his rear end—and, trust me, he had an ample rear. In other words, we blocked our own punt! The ball flew back over my head, and I fell on it. So, I think I still hold the record for the shortest punt that wasn't blocked by the other team in Alabama High School history—minus 24 yards!

I learned that night that I wasn't a punter!

The church is like a football team. It takes the whole team working together with each team member playing their position. Let's imagine it's the start of a game and the team is getting ready to receive a kickoff. The captain comes to the coach and says, "Coach, we've discussed it, and we've decided that you know a lot more about football than any of us do, so we've decided that you should go out and receive the kickoff." So just imagine the coach running out to the three yard line. Here's the kick, and he fields it at the four yard line and starts running up field.

He's a smart guy, and a good athlete, but before he reaches the 15 yard line, all eleven players from the opposing team slam into him—they have to carry the coach off on a stretcher.

You say, "That would never happen!" It would never happen in a football game, but it happens all the time in the church. It's so easy to sit in the pew and let somebody else do the work. Some people think because the pastor may know more about the Bible than they do, so when it comes to ministry their attitude is, "Let the pastor do that—that's what that he's paid to do!" Or "Let the staff members do that—they're trained, and I'm not." Can you imagine the chaos on a football team if when the team huddles up the guard says, "I'm tired of playing the line and blocking. I'm lining up in the backfield this play. I want to run the ball!" or what if the center decided, "I don't want to snap the ball any more—I want to catch it, so I'm going to play wide receiver!" Or what if the tight end threw his helmet on the ground and walked off the field saying, "You never throw the ball to me! I'm quitting!"

In any successful team, the team members must know their position and play their position. The same is true spiritually. The Bible says in Philippians 2:15-16: "So let's keep focused on that GOAL, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision—you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it." (*The Message*)

The goal of the Christian life is to know Jesus Christ and to make Him known. If you're a Christian, God has given you some special abilities to serve Him. He wants you to get off the bench and get into the game! The truth is that EVERY Christian has been given at least one spiritual gift from God. A spiritual gift is a supernatural ability to serve God in a way in which the whole church is built up. There is a wonderful variety of these gifts in the church. Some can teach—and that's an up-front gift from God. But others have the gift of service, which is doing simple things behind the scenes. Others have a supernatural ability to show mercy, or to give sacrificially the list goes on. Do you know what your position is on God's team? Are you willing to gladly play that position?

(3) TO REACH THE GOAL: TEAM MEMBERS MUST ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER

Every team needs cheerleaders. Cheerleaders play an important role in encouraging the team and getting the crowd into the game. Two of my favorite SNL characters are the Spartan High cheerleaders, Craig and Arianna, played by Will Ferrell and Cheri Oteri. They aren't official cheerleaders, but they have more spirit than anybody else—they even cheer at Spartan swim meets and Spartan chess matches!

Players who aren't in the game should be cheerleaders as well. During my freshman year of high school I was on the varsity squad, but as a freshman, I didn't see much playing time. So I learned that there are two things you have to do if you're on the team but not in the game. (1) Get back away from the sideline (one assistant coach is usually designated to yell that all through the game). And (2) to cheer on the guys who were on the field. I love it when you see reserve players turn around and wave a towel to get the fans in a game. When somebody comes off the field after a good play, the players on the sidelines are there to congratulate and encourage him. When the defense needs to rise up and stop a team, the cheerleaders are saying, "Push em back;

push em back; way back!" And the players on the sideline are yelling—"Let's go, defense!"

The Bible says the members of God's team should constantly be encouraging one another: "And let us consider how we may spur (cheer) one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching." (Hebrews 10:24-25 *The Message*)

Your spiritual gift may not have you in the starting squad, but you can stand on the sidelines and cheer others on. You may be the trainer who tapes ankles, or takes water in during time out. Everybody has a job, and we should all be cheerleaders for each other.

There may be a lot of touch downs that are forgotten, but there was one touchdown in a high school game in 2002 that won't soon be forgotten. It was a game when the McDermott Mohawks were down 42-0 in the last quarter. There was a 17-year-old kid named Jake Porter who had dressed out for football every day since the eighth grade. Jake had a mental disorder that kept him from playing, but he was the loudest cheerleader on the team.

In this particular game, the two coaches agreed to allow Jake to come into the game and receive a handoff. The Mohawks coach wanted Jake to take a knee, but the opposing coach said he wanted Jake to run with the ball. While the officials and opposing team stood by and watched, the ball was snapped and the quarterback handed it to Jake. At first Jake hesitated, and then the members of both teams and the officials started pointing and yelling, "Run!" Jake took off and ran 40 yards to the end zone. Both sides of the stadium went wild and players on both teams ran and congratulated Jake. It's always good to see a cheerleader like Jake finally get to be cheered!

