

Sermon for Sunday, August 22, 1976, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Senior Pastor
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"GAME PLAN FOR THE BIG GAME"

I Corinthians 9:19-27

Text: "Do you not know that in a race all the runners compete, but only one receives the prize? So run that you may obtain it." --I Corinthians 9:24

To be a consistent winner, a football team must have a good game plan and be able to execute it successfully. What is a game plan? It is a strategy for winning. It is a plan of action that takes into account not only the strong points and shortcomings of the other team, but which also makes a realistic appraisal of one's own strengths and weaknesses. St. Paul says that even in running a race, only one can win. If you want to be that winner, you have to have a good game plan. One of the things about the recent Olympics that stands out in my mind is the marathon race. The people running in it had a strategy for winning, but only one of them could come in first. If you want to be the winner you have to have a good game plan. As St. Paul puts it, "Run, then, in such a way as to win the prize." But a football game or a race is only an illustration. What St. Paul is really talking about is the biggest game of all--the game of life. If a person wants to run the race of life successfully he must have a game plan. If you wish to be a winner in the big game of life, you must have a strategy that takes into account strengths and weaknesses.

A game plan for a winner should first of all include plans for scoring. To put it another way, it isn't how long you play, but how often you score that really counts. The significant thing about your life and mine is not really how long we live, but how well we live. Perhaps you remember the story of Joan of Arc of France. Before she was out of her teens she had become such a pivotal point in history that her enemies had her burned at the stake. Yet, history has immortalized her. Her short years were meaningful ones that lifted an entire nation to its feet and gave it courage and dignity again. On the other hand, the Bible tells us about a man named Methuselah. The Bible tells us he played the game of life for 969 years. Wouldn't he have made a mess out of social security! Yet, the fact is Methuselah, in spite of how long he played, never scored a touchdown. The only comment the Bible had to offer on this man who lived so long was this, "and he died." That is a pitiful commentary on the scoring record of a man who lived so long. Perhaps he never really learned to live at all.

A recent article by a prominent psychologist reported an interview with a brilliant young man who had become schizophrenic. The patient argued persuasively that the psychiatrist--not the patient--was the sick one. He had seen through the sham of life. Life, insisted the patient, is doomed to defeat, it must end in death, so why not give up a losing fight? If you have a game plan for scoring, for making life count, how long you live is not important. But if life is not meaningful, if life is not counting for something, though you die tomorrow or live to be one hundred, it will not have been worthwhile. A young friend of mine came in the other day and with tears in his eyes he said, "I feel that I am not making my life count for something worthwhile." That is the burning desire of all of us--to have a game plan where life counts.

A second feature of a game plan for a winner is a frank recognition of limitations and weaknesses. Any team that ignores its weak spots is headed for trouble. To ignore limitations, to pretend they are not there, to wistfully wish them away simply won't work. A game plan must accept the limitations of the team and make the best possible use of what it does have. For example, the team that has O.J. Simpson may not have much else. However, if they utilize the strength of this one superstar, then they will do very well indeed. In a far grander sense this is true in life.

Each of us has differing capacities this morning. Some are athletically inclined, others are more studious. Some are smart and some are just smart-alecs. Some are pretty and some--well, some don't look so pretty! Some are interested in science, some in art, some in literature. The point is, all of us have limitations imposed upon us over which we have little or no control. We are limited by the traits we inherited from our parents, by the environment that nurtured us, and the events of life will continue to impose limitations upon us.

For example, suppose a girl grows up and becomes a housewife. Yet, in her heart she longs to be a writer, or a model, or a movie star, or whatever her particular day-dream happens to be. Do you suppose that girl can ever be happy in the kitchen when her heart is consumed by a burning desire for those other things? You know very well she cannot. Or suppose again a boy grows up and becomes a salesman. But in his heart he wants to be a professional quarterback for the football Cardinals, or a test pilot and maybe fly a U-2 with a suicide kit, or go to the moon in a space vehicle. Life has put certain limitations on him so that he can never do these things, yet with all his soul he desires them. Can he ever be content with himself--indeed, can he even be a very good salesman? Well, you know the answer to that.

