

7 DEVOTIONS FOR PARENTS

If we don't own the process of discipling our kids as they play sports, sports culture will do it for us. But as parents, we can get so consumed with our young athletes' physical development that we miss the chances athletics provide to help them grow spiritually. This 7-day devotional challenges us to be more than spectators on the sidelines of our kids' spiritual lives and turn sport moments into discipleship opportunities.



A CHRISTIAN PARENT'S GUIDE TO NAVIGATING YOUTH SPORTS

LOVE OVER SELF—RAISING OTHERS-FOCUSED ATHLETES

LUKE 9:46-48

Put yourself in the scene. Jesus heals a boy with an evil spirit and onlookers stand astonished at the work of God. But quickly, people begin to shift the conversation from what Jesus did to their own greatness:

"An argument arose among them as to which of them was the greatest. But Jesus, knowing the reasoning of their hearts, took a child and put him by his side and said to them, 'Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.'" (Luke 9:46–48 ESV).

Let's recap what happened:

1. Jesus performs a miraculous healing, and everyone is amazed.
2. But not long after this, the disciples begin arguing about which one of them is the greatest.

In fact, on numerous occasions, Jesus listened to his disciples engage in GOAT (Greatest of All Time) conversations. No, their debate wasn't about Jesus's greatness above anyone else who had ever lived or ever would live. It was about their own greatness in relation to one another.

Sound familiar? If you've ever listened to kids recap their youth sports highlights in the back seat after a game, you know the tone: "Did you see that shot I made?" "I probably had five assists!" "They couldn't handle the smoke today!"

In today's youth sports culture, the spotlight often shines brightest on those who achieve individual success. It's why our young athletes desire to stand out and be great. Greatness means attention, affirmation, and popularity. The "my brand, my highlights, my scholarship" mentality creeps in early—and as parents, we often feed that mentality through how we talk about and promote our young athletes. In many cases, unfortunately, our kids want to achieve athletic success because they believe that is the surest pathway to receiving love from us as parents.

Lucky for us, Jesus has something to teach us about true greatness. And He does this not by shaming the disciples for their ambition, but by completely redefining greatness.

What is true greatness according to Jesus? In the same scene from the gospel of Luke, He places a child beside Him and says, in effect, "Want to be great? Then serve the least. Receive the overlooked. That's how you receive Me."

The playbook for greatness in God's eyes is through this type of love. It's an unconditional, sacrificial love that seeks others' best even at personal cost.

As parents and mentors, we have the opportunity—and responsibility—to shape how our kids understand love through their participation in sports. Are we modeling a posture centered around others? Are we praising character as much as performance? When our children look at us, do they see us celebrating "team" or just tracking their stats?

In John 13, Jesus said, “By this all people will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (John 13:35 ESV). One of the ways we model our faith within the context of youth sports is by showing love to others—and teaching our young athletes to do likewise. Love isn’t just a warm feeling. It’s a life choice, especially when it’s inconvenient. It means teaching our kids to celebrate a teammate’s success even when they’re sitting on the bench. It means encouraging them to shake the ref’s hand, thank their family for coming, or notice the teammate who’s hurting. That’s a love that trains hearts, not just muscles. That kind of love turns weekend games into gospel moments.

What if, in our collective pursuit of greatness through sports, the next season isn’t just about growth in skill, but growth in love?

ACTION STEPS:

- This week, encourage your child to cheer for a teammate's success.
- Before bed, pray together for someone on the team who is struggling.
- Model humility by thanking the coach and the refs, regardless of the outcome.
- Have a conversation about what it means to be a great teammate.

PRAYER:

Jesus, thank you for showing us what real love looks like. Help us resist the pull of self-centeredness and instead follow your example of humble, others-focused love. Shape our hearts—and our children’s hearts—to reflect you in every arena, including the field and court. May our homes and teams be places where your agape love grows and shines. Amen.



PEACE OVER PRESSURE: HELPING YOUNG ATHLETES EMBODY PEACE THROUGH SPORT PARTICIPATION

2 THESSALONIANS 3:16, PHILIPPIANS 4:6-7

In his benediction at the end of his second letter to the Thessalonians, Paul writes, “Now may the Lord of peace himself give you peace at all times in every way. The Lord be with you all” (2 Thessalonians 3:16 ESV). There are four things we can learn about peace in this short verse:

1. God is peace. Paul says, “May the Lord of peace.” He is saying that God is the essence of peace.
2. As the true essence of peace, God can give it to us. He doesn’t run out of peace, so he does not need to be stingy. He can give it to us “at all times.”
3. He can also give us peace differently depending on what we need. Paul mentions that God gives us peace “in every way,” which means there must be more than one specific way to get it.
4. God’s peace always comes from his presence. Paul finishes the verse by saying, “The Lord be with you all.” When the “Lord of peace” is with you, he brings “peace” along with him!