(4) TO REACH THE GOAL: TEAM MEMBERS MUST KNOW THE GAME PLAN

My job is to be your coach today. I'm not the head coach, that job belongs to Jesus. I'm here to give you a pep-talk on how you can reach God's goal for your life. You see, in many ways, God's game plan for salvation is like football. In football, there are four downs—first down, second down, third down, and fourth down. And the Bible teaches God's game plan for salvation has four downs as well. Here they are:

First Down: God looked down and saw sinful people

First down was when God looked down and saw sinful people. The Bible says, "God looks down from heaven on the sons of men to see if there are any who understand, any who seek God. Everyone has turned away...there is no one who does good, not even one." (Psalm 53:2) God created people with the free will to choose to live right or to sin. He saw that almost all of mankind was making the wrong choice, so God did something about it.

Second Down: Jesus came down to save sinners

Second down was when Jesus came down to save sinners. Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but the will of him who sent me." (John 6:38) I don't care much for religion. Religion is man searching for God. The Christian faith is the story of God seeking

and searching for lost men and women. That's why Jesus came down to this planet.

Third Down: Jesus laid down His life on the cross

Third down was when Jesus laid down His life on the cross. In order to save us from ourselves and from our sin, Jesus went to the cross to die for us. He wasn't just a helpless martyr, Jesus **CHOSE** to die. He said, "I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." (John 10:17-18)

Fourth Down: Jesus sat down after He completed His mission

And fourth down was when Jesus sat down after He completed His mission. The Bible says, "Let us fix our eyes on Jesus ... who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." (Hebrews 12:2) Jesus died, was buried, and after three days He rose from the grave. Then He ascended into heaven and sat down at the right hand of the Father. That's the story of salvation in four downs.

CONCLUSION

Are you headed toward the goal? Are you moving closer and closer to God as you seek to have a personal relationship with Him? There have been strange football stories through the years, but one of the strangest is the story of Roy Riegels. Roy was a center and the captain of the football team for the University of California. That's when players were tough—they didn't have face guards—that little helmet was so flimsy players could fold them up and put them in their pockets after the game!

Roy Riegels was in the 1929 Rose Bowl as his team was facing the team from Georgia Tech. During the game, a running back from Tech fumbled the ball and Roy picked it up on the first bounce. He was spun around, and then broke free and starting running toward the goal line 64 yards away. The only problem was that he was running in the wrong direction! He was running toward the Georgia Tech goal. His teammates were yelling, "Turn around! You're going the wrong way!!" But Roy just thought they wanted the ball, so he put his head down and headed toward pay dirt. Finally just before he reached the goal, he realized his mistake and reversed his direction, but the Georgia Tech players tackled him on the one yard line. It was Cal's ball on the one yard line, and when they didn't get a first down, they had to punt from the end zone. Georgia Tech blocked the punt and scored a safety. The final score was Georgia Tech 8 Cal 7. Without that safety, Cal would have won. From that day on, Roy was called "Wrong way Riegels." The game received national attention, and Roy received upside down cakes, train tickets starting at the destination, and even marriage proposals on the one yard line! Roy handled it pretty well and laughed it off. Even though he played for Cal, he accepted admission into the Georgia Tech Hall of Fame in 1971! When he was inducted he said to the Georgia Tech faithful, "Believe me, I've earned this!" After all, it was just a game.

But sadly, in the game of life, there are a lot of people who are heading in the wrong direction. Jesus Christ said that there are only two eternal destinations. The Bible says, "There is a way that seems right to a man, but in the end it leads to death." (Proverbs 14:12) Don't you know if those

people in Minneapolis had known that bridge was about to collapse, they would have taken another way? In the same way, there are thousands of guys and girls who think they're on the right way, but, like Roy Riegels, they're headed in the wrong direction.

We've come to the end of GSPN, so let me leave you with two final challenges. Most importantly, let me ask you: (1) Are you headed in the right direction? Jesus said in Matthew 7 that there is a road that leads to destruction, and there are many people following it. The road to hell is an eight-lane expressway, and most people are driving on it at a break neck speed. He also said that there is a narrow road that leads to eternal life, and there are few people who are on it. Have you turned around and turned to Jesus? (2) Will you join God's Spiritual Playmaker Network? If you're headed in the right direction, God didn't save you so you could sit in the stands and be a spectator. He saved you so you can get off your seat, get on your feet, and get in the game.

OUTLINE

To reach the Goal:

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(3) TEAM MEMBERS MUST ENCOURAGE EACH OTHER

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2. Second down: Jesus came down to save sinners

Jesus said, "For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but the will of him who sent me." *John 6:38*

3. Third down: Jesus laid down His life on the cross

"I lay down my life—only to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord." *John 10:17*

4. Fourth down: Jesus sat down after He completed His mission.

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus...who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God." *Hebrews 12:2*



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...
Pastor David Dykes