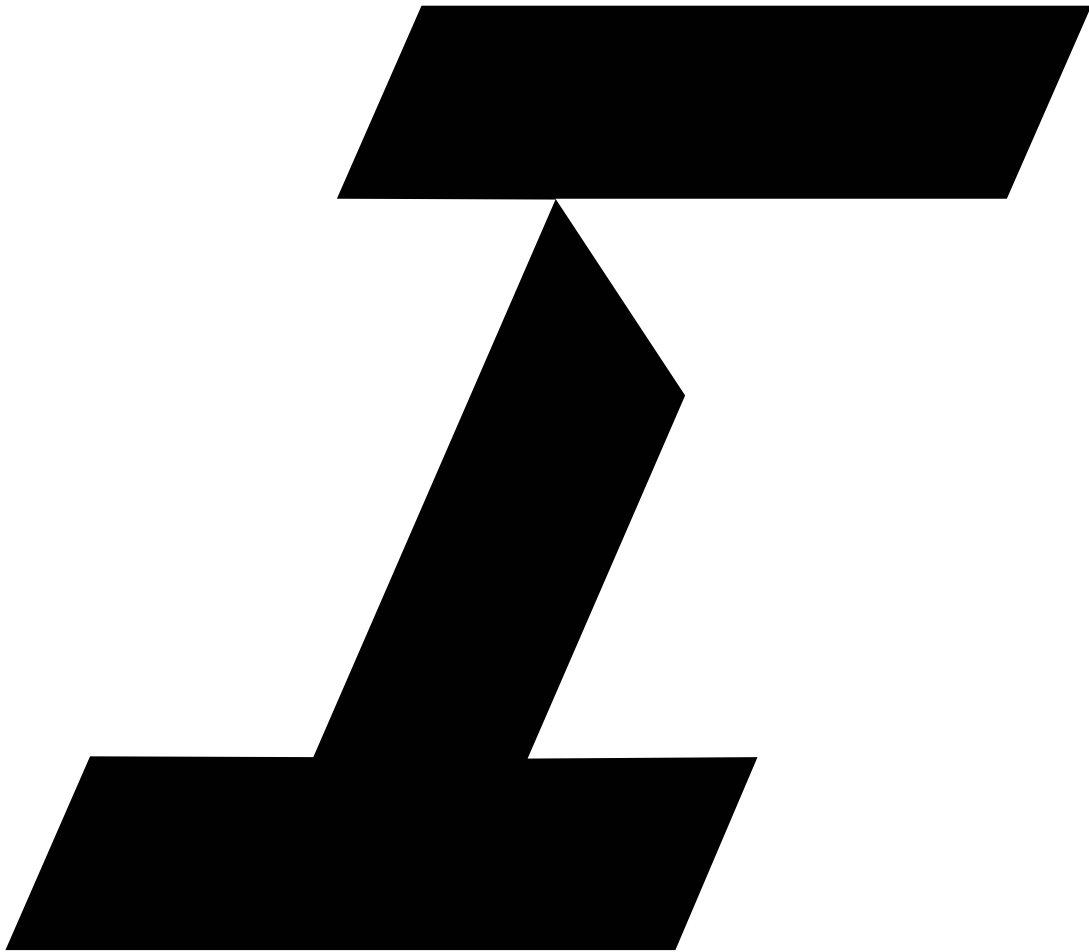


# ***INSIDE GAME***



**WHAT MOTIVATES ME?**

**BRIAN SMITH**

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WHAT MOTIVATES ME?

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## **PREFACE**

This is the second book in the Ultimate Training Series®—a series aimed at unpacking the five principles taught almost predominantly at Athletes in Action's Ultimate Training Camp.

“The Principles” are the gospel applied to sport, experienced through sport, and spoken in the language of sport.

These five principles are part of a unique curriculum developed by our Athletes in Action staff over the last 45 years. They will give you a biblical framework to help you see sport as an opportunity to worship God, so that you can participate in sport in a way that honors Him.

Each principle takes a different story from the Bible and applies the biblical principle from that story to sport and competition. They cover topics like worship, idolatry, motivation, identity, growth, pain, and perspective.

The beautiful thing about these principles is that they are God's principles from His Word and apply to life beyond sport as well. Don't limit them to your athletic career. Apply them to your studies, business career, relationships, finances—every area of life.

## INTRODUCTION

*Motivation Matters*

Buster Douglas lay flat on his back, bleeding from his nose and mouth. As his brain slowly regained its function, he heard someone counting in his face. *Five! Six! Seven!*

By the count of nine he regained his composure and steadied his feet. Then the bell.

Douglas had just been punched in the face by one of the most ferocious hitters the sport of boxing had ever known: Mike Tyson.

Douglas lying semi-conscious on the ground was hardly a surprise. Tyson was 37-0—the undefeated heavyweight champion of the world. Vegas gave Douglas 42-1 odds of winning. At that moment, with Douglas bloodied and fallen, those odds looked generous. Who knows what would have happened if the bell did not ring, simultaneously signaling the end of the eighth round and saving Douglas from becoming another casualty of Tyson's vicious right hook?