Christian parent, youth sports is an anxiety-producing machine. Even if we are well-intentioned, we often contribute to this pandemic. How? As the bills pile up, the travel increases, and the competition rises, kids feel pressure from everywhere—coaches, parents, social media, and even their own perfectionism. They worry about playing time, living up to unrealistic expectations, and not letting down the people they care about. Unfortunately, the result of a game is often viewed as an extension of their identity, instead of it just being another opportunity to compete. If professional athletes even struggle with this type of pressure, why would we think young kids are immune to the stress?

For many children, especially those under 13, this pressure turns what used to be a joyful activity into a fearful one. It’s a big reason why 70% of them quit sports altogether before they become teenagers.

What does that mean for us as Christian parents? The Apostle Paul gives us a beautiful answer in Philippians.

“Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus” (Philippians 4:6,7 ESV).

When stress rises, Scripture offers a different path. God doesn’t minimize our worries—he invites us to bring them to him. And when we do, he exchanges our anxiety for peace. Not the temporary peace that comes from a win or a great performance, but his peace—a deep, lasting, soul-level peace that “surpasses all understanding.”

As parents, we can be either a source of pressure—or a voice of calm. We can be the embodiment of what Paul is teaching in Philippians 4:6-7. No, we don’t need to fix everything. But there are ways we can step into the youth sports space and help our young athletes grow their “peace muscles”.

ACTION STEPS:

Here are a few ways to disciple your child toward peace as they play sports:

- Listen first and coach second. When your child is anxious, don't jump to solutions. Ask questions like, "What are you most nervous about today?" or "Who are you afraid of letting down?" Then just listen and empathize.
- Change the goal. When your child fears losing, help them set a different goal, like doing their personal best or learning something new.
- Keep perspective. Remind them (and yourself) that sports are just one part of life. Win or lose, your love—and God's—is not on the line.
- Pray together. Teach your child to bring their fears to God. A simple pregame prayer can go a long way: "God, thank you for today. Help me play with joy and courage. No matter what happens, I trust you."

PRAYER:

God, thank you that you are "the Lord of peace" and that peace is available "at all times in every way." Help us to be parents who pursue peace over pressure—for our kids' sake, and for ours.



SPIRIT-LED SELF-CONTROL IN THE HEAT OF COMPETITION

1 CORINTHIANS 9:24-27

Self-control is the virtue of mastering one's inner thoughts, actions, passions, desires, and words. It is a competence acquired when we repeatedly submit our whole selves to the Holy Spirit. The Bible talks about self-control as our ability to fight against the natural impulses that stem from our sinful nature. It's about disciplining the parts of us that try to push God to the side as we go through life.

In his first letter to the church at Corinth, Paul uses a sports metaphor to help us understand the relationship between self-control, character development, and faithful living:

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it. Every athlete exercises self-control in all things. They do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. So I do not run aimlessly; I do not box as one beating the air. But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified" (1 Corinthians 9:24–27 ESV).

Paul basically says that most athletes train and discipline themselves to get a trophy that's just going to end up in the garbage one day. Not us. We train and exercise self-control because it's the playbook for faithful living now and the promise of reward in the future.

What does self-control have to do with youth sports? Showing up to the field or court on any given weekend will provide the answer.

As parents and coaches, we've all witnessed (or participated in) sideline meltdowns, harsh words, or retaliatory actions that feel "justified" in the heat of competition. A lack of self-control is one of the most consistent character failures witnessed at sporting events. Yelling, retaliation, and even physical aggression are not uncommon experiences. And when behavior like this goes unchecked, the message becomes clear: "Winning justifies whatever it takes."

But Scripture calls us to a different path, one marked by Spirit-led self-control.

Parents, youth sports offer fertile ground for this kind of training! Our kids' involvement in sports is the opportunity of a lifetime. Our children (and us) are regularly tested through missed calls, losing games, rough opponents, and disappointing performances. These aren't obstacles. They are opportunities. Each competition is a chance to teach our kids that self-control isn't weakness—it's actually strength under submission.

So, how do we begin teaching self-control to our young athletes?

