

Tyranny of self preservation.

Sports are so popular because they're so black and white. Good guys, bad guys, winners and losers. To foster more winning coaches have to be expert motivators. Imagine if you could put all of the inspiring speeches from managers, all of the training camp machismo, all of the sheer testosterone of football season into one massive metaphysical pile – what would that pile contain?... besides big muscles, low SAT scores... and HGH...

In that pile you might find a lot of clichés:

- If you can dream it, you can achieve it!
- You might even find God brought into it, like a Bible verse or two
  - His enemies will lick the dust! Ps 72:9
- Or general motivational spirituality...
  - Like this verse: “God don't want to see me fail.” – where is that found? 1 Book of Terrell Owens 1:1 – not actually in the Bible – but it was quoted in Sports Illustrated when Terrell Owens was with the Philly Eagles

There is a Bible verse you're NOT going to find, in a single motivational speech by a single coach in a single game all year. It's this one from Jesus (paraphrased):

“The real winners are the losers! The real losers are the ones who look like winners!”

How do you think that one would go over in the locker room? (*Actually, the Sonics could really use that pep talk this season.*) As in-congruent as that would be in a sports locker room, imagine if we took what Jesus said in Luke 9:24 seriously. Here's the actual quote:

“If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life.”

***That's upside down living!***

- Try to grasp life and you will surely die.
- Start accepting death and you will surely live.
- The road to up, is down!

What on earth did he mean? We begin to understand when we realize that while a focus on self preservation thru muscle is something celebrated on football fields and in the business world and in warfare, it can be deadly in the spiritual world.

Last week we said that if it's all about me, that's a life that doesn't work. I begin to think the world and God revolve around me and I find myself bowing low at the altar of ego. Self worship. Some of you maybe when I said that maybe said to yourself:

Come on Rick! Self worship? What person in their right mind thinks of themselves as God?

Well, I was reading snippets from this book last week that has been read by over 30 million Americans, *The Secret*. And in this book, the idea of worshipping yourself isn't just hinted at, it's explicitly encouraged!

Lisa Nichols: We often get distracted with this thing called our body and our physical being. That just holds your spirit. ...You are God manifested in human form, made to perfection. (my wife might beg to differ on that one)

Buckminster Fuller: You are God in a physical body. You are Spirit in the flesh. You are Eternal Life expressing itself as You. You are a cosmic being. You are all power. You are all wisdom. You are all intelligence. You are perfection. You are magnificence. You are the creator, and you are creating the creation of You on this planet.

So wow, if that's true, let me ask you something: When was the last time you controlled the weather? When did you turn water into wine? When have you ever created a universe, or an amoeba for that matter? Some of us can't control a 2 year old, much less the weather.

Here's more telling evidence of our un-God-ness: when was the last time you managed stopped **pain** or **longing** or **suffering** from hitting you? When was the last time you righted all the wrongs? That's not really working out, is it?

AND YET WE SEEM BENT AS A SPECIES ON TAKING GOD'S SPOT despite the evidence that it's an ill fitting yoke.

- We're set on being permanent, when we surely will die.
- We're set on being in control, when surely can't control even ourselves
- We're set on being self sufficient, self contained, self preserved from all pain.

Those things sound so good, but that's actually a burden Jesus said – if we make it the center of our lives. Because it's built on a lie: The Terrell Owens philosophy:

***God, if he exists at all, must be about my survival, my success, my comfort, my satisfaction, my benefit.***

You don't have to be a new ager to think like this. Some Christians think act as if God is their butler. It's a form of Christianity you seen in popular ministries that find their way onto TV from time to time. This God only seems to care about your comfort. He's up in heaven some place saying:

- cakes, dear?
- Comfy, sweetie?
- Pillow, love?

In contrast to this idea, last week, we kind of laid out the soul rocking notion that **God doesn't exist to make a big deal out of us, we exist to make a big deal out of God.**

That's what biblical Christianity teaches. Phil 2:10-11

that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,  
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,  
and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,  
to the glory of God the Father.

Have you ever thought that maybe the **pain** and **weakness** and **suffering** and **need** that we experience daily is actually EVIDENCE that God does not Exist to provide the cakes, pillows and comfort for our lounge? I mean, friend, if God exists to make it all OK for us, something is terribly wrong! Just look around! The death, disease, slumping economies, hurricanes, terror, war. One of three things is true.

- Either God doesn't exist, or
- he's doing a pretty miserable job! **OR...**
- God doesn't exist FOR OUR COMFORT.

