

“On the Team, or Not?”

Luke 9:51-62 ¹

Many of us have seen the movie, *War Room*, an excellent and inspirational film about the power of prayer. One of the amazing things about the film is that it is the latest in a series of powerful Christian films done by the Sherwood Baptist Church in Albany, Georgia.² For those of us who may think that there's not a lot that one church can do, this congregation has now produced five films that have made it to theaters and changed many lives for God's Kingdom.

The second of these films was *Facing the Giants*, and though the story is fictitious and the plot predictable, I laughed and cried and prayed my way through the film like many others who have watched it, and I commend it to you as worthy of your time. The gist of the story is that a losing coach with a losing team made a most unlikely turnaround that led to wresting the state championship from a steamroller team that had controlled the trophy for years. The turnaround happened after a friend challenged Coach Grant Taylor to be more intentional about putting God first in his football program.

Early in the turnaround, Coach Taylor asks his players to tell him which team won the state championship ten years ago. They don't know. Neither do they know who won five years ago, and they're not really sure who won three years ago. Since championship fame is obviously so fleeting, Coach Taylor points out that, while winning the state championship is a worthy goal, that goal isn't big enough to hang your life on. Winning the championship amounts to the proverbial “fifteen minutes of fame,” and that's it.

Over and over, Coach Taylor reiterates Paul's point that “*in a race everyone runs, but only one person gets the prize. You also must run in such a way that you will win. All athletes practice strict self-control. They do it to win a prize that will fade away, but we do it for an eternal prize.*” (1 Corinthians 9:24-25). “Football is great,” Coach Taylor says, “but living your life for Christ is what really matters.”

In one of the most memorable scenes in the film, Coach Taylor challenges Brock Kelley, the team captain, to prove that he has what it takes to win. As that gut-wrenching scene comes to a close, Coach Taylor tells Brock, “You're the most influential person on this team. I need you! The rest of the team will follow if you'll lead!”

Well, Brock does lead, and the team does follow. They pour their hearts and souls into their work, and “the rest is history.” Keep these images in mind as we turn our thoughts toward Palm Sunday, that day long ago when Jesus made what we sometimes call “the triumphal entry” into Jerusalem.

Seldom in the world's history has there been such a display of magnificently deliberate courage as Jesus' Triumphal Entry. We need to remember that Jesus was essentially an outlaw, and that the authorities were determined to kill Him. If He was to enter Jerusalem at all, caution and common sense would have demanded that He enter secretly and in hiding – but Jesus came in a way that focused every eye upon His arrival.

The Triumphal Entry is recorded in all four Gospels, but only John mentions that the branches were palms, that the raising of Lazarus was a factor, that the disciples did not

¹ A sermon by Dr. David C. Stancil, delivered at the Columbia Baptist Fellowship in Columbia, MD on April 9, 2017 - Palm Sunday.

² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sherwood_Pictures

understand the significance of the event until after Jesus was glorified, and that the Pharisees took such a dim view of the whole thing.³

As John describes it, there were two crowds: there was the crowd coming in with Jesus from Bethany; and there was the crowd coming out of Jerusalem to meet Jesus. Perhaps many of the people were sightseers who wanted to see Lazarus and this miracle worker who had raised him from the dead (John 12:9, 17-18).

Many of the people who were with Jesus were going up to the Passover. Many of them were probably from Galilee, where Jesus had carried out most of His ministry. Many of them had probably thought for some time that Jesus' teaching and miracles showed Him to be the Messiah, but up until now He had not been willing to make that claim. And so now, when Jesus did not reject their praise, their enthusiasm knew no bounds. It appeared to them that He was doing what they had always wanted Him to do!

As Jesus entered the city, the people cried out, "Hosanna! Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" (Psalm 118:25-26). "Hosanna" means "save," or "save now," and it was almost equivalent to shouting, "God save the King!" Those words had been famously used to greet the arrival of Simon Maccabeus, the first of the Hasmonean kings (141 BC), and a prominent leader of the rebellion known as the Maccabean Revolt.

