CONFIDENT LIVING IN A COMPETITIVE WORLD

Bertrand Russell, the late British philosopher, author, and atheist, wrote, “Life is nothing but a competition to be the criminal rather than the victim.” Businessman David Sarnoff said, “Competition brings out the best in products and the worst in people.” Yet early 19th-century American statesman Henry Clay adds, “Of all human powers operating on the affairs of mankind, none is greater than that of competition.”

Because it is self-evident that there is at least a measure of truth to such quotes, we’ve asked RBC author Dave Branon to take a realistic look at whether or not followers of Christ can be fierce competitors while retaining their honor in the process.

Mart De Haan
COMPETITION IS EVERYWHERE

The television screen is blank except for two figures. One is a hip young person dressed casually and exuding quiet, unaffected confidence. The other is a somewhat geeky man, a little older, dressed in a suit and looking like an unsuccessful door-to-door salesman. The first represents the Mac computer while the second stands for everything related to PCs (all personal computers that are not built by Apple Macintosh).

The dialogue usually begins with, “Hi, I’m a Mac. And he’s a PC.” The two seem slightly bemused with each other in these popular, entertaining commercials as their conversations touch on various computer-related topics. The genius of the Mac vs. PC ad series is that it portrays in a disarming, humorous way the intense competition between two giants of the computer world: Microsoft and Apple. While their boardrooms might reverberate with ferocious efforts to defeat each other, the Mac-sponsored ads suggest a more friendly rivalry.

The ads are funny, but the competition behind them is extremely serious business. The struggle for limited resources is an inescapable, serious reality in the 21st century.

On the international scene, it’s becoming more and more clear that nations must compete with each other for commodities such as oil and food. Competition for ideas, borders, and ways of life has always led to country vs. country conflict, often leading to battlefield clashes. But as the globe’s resources dwindle, competition takes on a new dimension.
On the national scene, political competition pits rivals against each other as they run for office—each trying to convey traits that will convince voters to choose them. Elections are serious, deeply personal examples of competition.

It’s nearly impossible to ignore competition in daily life.

On the domestic scene—in real-life situations where we all live—competition takes its place in various elements of living. We compete for jobs. Students compete for grades and placement at higher levels of education. The stores where we shop compete for our dollars. People compete with each other for attention, affection, and love.

In our recreation, we compete. We play on a softball team and covet the first-place trophy. We get up a foursome for golf and battle for bragging rights. Our kids start early playing T-ball or youth soccer—and we urge them to continue to compete their way through life.

Even for fans who cheer for sports teams to whom they have no connection other than geography, competition sometimes turns from friendly to fierce. Case in point: The New York Yankees fan who used her car to run down and kill a Boston Red Sox fan in 2008 over their disparate loyalties.

Indeed, it’s nearly impossible to ignore competition in daily life.

Are we ready for it? Are we prepared for the growing levels of competition in today’s society? Have we spent any contemplative time exploring its value, advantages, disadvantages, and controversies? Maybe it’s time to think more about
what it takes to live with honor and with confidence in a competitive world.

DEFINING COMPETITION

On October 4, 1957, an event took place that thrust two huge groups of people into direct competition. These two nations were already at odds with each other on matters of governance and philosophy. But after the event in question took place, the two countries were immediately forced into a new, all-out competitive struggle.

On that day more than 50 years ago, the USSR and the United States became high-flying competitors because the USSR launched Sputnik, the first artificial satellite, into outer space—startling officials in the US into flinging themselves headlong into what would soon become known as the Space Race.

The launch of that 184-pound satellite, with its mysterious beeping sound that could be heard by Americans via shortwave radios as the satellite passed over their country, started an intense competition in the US. Americans feared that Russia had a technological advantage and could possibly even spy on them from overhead. Perhaps, it was thought, they could launch weapons that would reach the previously unreachable shores of the continental US.

Once the US realized that it was trailing the feared USSR technologically, the race began for the US to catch up and pass the USSR in the Space Race.

The story of Sputnik illustrates various aspects of competition. First, it reveals that in competition
**it usually takes two rivals.** Before Sputnik, officials who were working on the US space program (this was pre-NASA) were not convinced that they should take seriously the Soviets' satellite-building capabilities. In competitive parlance, the USSR was underrated. That led to some lethargy in the US effort. But as soon as the Russians announced their successful mission—and as soon as the American people felt threatened by this activity of a communist nation—the country sprang into action. The Sputnik launch created a competitive situation that had not been perceived before.

