

So we're going to just have a brief story that I want to tell you about two football teams. There were two teams playing a football match: it was Addiscombe Town against Woodside Wanderers. And Addiscombe Town were winning 3-0 and the Wanderers were beginning to get really really frustrated. There's a member of the team called Tom and he was known as "Tom the Terminator" 'cause he was one of those players that would go in not just hard but excessively hard, and he decided that desperate times called for desperate measures. And he knew that all of the goals for Addiscombe Town had been scored by their star striker. And so he decided that as he saw the Addiscombe Town star striker running down the pitch ready to score again, he thought to himself "I'm going to do something. I'm going to take him out. I'm going to tackle him so hard that he'll have to go off injured. I'm going to" (as we said earlier on) "take one for the team. So we'll see how many goals he can score once he's been tackled by me" though Tom the terminator to himself. And he went for it! He charged into the star striker so hard that he fell to the ground with a loud shout as his ankle buckled underneath him; he was in absolute agony.

The referee blew the whistle and reached into his pocket for his red card, but the start striker shouted "No! Don't send him off." The referee and the players from both sides looked at him in disbelief. "What do you mean?" said the referee. "He doesn't know what he did," said the star striker, "let him continue playing – don't punish him!" By this time even Tom was staring at the striker; his heart was filled with remorse for the stupid thing he had done. "Look at your ankle!" said the referee, "He's got to paid the price for what he's done! You can't expect him just to continue playing as if he didn't do anything wrong, he should be sent off!" "I'm already in pain;" said the start striker, "I'm already sitting out of the game so take it as though I've been the one sent off in his place."

But even Tom said "But I did a really stupid and bad thing – I really hurt you." And he was in tears himself by now. And the star striker said "I forgive you. No go back and play. There's only one thing I want you to do: be a changed player – play not to win at any price but play a really, really clean game, putting the good of the other players before yourself; I want you to score some beautiful goals (just like I did)." "But what about your ankle?" said Tom. "oh, don't worry about it. In a few days" said the start striker "I'll be back stronger than ever." So the referee held up his hands astounded at what he had just witnessed. Tom watched as the star striker was carried off the pitch unable to walk, let alone play. But as the game restarted Tom promised himself he would never forget what the star striker had done for him, and he was a changed player from that moment onwards.

Now. That's a made up story. I want you to have a think for a moment about some questions:

Why do you think the star striker in that story did what he did? Why did he do it? What would motivate somebody to do something like that?

So he could learn from his mistakes; absolutely, so he could redeem himself. That's it! So the next question:

Would this ever happen in real life?

Have you ever heard of a situation like that? Highly unlikely isn't it, particularly in a game which has all the money in it – everything seems to be about winning, and the idea of giving away your

advantage by allowing an opposition player to stay on in that way seems unlikely.

Does this remind you of a story that you've heard before? Does it remind you of a story that you might have heard before? No?...Yes...What story does it remind you of? Jesus – that's it!

The story reminds us of what Jesus did for us. It's very difficult to see, so let me read out what it says up here: (this is 2 Corinthians 5:21) "God made him" (that is Jesus) "who had no sin to be sin for us so that in him we might become the righteousness of God." And we can replace that word "sin" with a red card. God made him, Jesus, to take the red card for us (just like the star striker did for Tom); God made him take the red card who didn't deserve it to take the red card for us so that in him we could become righteous, we could become people who are serving and living for God because we know that we have been redeemed, we've been set right with God.

Ok, just for a couple of minutes I wanted to just reflect on the idea. As I said earlier, the Bible never refers to the word "sport", but it's interesting, isn't it, that sport has gained such power (You can't really see it there) in our world as a cultural phenomenon and the picture there is of all of the flags coming into the Olympic arena, and I heard somebody once say that sport has taken such an important position in society because actually it fills the sort of cultural gap that used to be filled by military conflicts and wars, so that instead of having to go to war with the French, or whoever else – in actual fact we are able to work out some of our frustrations and are able to work some of those things out on the sports pitch rather than doing so on the battle field. Now I'm not sure that's totally true because otherwise we'd have no more wars, but there may be an element of truth about it that in some ways we pour some of our nationalistic fervour into sports rather than into wars and that sort of thing – there may be something in it.