ACTION STEPS:

- Help them pause and breathe. Deep breathing calms the nervous system and creates space to choose a godly response. Teach them to use physical reminders (like a wristband or a silent signal from the stands) to slow down in emotional moments.
- Pray Scripture with them before the competition. Verses like Psalm 141:3 or 2 Timothy 1:7 prepare their hearts to respond with grace under pressure.
- Model and reinforce delayed gratification. When your child sacrifices short-term comfort, like choosing hard work, rest, or respect for authority, you can affirm that this is the Spirit's work bearing fruit. They need us to help make that connection.
- Teach the heart behind self-control. It's not just about avoiding bad behavior—it's about honoring God. When our kids hold their tongues or walk away from conflict, they reflect Jesus.

PRAYER:

Lord, help us and our children to walk by the Spirit, not by our flesh. Teach us to value self-control—not for applause, but as an act of worship. In every win and every loss, may we reflect you. Amen.



THE STRENGTH OF GENTLENESS IN YOUTH SPORTS

MATTHEW 11:29

The Bible dedicates eighty-nine chapters to Jesus's embodied time on earth. From those chapters, we learn much about his life, teachings, ministry, and emotions. But Matthew 11 is the only place where Jesus specifically mentions his heart. Jesus says, "Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls" Matthew 11:29 ESV).

In his book, *Gentle and Lowly*, Dane Ortlund highlights the importance of what Jesus says. He notes that Jesus doesn't say his heart is "bold" or "mighty" or "victorious"—all of which would be true. He says he is gentle and lowly. This revelation is more than comforting. It's transformational. It's also a helpful reminder for those of us involved in youth sports.

In youth sports, strength is often measured by speed, skill, or toughness. These external metrics become what's celebrated and affirmed. After all, we want kids who are fast and strong, right? How many of us are posting on social media about how our young athlete was gentle and lowly at their most recent tournament? However, if Jesus describes himself that way—and we are called to look like him—how do we prioritize something like gentleness within the context of sports?

It's important to understand that Jesus's gentleness doesn't mean he lacked courage or conviction. He flipped tables, rebuked Pharisees, and stared down death itself. Yet his strength was never expressed through harshness or shame. Instead, he met sinners, sufferers, and even doubters with tenderness and patience. As Ortlund says, "The posture most natural to Him is not a pointed finger but open arms."

Contrast that with much of modern youth sports culture. Too often, when kids make mistakes on the field or court, they're met with yelling, shame, and pressure—from coaches, teammates, and sadly, even parents. The result? Children begin to believe that their worth is tied to their performance. One bad game can make them feel like they're failures—not just in sports, but in life.

Jesus offers a different path forward for all of us. He offers a yoke that's easy and a burden that's light. As parents, coaches, and mentors, we're invited to walk that path with him by practicing gentleness in our own response to young athletes' successes and failures.

The parable of the prodigal son from Luke 15 is a beautiful example of what this looks like. The father didn't meet his returning son with punishment or shame (or even a list of what he could improve upon next time!), but with compassion and celebration. That's the kind of heart God has for us—and the kind of heart we're called to show to our children, especially when they fall short of athletic expectations.

Again, youth sports are not just a test of athletic ability. They are a training ground for discipleship, for parents and kids alike. In every loss, injury, or missed shot, we have the chance to model the grace and gentleness of Jesus, helping our children learn that their value comes not from what they do, but from whose they are.

ACTION STEPS:

Gentleness doesn't ignore mistakes. It simply refuses to define kids by them. When we lead with gentleness, we:

1. Refrain from reacting in anger or embarrassment.
2. Remind our kids that their identity is not in their performance, but in Christ.
3. Reframe failure as an opportunity to grow, not a verdict on their worth.
4. Redeem hard moments by responding the way Jesus would—restoring, not shaming.

PRAYER:

Jesus, thank you for showing us what true gentleness looks like. Help me to lead with grace, especially when life gets hard. Teach me to speak life over the children you've entrusted to me—not shame. Make my heart like yours: gentle, lowly, and full of love. Amen.



GROWING HUMILITY IN YOUNG ATHLETES

JAMES 4:6

Pride is a trap that catches many athletes. It masquerades as confidence, whispers that greatness requires arrogance, and tempts us to center our identity on what we achieve instead of who we are in Christ. In youth sports, the seeds of pride can grow quickly, watered by applause, stats, and success.

Yet Scripture is clear: pride distances us from God. It's the posture of the one who says, "I don't need help." We're warned in James 4:6 that God stands in opposition to the proud, but he gives grace to those who are humble.