In most forms of competition, two parties oppose each other with the goal of gaining something at the end, whether it's a trophy in sports, customers and money in business, an office in politics, or as in the Space Race, international strategic advantage.

Competition doesn't always have to involve two opposing sides or antagonists. Sometimes, competition is more remote, with no head-to-head rivalry. Let's say you are a salesperson and you want to increase your numbers. You could, in effect, compete with yourself by seeking to raise those numbers. Or maybe each time you play golf, you seek to improve your score. Or you are a recreational runner who competes against your stopwatch—attempting to improve your time. You are competing without facing a competitor. That seemed to be what the Soviets were doing before the US jumped into the fray.

Another characteristic of competitive situations is that they provide focus—a goal. This can result in a
concentration of effort that may not be needed in a noncompetitive scenario. Before Sputnik, the US had some individuals working on space rocketry, but there was also much dissension among the military branches as to what would be the most effective applications of rocket science. But after the Soviets startled the US into action, the country needed a central rallying organization that could concentrate on what had become the goal: Surpass the USSR in space technology. Thus, the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) centralized all of the US efforts. And later, President John F. Kennedy synthesized all smaller goals into one huge one. On May 25, 1961, he boldly proclaimed: “I believe that this nation should commit itself to achieving the goal, before this decade is out, of landing a man on the moon and returning him safely to the earth.”

A third component of competition is that it provides an incentive for improvement. The US could no longer be satisfied with the status quo—not just in regard to the formation of NASA but also in relation to its entire citizenry. Across America, schools were asked to increase their expertise in teaching math and science, for it was feared that the launch of Sputnik had shown that the country might have fallen behind the Soviets in education as well.

No one could have predicted the outcome of this competition—and no one could have ever dreamed what would result from two countries taking each other on in this way. While it’s often thought that the arrival of a manned American spaceship on the surface of the moon was the
indicator of success in this rivalry, much more than that came from the race. In the end, for instance, the competition ultimately resulted in an ironic outcome: An American and a Russian shaking hands in outer space in 1975 as the competition ended in cooperation.

Through the years, space competition has also resulted in a long list of developments and discoveries that have affected mankind in ways that surpass the value of standing on lunar soil.

Almost inadvertently, the great competition led to such things as these: The rush to replace vacuum tubes with integrated circuits (which helped ignite the computer boom), a computer-connection scheme called ARPANET (now known as the Internet), satellite communication, ultrasound technology, GPS systems, freeze-dried coffee, and, of course, Tang. Competition nearly always results in unintended consequences.

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Competition, then, can be seen as a struggle for limited resources or for a goal, which calls for effort and self-improvement.

By itself, competition is neither good nor bad but can result in great advantage or harm, depending on the motives and methods that are used to try to reach the desired goal.

Because such competition has consequences, both sought and unintended, our involvement in it deserves careful consideration.
THE DANGERS OF COMPETITION

Competitive desires, if left unchecked, can lead to roaring flames of trouble. This shouldn’t preclude our involvement in competition, but it can signal to us the importance of thoughtfully weighing our motives for trying to win at the expense of others or even at great cost to ourselves.

Examining a sampling of these dangers can help us to avoid the negative aspects of competition.

THE GREED FACTOR

Everybody enjoys getting a paycheck—a monetary reward for the time, effort, skill, and dedication poured into a job. It’s easy to imagine that some people must enjoy that paycheck more than others—for in our competitive world, some people are getting incredibly rich. For instance, the CEO of one major clothing company made $26 million in 2007, which means that his pay stub would have something like $1,000,000 written in the “wages earned” column every 2 weeks. We might say that this person is getting paid extravagantly because his company is beating the pants off its competitors.

Bringing up the fact that one person can make that much money reminds us of one of the dangers of competition in a capitalistic society: greed. Of course, we don’t know what’s in the heart of the corporate lion who makes as much money in one year as a minimum-wage worker would have to work for 4,000 years to earn, but we do know that greed does rear its head in the competitive world.

When we turn to the competitive arena of sports,
we can see how greed and competition get tangled up in each other. One major-league pitcher spelled out how the continual search for bigger salaries can change a person’s perspective about contract negotiations when he said, “I am the most loyal player money can buy.”

A magazine that catered to professional athletes used the greed of rich athletes as a drawing card. In one edition, the magazine ran an article about watches that athletes could buy. Two of the timepieces were priced at $1 million each—one had 435 diamonds embedded on the watch. The magazine also featured resort locations the athletes might want to visit. The going price to stay at some of the swank, exotic locales was more than $25,000 a night.