Of course, you realize we are talking about this thing called vocation. You see, if I understand my life, my work, whatever I am doing, as a divine vocation--if who and what I am is God's will for me, then it makes a profound difference. See how it works. As a minister I have demands made on me and my family has demands made on them that most people don't have just because I am a minister. Yet, I am supremely happy and content as a minister--I am supremely content within the framework of the particular limitations that my career puts on me because I understand this to be my vocation, God's will for me.

Does that make sense to you? As long as you understand your vocation--whether it be as a professional athlete, a housewife, a salesman, a minister, a doctor, a chemist, or whatever--as long as you understand that to be God's will for you, you can live happily and meaningfully within the framework of your particular limitations. Then you can watch people in other fields who have become famous or successful without envy or regret because, within the framework that God has placed you, you found meaning for life.

But a game plan for a winner not only includes a frank recognition of your weaknesses and limitations, it involves doing the very best with what you have. So many people today feel trapped in the circumstances in which they find themselves, and because they are unhappy with that and want something here or there or yonder, they refuse to face the potential within that limitation and to develop the best they have within it. Look at a little anemic boy who was so weak that he had to eat special foods and sleep 12 hours a day. He had to watch from the sidelines when his friends played their rugged games. But that frail little fellow took what resources he had and within the framework of his limitations he developed all he had to its greatest potential. Consequently, because he did the best with what he had, he became the supreme athlete of his time. In 1948 and again in 1952, Bob Mathias won gold medals in the most grueling of Olympic games, the decathlon.

Or look again at the Hungarian Karoly Takacs. He was recognized as one of the best pistol shots in the world and more than anything he wanted to win in the Olympics. But fate had strange plans for him. One day, driving home, Takacs was in a crash, and when it was all over, the doctors had amputated his right arm--his pistol-shooting arm. His recovery was slow. It wasn't so much a physical problem, it was an

emotional one. He had hit bottom. People tried to help him but there was little they could do. He began to avoid his friends. Even his family did not know where he was. Yet, Karoly Takacs went to the next Olympic games--as a contestant. In solitude he had trained his left arm and his aiming eye. Pistol shooting requires tremendous coordination and mental development--it is far more of an intellectual operation than more people realize. But when the pistol event was over, this one-armed Hungarian stood, the cheers rising about him, on the topmost step of the winners's platform, a gold medal around his neck. Life had imposed certain limitations upon him, but within the framework of those limitations he took what he had and did the best he could.

I have been watching the two political conventions in recent weeks and I was tremendously moved the other day to see Senator Dole standing there and to hear the story about this man who, during World War II, had been leading his men in an attack on a machine gun nest. A shell exploded close by and his body had been riddled with shrapnel. His right shoulder, vertebrae and his arm were badly damaged. He spent three years in a hospital in the recovery process, but even today his right arm is virtually useless. Within those limitations he could have quit. He could have said, "I have been badly wounded. My government owes me a living." He could have had an income for the rest of his life. But he didn't do that. Within the framework of the limitations that life had thrust upon him, he began to do his very best. There he stood, having been nominated by his party for the Vice Presidency of the United States. He took what he had and he did his best.

If you want a winning game plan for life, it must include the acceptance of your vocation as God's will for your life and the determination that within that plan for your life you will do the best you can with what you have.

A fourth thing that a game plan must take into account is the emotional needs, the psychological responses of the players. How do the players react when they make a mistake? What happens to them when they are penalized? How do they respond when they get behind? In short, what are the emotional needs of the team? The fact is, all of us carry emotional needs into life and into every human relationship. If we are not aware of these needs, if we do not understand what makes us act as we do, if we cannot be honest about our own emotions, our game plan will not work.

For example, can you admit--even to yourself--"I'm jealous of the way another person dresses and that's really why I criticize him or her." Can you admit, "I run down so-and-so because I want the attention and admiration that person gets." Can you honestly confess that you condemn others because their popularity is a threat to your own status? Can you understand that others don't accept you perhaps because you have to dominate every conversation, know more than anyone else, top every joke, and are unable to let someone else be the center of attention? The fact is, until you can see these things as expressions of your own feeling of inadequacy and insecurity you can never understand yourself. You can never be emotionally equipped to win the game of life.

