

The younger son also used his father to get something that he thought was better. How often do we act similarly towards God with our sport? We say the right things and do the right things in hopes that he would bless us athletically. We abstain from certain sins before a big competition, thinking that he will see our obedience and reward us for it on the field.

In short, we try to use him to get what we want.

The danger in all of this is that, while we were created to worship, we only experience the contentment our hearts truly long for when we direct that worship towards God. When it's directed at created things, at best, our hearts will cry out for more. At worst, our lives risk being turned upside down.

THE RESULT OF INDEPENDENCE (VS.14-16)

The younger son, motivated to leave his father, took his wealth and spent it on worldly things—and ended up relying on pigs to survive. That's tragic irony. It was Jewish law to stay away from pigs because they represented uncleanness. And here was a Jew, forced to feed pigs—and wishing he could eat the slop he fed them.

The result of intentionally leaving his father was desolation. This is what sin does to us. It pulls us into unsuspecting and nightmarish circumstances, darkens the exits so we can't find our way out, and robs us

of the blessings God has in store for us if we chose his path instead.

Sin always baits us into thinking we will be okay if we just give in a little more.

It causes us to push the limits as we believe the lie that *God isn't enough*.

When we are primarily motivated

by the pleasures of sports, we are not living to glorify God through our sport—instead, we use our sport to glorify ourselves.

And so we cheat. We play dirty. We curse our teammates—out loud or under our breath—for a bad play. We berate officials. We talk behind our coach's back. We become passive aggressive in real life—and on social media—about what is frustrating us. Why?

Think back to the Prodigal Son. If you remember, there was a famine in the land that led to the younger brother's downfall. Sure, he spent his wealth, but once the famine hit, there was no one willing to help him.

Athlete, when we choose to live a life independent of our Father, we experience a similar reality.

As author Skye Jethani puts it in *With: Reimagining the Way You Relate to God*:

The greater problem is not the son's morality but his locality—he is in a famished country far away from his father's house where no one cares for him. When we recognize this part of the story the problem is no longer just a lack of responsibility, but the son's distance from, and severed relationship with, his father. Therefore, the moral of the story is not “be more self-controlled to avoid hardship,” but “stay connected to the father who loves and cares for you.”

At times we are all undisciplined. We are all irresponsible, unwise, or reckless. As harmful as these actions may be, the greater harm is abandoning our heavenly Father.

The greater harm is abandoning our heavenly Father. When we abandon him and look to things like sports to fill the void in our hearts, we will always be left wanting more.

It's why, after his first three Super Bowl rings, Tom Brady admitted in a *60 Minutes* interview, “God, it's gotta be more than this. I mean this can't be what it's all cracked up to be. I mean I've done it. I'm 27. And what else is there for me?”

When pressed for the answer, Brady simply said, “I wish I knew. I wish I knew.”

THE REPURCUSSIONS OF INDEPENDENCE (VS.17-21)

Mike has been on staff with AIA for more than ten years. Jackson, a sophomore on the track team, emailed Mike at 1:37am with the subject “My Story”:

Hey Mike, I'm a Division 1 athlete, full-ride scholarship, 2011 NCAA national champion, and I am in a distance relationship with the homecoming queen from high school for 6+ years who is an absolutely gorgeous and incredible person. This is how I identified myself. I thought I had it made. I had a girl who I absolutely thought I'd spend the rest of my life with; I had an NCAA title, a full scholarship and an absolute love for my sport to the school of my choice. Perfect right? Not quite.

As a "man" I also identified myself in partying, and in getting girls to like me. I mean that's what we are taught right? If you are a real man you can go get any girl you want. A few times while partying, I lost my sense of control and ended up not being faithful to this girl I loved. I hid it. I hid everything I had done wrong to her. I had to cover my lies with more lies and it snowballed out of control.

After a few months of trying to cover up these lies, I was caught. She had confronted me in suspicion and finally I confessed, ashamed and in absolute shambles. She was gone.

So what's left in my identity? Oh yeah, running. At the exact time of this all happening I developed tendonitis in my hamstring. That was in November, and we are currently at the end of February. Running was the main way I identified myself in life, well that's gone right now as well. Running is my way of dealing with my stress, getting out there into the rhythm of a great run is something that is just majestic to me in times of trouble. Not only is running my sense of stress relief, but I, as with most athletes in general, identify myself my success. If I'm successful in my athletic life then it really doesn't matter how the rest of my life is going, I can confide in that. Again, in life we are raised that our athletic performance is another measure of a real man. The bigger faster strong you are the more of a man you are. The Conference Championships are this weekend, and I'll be sitting on the sidelines cheering instead of competing. Great, now the two biggest ways I identified myself are as follows. I'm a cheater, and I'm broken. Real manly huh?