What this all means is that the people were greeting Jesus as a conqueror, and such a greeting did not go unnoticed by those in power. This was a Messianic Moment. To those who welcomed Jesus that day, it must have seemed like only a matter of time until the trumpets rang out and the call to arms sounded, and the Jewish nation swept to its long-awaited victory over Rome.

It was also highly symbolic that Jesus chose to ride into the city on a young donkey. Jesus was only coming from Bethany, two miles away, and He was accustomed to a great deal of walking, so Jesus didn't need an animal to ride because of distance or fatigue. His choice of the donkey's colt was a dramatic enactment of Zechariah 9:9: "*See your king is coming, riding on a donkey's colt.*"

In those days, the king came riding on a horse if he was bent on war and conquest, but the king came on a donkey if he was coming in peace. Jesus was very intentionally, very publicly—and very dangerously—entering the city as a king, but as the King of Peace. And, while *everyone* understood the "king" part, *no one* understood the "peace" part. Indeed, the fact that the disciples were completely clueless about what was really happening is evidence that this was not a prearranged theatrical event.

The priests and religious leaders knew Zechariah 9:9 very well, too, and they believed that it pointed to the Messiah; but when the Messiah came, when it really happened, it didn't look so wonderful to them. The basic idea of Palm Sunday has to do with a rousing and rowdy welcome for Jesus six days before those very same people viciously turned on Him as they began to understand what He was really doing.

Palm Sunday has to do with commitments hastily made and hastily abandoned; and Palm Sunday has a lot to do with recognizing ourselves in the "Hosanna Crowd." You and I think we are sincere lovers of truth, that we wholeheartedly accept Jesus' teaching, and that we earnestly desire the arrival of His way of life. And yet how often do truth or righteousness or even Jesus

³ John 12:9-19; Matthew 21:4-9; Mark 11:7-10; Luke 19:35-38

Himself come to us and we fail to recognize them? Worse, it just might be that sometimes we do recognize them, but we don't like what we see.

My friends, God's thoughts are so unlike our thoughts that they sometimes seem to us to be futile and preposterous and silly. When it gets down to specifics, we tend to regard unselfishness as weakness, not as strength. We often regard forgiveness as cowardice. We consider turning the other cheek as sheer foolishness; and both are obviously quite out of the question for persons of the twenty-first century. Jesus is not the king we had in mind, thank you very much!

It's at this point that we turn to our text in Luke 9: "As the time drew near for his return to heaven, Jesus resolutely set out for Jerusalem. He sent messengers ahead to a Samaritan village to prepare for his arrival. But they were turned away. The people of the village refused to have anything to do with Jesus because he had resolved to go to Jerusalem. When James and John heard about it, they said to Jesus, 'Lord, should we order down fire from heaven to burn them up?' But Jesus turned and rebuked them. So they went on to another village.

"As they were walking along someone said to Jesus, 'I will follow you no matter where you go.'

"But Jesus replied, 'Foxes have dens to live in, and birds have nests, but I, the Son of Man, have no home of my own, not even a place to lay my head.'

"He said to another person, 'Come, be my disciple.'

"The man agreed, but he said, 'Lord, first let me return home and bury my father.'

"Jesus replied, 'Let those who are spiritually dead care for their own dead. Your duty is to go and preach the coming of the Kingdom of God.'

"Another said, 'Yes, Lord, I will follow you, but first let me say good-bye to my family.'

*"But Jesus told him, '**Anyone who puts a hand to the plow and then looks back is not fit for the Kingdom of God**' (Luke 9:51-62).*

Here we have a striking contrast between Jesus' "resolutely setting out for Jerusalem" and the failure of these would-be disciples to understand what the cost of following Him really is. Jesus made this cost even clearer when He said, "If you want to be my follower you must love me more than your own father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, more than your own life. Otherwise, you cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26).