Many rich athletes would protest that they are not being motivated by greed—and that may be true. But we don’t have to observe many contract discussions between teams and player agents to realize that “the excessive desire for money,” as most standard dictionaries define greed, is indeed a part of professional sports competition.

Using competition to get more and more of what we already have enough of isn’t just about money. It may also have to do with gaining advantages over others in the corporate world (bigger offices, longer vacations, better perks). And even in the athletic world, we can become greedy about playing time, attention from coaches, and the adulation of those who are observing our competition.

**THE TEMPTATION TO BREAK THE RULES**

It’s certainly no secret that the landscape of competition in recent history is littered
with the remnants of competitors whose reputations were damaged by a propensity to play outside the rules.

In the world of business, for example, we have seen wealthy captains of industry brought down from the boardroom to the prison cell because of criminal activity. Trying to stay ahead of the competition, they blurred the line of legality (perhaps because of the aforementioned greed) and ended up cheating to gain an advantage.

In the world of sports, we’ve endured ongoing reports of athletes who used substances that gave their bodies a boost over non-substance-using athletes. They cheated to gain an unfair athletic advantage over clean-playing opponents. In addition, we’ve watched as a famous NFL coach paid a small fortune in fines for spying on other teams, presumably to pick up an unfair edge over other coaches.

In each situation where competitors got out of line, they violated either well-known league rules or clearly documented laws. These people were involved in competition, but it was not competition that led to their misconduct or to the charges against them. Instead of competing legitimately, they chose to try to circumvent accepted standards of conduct. It was their error in judgment, not the circumstance they were in, that led to the difficulty.

Cheating is so prevalent in some competitive areas that a maxim among players in one sport is this: “If you’re not cheating, you’re not trying.” This puts an added burden on those who wish to compete by the rules.

The rewards of
competition are so great that people are sometimes tempted to bend those rules to gain an unfair advantage.

THE POTENTIAL FOR CONFUSED PRIORITIES
Udo Middelmann of the Francis A. Schaeffer Foundation says, “Sports has become for many the central fascination of their lives.”

Competitive efforts have a tendency to do this to people. The inner drive to compete (either actually or vicariously) fosters within many men and women a compelling need to succeed, even at the cost of time with significant people, of dignity in interacting with others, and in the willingness to engage in other, more important, activities.

Businessman Greg Bourgond explains how a person in competition can sacrifice the vital and significant on the altar of the expedient. “During my daughter’s senior year in high school,” he wrote, “she repeatedly asked if I could

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attend one of her school's basketball games. She was a varsity cheerleader. At the time, I was a general manager of a business. I remember giving perfectly legitimate and rational reasons why it was impossible to be there. To this day, I cannot remember any of those reasons. What I remember is I wasn’t there for my daughter. My primary focus was on my business sphere of influence.”

Also, competition can make fools out of us when we give too much credence to our own opinion. We’ve all watched in dismay as men in nice suits behaved like irate children because a referee made a call with which they disagreed. We’ve seen the YouTube videos of athletes, coaches, and managers as they rant, rave, and reveal their inner anger because something didn’t go their way in a sporting event. We’ve heard tales of people at board meetings—both professional and ecclesiastical—giving away a piece of their mind they could ill afford to give up, and doing so with embarrassing rancor because they disagreed about a competing idea on the table.

Then too, being involved in competition can sometimes rob us of involvement in a better activity. While there is nothing wrong with fantasy baseball, for instance, a man who spends several hours a day with this instead of taking care of his family or paying the bills or spending time in more valuable pursuits has a priority deficit. The vicarious enjoyment of competition by fans has stolen many hours of precious time from countless families.

Competition can overtake our minds like a bad drug if we let it, rearranging our
otherwise well-ordered world and causing our priorities to rage out of control.

THE VALUE AND BENEFITS OF COMPETITION

Competition, like life, is full of paradoxes. While there are dangers that could make us think we should throw away the spreadsheets and box scores and get out of competition for fear of corrupting ourselves, we can also observe that involvement in the arena of competition can have positive outcomes. Here’s a look at a few good results of head-to-head battles in life.

COMPETITION INSPIRES

Some of the most inspirational human-interest stories come directly from competitive situations. How many times have we sat in awe as we learned the history of competitors who have overcome great disadvantage and risen to success from the depths of their previous failures!