But the question I want to ask you this morning is (or one of the questions is): What does sport teach us about living like Christ? Well first of all it talks, in the Bible, about discipline – discipline means regulating our behaviour to achieve a particular outcome. So if you want to become a great rower like Sir Steve Redgrave for instance you have to be prepared to get up very early to work out in the gym, to be prepared to eat certain foods that are going to help you to build up the muscle mass you're going to need to be a great rower; you need to be prepared to be out on the water for hours on end working, improving your skills and your abilities at rowing. And of course all of that means you're not going to see so much of your family and your friends. You're probably not going to be able to drink much alcohol because all of that affects your performance. So it's all about discipline.

So my question to you is: How disciplined are we in our Christian lives? In Hebrews 12:11 the writer of Hebrews (we don't know who it was but the person who wrote it) said "No discipline seems pleasant at the time but later it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace." So, sport teaches us about discipline. And this here (you can't see it) is Haile Gebrselassie (the picture there) and he said "All athletes need three things: Commitment, Discipline and Hard work; without that it's hard to keep running." And he won a number of Olympic gold medals and world championship titles.

The second one, as well as discipline, it also teaches us about training. Now there's a link, of course, between discipline and training because athletes need the discipline to train. But what does "training" in our Christian lives look like? Well, I would suggest to you it's the obvious things that we so often think about: it's reading the scripture and allowing God's word to speak to us; it's about being together with people in God's family; it's about praying and bringing the issues in our lives to the Lord, and asking him to guide us and help us in the things of our lives; and it's about

sharing God's word, whether that's by word or how we live and how we seek justice in the world that we live in. It also teaches us about encouragement. In football I said earlier the crowd is sometimes referred to as "the twelfth man" because if they really get behind the team they can lift both the spirits of the team, but also even lift their performance. And I saw this little cartoon about encouragement (encourage one another and build each other up): and here you've got a ruler and you've got a rock and the ruler's saying "hey, you rock!" And the rock's saying "hey, you rule!" Well it's probably a little more complicated than that but certainly the idea being that we encourage and support each other: alongside each other in the difficult times when things are tough, encouraging and supporting each other.

So, there's just a little reminder of the ways in which sport speaks to us about our Christian lives.

We're going to finish with a final song (I think it's a one we don't know): it's "The world is looking for a hero", and the idea with this song is that sometimes we look to all sorts of other heroes but actually the one who really deserves our hero worship, the one who really deserves our love and adoration, is the Lord Jesus. So we're going to listen to this song and then we're going to share a final prayer together...

[Band plays "The world is looking for a hero (Champion)" by Noel & Tricia Richards 1994]

Lord Jesus, we see so many people raised up as heroes in our world: sporting heroes, musicians, national leaders, all sorts of people lifted up, put on parapets inviting us to look to them as the epitome of what the successful life looks like that we should follow them and emulate them in the way that we live. And yet, Lord Jesus, we look to you, we look to you, our suffering saviour. Your word tells us you didn't even have anywhere to rest your head - you had no permanent home. You were a restless wanderer in this world when you were here, and you invite us not to put our hope and our belief and our adoration in worldly figures - in earthly figures - who are in the end simply human beings like us, who make mistakes and are so human and able to make mistakes as we all do. Your word tells us that you Lord were tempted in every way as we are and yet you did not sin. So Lord, we look to you as our Lord and saviour. You invite us to live humbly and honestly, recognising our mistakes but coming to you and knowing your forgiveness and your renewal. So Lord, at the end of this service we share in the Grace together: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the love of God and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all evermore, Amen.