

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Celebrating Our Wins

Luke 5:17-26

“Who do you want to win?” That’s the question I’ve been asked a few times leading up to today’s Super Bowl matchup between Philadelphia and Kansas City. I don’t really have strong feelings either way. I guess I would pick Philadelphia, partly because Kansas City has won the last two Super Bowls, so it would be nice to see someone else hoist the Lombardi trophy this year, even though the Eagles did defeat the Commanders in the conference championship game. As I said, I don’t have intense leanings either way. Whoever wins, I’ll be satisfied with the spread of food that various members of our family will bring to the table.

But what about God? Does God have a favorite in this year’s game? Does he care about who wins the Super Bowl? A 2017 survey indicated that about one quarter of all Americans believed that God has a preference. In a 2013 survey, 27 percent of Americans responded that God was involved in sports outcomes, and in 2015 that number was 26 percent. You can see how those numbers have stayed pretty consistent. On the flip side, 20 percent believed their teams have been “cursed” at some point. The majority, though—73 percent of Americans--believed that God doesn’t intervene in the final score.¹

Back in the late 90s, one sports enthusiast, in a letter to the editor of *Sports Illustrated*, said: “To suggest that God really cares about the outcome of a sporting event is preposterous. Conservatively, 20 million people in the U.S. went to bed hungry on Super Bowl Sunday. A God who cares about the outcome of the Super Bowl is not a God I ever want to meet.”²

The God we meet in today’s text from Luke cares about the outcome of an off the field battle between bondage and liberation. A man enslaved by paralysis is set free. He goes from being flat on his back to being on his feet and going forward. “Get up, take your mat and go home,” says our Lord (v. 24). And so he does. Final score: Jesus and the kingdom of God 1, Satan and his dominion 0. Or actually, if we throw in all the other healing miracles that Jesus has performed so far in Luke’s Gospel, the rout would be even more evident.

It's interesting how Luke brings this miracle story to a close. The whole scene ends with an expanding chorus of praise. First, the former paralytic begins praising the Lord. Then the crowd that had witnessed the healing starts glorifying God. I don’t know whose home they were in, but the space truly became a house of worship. Now all the homeowner needed to do was hire someone to inspect his roof for potential repairs. But that can wait. Right now, the main thing is that credit be given where credit is due. “They were filled with awe and said, ‘We have seen remarkable things today’” (v. 26). This is the Lord’s doing. Thanks be to God.

That’s something you may even hear tonight if you watch the post-game interviews. You may have noticed that it has become more and more common for athletes, at various levels

of sports, to give credit to God. Some do so when a microphone is put in front of them immediately after a thrilling victory. Some do so by pointing to the sky after scoring a touchdown or hitting a home run. Some do so by gathering in the middle of the field and kneeling with teammates, as well as players from the opposing team, in a moment of prayer. These days, belief in a higher power isn't something that has to be confined to the heart or the locker room. There's more room for athletes to express their faith.

There's certainly something to be said for acknowledging the presence and work of God in all fields of endeavor, including the field of play. We're right to recognize and marvel at the skills and abilities demonstrated by athletes whose bodies and capacities are gifts of God that can be used to honor God and bring glory to God. Plus, sports creates unique opportunities to cultivate self-discipline, to stretch oneself into greater levels of achievement, and to join in the effort toward a common goal. So what happens in the arena or on the field can be a form of beauty and goodness that points to our Creator.

But at the same time, we have to be careful, because the presence of God and the name of Jesus can also get linked with ideas of strength, victory, and success that run counter to the nature of the gospel and the way of the cross. We have to be discerning about ways that God gets invoked as an endorsement for the ways of this present world rather than being what he is, the ruler of a very different kind of kingdom.

Ben Zobrist was one of Major League Baseball's most valuable players, retiring from the Chicago Cubs in 2020. When an interviewer said to him, "You played well, you got promoted fairly quickly, but baseball is fundamentally a failure game," Zobrist responded:

It's funny, I listen to those interviews after people win the Super Bowl or World Series and stuff and sometimes I'm like, we're missing it. If we are believers and we're telling people, look you work hard and do it as unto the Lord he's going to bless you and you're going to be successful, that's not what this life is about. ... I hear people use Philippians 4:13, "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" as like their pump-up verse that's gonna allow them to do things on the field they've never done before ... When you really look at that passage, the Apostle Paul is saying, "I can even do jail, and misery, and weakness through Christ who strengthens me." For me, I have to realize if that's the truth, when I fail I need to give God glory just as much as when I succeed. If through that people can see that my hope is not in my success or failure, it's in him, then so be it. Let that be for God's glory.³

When was the last time you heard a player say "I just want to thank God that I missed that field goal that would have won it for our team." Or "I give glory to God for this defeat that knocked us out of the playoffs." Or "Praise the Lord, this knee injury will keep me out of the game for the rest of the season, and give me time to grow in being more humble and dependent on him." When it comes to American sports, one writer highlights what he calls the unconscious belief "that God is synonymous with victory, triumph and accomplishment, not defeat, loss or suffering. That God is present when we achieve our goals athletically, when the game goes our way. God is forgotten when things fall apart."⁴

The man whose friends lowered him through the roof and into the presence of Jesus was a man for whom everything had fallen apart. We don't know how long he had been in this condition, perhaps his entire life. He hadn't known what it was like to stand upright and get about on his own. Every day, he had to rely on others to help care for him and to get him where he needed to go. Thankfully, his companions were determined to get him to Jesus. In fact, Jesus looks at their perseverance and determination and sees an indication of confidence in his power, a faith that's willing to do what needs to be done in order to reach him.