Josh Hamilton, a major-league baseball outfielder, could be a poster boy for this. Hamilton was the first amateur player drafted in 1999—selected by the Tampa Bay Rays as the best prospect in the country. Hamilton proceeded to do everything he could to throw his life away. He drank too much. He took drugs. He became addicted to both and to a lifestyle that was killing him. Baseball was the furthest thing from his mind as he went from drug hit to alcohol binge to another dead-end day. But some people believed in him anyway. His wife. His grandmother. A coach. Through their prayers and their influence, Hamilton turned his life over to God.
Eventually, everything turned around for him. In 2007, he got another chance at major-league baseball. Clean, sober, and spiritually strong, he hit 19 home runs for the Cincinnati Reds that season.

The inspirational value of the stories of competition can warm our hearts and bring hope to a beleaguered world. Dave Thomas rises from nothing to create an international food chain called Wendy’s. Young baseball player Jim Abbott overcomes having just one hand to pitch in the majors. A basketball player named Muggsy Bogues makes a career of the NBA although he is just 5' 3" tall. A college kid named Mark Zuckerberg starts a Web site named Facebook, and in just a few years he’s a billionaire.

The value of the success achieved by competitors reaches beyond their own personal triumphs. Those who compete well must always find detours around obstacles—either internal or external—thus encouraging and inspiring the rest of us to discover ways around our own personal roadblocks.

**COMPETITION TEACHES TEAMWORK**

Why would a corporation pay good money to take its valued employees away from the office for a retreat just so they can bake a cake together, or go on a scavenger hunt, or face each other in physical competition? Why do companies participate in these team-building activities? They do this because in the competitive world, the individuals (as important and talented as they are) get more done when working as a team.

In most settings, competition forces people to blend their talents and skills
with the talents and skills of others to get a job done. To succeed, competitors cannot Lone Ranger their way through the challenges they face. They must create teams that blend individual talent to create success.

One of the most successful food franchises of all time—one that has more than 30,000 restaurants worldwide—understands competition. In operation for more than 50 years, this company has seen hundreds of competitors come and go. But none have been able to emulate its success. A close look at this company’s method of operation reveals that at the top of its list of employee qualities—whether those workers are flipping burgers or running things at corporate headquarters—is this word: Teamwork. The chief executive officer of this fast-food giant says, “Every person who gets [his] start with [us] learns lifetime skills such as teamwork.”

Teamwork is a valuable and admirable outgrowth of competition done well. It is guided by wise leadership—those who know that more is done by people acting as a unit than by a number of people acting individually. Teamwork is often an outgrowth of competition.

**COMPETITION DEVELOPS INDIVIDUAL POTENTIAL**

Why do parents allow their children to be subjected to the challenges of playing high school sports? After all, participating in a sport is not an easy task. It includes physical training that often drives young people to exhaustion. Then the season starts and it gets tougher. Also, it’s draining mentally as the student-athletes are asked to learn complicated plays and drills, to think and...
react quickly to changing situations, and to begin to develop a mind bent on success. And finally, there are often psychological challenges faced by these young kids as they learn to understand how a coach thinks, try to get along with teammates, and work to deal with the ups and downs of success and failure.

Parents allow their children to do this because with proper and careful coaching, the competitive world provides a sophisticated opportunity for sharpening mental, physical, and psychological skills.

Sports competition at the college level was a major contributing factor to my own success later in life. Being part of a college basketball team for 4 years helped me overcome a number of deficiencies—spurring me on and giving me confidence for a future career in both teaching and coaching. The mental toughness demanded by my coach pushed me away from a natural tendency to avoid difficult situations. Being physically fit in college has encouraged me to attempt to stay that way in the years since. And being given the chance to succeed on the court in front of my peers helped push me out of a natural shyness and reticence. These many years later, it’s clear to me that the intense competition of college basketball pushed me and sharpened me as a person God could use.

**COMPETITION AT ITS BEST**

One well-known competition-based organization uses the following statements as its guiding principles. The group “assists in developing the qualities of citizenship, discipline, teamwork, and
physical well-being.” Its pledge further states: “I trust in God, I love my country, and I will respect its laws. I will play fair and strive to win, but win or lose I will do my best.”

It would be hard to find someone who could not embrace a set of goals as valuable as those created by this well-respected institution. Citizenship. Discipline. Teamwork. God. Love of country. Fair play. Doing one’s best.

This is the mission statement for Little League Baseball. Its expression of the importance of admirable qualities points out that often in competition the high call for excellence from a secular institution is not too different from what we might consider to be a lofty call for top-quality competition from a Christian perspective.