I mean, maybe friend, your comfort is not God's number one priority. "So are you saying God is mean, Rick?" Not any meaner than you were

- the last time you grounded your kid, or
- took the candy bar out of his hands, or
- the large aluminum bat raised over his sister's head.

Some of you are here just seeking answers, investigating Christianity to see if it might hold them. And I bet some of you assume that Christianity is selling this idea that with God in your life, it means a free ride. That God's idea of paradise on earth should be some place with no challenges and no obstacles and no temptation.

Well, that's not the case. We actually have the Bible's account of God's idea of paradise on earth: When God made the world, the Bible says creation was GOOD, but evil was already here. That's what that serpent in the Adam and Eve story signifies. The tempter, the Evil One. There he is, at the beginning of the human race, in our infancy.

And if that weren't enough, the earth starts out wild. When God makes man, he puts this mandate into his soul:

- o I want you to multiply and fill the earth and **subdue** it and be gracious masters over all life (Gen 1:28)

So Paradise is filled with challenges! I mean we wouldn't be asked to subdue earth if it wasn't previously wild, right? It's a bit dangerous, this world God put us in. Yes God places the humans in Eden. Yet even in the garden, it's not like it's perfectly tame, there are wild animals there and wild plants and so God says

- I'm placing you here to tend this place and take care of it like responsible stewards. (Gen 2:15)

- I want you to be like me: bring order out of Chaos, just as I brought order to the universe out of chaos: the earth was formless and void – and then I spoke!

See, we sometimes think that God meant for us to have a free ride, that God's ideal plan should be life without challenges or obstacles or temptation. Apparently, even from the beginning before we started wrecking things, God meant for us to...

- overcome obstacles
- tackle challenges
- subdue and tend a raw earth and
- overcome temptation which was there from the moment we became self conscious beings after God made us from the raw components of the earth.

And you know, this *would have been* a perfectly tolerable and even blessed existence – yes even this challenging life...

- would have been a world of productive labor, and adventure; it
- would have been a world where our mastery of the **earth** and maybe even someday of the **galaxy** and the **universe** would have been a perfect way for us to shine the spotlight on God, as we steward everything in harmony
  - o with each other and
  - o with our environment, and
  - o with our God –

– ***It would have been all that, and more***, until we screwed it up. The moment we first bowed at the altar of ego...kicking God out of the center. Everything went sideways from there...

- productive labor became burdensome, tedious work
- communal relationships meant to be self giving and marked by oneness now were strained by power plays for control. (man over woman, woman over man)

And if that weren't enough, we invited a whole new set of challenges to our existence:

- pain rose to a whole new dimension in our experience
- disease and decay entered the picture
- the whole created order was thrown out of whack.

Now, friends, as I explain this, think about your struggles...

- the demands at work
- the tumor in your body
- the bills on your desk
- the relationships that are strained

How do YOU explain this?

- No God? (based on other data, hard to believe)
- Maybe God just messed up!

- Maybe God got so caught up with Hurricane Katrina he forgot about your cancer?
- Maybe God tried and wasn't strong enough... he started the universe, but he just can't budge that stubborn streak in your spouse.
- Maybe God is just flat out mad... maybe he's sick and tired of us screwing up millenniums ago and now he's just let us go.

Well, of all those explanations, the last makes a bit of sense – Roman 1 – says God gave them over! But can we really conclude that God has left us **totally**?

No. Think of the common grace and kindness he sends to all people. The design of nature. That as the argument an early church leader, Paul, when talking to some people investigating Christianity 2000 years ago:

**Acts 14:16** In the past, [God] let all nations go their own way. Yet he has not left himself without testimony: He has shown kindness by giving you rain from heaven and crops in their seasons; he provides you with plenty of food and fills your hearts with joy.

So if we accept the teaching of Jesus Christ, we're left with TWO IDEAS:

- we find a God who gives us the freedom to bump him out of the center,
- yet we find a God who is so powerful that he can leverage those freely chosen actions and the pain they produce in us AND others and **use them** for his own good purposes.

The God of Scripture says,

- Trust me in your times of trouble, and I will rescue you, and you will give me glory. (Ps 50:15)

That means even our troubles, if correctly managed can be the very vehicle to put God back at the center and show off His importance in our lives. And that is our purpose. That's why we're on the planet. And doesn't that give you so better way to understand when things don't go right?

Better than saying...

- There is no God
- God screwed up
- God doesn't care
  - o It's saying, maybe God has allowed bad things to happen, but in his great wisdom and power, he can leverage my pain (and even the pain from my freely chosen stupid actions) for his own purpose and good.