So now the scene is set. The expectation and excitement build. The crowd looks on, anticipating the miracle that they believe Jesus is about to perform. Some of them look like those fans you'll see in the stands, caught on camera, with their hands folded in a position of prayer, at a crucial moment in the game. And praise the Lord, Jesus doesn't disappoint them. He pulls off a miracle, snatching victory from the jaws of defeat. Only it's not the miracle everyone was expecting. Instead of restoring the man's body, Jesus performs the miracle of reconciliation. He pronounces the man's sins forgiven.

Jesus has come to save the whole person, body and soul. The debate that follows, where Jesus goes back and forth with some of the religious leaders, serves to show that God's reign is present in Jesus, that Jesus has the authority to forgive and heal. But will Jesus be vindicated? After all, the paralytic may be forgiven, but he's still lying there flat on his back. What about the healing? As one commentator has put it, this moment in the scene is "crunch time."⁵ If it turns out that Jesus can't raise the man to his feet, what will become of his claim that he has the power to forgive sins? When all is said and done, will we sinners just be left lying there helpless, captive to our brokenness and lostness?

The answer to these questions comes quickly. "Immediately he stood up in front of them" (v. 25). Then the worship starts. The praise breaks forth. The rejoicing begins. The celebration is underway, first from the former paralytic himself and then from the crowd. Some of them even start trying to do the wave. All that's missing are the confetti and the fireworks.

It's true, the God we worship and serve is a God of victory, triumphant over sin and death. He has reconciled us to himself, bringing about a new creation in Christ, whom we confidently proclaim as Lord of all. But the way that God has restored us and made us whole often goes against the present world's definitions of winning and success. In a blogpost, Kevin DeYoung once warned about following a Jesus who is more a reflection of the current mood or a projection of our own desires than he is the Christ of the cross. Young goes through a list of popular versions of Jesus, including the Republican Jesus, the Democrat Jesus, the Therapist Jesus, the Starbucks Jesus, and so on. He even includes what he calls the "Touchdown Jesus—who helps athletes run faster and jump higher than non-Christians and determines the outcomes of Super Bowls."⁶

Tonight's game is expected to attract nearly 120 million viewers. Our worship service this morning has gathered between 30 and 40. We don't have any fighter jets flying overhead or flame machines going off as teams run onto the field. We don't have any multimillion dollar commercials or a made-for-TV halftime show. But we do know what it means to celebrate a win. Our triumph is in the cross, where God's power to save is revealed not in human skill and strength but in the weakness and suffering of our Savior.

Part of what this means is that we need to be a congregation where we rejoice in our victories. Especially in a day and time when churches are struggling, in a whole range of ways, we need to celebrate our wins. Not wins that announce our greatness, but the victories that testify to the presence of God among us, doing things that only God has the power to do. Things that are manifestations of the kingdom of God. Things like someone coming to faith in Christ, or someone rededicating their life to Christ. Someone experiencing God's forgiveness and making peace with others. Someone experiencing God's healing in their body and steady recovery of strength. Someone whose body is still sick, broken, and weak but who knows how God is encouraging and sustaining them. Someone whose grief is heavy but is surrounded by the Lord's comfort. Someone who hears and responds to God's call to work for justice and mercy in the local community. Someone who just keeps giving generously of their time, talents, and treasure to build up

this fellowship of believers. Someone who lacks direction and finds renewed purpose. Someone whose mental health is deteriorating and discovers wholeness and hope in community with others. Someone who arrives at this church for the first time and experiences the hospitality and welcome of Christ. All these are just some of the ways that the power of the Lord is present to forgive, heal, call, guide, transform, teach, comfort, exhort, redeem, and restore. Sometimes in ways that are visible to our eyes, and sometimes in ways that are hidden from our sight, God is here in our congregation, taking us, flat on our backs and dead in sin, and raising us up to newness of life in his reign, so that we can go forth with praise and thanks, saying "We have seen remarkable things today."

¹ Kimberly Winston, "Does God give a hoot about the Super Bowl?" Religion News Service (January 30, 2017).

² *Sports Illustrated* (March 2, 1998).

³ Collin Hansen, "Pride, Pro Baseball, and Perspective." The Gospel Coalition (September 22, 2015).

⁴ David Cook, "Athletes Often Thank God for Wins. Why Not Losses?" Common Good. November 29, 2023.

<https://commongoodmag.com/jesus-was-a-loser/> (February 5, 2025).

⁵ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke*. The IVP New Testament Commentary Series, 3 (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 1994) 106.

⁶ Kevin DeYoung, "Who Do You Say That I Am?" DeYoung, Restless, and Reformed blog (June 10, 2009).