This can be an important observation for those who have never considered how the subject of competition could be connected with things considered religious. Many have sensed that elements of fair play and goodness are honored when people compete according to accepted standards and rules, yet they may not have seen the underlying reason for this—a reason that relates to a higher set of values and principles for living.

If that’s the case, there is reason to consider the possibility that the goodness and fairness that most often prevails in competition comes from an innate knowledge borne in all people—and that the times when competitors fall into cheating or inhumanity result from a rejection of what God has instilled in them.

Consider, for instance, a quote from the Bible that speaks of the ability all people have to see the
difference between right and wrong. In Romans 2:15, the apostle Paul wrote that people “show that the requirements of the law are written on their hearts” (NIV). Bible commentator William Hendrickson explains it like this: “[God] equipped them with a sense of right and wrong.” Hendrickson further explains that a person will “spontaneously . . . do certain things required by God’s law. For example, he is kind to his wife and children, has a heart for the poor, and promotes honesty.” And, we could add, he has a sense of fairness and integrity in competition.

That’s why it’s not a big step to go from a moral, reasonable view of competition (such as the Little League mission statement suggests) to one that is solidly supported by principles honored and illustrated by the Bible.

By tracking timeless principles back to their origin, any competitor, religious or not, can find practical, helpful guidance from the wisdom of the Bible. Its pages offer not only inspiring insights that encourage fair play but also reasons to rely on a source of unlimited help for living with honor in an inherently competitive world.

HOW TO COMPETE WITH CONFIDENCE

Once it becomes clear that standards of fair competition represent more than just made-up rules—that they represent guidelines rooted in the wisdom and character of our Creator—competitors can begin to understand what it means to compete with confidence. Together we can discover that it’s possible to live in a competitive world without
believing that our well-being depends on whether we win or lose any given contract, argument, or game.

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When our focus is not just on the struggle for limited resources, but on our confidence in the unlimited ability of God to care for us, we can compete not only for our own benefit but for the good of others as well.

One man who knows what it means to live with honor in the middle of fierce competition is football coach Tony Dungy, who led the Indianapolis Colts to victory in the 2007 Super Bowl. Throughout his coaching career in the National Football League, Dungy has recognized his role as a Christian immersed in the high-pressure world of pro football. Therefore, through his controlled demeanor as a coach and his calm words of faithfulness, he has shown a skeptical, watching world that it’s not just okay, but in many ways preferred, to be a person of faith in the midst of an intensely competitive atmosphere.

Dungy, in discussing his best-selling book *Quiet Strength*, said this: “No matter where the Lord places you, you can have an impact on that community.”

That impact happens when a person competes in such a way as to show that it’s possible to give your best effort to win without making
a god out of the game or the competition.

Even though Dungy is as imperfect as any of us, he is one of many who has determined not to sacrifice character on the altar of temporary success. By showing a faith that transcends the playing field, Dungy has been able to draw upon a strength that honors the game while pointing much higher.

**COMPETE WITH HONOR**

Legendary NFL coach Vince Lombardi is often quoted as saying, “Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” Whether that’s what he meant is sometimes debated. But the quote is often used as a counterpoint to the idea that what counts is not whether we win or lose but how we play the game. The idea that “winning is everything” even runs counter to the modern Olympic Creed that “The most important thing . . . is not winning but taking part [in the Games].”

This is where we need to think carefully about how important it is to us and others to do our best to win, while retaining our good will, honor, and confidence, regardless of the outcome. People of faith do not honor themselves, their competitors, or their God if they don’t do whatever they can to win at the games and business of life. While winning isn’t everything, there’s no honor in throwing a game or deliberately losing a sale.

**Run To Win.** In 1 Corinthians 9:24, Paul used an image that would have been familiar to his readers—an image right out of a contemporary Olympic-like sporting event known as the Isthmian Games. With such a competitive setting in mind, Paul wrote about what
it takes to “run in such a way as to get the prize” (v.24 NIV).

When the athletes of the Isthmian Games trained diligently to win their races, they knew two things: First, only one person could get first prize; and second, the prize the athlete would receive would eventually decay into worthlessness.

Against that backdrop, Paul talked about how important it is to run the race of life with the kind of faith that will eventually win a prize that is timeless. Of the Isthmian competitors he wrote, “They do it to obtain a perishable crown, but we for an imperishable [eternal reward]” (v.25).

What’s common to Paul’s illustration and his spiritual application is the effort to win. He was urging his readers to compete diligently—straining against all competitors and anything else that would keep them from reaching their goal of God’s approval.

