

We're right in the thick of football season, so this will be easy to imagine. Suppose you are a TV sportscaster at a football game. You're the person on the sideline that sometimes talks to players or coaches. You are here to get the inside scoop on the game.

Now, here's what you see unfolding on the field in front of you. The team nearest you is standing together with its coach in the center. They seem excited for the game to begin. You can see that the coach is speaking with great passion to the players. Suddenly the whole team puts their hands together and they let out a shout, "Go team!" But then you see the players all go to the bench and sit down while the coach runs out on the field. You run down to the sidelines and ask one of the team members what's going on. "What's the coach doing out there?" you ask. "Oh, he's going to play today." "All by himself?" you respond. "Sure, why not? He's had a lot more experience and training than the rest of us. And we pay the coach well. We're all here to cheer for him and support him." Bewildered you watch the kickoff. The coach catches the ball. He valiantly charges up the field. But he gets buried under eleven opposing tacklers. A stretcher is brought out to carry the dazed and injured coach off of the field.

In a few minutes things change. The whole team realizes that they will all have to play. So they are on the field in a huddle. They huddle...and huddle...and huddle. The referee calls a penalty for delaying the game and moves the ball back five yards. Still the team huddles, huddles, and huddles. The referee calls penalty, after penalty, until the ball is moved all the way back to the team's own goal line. "Hey coach," one of the players shouts. "This is the greatest huddle I've ever been in. What a great team we have! We have the best fellowship and some of these guys know the whole play book by heart." "But when are you going to play?" the coach asks. "Why should we play? What we want are better huddles! Besides, we might get hurt if we played. No one ever got hurt in a huddle!"

At the urging of their coach the team finally breaks out of their huddle. But instead of lining up against the opposing team they break into groups of two or three, and begin arguing with each other. They start pushing and shoving each other. Some are actually fighting each other! "What's wrong now?" you ask one of the players who is walking off the field in disgust. "Those guys can't agree on anything," he says. "Those two over there are still arguing over the color of the uniforms. Those three are quarreling over the right way to kneel in the huddle. There are some who are fighting over the positions they were assigned to play. And I'm quitting the team because they don't do things the way I think they should be done!"

As you consider the scenes I just described for you do any of them remind you of our ministry here at Good Shepherd Lutheran Church? If the pastors and teachers are coaches do we send them out alone to do ministry? Do we at times huddle, and huddle, and huddle some more, without actually carrying out our plans? Or when we do finally break out of our huddle do we fail to act as a team? If we are honest with ourselves we can see that all three of those scenes describe us to a certain extent. So let's turn to God's Word for encouragement in the ministry that we share. The Word of God to which we will direct our attention is 1 Corinthians 15:58. **1 Corinthians 15:58 Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.**

May the Holy Spirit work powerfully among us through these verses. The Apostle Paul summarizes our mission as individual Christians and as a congregation of believers. He encourages you and me by saying:

“GIVE YOURSELVES FULLY TO THE WORK OF THE LORD”

- I. With full confidence in God’s Word and promises
- II. With full confidence that our work is not a waste

Have you ever noticed that if you’re not completely on board with a concept or plan, you don’t give as much of yourself? If your boss at work puts you on a project that you believe is heading in the wrong direction, you aren’t going to pour yourself into that project. Or how about this: If you’re wife wants to thoroughly clean out the garage, and you don’t think it’s that bad... and Sunday afternoon football is wrong... you are not going to put much of yourself into that project. (In fact, you might not put any of yourself into that project!

In order to be fully committed to a team the members of that team need to know some basic facts. What benefit is there to being on this team? How did they become a part of the team? What is the purpose and mission of the team? What job does each player have on the team? And who is in charge of the team?

The Christians in Corinth weren’t sure of the answers to these questions, and so it’s not surprising that they weren’t giving themselves fully to the work of the Lord. If we here at Good Shepherd will give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord, we need to know these things!

- 1) What benefit is there to being on Christ’s team? Let’s answer that question by considering the loss of not being on Christ’s team. Apart from Christ, we stand before God on our own. We are personally responsible for every thought, word and action of our entire life.
  - a. Talking back to your Mom when you were a kid? You’re guilty and accountable to God.
  - b. Underage drinking as a teenager? You’re guilty and accountable to God.
  - c. Not devoting much time to God in word in prayer? You’re guilty and accountable to God.
  - d. Talking bad about someone? You’re guilty and accountable to God.
  - e. Impure, lustful thoughts? Pornography. You’re guilty and accountable to God.

And when you stand before God to give account of your life... and you’re not on Christ’s team... you *will* be found guilty on all counts. You will be cast out of God’s presence for eternity.

So here’s the benefit to being on Christ’s team. Jesus always listened to his mom. Never got drunk. Always spent time with his heavenly Father. Always defended the good name of others. Always had pure thoughts. Jesus is perfect. And he is your substitute.

Have you ever seen an athlete having a terrible game, then the coach send in the sub? The sub has a great game and wins the victory for the team. Jesus is your sub. But unlike the scenario I just described, his perfect performance, is all yours. Your flops and failings... your sub took the blame for. In Jesus you have a perfect game. God is pleased and shouts cheers for you.

On Jesus’ team, then you are perfect, forgiven, holy, and fit for God’s eternal kingdom. On this team, you are rich beyond measure.

If you are going to give yourself fully to the work of the Lord, you absolutely must know the amazing benefits that God has given you free of charge as a member of his team.