Have you ever felt disciplined by God? You say, "God doesn't discipline, buddy! That doesn't jive with what Oprah says!"

I've felt it before – it's evidence of God's existence as much as answered prayers.

- Recurring nightmare – speaking, no notes

- Jubilee, 10,000 people, notes blow away
- Discipline for my pride and obsession in preparation
- Love in correcting me – teaching me I survived my worse nightmare.

The idea of a Loving God who also disciplines those he loves... doesn't that give you a better foothold today in the midst of trouble? I mean, you could go on thinking it's all about your comfort, and getting exactly what you want when you want it, **but what would you learn if that were the case?** You'd eventually think that you ARE God. You'd be indifferent to others... you would be all about YOU.

No wonder God lets us **need** sometimes, lets us **wander**, lets us **question** and even feel **pain** and **sorrow**. We can try to stop it, and pretend that you can keep it all together (\*wealth allows), but eventually the illusion is shattered.

- We scored the great job, but now the responsibility is killing us.
- We got the husband and the kids but now the love is growing cold.
- We had some great times in college, but now there's this disease.
- We got rid of that spouse, but now there's these complications, children, child support, anger, lack of peace.

**Friend, if you live only to avoid pain, you wind up tortured and frustrated because you cannot succeed – and you die a little every day. BUT, if you live to find God's purpose in all things, you get *God centered*, instead of Self Centered, you find hope in all circumstances and you start to really live.**

NOW are you beginning to understand the upside down life Jesus offers?

***If you try to keep your life for yourself, you will lose it. But if you give up your life for me, you will find true life.***

Are you still trying to keep your life for yourself? for self preservation; for avoiding pain; maximizing pleasure? Then, when pain and weakness creep in – as they inevitably do – it will rock your world and your theology!

*Man I thot God was good for something. Apparently not! Why doesn't he get me out of this mess? And with words to that affect we give up on God, and try even hard to find our lives on our own.*

Friend, there is a better way. An upside down way. It won't work in the NFL, nor in most of our culture. It's mostly an un-American way, I'm afraid. But it is a way of Life. A life where, because God is at the center, you do not work pain avoidance as your highest value, where you can embrace your brokenness as a moment for God to shine.

There's a story in the Bible about Jesus passing by a man born blind. Think about that... blind since birth! A lifetime of darkness. Never saw a mother smile or a sunset. Jesus' apprentices immediately wanted to blame someone... they despised weakness. So it must be someone's bad deed that lead to this, right?

Wrong, Jesus said. Don't look in the family tree. I suppose if they wanted a reason generally for blindness they could look to the spoilage of the earth due to human rebellion OVERALL. But in this specific situation, there's no 'one to one' tie to sin.

Here's the bigger purpose that can happen, Jesus said to them:

"So the power of God might be displayed in his life!"

THAT was his vocation... a purpose God could draw out of his pain. Now, I bet this guy would have preferred a different calling don't you? But you see, if it's not really about you, and it's really all about God... then shouldn't we accept humbly what cannot be controlled, continue to do good, and then look for God to work in it?

Imagine the God who made the universe said to this man:

- friend, through the brokenness of planet earth, you'll be blind, but the wonder of who I am will come through your blindness. I don't like blindness, I didn't design it, but here's the miracle of my world... I can USE blindness in you.
- I'll be blind?
- Yes.
- It's my assignment?
- Yes.
- And you'll somehow get glory, and honor and credit through this?
- Yes.
- But I don't understand.
- You'll see. There will be a miracle. I will get involved and I will get glory and YOU will get LIFE!

Friend, if you're not the idol... if God's purpose is not to make a big deal out of you, then you're here to made to make a big deal out of God. Will you accept that? Is there a chance you've been selected to struggle for God? You say, but...

- that will hurt me,
- that will be uncomfortable for me,
- that will be risky for me...

I know, but what if it's not about you? You say, Rick that's harsh! Listen, it's not my idea. I like pain avoidance. I raised it to a fine art! But I'm just telling you God says it's not about me.

In this situation you're in that's very difficult, maybe, just maybe, God gets credit if I handle it well.

- Maybe God shines through,
- maybe God's reputation gets enhanced.

Christ followers accept that challenge, because they follow the man who said,  
He who finds his life will lose it and he who loses his life will find it.

Friend, I have good news. If it's not about you, then you don't have to live for self preservation as your highest goal. Give up that heavy burden! And take on an easier, lighter YOKE... the God centered life.

*THAT would ennoble your existence and put meaning behind struggle that up till now look like nothing but meaningless despair.*