It’s understood that in a fair race no one can ensure victory, but victory won’t go to one who is lazy, takes victory for granted, or makes excuses instead of an all-out effort to win. That’s as true of running the great race of faith as it is of running for an Olympic medal, a job, or an educational degree.

**Compete With Strength.** Followers of Christ—and especially Christian competitors—have often been slapped with the criticism that they are too soft, too nice to be winners. One answer to that accusation would be to enumerate the many Christians who have succeeded at their competitive endeavors while maintaining their good name and reputation in the process. Truett Cathy in the fast-food industry (Chick-fil-A). Mary Lou Retton in the Olympics. Steve Largent in
politics. Ken Wales in film and TV production. Johnny Hart in cartooning. The list goes on and on of men and women of faith who stood their ground in their competitive field and were not limited by a supposed weakness that some attribute to Christians.

To a young man named Timothy, the apostle Paul wrote, “God has not given us a spirit of fear, but of power and of love and of a sound mind” (2 Tim. 1:7). Timothy apparently suffered from occasional bouts of anxiety. In 1 Corinthians, Paul hinted as much to the people in the church in Corinth when he said, “If Timothy comes, see that he may be with you without fear” (16:10). In the work God called Timothy to do, then, Paul was reminding him in 2 Timothy that he had to, as commentator Hendrickksen paraphrases it, “fight that tendency of yours toward fearfulness.” And he could do so because the Spirit of God, who indwells each believer, is a source of power, love, and self-discipline.

Paul’s words of encouragement have application far beyond Timothy. What he wrote reminds us that God stands ready to give anyone who trusts Him a spirit of courage.

In a letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me” (4:13). His point was not that God will help His people do whatever they want to do. He was saying that in times of prosperity, as well as in times of poverty, he had learned to be content with whatever God was doing in and through him.

One implication for us is that whether we win or lose, we can find our life and
strength in God rather than in the win-loss column. From the beginning of time until now, those who live to rely on and honor their God in the midst of a competitive world can find grace and hope in their ever-changing circumstances.

*Those who live to rely on and honor their God in the midst of a competitive world can find grace and hope in their ever-changing circumstances.*

**BE A GOOD WINNER**

Occasionally in the world of competition, we encounter those who think that their life, happiness, and significance depend on winning. Because they have made a god out of winning, they have a hard time bringing themselves to accept defeat with grace. They find excuses for losing, blame other people, pout about the loss, and complain that it wasn’t fair. Such competitors often disappoint their fans and detract from the competition. But we can also empathize with them and recognize their pain. After all, we’ve all done our share of losing.

The bigger problem is with those of us who have not learned to win with grace. If that’s our problem, in all likelihood we have not seen our opportunity to compete as a gift from God but as a measure of our own skill and effort. The result is that we disappoint others and detract from the competition by accepting victory with arrogance.

It’s far better to be able to say with Paul,
"I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation" (Phil. 4:11-12 NIV).

Such contentment can grace our joy in victory and soften our disappointment in defeat. It’s rooted in the confidence that what really counts is recognizing that every good thing we have and experience comes to us as a gift from God.

**Compete With Humility.** When my daughter’s high school wanted to put a plaque near the Melissa Branon Memorial Softball Field in 2003 to honor her memory, we suggested that it contain this verse: “Be completely humble and gentle; be patient, bearing with one another in love” (Eph. 4:2 NIV). As a varsity athlete, that was how she competed, which contrasts greatly with the pride and hostility that so often marks competition. According to Rudyard Kipling in his famous poem “If,” a humble, gentle winner can face “triumph and disaster and treat those two impostors just the same.” And further, a winner with the right attitude will mirror these words of Kipling later in the poem: “If you can talk with crowds and keep your virtue, or walk with kings—nor lose the common touch.” Win or lose, the good winner stays the same—living with Christlike humility, patience, and love.

**Compete With Integrity.** Those who know that life is not found in winning nor lost in losing are in a good position to live with the kind of integrity that reflects their confidence in God.

By contrast, some of the biggest losers over the last...
couple of decades have been those who tried to put winning above honor and fair play. Examples come from the world of sports (Olympians who had to give up their medals after it was discovered they used steroids to win the tainted medal), business (men and women who used illegal business practices to become immensely wealthy, only to see their millions disappear when convicted of wrongdoing), and, sadly, the church (leaders who rose to heights of respect among the faith-based community, only to be brought down by the same kind of temptations that disqualify competitors in sports, business, and government).

Examples from every walk of life illustrate the wisdom of the apostle Paul when he wrote, “If anyone competes in athletics, he is not crowned unless he competes according to the rules” (2 Tim. 2:5).

