



Organized Sports on Sundays?

Mark Jones

Christian parents are faced with many dilemmas as they seek to raise their children for the Lord. If they have sporty or athletic children who play on a sports team, the question of playing on the Lord's Day (Sunday) becomes a real issue.

I became a Christian at University. Giving up soccer on Sundays was something that had to happen so that my love for and commitment to the Lord was not divided on his Day. That meant also giving up a \$30,000 a year soccer scholarship. That may sound crazy to some, but, out of God's abundant kindness and grace, I was able to complete three degrees and not have a single dollar of debt at the end. God graciously rewards even small (and imperfect) sacrifices.

After transferring to an affordable Canadian University, I did not play games on Sundays. There were times when I wanted to, but now that I look back, I don't regret missing several games in order to go to worship the Lord at a solid ARP church. Many asked why I wasn't playing and it was a good opportunity to tell them about the Lord.

Now that I'm older, and have four children, who all love sports, I am constantly faced

with the issue of organized sports on Sundays. My daughter has to play on a boys' team because boys play Saturdays in Vancouver whereas girls play on Sundays. We had to get special permission to allow her to play boys soccer. I also have three boys, all of whom love soccer. But they know that organized sports on Sundays are not an option.

The pressure can be intense. It comes from coaches and parents; it sometimes comes from your own children; and, for me, it comes especially from my own heart where I don't want my children to "miss out". Thankfully, I have had many opportunities to speak to people about the gospel not because I forced it upon them, but because they have asked where my children were on a Sunday.

I recently spoke with a mother of one of my son's teammates. She used to go to church, but, in her own words, she said that her children all now have sports on Sundays so they aren't able to go to church anymore. But she "wears" her Jesus-fish tattoo without shame.

Many Christians today are allowing their children to miss worship because of commitments to sports.

So, how should we respond?

Here our theology informs our practice. If we believe the Biblical teaching on the Sabbath, as faithfully summarized in the Westminster Confession of Faith, the answer is fairly straightforward and easy (WCF 21.1-8).

But what about those Christians who do not hold to the Sabbath?

I think it is important, in all things, for our children to learn from their parents that from the time they come out of the womb to the time they leave the home the Lord must come first. Following Christ demands that we even renounce our family if we have to (Luke 9:57-62, 14:26); how much more should we renounce sports for Christ's sake? We are always to seek first the kingdom of God (Matthew 6:33).

Giving up worship for sports is not an option for Christians. In fact, to miss worship because of sports is positively wicked. Your children will not likely be converted on the field or on the court or on the diamond. In God's house, with God's people, they are in the most important place for their never-dying souls. They are in the place that shapes their living for the week, week after week, year after year, decade after decade.

The most important thing Christians can do in this world is worship God in the corporate assembly of his people on the Lord's Day. Think about that. We enter into the heavenly places when we worship. We commune with the triune God and his people. Through faith, we receive grace upon grace, and we offer praises to the living God. And would we rob our children of this inestimable blessing for a game?

What about Jesus + Sports on Sunday?

Most sports games take place in the morning, when God's people worship. But sometimes it is manageable, if the game is later on. But, your child may sit in the pew hoping the minister won't take too long because he or she needs to get to his/her game. Are we prepared to put our child in that situation? Do some rush away from God's people too quickly (and speed) to get to a game? Is it really worth it to put such emotional pressure upon yourself and your child?

Sometimes organized sports gets so competitive that it becomes increasingly hard for children and teens to maintain their focus during church because of the nerves or excitement they get from the sport they play.

I actually think that not allowing my children to play on Sundays (or do homework) has far more advantages than disadvantages. They know the Lord's Day is just that: the Lord's Day. As a result, they actually enjoy freedom

by not having to worry or concern themselves with anything else on that day except the principles found in, for example, Acts 2:42. Moreover, they learn, by being with God's people, in God's house, that their lives are not primarily about self-enjoyment, but about serving the Lord.

If the Lord's Day is filled with public worship, fellowship with the saints, and works of mercy and outreach, there simply isn't enough time in the day to play organized sports on Sundays. It is all about priorities. Spend the whole day with Christ and his people, not just 60 minutes or so. If you want your children to love Jesus, provide them with an example where love for Christ demands that he must come first, and not be shared with the fleeting pleasures of the world. You cannot serve two masters. Your child may end up hating the wrong one and loving the wrong one.

There's no question that I still struggle with this principle. My heart sometimes asks whether it would be a big deal to let my son play in a mid-day game while the rest of the family has a fellowship lunch. (We've even had parents say they will do all the driving for our kids on Sundays). It isn't easy for parents who want the best for their children. But, ultimately, living by faith, in obedience to God's Word, enables us to do what is best for our children. My assistant coach (a pagan) said, after he found out we don't play on Sundays: "Oh, because that's like God's day, right?"

Right?



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