

# The Idol of Youth Sports

By Noah Adams

*Editor's Note: This article was written by a denominational author. You'll see him use the term "pastor" and possibly the word "worship" (worshipping God at the gym and on the field) incorrectly. However, his frank and potent words on this subject are worth reading and reflecting upon, particularly for parents. Some portions of the article have been edited out due to space constraints. -PWS*

I fear that sports in general might be the defining idol of our culture. We find community with the same people who root for our team instead of our church family. We find joy in attending the game instead of attending church. We clothe ourselves with sports gear instead of the righteousness of Christ. By our time and actions we declare what is really important to us. Where you spend your time and money are greater indicators of what you value, what you love, and what you worship than what you say.

Not all passionate sports fans are immersed in idolatry. I am a diehard fan of the Chicago Cubs and the University of Kentucky Wildcats. I own jerseys, I watch the games, and I tweet at the players.

Sports are not evil, but the very second that they become the object of our love, they transition from a gift of God into an enemy of God, an idol.

Sports dominate so much of our lives. And as a youth pastor one of the things that I have seen plague the lives of my students is the idol of sports. I slipped into it when I was in high school. It becomes very difficult not to because of the demands that sports and coaches put on their players from a very young age.

The Bible speaks a great deal about idolatry. Throughout the Old Testament we see that idols are manmade things that people create for themselves to worship. In some cases, the idolaters simply continue in the ways of their fathers, having never learned how to cast down idols. In Leviticus 19 and all throughout the Bible we are commanded to worship God and God alone. He is a jealous God and he will share us with nothing else. He alone is worthy of our love and praise. God does not respond well to idolatry in our lives. In Judges 10:13-14 God declares, "Yet you have forsaken me and served other gods; therefore I will save you no more. Go and cry out to the gods whom you have chosen; let them save you in the time of your distress." In 1 Corinthians 10, Paul warns the church to flee idolatry, saying that we cannot share fellowship with both God and idols. There is only room at God's table for those who worship him alone. We cannot allow idols space in our lives, or the consequences will be severe.

In light of these realities and what Scripture has to say about idolatry, here are a few pleas that I have of kids, parents, and churches to help tear down this idol.

**Parents, please don't let your kids play sports on Sunday morning... ever.**

There is no reason to miss church on Sunday mornings for sports with any kind of regularity, especially for kids. Kids need to be taught that nothing comes before their relationship with God. Adults may be able to worship elsewhere or even claim that they are being missionaries on Sunday morning to those at the ball field or in the gym, but kids are rarely mature enough to do the same.

Sunday morning is time set aside to worship God as a community of believers. Being missionaries to team parents is important. Worshipping God at the field or in the gym is important. But the time for that is the other 165 hours of the week. On Sunday mornings, there is no more important place to be than with the body of Christ worshipping our God, declaring to our coaches and teammates and their parents that we value God and church more than we value sports.

Parents, please build it in to your kid's minds and hearts that their relationship with God cannot be so easily disconnected from their presence at church. Please build it into your kids minds that no baseball game, no volleyball game, no football game of any kind is more important than time spent with your local congregation praising God and hearing from his word. Please don't let your kids skip church to play in a little league game.

Will there be consequences? Yes. Your kid might play less. They might warm the bench. Their coach and team might be disappointed in them. If that is something that you are not willing to endure, then you really might just love sports more than God. That temporary suffering of being benched or cut from the team is nothing compared to eternal weight of glory that is to come for unwavering commitment to loving God alone and tearing down idols in our lives. And it is nothing compared to the value of teaching your kids that God alone is God and that He is more important than anything else.

**Kids, please be strong enough to tell your coaches at the beginning of your season that God and church are more important to you than your sport.**

I know it's hard. As soon as I entered the world of AAU basketball, my incredible parents taught me to tell my coaches right after I made the team (sometimes even before) that I would not be playing or practicing on Sunday. They made me tell my coaches that God and church were more important to me than basketball and that if it came down to it, I would choose God and church ahead of basketball.

I hated that at the time. Not because I disagreed but because I feared being benched or judged by my teammates who were sold out for the sport. But my parents taught me that it was more important to be sold out for Christ (and to make that known to coaches and teammates) than to be sold out for a sport.

Kids, I know it is hard. I know you might lose your starting spot. I know you might get cut. But please be strong enough, bold enough, and in love with God enough to tell your coaches that your sport is not the most important thing to you. The longest you'll be playing organized team sports is through college, if you're lucky. Sports don't last. Athletic abilities don't last. I'm only 26 and I can testify to that. But your relationship with God will last for all of eternity. I know it may not seem like it now, but sports are so unimportant in the grand scheme of things. They are so much less important than being at church, worshipping God and learning more about who he is. Kids, please take the incredible leap of faith and tell your coaches that God is more important to you than your sport.

**All, please understand the severity of idolatry and the reality that kids sports is an idol and can contribute to spiritual destruction.**

You need only read through 1 Corinthians 10 to see a powerful picture of how severe the consequences of idolatry are. Paul says that we cannot love both God and idols. We cannot serve both God and sports. We must choose to love, adore, obey, and serve God alone. Our idols have no power to save us. The idolatry of youth sports is very real and so are the consequences. None of the physical or social benefits of team sports outweigh the spiritual benefits of church attendance. Sports, more than anything I have seen in my time as a student and as a student pastor, have contributed to the spiritual decline and destruction of the hearts of kids. And not only kids, but their parents. Be on your guard. Examine yourselves and your lives and be willing to make drastic changes in order to avoid the spiritual destruction that can arise from the idolatry of youth sports.

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When it comes down to it, this is something each family and each student must decide for themselves. You alone know your heart. You alone know your families and what is best for them. But please do not take lightly just how dangerous this idol can be in the lives of young kids, youth group age kids, and even adults. I have no vendetta against sports or families that partake in such events. But please take the time to examine your situation and your hearts. How many thousands of dollars did you spend on youth sports last year? How many thousands of dollars did you spend just so your kid could be on the team? How many Sunday worship services and bible studies did your kid miss because of sports?