Honoring the rules of fair play is central to healthy competition. That’s why steroids in sports are such a big deal. That’s why recruiting violations are exposed and penalized. That’s why an unfair advantage through insider trading on Wall Street is punishable with prison time. That’s why voter fraud in politics is so diligently opposed.

There’s a price to be paid for not having the confidence that life is found in something other than in the championships and Super Bowls of our lives. Great rewards wait for those who know that what really counts is to live in a way that reflects deep and personal confidence in the real Provider in our lives.

Golfer Wendy Ward gives us an example of such trust in God. She spent several successful years competing
in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA), winning four tournaments during her career and finishing as high as 12th on the LPGA circuit for an entire season.

In 2000, she was playing in the McDonald's LPGA tournament when she was confronted with a moral dilemma. As she played her way through the final holes of the tourney, something strange happened. On one hole, as she got ready to hit her ball while it lay on the green, Ward saw the ball move. She hadn't touched it with her putter, but it moved. No one else saw it move, but Ward knew that any movement of the ball while she was standing over it—even if she didn't touch it—would result in a stroke being assessed.

Ward, who has a reputation as a woman of faith in Christ, knew what she had to do. She called an official over and explained the situation. Following the rules to the letter, the official added a stroke to Ward's total. She ended the tourney with a 282.

That single stroke was important, because Juli Inkster and Stefania Croce ended at 281, and they faced each other in a playoff, which Inkster won. Inkster was handed a check for $210,000 for her win. Ward's winnings? She received $76,319. That extra stroke cost Ward the opportunity for an additional $133,000.

Later, Ward said, “I was disappointed to have lost a major championship. But I felt as if I did the right thing in God's eyes, and that is more important to me.” She is an example of a person who, in the heat of competition, realizes that her real security and honor are found in her dependence upon a God of unlimited
resources. As hard as Ward worked to win that tournament, she knew that what really counted was whether, from her heart, she honored the real Source of her life.

**PRINCIPLES OF THE ULTIMATE COMPETITOR**

What should competitors who want to follow Jesus look like? A lot like Jesus Himself. But the image of Jesus is often portrayed either by Christians with a sanitized image of Him or by non-Christians who see Him as a mild-mannered guy in white robes with an air of detached indifference. But these images don’t line up with the Gospel stories. Jesus was tough when He went into the temple to chase out those who had turned a house of prayer into a den of thieves. He was also tough when, after going without food for 40 days in a barren Judaean wilderness, He went toe-to-toe with His enemy.

One thing to notice about this classic battle of good vs. evil is that Jesus didn’t go into this confrontation alone or without encouragement. Just before the desert duel between the Lord and His challenger, Jesus had received a resounding endorsement of His work when He heard His Father’s voice from heaven saying, “This is My beloved Son, in whom I am well pleased” (Mt. 3:17).

When the temptations came, Jesus not only showed His ability to stand against His enemy but He also gave us an example of what it takes to live with honor in a competitive world.

Let’s look at how Matthew describes Satan’s attempts to defeat Him:
Then Jesus was led up by the Spirit into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil. And when He had fasted forty days and forty nights, afterward He was hungry. Now when the tempter came to Him, he said, “If You are the Son of God, command that these stones become bread.” But He answered and said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God.’” Then the devil took Him up into the holy city, set Him on the pinnacle of the temple, and said to Him, “If You are the Son of God, throw Yourself down. For it is written: ‘He shall give His angels charge over you,’ and, ‘In their hands they shall bear you up, lest you dash your foot against a stone.’” Jesus said to him, “It is written again, ‘You shall not tempt the Lord your God.’” Again, the devil took Him up on an exceedingly high mountain, and showed Him all the kingdoms of the world and their glory. And he said to Him, “All these things I will give You if You will fall down and worship me.” Then Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan! For it is written, ‘You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve.’” Then the devil left Him, and behold, angels came and ministered to Him (Mt. 4:1-11).

Three times the challenger tried to tempt Jesus. Three times Jesus responded with a well-chosen quote from the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy. In the process, Jesus not only resisted the temptation but He also gave us foundational principles for living with honor in a competitive world.
**NO ONE LIVES BY BREAD ALONE**

First, the devil challenged Jesus to show that He was the Son of God by using His power to turn rocks into bread. In response, Jesus gave us the ultimate confidence that can grace the life of any competitor. He said, “It is written, ‘Man shall not live by bread alone, but by every word that proceeds from the mouth of God’ ” (Mt. 4:4; Dt. 8:3).