Two rounds later, Douglas knocked Tyson out and replaced him as the undisputed heavyweight champion of the world. What motivated Douglas to get into the ring with Tyson in the first place? Why did he fight the urge to stay on the mat until the final ten-count? What motivated him to ultimately beat the unbeatable champion?

His mom.

Douglas broke down in tears after the fight when asked how he overcame nearly impossible odds to win this fight when no one thought he could. "Because of my mother," he said. "God bless her heart."<sup>1</sup>

Twenty-three days before the fight, she passed away. He fought Mike Tyson in her honor.

In 2020, ESPN released a documentary titled *The Last Dance* detailing the life and basketball career of Michael Jordan. With sports temporarily on hold due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the world found itself captivated by the story of arguably the greatest basketball player who ever lived. (This isn't meant to spiral into a conversation about who is the greatest of all time—so you can hold your LeBron James arguments for now! But if there is anything that would pull Jordan out of retirement, it would be the masses saying he would lose to LeBron.)

The ten-part series shined a light on the internal drive of Jordan. What drives someone to be the best—and stay the best—for so long? For Jordan, it was grudges.

In 1987, Indiana Pacers guard Reggie Miller owned Jordan in the first half of a regular-season game. Miller approached Jordan and said, "You're Michael Jordan? The guy that walks on water?"

Jordan's response? "Don't ever talk trash to Black Jesus." He came out firing in the second half and scored 37 points to Miller's 20.

The General Manager of the Bulls spoke often about the defensive prowess of Dan Majerle, one of Jordan's competitors.

Jordan said, "I knew that Jerry Krause loved Dan Majerle. And just because Krause liked him was enough for me. You think he's a great defensive player? Okay, fine. I'm gonna show you that he's not."

The Bulls went on to destroy Majerle's team, the Phoenix Suns, in the 1993 NBA Finals. Jordan averaged 41 points a game.

Sometimes, Jordan would even make up scenarios to motivate himself: After LaBradford Smith hung 37 points on Jordan's Bulls in 1993, Jordan mentioned that Smith put his arm around Jordan after the game and said, "Nice game, Mike."

Jordan told his teammates before the same two teams played again the following night: "In the first half, I'm gonna have what this kid had in the game." Jordan scored 36 points in the first two quarters. In *The Last Dance*, we learned that Smith never put his arm around Jordan after the first game. He never said anything to him. Jordan made the whole thing up.

Proving others wrong fueled his inner drive.

**ALL ATHLETES ARE  
MOTIVATED BY  
SOMETHING.**

<sup>1</sup> Joshua Jones, "Buster Douglas Reveals How Death of Mum Just Weeks before Mike Tyson Fight Inspired Him into Shocking Boxing World," *The Sun* (The Sun, December 12, 2018), <https://www.thesun.co.uk/sport/7958290/buster-douglas-death-mum-mike-tyson-fight-boxing/>.

All athletes are motivated by *something*. For some, it's petty grudges. For others, like Buster Douglas, it comes from an inspirational source. But all athletes are motivated by something.

What about you? What motivates you to continue playing your sport? There are many different motivations that propel us through sport and life—some good and some bad. Which of the following resonates with you?

Recognition	Money	Coach	Goals
Friendships	Pride	Winning	Teammates
Revenge	Parents	Fear of Losing	Family
Success	Anger	Accomplishment	Fame

It's worth noting that none of these motivations are necessarily bad or sinful in themselves. They may start as motivations to pursue good things, things part of God's created order like pleasure, money, or sex. But when our own sinful heart distorts them, they become ultimate ends, something they were never intended to be. Unchecked, they risk becoming like a god to us and we metaphorically bow down to them as the foundation of our "why." Like it does with everything, our sin nature twists the motivation and makes it "worldly."

All of this raises the question: Who cares? Does the foundation of our motivation really matter in the grand scheme of life? If we're playing well, should we even be questioning what's driving us? Does God even care about our motivation?

Athlete, your motivation—your "why"—matters. It matters because if your motivation trends up one day and down the next, your ability to compete at a high level will rise and fall with whatever is driving you. If we want consistency in our athletic performance, we need a motivation that remains permanent and independent of our circumstances.

Yes, motivation matters to optimize athletic performance.

But it also matters because God shows us in his Word that it does. What's driving us at the core of our being is of primary importance to God, who prioritizes the posture of our hearts above all else and cares deeply about what drives that heart.

God says in 1 Samuel 16:7 that "the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart."

Athlete, he's after the "inside game" going on within us!

The first step towards gaining a godly motivation in sports is identifying what currently fuels our motivation. This means being honest with yourself. God loves you exactly where you are, poor motivations and all—but he does not want you to stay there. He knows that no championship or personal best performance will fill the void in your heart for true joy and peace. He desires more for you.

What motivates you matters to God. For that reason, it should matter to you, too. Motivation can be external or internal. We see time and time again in God's Word that he is after our internal motivation. He places a premium on our inside game in sports and life, the game that happens in our hearts and in our soul. What we believe on the inside is what fuels our actions and efforts in life and sports. God's desire is that we would fully know who we are *in him*—and that this new identity would move us from fear to freedom.