As parents, we should be considerably more concerned about watching our kids live long stretches controlled by stubborn pride than we are about watching them strike out, sit on the bench, or fumble the ball. Tripping over a hurdle is embarrassing, but stubborn pride will destroy a life. There is a tension here worth considering as well. While we don't want our young athletes to become prideful, we do want them to have some level of confidence. How do we see the difference? Humble confidence builds others up while pride builds only the self.

- The proud athlete says, "It's all about me."
- The humble athlete says, "It's about the team and honoring God."
- The proud athlete says, "I know it all."
- The humble athlete says, "I'm still learning."
- The proud athlete avoids apologies.
- The humble athlete says, "I'm sorry. Please forgive me."

ACTION STEPS:

To nurture humility, we must intentionally:

1. Let praise come from others

Teach your kids not to boast. "Let another praise you, and not your own mouth; a stranger, and not your own lips." (Prov. 27:2 ESV). Instead of talking about how great they are, encourage them to let their play do the talking. When praise does come, receive it with a simple "Thank you"—and keep working hard.

2. Celebrate others' success

It's easy to feel threatened by a teammate or opponent who excels. Help your child see greatness in others without needing to diminish it.

3. Think about themselves less

Athletes often become overly concerned with how they look to others. Humility isn't thinking less of yourself—it's thinking of yourself less. Teach your child to focus on serving teammates, encouraging others, and playing for God.

4. Ground their identity in Christ

Help your kids know their worth isn't tied to performance. They're loved—by you and by God—no matter what. When they believe this, they can play with confidence and humility, free from the need to prove anything.

PRAYER:

Father, help me notice the many opportunities sport provides my child to learn about humility. May they desire to imitate you, Lord, by playing in a spirit of humility. Help them see others as more important than themselves and give them opportunities to put that perspective into practice.



REPLACING ENTITLEMENT WITH GRATITUDE IN YOUTH SPORTS

1 THESSALONIANS 5:18

In a national survey, over thirty-five thousand sport officials were asked to name the age or level of sport where they felt sportsmanship was at its worst. Over half the officials pegged competitive youth leagues as showing the worst sportsmanship. As we spend more and more money on youth sports, officials are telling us that it's producing kids who behave in ways that a Christian parent would find inconsistent with the faith we profess.

And it's not just our kids. *It's us.*

The officials surveyed overwhelmingly said that parents are the biggest culprits when it comes to poor sportsmanship. Yikes! How does this happen? One thought: as we spend more on youth sports, our expectation of that experience reaches unrealistic levels. When an official makes a bad call or a coach makes a mistake, we respond in ways consistent with our expectations, but often inconsistent with our faith.

As Christian parents, what do we do to disrupt and stunt the growth of entitlement in our kids (and in us)? How do we work with God to counter the spirit of entitlement that's become so easy to embrace?

We practice gratitude.

In fact, 1 Thessalonians shows us that we should "give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you" (1 Thessalonians 5:18 ESV). Did you catch that? It's actually God's will for us to give thanks in all circumstances! Yes, even when the ref makes a bad call. Yes, even when our kid gets benched or cut from the team. Yes, even when...you can fill in the blank. Gratitude is the "gotta have it" play in God's playbook.

Entitlement is easy. It is frictionless. Gratitude requires work and takes intentionality. But it's actually practicing gratitude that produces grateful people. Puritan pastor Richard Baxter rightly points out, "Resolve to spend most of your time in thanksgiving and praising God. If you cannot do it with the joy that you should, yet do it as you can.... Doing it as you can is the way to be able to do it better. Thanksgiving stirreth up thankfulness in the heart." Baxter argues that choosing to practice gratitude changes the heart over time, just like choosing to practice sport skills changes performance over time. New movements eventually start to feel natural, provided we put in the necessary practice.

Yes, gratitude takes practice. It's a muscle that must be exercised. And lucky for us, youth sports offer much more than trophies or scholarships—they are a spiritual training ground where we can help our kids get in the appropriate reps.

ACTION STEPS:

We can start with small, intentional steps:

- Encouraging our children to thank their coaches. Maybe even have them write notes of appreciation at the end of the season.
- Pause before a game to recognize the gift of simply being able to play.

- When disappointment comes—missed shots, tough losses, unfair calls—we teach our kids to look for silver linings. Even sports setbacks can be used by God to build character, perseverance, and humility.
- Ask ourselves questions like: Where have I seen entitlement creeping into my child's (or my own) mindset around sports? How can I help my athlete recognize overlooked blessings and people? What's one intentional act of gratitude I can encourage this week?