This was a direct allusion to the way God had provided for His people when they wandered in a barren wilderness for 40 years.

The principle is as true today as then. We do not live by our own strength. Neither do we survive by bread or money alone. We live by the mercies and provisions of our God in this world of limited and shrinking resources. That is our confidence—whether we win or lose.

**DON’T PRESUME UPON GOD’S HAND OF PROVISION**

Satan’s second temptation took place on a high corner of the temple wall. There he challenged Jesus to jump off to prove His relationship to God. In essence, he was saying, “If You are the long-awaited Messiah, prove it by jumping. If You are the Son of God, Your Father will send angels to protect You.”

Jesus responded by saying, “You shall not tempt the Lord your God” (Mt. 4:7; Dt. 6:16). This quote comes from a section of the law in which Moses is warning the people of Israel not to think they can listen to other gods and still enjoy the care and provisions of God.

The principle applies to us in our competitive world. In the heat of battle, we might be inclined to heed the voices that say, “You have to look after yourself. If you don’t look after
yourself, no one else will either. Don’t be afraid to cut some corners and bend the rules. Everybody else is doing it too. Besides, God understands. If He’s a God of love, He’ll forgive you.”

But as Jesus showed us, that’s not the way to be faithful to our God. And that’s not the way to live with confidence and honor in a competitive world.

TRUST AND WORSHIP GOD AND GOD ALONE
Satan’s third challenge was his biggest. He offered to give Jesus the world without a fight, if Jesus would just bow to him.

But once again Jesus relied on the insight and words of God. He said, “You shall worship the Lord your God, and Him only you shall serve” (Mt. 4:10; Dt. 6:13).

In the middle of the competitive seasons of our lives, we are often tempted to worship the gods of victory, money, and acclaim. We know that our world doesn’t do much for losers. So we too can be tempted to bow our knee to the gods of this age.

Yet our loving Father in heaven urges us not to sacrifice our confidence in Him on an altar of expedience.

Our loving Father in heaven urges us not to sacrifice our confidence in Him on an altar of expedience.

Jesus teaches us that there is no greater confidence than worshiping and valuing and honoring God and God alone.
The temptations of Satan in the wilderness were followed 3 years later by another series of challenges. In the darkness of the night that preceded His ultimate challenge, Jesus was arrested in the Garden of Gethsemane. Alone because “all the disciples forsook Him and fled” (Mt. 26:56), He was taken to stand before the high priest Caiaphas while Jewish religious leaders looked on.

It was the Sanhedrin vs. Jesus, and Jesus had no defender. So Caiaphas proceeded to trump up some charges. Jesus' first response to the charade was silence. Even in the face of wrong information, He kept His composure. When the high priest finally demanded that Jesus respond, He did so with truth and without returning evil for evil.

When He acknowledged the truth about His relationship with God, His opponents reacted with shock at what they thought was an outrageous insult to God. Then they asked for His death.

The challenge and trumped-up charges against Jesus that day seemed to be leading to His tragic defeat. But Jesus knew that His truth and His composure were necessary to fulfill Scripture and to complete the Father's plan.

Jesus responded with confidence, even as His accusers taunted Him, mistreated Him, and sentenced Him to die. Looking back, it’s apparent that He knew that even as He hung in agony and humiliation on a crude cross of torture, He would end up with the victory.

In fact, this was a competition that was in one regard unfair to the

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other side. The rulers who sentenced Jesus and the men who followed through with the death penalty never had a chance of winning. That's because Jesus’ death on Calvary would be followed by the greatest come-from-behind win of all time.

After Jesus was buried in the borrowed grave of Joseph of Arimathea, those who killed Him were basking in the glow of what they thought was a victory. But their celebration was short-lived. Three days later, Jesus burst through the walls of death and defeat to emerge as the greatest Victor ever. When He rose from the tomb, He won the free gift of life and reconciliation with God for anyone who would trust Him.

As we contemplate Jesus’ triumph in the face of mistreatment, rejection, and relentless pain, it’s clear that His example, His words, and His sacrifice can give insight to the competitive situations in our own lives.

Let’s pray that as we face the daily challenges of living in a competitive world, we will respond in a way that honors the One who secured for us a relationship with His own Father.

Jesus’ example, His words, and His sacrifice can give insight to the competitive situations in our own lives.

Let’s not waste a single opportunity to show that while we live in a world that is struggling for limited and shrinking resources, our hope and our confidence is in the One who daily provides for us, while also promising our ultimate—and future—victory.

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