**ATHLETE, YOUR  
MOTIVATION—  
YOUR "WHY"—  
MATTERS.**

And yes, there are consequential side effects to having a poor motivation. We can become bitter, angry, prideful, or resentful. But all of those negative side effects camouflage the biggest issue we face when we fail to secure an internal drive that comes from a godly place: we offend the God of the universe who, above all else, cares about the "why" behind our actions. The heart of the issue: what motivates us is an issue of the heart.

So, where do we look for that? And how do we get it?

We can start by looking at Jesus and a parable he once told to his followers.

# 1

## **THE PARABLE OF THE PRODIGAL SON**

As tax collectors, sinners, Pharisees, and teachers of the law gathered around Jesus, he told them a series of parables. A parable is a short story, usually about something that did not actually happen, with the purpose of driving home one illuminating message or theme to the listeners.

Think of any great game-winning shot. Certainly, the game had plenty of subplots (bad calls, injuries, momentum swings, missed opportunities), but it is always remembered by that last shot.

Likewise, Jesus's parables contain many subplots—and we can often learn from those subplots—but the purpose of a parable is to drive home one key theme.

In Luke 15, Jesus is trying to teach the people listening—both the religious elite and the irreligious—about the mercy of God. His parable of the lost sheep is a response to the religious elite's snarky comment that "[t]his man receives sinners and eats with them" (Luke 15:2).

He starts by telling a story about a lost sheep. Surely, he points out, if any of you had one hundred sheep and one got away, you would go looking for that one sheep. And when you find it, you would celebrate with your friends and family. Jesus ends the parable by saying, "Just so, I tell you, there will be more joy in heaven over one sinner who repents than over ninety-nine righteous persons who need no repentance." (Luke 15:7).

Jesus then moves to the next parable. This time, it's about a lost coin.

He describes a woman who owns ten coins but loses one. She looks everywhere for it. Finally, she finds it. Like the man with the lost sheep, she celebrates finding what was lost with those around her. Jesus caps off the second parable in similar fashion to the first: "Just so, I tell you, there is joy before the angels of God over one sinner who repents." (Luke 15:10).

Jesus concludes his mini sermon by sharing what became known as the "Parable of the Prodigal Son" (Luke 15:11-32). It goes like this:

There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, "Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me." And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

But when he came to himself, he said, "How many of my father's hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father, and I will say to him, 'Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.'" And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son." But the father said to his servants, "Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found." And they began to celebrate.

Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, "Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound." But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, "Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you killed the

fattened calf for him!” And he said to him, “Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.”

As standalone parables, each of the three are powerful stories. But if we view them apart from each other, we miss the impact of Jesus’s teaching. For starters, Jesus moves his listeners numerically from one hundred to ten to one.

It’s also worth noting what those numbers represent. In his book, *Here and Now: Thriving in the Kingdom of Heaven Today*, Robby Gallaty, a pastor at Long Hollow Baptist Church in Tennessee, explains:

Hebrew is a language devoid of punctuation marks or emphasis tools like bold, italics, or underline. Instead of distinguishing points with punctuation or formatting, a Rabbi would employ repetition of words or progression concepts. A careful observation of the text reveals another grammatical accentuation. Jesus starts with one sheep, moves to one silver coin, and ends with one son. He introduces with animals, moves to inanimate objects, and concludes with human beings, the crowning jewel of God’s creation.

When Jesus finishes speaking, the audience is left asking themselves these questions: What kind of person leaves one hundred sheep to hunt for a lost one? God does. What kind of person searches high and low for one lost coin out of ten? God does. What kind of father forgives a son who humiliated him? God does.

That’s the point that Jesus repeatedly communicates to everyone—including you. Remember, the initial question: “Why would Jesus be spending time with these people?” The answer: because he cares about everyone—even those overlooked, or deemed unimportant, or too evil, by the rest of the world. Athlete. God cares deeply about you. That’s the driving theme Jesus is trying to help us see. But there are also a couple of subpoints that rise to the surface as well, specifically in the prodigal son parable.

Through this story, Jesus shows us two representative and familiar attitudes that jeopardize our spiritual life. On one side, there are the moral elites. They are the ones who claim to have it all figured out. On the other side are the rebels. This group is hellbent on doing things their own way, whatever the cost.

Spiritual disaster accompanies both sides. Both son’s actions are a byproduct of ungodly motivations. And the only motivation worthy of our pursuit can be found in the heart of the father.

Let’s do a deeper dive into these toxic approaches to life and reflect more on our own relationship to them. We’ll start with the younger son—the wild child.

#### REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

**What’s the greatest win you have ever been a part of? What made it so memorable?**

**What resonated the most with you from the story of the prodigal son?**

Why do you think Jesus often communicated using parables instead of plainly telling people what he was trying to say?

Which motivation most resembles your own—the younger or older brother? Why?

What do all three of these parables communicate to us about who God is and what he cares about?