Our needs can do terrible things to us if they are unconfessed and unrecognized. Unadmitted insecurities can push us around emotionally. They will make us critical, hostile, selfish, self-seeking, and ambitious. The point is this: once we recognize and admit to a need, once we confess to who and what we really are, once we can dare to be honest about what makes us act as we do, we can deal with that need. But as long as we are unwilling to confess that need, it is going to dominate our lives and cause us to do things--sometimes shameful things--that a Christian wouldn't do. Suppose, for example, a girl is faced with the problem of just how

far she is going to go with her boy friend. Now, once she faced her own need--the fact that she is even considering this because she has a need to be accepted by this person--then she can deal with her problem on a different level. But as long as she refuses to recognize her need for acceptance, she is headed for trouble. And what about a boy who would demand such a response from a girl? Must he not recognize that he is also carrying a need into his courtship? Must he not also confess his own insecurities, his own instability, that drive him to ask this demonstration of affection and acceptance from a girl? The boy who can dare to be honest about his motivations will deal with this problem on another level.

One of the problems I have to deal with frequently is with adults who have gotten involved in adultery. What causes a man or a woman to involve himself or herself in an extramarital relationship that threatens to destroy their home, happiness, their marriage, their children? Why in the world would a person do that for a momentary sexual gratification? The answer to that question is that that is not why they do it. They do it because there are desperate inner needs that they are striving to meet in a very inadequate way. They can never deal with that problem until they recognize what their real needs are.

I would not suggest that this is an easy thing to do or even that we can always understand our own needs and motives. Yet, the person with a winning game plan is the one who never gives up trying to understand himself. It is only as we become conscious of needs that we can deal with them. And if we insist on denying these needs to the conscious mind, from the depths of the unconscious mind they will rear up to dominate us and destroy us.

Finally, I would like to suggest that a game plan for a winner must include Jesus Christ. To put it another way, if you want to be a winner in life you must have a source of forgiveness that comes only in Jesus Christ. And why is this so? It is so because no matter how hard we try to make life meaningful, no matter how hard we try to live within the framework of our limitations, no matter how hard we try to develop what potential we have, no matter how hard we try to be honest in understanding our own needs and emotions, the time will come again and again when we fail. Then we will need forgiveness.

Most of us this morning have old sins, old wounds, old sores, old failures, in our souls. Most of us have guilt that sits heavily on our hearts and that stands between us and God; between us and happiness, between us and others. No matter how much we might like, we can't go back and undo those things, we can't go back and re-live life. Now that is what I meant when I said you will need Jesus Christ--you will need his forgiveness. In the Rose Bowl game of 1929 California was playing Georgia Tech. Roy Riegels of California recovered a fumble in the line, became confused and began to run in the wrong direction. Before he could cross the goal line he was tackled by his teammates, but the damage was done. Georgia Tech took over and went on to score what proved to be the winning touchdown. When the halftime period was over, Riegels sat in a corner of the locker room by himself, wrapped in a blanket, his head down, with tears streaming down his face. His coach said to him, "Roy, I'm sending you back in at the start of the second half." "Coach," said Riegels, "I can't go back out there. I've ruined you, I've ruined California, and I've ruined myself." "Get up, Roy," replied his coach, putting his arm around his shoulder, "Get up and go on back. The game is only half over." And he did get up and go back and the men from Georgia Tech said they never saw a man play like Roy Riegels did that second half.

Yes, the game plan for a winner in life will include Jesus Christ. We will trip and fall, we will run in the wrong direction, we will fumble the ball, and we will be so ashamed of ourselves that we won't want to try again. Then, in forgiveness, our Savior comes to us. With his holy arm around our shoulder, he says, "Get up. Get up and go on back. The game is only half over." With his forgiveness we can go back into the game of life. With Jesus in our game plan, we've got to be a winner.