Ultimately, gratitude is more than good manners. It is spiritual resistance against a world that trains our children to demand more and thank less.

PRAYER:

Lord, help me and my child to see every practice, every game, and every breath as a gift from you. Teach us to be thankful in all circumstances and to reflect your goodness in how we respond. Amen.



REDISCOVERING JOY IN YOUTH SPORTS

PHILIPPIANS 4:11-13

Did you know that nine out of ten kids play sports because it's fun? Yet, for many young athletes today, that joy has vanished, often replaced with pressure, burnout, and performance anxiety. As Christian parents and coaches, it's worth looking in the mirror and asking: Are we unintentionally contributing to diminishing joy in their athletic experience?

One way to measure our role in this process is to assess our own relationship with winning.

Parents, God created games to be enjoyed. Yes, Scripture tells us to "run in such a way as to win the prize." Yes, competition has value. But when winning becomes the primary goal, we risk turning sports into an idol and draining the joy from an experience meant to reflect God's goodness.

In his letter to the Philippians, written from prison, the Apostle Paul talked about a joy not based on circumstances, but one grounded in Christ. Paul's perspective in this letter also produces one of the most misinterpreted scriptures claimed by athletes. "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13 ESV). Athletes often use this as the ultimate "I got this" verse.

They hope that, with Jesus by their side, they're guaranteed (or at least more likely) to run their personal best, win as an underdog, or reach their personal goal in any given competition. But the promise from Philippians 4:13 is actually better than any of that.

In the previous few verses, Paul describes his ability to be content regardless of circumstances. He says he has learned the secret of contentment! What is it, Paul? How can we be content in sickness or in health, with plenty or with nothing, among friends or alone—even through youth sports successes or failures? That's when we bump into the "I can do all things" statement. Paul argues that Jesus is the personification of joy. He is the secret to contentment. Jesus offers us a soul-level joy that remains steady whether we're on the mountaintop or in the valley.

This is the kind of joy our kids need—not one predicated on performance, but anchored in God's presence. It's worth pointing out that even though most kids don't have a vocabulary that uses this language, they long for joy and contentment, just like us. Most kids use a different word to describe the feeling that accompanies this desire: fun.

When they experience "fun" on the field—the laughter with teammates, the satisfaction of hard work, the thrill of small victories—they're tapping into something deeply spiritual. It's probably not a stretch to argue that the sensation of joy manifests itself for our young athletes in the context of sport, most frequently in the experience of "fun."

So what can we do to cultivate this joy that's experienced as fun?

ACTIONS STEPS

1. Prioritize presence over pressure.

Let's stop managing every move they make and start truly watching them—cheering them regardless of the score or how they are playing. Let's enjoy being present. Let's put down the phones. Let's take a deep breath. And let's just watch them play.

2. Infuse fun into the journey.

Joy doesn't need to be a reward for performance. It should be part of the process. Help your child notice the good gifts: the smell of fresh grass, the sound of sneakers on hardwood, the feeling of getting better together. Celebrate things like laughter and the occasional silliness that is bound to happen in sport.

3. Practice gratitude.

There is that gratitude word again! We can model thankfulness for the opportunity to play, for the teammates God has placed in their lives, for the ability to run, throw, and sweat. Flexing our gratitude muscles grows our joy.

4. Reframe winning.

Winning is good—but it's not god. Help your child see that the greatest victory has already been won through Jesus. His love and approval do not depend on a scoreboard. That's not just a churchy platitude, but something we can reinforce by telling them before they head out to play, "Hey, I love you and nothing that happens today will change that!"

Sports are a gift. But like any gift, they must be stewarded well. If our kids are going to learn that joy is found in Jesus, not in achievement, they need to see it modeled through us. So let's take a breath. Let's smile more from the stands. Let's make space for laughter and play.

And let's help our kids find joy and fun through playing—not just winning.

PRAYER:

God, thank you for the gift of feeling and experiencing joy. Help us to be satisfied with you, Jesus. Bring my kid(s) joy today through knowing they are fully loved and fully accepted. Help them to play fast, free, and full of joy. Amen.



PS. THIS 7-DAY DEVOTIONAL WAS ADAPTED FROM THE BOOK [AWAY GAME: A CHRISTIAN PARENT'S GUIDE TO NAVIGATING YOUTH SPORTS](#). IF YOU ENJOYED THE DEVOTIONAL, YOU WILL LOVE THE BOOK!