

LESSON 26

Fathers and Sons and March Madness

by Pastor C.J. Mahaney

Lig [Ligon Duncan], your care and comfort at this difficult time are much appreciated. I didn't expect Maryland to be invited to the big dance and they didn't deserve to be invited (neither did Air Force, George Mason or 4 teams from the Missouri Valley Conference). Maryland fans will comfort themselves with memories of our national championship in 2002 as we anticipate the sweet news of a Duke loss in the tournament. Sunday night after the tournament selections were announced, Chad and I continued our tradition of going out to a local restaurant and filling out our brackets together. I have Duke losing in every round. Thursday can't come fast enough. Let the madness begin!

I will do my best to provide some answers to your excellent questions about fathers and sons and sports. It is certainly an area I have given some thought and attention to, because of my love for sports and my son Chad's participation in sports. My son is not only familiar with my love for sports, he is also aware of my idolatrous devotion to sports prior to my conversion. For me, participation in sports growing up was a means of self-exaltation. But I want my son to glorify God and not himself when he plays. So from a young age I have sought to protect him from emulating my past sinful example while building into his soul an appreciation for playing sports as a gift from God. I attempted to address this topic in chapter twelve of *Humility: True Greatness*.

Playing sports holds great potential for growth in godliness for our sons, but only if we as fathers lead our sons theologically and strategically. I fear that all too often our sons devote significant time to playing sports with little growth in godliness. Here is where the example and leadership of a father can make all the difference. It is our responsibility as fathers to teach and prepare our sons with biblical priorities prior to a game (or practice) and not to assume that we have fulfilled our fatherly responsibility simply by attending the game. And after the game, we should encourage and celebrate evidences of godliness and not primarily our sons' athletic ability or achieve-

ments. Our priorities for our sons' participation in sports must be theologically informed priorities rather than culturally celebrated priorities. Fathers who aren't theologically informed are more impressed with athletic ability, statistics and final scores than they are biblical masculinity and godly character.

So, prior to each practice and game (Chad plays basketball and soccer) I have a conversation with my son about how he can glorify God. Here is a sampling of the biblical priorities and practices I review with him:

- Humbly receive correction from your coach and ask your coach how you can grow in character as well as athletic skill.
- Thank your coaches for the way they have served you. And thank the referees after each game.
- Encourage your teammates for their display of godly character and athletic skill—in that order of priority.
- Encourage your opponents during and after the game. If you knock someone over, extend your hand to help them up.
- Play the game passionately and unselfishly. Serve your team by playing aggressive defense [his father never did this] and passing the ball on offense [again, his father never did this].
- Humbly respond when the referee calls a foul on you. Do not complain or disagree in word or by facial expression [his father never did this].
- No inappropriate celebrating after you score; instead, recognize that others played a role [his father never did this].
- Thank the team manager for the way he served and recognize the humility and servanthood he is displaying each game. True greatness is sitting on the end of the bench.

There is nothing original or profound about this list. But helping my son apply it to his heart and life can make a profound difference. So after each game, I

review the above list with my son. I go over the game with him and celebrate any and all expressions of humility and godly character. I tell him that this is more important to me than how many points he scored or whether his team won the game (although we do play to win!). Remember, fathers, what you honor and celebrate, your son will emulate. Therefore, we must celebrate godly character more than athletic ability or achievement.

This applies to watching a game as well. So as Chad and I watch the tournament, I will draw his attention to any evidence of humility or unselfishness I observe, as well as any expression of arrogance or selfishness. I will celebrate the former and ridicule the latter. I don't just watch the game with Chad; I seize it as a teaching moment to equip him with discernment about true greatness in the eyes of God.

My passion for my son as he plays sports is that he would please and glorify God. I want him to grow in godliness, not simply athletic ability. You see, Chad will never play professional sports. His participation in sports is temporary and meant to be preparatory. Like his father, he will inevitably grow old and only be able to walk for recreation or play golf poorly. But, by the grace of God, sports can help him grow in godly character and prepare him for manhood. His participation in sports can equip him to fulfill his calling as a man to humbly and courageously serve and lead in the home, church and culture. But for that to happen, a father must teach his son to discern and adopt biblical priorities and practices while playing sports.

—Mahaney, C.J. "Fathers and Sons and March Madness." <http://t4g.org/2006/03/fathers-and-sons-and-march-madness/>, published on March 14, 2006 (accessed August 19, 2010).