So what did I do? I jumped off the deep end. I was drunk at least 9 of 14 nights after the break up. Partying, trying to ease

the pain with the fun of the people I was with and masking my feelings with alcohol and drunkenness. Justifying it as my stress reliever since my running is non-existent as well. It was the perfect excuse; I had about 4-5 friends turn 21 in those few weeks, so I attended with pleasure. I still felt absolutely empty. Thankfully I had a safety net. All of this was happening while consistently I was being told that that is the last thing I need to be doing by my friends who are Christ followers, and by my parents. I ignored it all. I still went to church, went to Bible study, and went to Athletes in Action. Just going through the motions of it, while not actually doing anything about my so-called faith.

So now what? It leaves me in God's hands, as a brand new ball of clay, broken, but fixable and ready to be remolded. I truly believe that God is using all of this to break down the things I confided in that weren't him. He is showing me that what I identified myself in before is just of the world, and is not where my focus needs to be. He is redirecting me to Him. It really took me until tonight to not just realize that but to actually. He is showing me that what I confide in is not strong; they are simply "idols" of this world and will not prove to be stable. He is the only rock where I need to put my complete and total faith. I can trust Him through this. I sincerely want to take the steps to be able to totally trust Him in everything.

This really sucks right now, but I know that He has only what's best for me.

I want to completely transform from how I've identified myself as a man in the past and really make strides. I want to be totally for God. That is the only way. Jesus is the way. The messages I've been hearing at church, and at AIA, and our Bible study, have been way too eerily coincidental to my current situation for me not to listen. I want to be able to go through my athletic career, and really glorify Him through it. Compete to glorify him and not for myself, for the acceptance of others, or for any other reasons, but to get everything out of the gift I was given. After all that's all it is right? A gift? A gift that is so easily taken away, and not what I need to identify myself with, but identify myself in the One that gave me the gift.

I realize that this isn't going to be a flick of the light switch, poof! I'm 100% obedient. It's going to take time, and fellowship, and it's going to take a lot of self-control and determination. Something I've never had much of. I know that God never gives you obstacles too tall to tackle, and I know He's going to help me through every step. The people I surround myself with will also help me in my walk.

I'm writing all of this I guess as a way to really make it real. We don't really know each other that well right now, but I figure if we are going to meet, and discuss, you should really know exactly where I'm coming from.

Jackson's lifestyle of pursuing worldly pleasures left him at a similar crossroads as the younger brother from the parable in Luke 15. Perhaps you are like Jackson—and the younger brother. Do parts of your story resonate with theirs? If so, pay attention to their next steps.

Like the younger brother, Jackson came to his senses and got honest about his life. What he was going after failed to satisfy this longing his heart continually produced. And he did what God calls everyone to do through his word: confess.

Jackson owned it. No excuses. In humility, he admitted that his plan didn't work.

His greatest need was to go back to the faith that revived him at a younger age and seek a restored relationship with God through Jesus.

Athlete, if we choose to find our motivation in worldly pleasure and pursue life independently from God, we will eventually hit rock bottom. We will find ourselves at a place emptied of joy and wonder—how we got there. A choice needs to be made. Will we return to the Father's embrace and trust that he has more than enough to satisfy the void inside of us? Or will we again harden our hearts and believe that another short season of self-centered independence will finally pay off?

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Which of the three points about sin most resonated with you?

Can you think of a time in your athletic life when your motivation was aligned with the younger brother's?

What can we learn from Tom Brady's experience with success and its inability to fully satisfy him?

Did you identify with Jackson's story? If so, what part(s)?

How did you respond to the two questions posed at the end of this chapter?

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MOTIVATED BY PERFORMANCE

It's important to remember why Jesus told this parable. We can trace his motivation back to the beginning of Luke 15. In the first verse, we read that tax collectors and sinners were gathering to hear him. These were the rebels of the group—the younger brothers in the story. But there was another group present as well: the pharisees and teachers of the law. Verse two tells us that this group complained amongst themselves when they saw that Jesus associated with the rebels. If the truth about the younger brother receiving grace and mercy from the father wasn't scandalous enough, Jesus pulled back the curtain for this group of moral elites to see how the Father views them as well.

Before we go any further, picture the best athlete you can think of in your head. Got one? This group of religious studs were better at following the law than whatever athlete you thought of is at their respective sport.

ATHLETES SPEND MUCH OF THEIR LIFE REFUSING TO SURRENDER.

At a base level, to be a Pharisee, you had to have the Torah memorized. That's the first five books of the Bible: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. This group was superior in knowledge to anything we can fathom today. But Jesus cared about something beyond their religious pedigree. Remember, motivation matters. What's driving our obedience is of utmost importance to God.

While the younger son was driven by worldly pleasures and sought a life independent from his father, the older son found his motivation in self-righteousness: living a life of performance for his father.

Self-righteousness means being totally confident in one's morality and abilities. It's being smugly intolerant of the opinions and behavior of others. It thrives on comparison and feeds off those who fail to meet your own standards.