2) How did you become a part of the team? God chose you. He chose you before you were ever born. And that means his choice was in no way based on your performance or works. Simply by his grace, from eternity, he drafted you as one of his team members. For the majority of you, it was at your baptisms that he gave you the gift of the Holy Spirit so faith was created in your heart. At that moment you put on the uniform of Christ' holiness and perfection. Look around you today, and you'll see a church-full of people wearing the same uniform. Well, we can't actually see it. The halo's aren't visible, nor the glow of righteousness. But be sure of this: God sees it. We're all wearing the same uniform. All of us are clothed in Christ.

3) What is the purpose and mission of the team? Jesus, our great coach and captain also gave us some simple goals to pursue for his team. (a) Make sure we never walk out on the team by being lifelong students of his Word. (b) Our Savior also called us to teach the young members of our team that same Word. (c) Additionally, Jesus gave us the great mission of sharing his Word with everyone around us and inviting them to join the team. That's the simple mission and purpose God has given us. It's reflected in our church's mission statement:

**“As the flock of the Good Shepherd, we exist... To be fed by his Word and Sacrament To follow him in love To find the lost with his Word, All to his glory.”**

Now I'll be the first to admit it might be nice of Jesus gave a more specific game plan. How are we to carry out this three important tasks here at Good Shepherd, considering the mix of people we have, the facility we have, the unique community needs of Midtown Omaha? Well, God has given us freedom... and the simple command to work together in unity, and with single-mindedness to work together for his truth.

4) What job does each player have on the team? First, understand this: God has given absolutely every member of the church a vital role to play on this team. There are no unimportant members. And, listen to this: there are no benchwarmers. God has equipped every single one of us to be a player.

But aren't the called workers the players, and you're the support and cheerleaders? No way. Our called workers, our pastors and teachers, are to be equipping all of our members for our mission. Ephesians 4:11-13 reminds us of this fact. *“It was he who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, <sup>12</sup> to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up <sup>13</sup> until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.”* Like coaches on a team our pastors and teachers are here to train and equip everyone, young and old alike, for service so that we are all in the game.

5) And who is in charge of the team? This one should be pretty obvious by now. It's not the pastor, or president, or called workers. It the Lord Jesus who is the head of his church. He's in charge of the team. He is the one we serve. He calls the shots.

Give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord. Do this knowing the blessings that are yours in Christ. Knowing you are absolutely a vital member of God's team... he chose *you*. Knowing that we have a tremendous amount of important work to do together as we grow

individually and together in our relationship with Christ, and as we reach out with God's good news to bring others into the team.

A church in the Deep South was having a revival. The pastor was trying to get the congregation excited about some new ministry opportunities and potential growth. He gave a passionate sermon. The preacher said, "This church is like a crippled man who needs to get up and walk under the power of Jesus." The congregation replied, "Let the church walk preacher, let it walk." Then the preacher said, "This church needs to be like Elijah on Mount Carmel. It's got to run." The congregation replied, "Let the church run preacher, let it run." Then the preacher said, "This church has got to mount up on wings like eagles and fly." The congregation replied with enthusiasm, "let it fly preacher, let it fly." Then the preacher added, "Now if this church is going to walk, run, and fly it's going to take a lot of sacrifices on our part. It's going to take a lot of our time, our abilities, and our money." The congregation went totally silent. You could have heard a pin drop. Then someone yelled out from the back, "Let the church crawl, preacher, let it crawl."

There is only one way for us to grow the Kingdom of Christ here at Good Shepherd. It will take every single member giving it their all, working hard, and working together under Christ. And I pray no one is sitting here today thinking, "Then let the church crawl, preacher. Let the church crawl." Is our ministry worth the effort? I pray that the Word of God has moved you today to answer that question with a resounding "yes!" Jesus is worthy of our very best.

And when we give him our very best, that effort, that sacrifice, that expenditure is NEVER in vain. *"Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."* Whether we see the results or not... whether we truly accomplish all we set out to do or not, the fact remains the same. Our labor together for the Lord is never in vain. Because as we labor in the Lord we are fighting the forces of darkness and we are God's instruments in rescuing souls for eternity. And that, friends, is worth every ounce of work, and every last resource at our disposal.

One last time let's go back to our football game. The first half ended. The team went off to its locker room discouraged, demoralized, and facing defeat. But when the second half begins we see a different team. Suddenly they are all playing together with a new spirit. They huddle and then quickly go to the line of scrimmage. When the ball is snapped there is no hesitation on the part of any player. Each team member carries out his assignment. Soon they score a touchdown, then another, and another. When the game ends the team you have been watching wins! You go up to the coach and ask what happened. "We were sitting there facing defeat," he says, "but then we started talking." "I admitted my mistakes and the players admitted theirs. We took a good look at ourselves. Then we remembered what it means to work as a team. We set aside our differences and refocused on our goals. We got back to the basics and agreed to work hard in every way that we could."

Friends in Christ, on this Celebration Sunday, let's give thanks to God for our congregation. What a wonderful family of believers we have. God has blessed us in so many ways. And let's also look honestly at ourselves and the ministry we share. With different gifts we go forward to carry out the mission our Savior has given us. Together, as a team, let's give ourselves fully to the work of the Lord—with full confidence in God's Word and promises—and with full confidence that our work for the Lord will *never* be in vain. Amen.