Though the context and significance of the conversation were very different, Jesus' challenge reminds me of Coach Taylor's sweaty challenge to Brock Kelley: "You're the most influential person on this team. I need you! The rest of the team will follow if you'll lead!" And all of this together has set me to thinking about the commitment required to follow the Way of Jesus in our own time. Hence today's title, *Are You on the Team, or Not?*

Most of us in this room have accepted the claims of Jesus on our lives to some degree. At the very least, we're here because those claims intrigue us. Like Peter and James and John and the players on Coach Taylor's football team, we have a built-in, God-given desire for our lives to matter. To one degree or another, we want to give ourselves to a cause that is grand enough and glorious enough to be worthy of all we are and all we have, something of more lasting value than last year's trophy, however grand it was.

We want to invest our gifts and skills, our passions and resources, our hopes and dreams, in something that can gather our individual offerings together into something more wonderful than any of us could do alone. That is, after all, the significance of team sports, and of team

efforts of any kind. And that's what Jesus is talking about when He invites us to "fish for people" in the Kingdom of God.

Now I expect that you more-or-less agree with what I've said so far. But if we believe these things, are we living them? Let me explain what I mean.

Many of us are members of service clubs of one sort or another, and that's a good thing. Indeed, that's an essential thing if we Christians are going to be influencers in our community. I've had several friends across the years who were deeply committed to their local Rotary Clubs, for example.

Such clubs make very positive contributions to the community; and those of which I'm aware frequently make far more stringent demands on their members than those same members would tolerate in their churches. This puzzles me.

Now living in a way that causes God's Kingdom to "come on earth as it is in heaven" doesn't mean that everything we do has to be obviously related to the organized activity of the Church. But what it does mean is that in everything we do, our number one priority is our relationship with God and our obedience to God's commands—commands that lead us to abundant life, and that enable us to become more and more contagious as we share our joy with others.

Being "on Jesus' team" affects how we make a living, and it affects how we relate to those with whom we work. Being "on Jesus' team" has to do with how we relate to our families, with how we spend our time, with the kind of amusements we pursue, with the instruction we give to our children, and with the activities we enjoy with our families.⁴ And so, thinking about Coach Taylor and his "turnaround team," I've put together a short list of "Team Commitments" that might also have some application to our life together in the Church:

1. I will be suited up, well rested, and on time for every practice.
2. I will know the playbook inside and out.
3. I will diligently practice the prescribed disciplines to be in top shape for every game.
4. I will be suited up, well rested, and on time for every game, at home and away.
5. I will be eager to be in the game, not on the bench.
6. I will play for the honor of the team, not myself.
7. I will "leave it all on the field."
8. I will pursue a lifestyle consistent with team standards in every way.
9. I will be passionate and persuasive about the purpose and benefits of the team.
10. I will always be on the lookout for new team members.

Palm Sunday has to do with commitments hastily made and hastily abandoned; but such commitments don't lead to winning teams. The Master has come, and He calls us to follow. Like Coach Taylor, Jesus says this morning, "I need you! Others will follow if you'll lead!"

One of the sayings my Dad quoted a lot fits our life in Christ on Palm Sunday, and on every other day. It's not good grammar, but it's a good maxim to live by, and it goes like this: "If

⁴ It troubles me that many of the activities in which we involve our kids seem to have more to do with the fact that everyone else seems to be doing them or that we think such activities will reflect well on us as parents, or that such activities might save us money in the long run if they lead to a scholarship in college, rather than being intentionally focused on building faith and character into their lives. I'm afraid that what we're teaching our children and grandchildren may be that materialism and fame are the only things that matter very much. What do these precious ones *really* see when they watch our lives?

every player were just like me, what kind of team would this one be?" Consider that question: **"If every player were just like me, what kind of team would this one be?"** The Master has come, and He calls us to follow! *Are you on the team, or not?*