

Bucket Talk – Our Shepherds

Bible Verse

Week 10

John 10: 11-18 Jesus said: "I am the good shepherd. A good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. A hired man, who is not a shepherd and whose sheep are not his own, sees a wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away, and the wolf catches and scatters them. This is because he works for pay and has no concern for the sheep.

I am the good shepherd, and I know mine and mine know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I will lay down my life for the sheep. I have other sheep that do not belong to this fold. These also I must lead, and they will hear my voice, and there will be one flock, one shepherd. This is why the Father loves me, because I lay down my life in order to take it up again. No one takes it from me, but I lay it down on my own. I have power to lay it down, and power to take it up again. This command I have received from my Father."

The following reflection was written from the heart of Brett Illig. Brett is a former Major League Baseball player and coach who now heads up the "Message of Hope" ministry that integrates faith and sports.

My Shepherds

As an adult, I have come to grow in the understanding that Jesus is my shepherd. Although limited in my capacity to fully understand this, I pray that He will always be the one that I flock to. As a kid growing up, my parents did a wonderful job setting the foundation for my faith. Like most kids though, it wasn't tangible to my life, which I think is pretty normal in the faith and child development process.

Thinking back as a kid, sports was at the center of my life, and my shepherds came in the form of my parents and coaches. Shepherds as being the people in my life that when I heard their voice, I came running. I went where they told me to go and I did what they told me to do. My life was spent in their pastures. So in essence my understanding of Jesus in my life and what His Father meant to me came from my experience with my own dad, mom, and coaches. In my life, my religion was sports, my shepherds were my parents and coaches, and my pastures were the athletic fields.

My Father

I think sports in today's culture in many ways has tremendous influence in our relationships with our dads, or us as fathers with our sons. In many ways, the bonding that happens with fathers and sons through sports is what makes sports such a positive and powerful outlet. It is the time outside playing catch, going to the game sitting next to our dads or just watching a game together on the couch that we will never forget. Sports give us an outlet for fathers and sons to come together on common ground and provides us the activities, excitement, and most importantly the time to get to know each other. I loved hearing my dad talk about Mickey Mantle or Gale Sayers not so much because they were incredible athletes in their time, but deep down I was getting to know my dad. I was getting to know his likes, his dreams, his values and his hopes. Sports was the avenue that got me there. For us, and for many other fathers and sons, sports are the avenue to get to know each other and establish that once in a lifetime relationship.

Yet in my observation, sports becomes dangerous when they represent the end in themselves in our father and son relationships, instead of the means to the end. In other words, it is about my dad and I, and now my son and I, our relationship and our love, with sports being a powerful and fun way of exploring that relationship. How often though in today's culture do sports become the end. Sports becomes the relationship in itself. When this happens I think the relationships get out of balance and the wins and losses on the field become a cry for love and acceptance to our dads. As I have stated before, a good friend of mine, an ex-NFL player who works with players and coaches in the NFL today, once told me that he believes 65% or so professional athletes have a dysfunctional relationship with their fathers. In other words, their fathers love for them came in the form of how many wins and points they would score in an athletic game, and thus pathologically gave them that unhealthy drive and need to compete and win. Win so they can receive their father's love.

I was very blessed to have been in the 35% category for having a healthy relationship with my father through my sports career. I never felt pressure to succeed for him. I never felt the need to win so I could receive his love. For this I am eternally grateful. My dad would tell me two things, work hard and have fun. I count my blessings every night that I had a shepherd like my father within my pasture of sports. Hopefully I can be that shepherd to my son.

My Mother

My mom was the glue that held everything together in my family. My dad would travel a lot with his job and my mom was always there for my brothers and sister and I. Again, for me she also represented a shepherd in my pasture of sports. Much like my dad, my mom always treated me the same as my other siblings and never made me feel like I needed to play anything, succeed in anything, or compete in anything to receive her love. Quite simply, I was her son who liked and excelled in sports. I wasn't her exceptional athlete who also was her son.

I often times laugh about the consistent message from my mom no matter what I did on the field. If I were to go 4 for 4 with 2 homeruns and great plays in the field, I would receive a good game from my mom in the car ride home followed by you have homework, wash, and bedtime at 10. By the same token if I were to go 0 for 4 with 3 strikeouts and an error in the field, I would receive a good game from my mom in the car ride home followed by you have homework, wash, and bedtime at 10. Over the years this consistent message from "my shepherd" (mom), not only gave me the unconditional love that I desperately needed as a young athlete in youth sports but probably more so as a professional athlete as I got older. Yet it also gave me a pasture to come home to built on love when my athletic world came crumbling down. In many ways, it was my mom's love that saved my life.

I often wonder how I got here today. I first came to know that it is a blessing to have faith. Yet I also know that I am blessed to have had parents who loved me unconditionally on and off the athletic fields that gave me a glimpse of what my heavenly Father's love would be. And for that alone I am truly grateful.

Coaches

Finally, with sports being at the center of most of our kids lives, the role of a coach is becoming more and more important. For many kids like me, second to my parents the most important "shepherd" was my coach. For other kids who come from broken homes, fairly or unfairly, coaches become the most important "shepherd" in the lives of kids today.

Cycles of Life

Becoming a father of a young boy has enlightened me in many ways. One of which is the realization of the cycles in life. When I look into my son's eyes, watch him run around, and start to become his own person, I know that he is a prisoner to my hopes and dreams, my insecurities and my fears. He has inherited me. This realization not only as a father, but as a coach and now a youth minister is something that is real. And the thought of now myself being a shepherd to my son, leaves me on my knees in prayer, driving me to the only true "Shepherd" for guidance, healing and love.

With the realization of the cycles of life, I am reminded of a great quote. "There is nothing that affects children more than the unlived lives of their parents." *Jung*.

Let us look to the One who holds us in the palm of His hands, who shepherds us so we may become the parents and coaches that He is calling us to be. Let us be reminded of His unconditional love, so we may be the shepherds to those who are in our flocks.