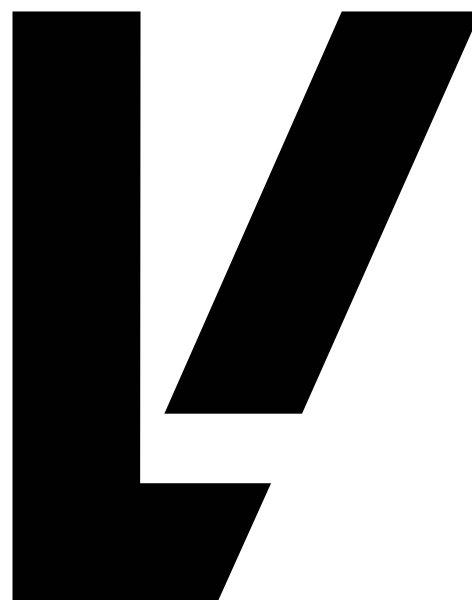


# ***VICTORY BEYOND COMPETITION***



**HOW DO I LIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM  
INSTEAD OF MY KINGDOM?**

**BRIAN SMITH**

ULTIMATE TRAINING SERIES

# VICTORY BEYOND COMPETITION

HOW DO I LIVE FOR GOD'S KINGDOM  
INSTEAD OF MY KINGDOM?

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## **PREFACE**

This is the fifth book in the Ultimate Training Series—a series aimed at unpacking the five principles taught predominantly at Athletes in Action®’s Ultimate Training Camp®. These five principles are part of a unique curriculum developed by 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.

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

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

The beauty of these principles is that they come directly from God’s 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**

*Equipped with Talents*

Five years after the end of the American Civil War, the Ohio Soldiers' and Sailors' Orphans' Home was established in the small rural town of Xenia, Ohio. The war had claimed 750,000 lives, and this home sheltered children who had lost their fathers in the half-decade long conflict.

Over the course of its 125-year existence, the home showed hospitality (that's what the word *xenia* means in Greek) toward 13,500 orphans. This hospitality went well beyond just shelter and food. Children also received academic, vocational, and religious instruction and training.

In the late 1880's, diphtheria swept through Xenia. Before a cure was found (a few years later in 1894), diphtheria was described as "a gruesome killer with no known cause and many ineffective treatments."<sup>1</sup> A bacterial disease, diphtheria initially presents as a sore throat before the bacteria becomes toxic and kills healthy tissues in the respiratory system. At the time, it was a leading cause of childhood death around the world.

While much of the orphanage's history can be accessed through a simple online search, the tragic story of the local diphtheria outbreak lacks a viable digital footprint. It's only known through the graveyard on the property.

Visitors to this graveyard are few. Most are not relatives of the deceased, but passersby intrigued by the sight of the ancient-looking cemetery sitting behind a vacant chapel and surrounded by aging oaks. A newly paved asphalt road runs in front of the chapel and loops past the cemetery and around a set of historic red brick buildings—the same buildings that once housed thousands of orphaned children.

A walk through the cemetery reveals a peculiar similarity amongst the dates on the tombstones. Almost half share the same year—either 1889 or 1890. The year of the diphtheria outbreak.

Lost in this history—and even in the small cemetery—is the story of nineteen-year-old Olive Smith.

As diphtheria spread, the orphanage began to evacuate its caretakers so they wouldn't get sick. But Olive Smith chose to stay. While those around her fled the property, Olive sat courageously in a rocking chair holding a sick child in her arms. The next morning those who left found her and that same child, still in the chair together. Both had died.

Olive's tombstone, in the old cemetery, is surrounded by those of the children she cared for.

What Olive understood at the age of nineteen was that there was something bigger going on around her. She was not just living for herself.

What does her story, and the legacy she left, have to do with sports? We will get to that shortly.

### **JESUS AS SAVIOR AND LORD**

"I just want to thank my Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ."

You've probably heard that phrase a few (hundred?) times. It's usually spoken after a win or a highlight reel performance. Among other things, the "Jesus shout out" identifies that the individual is likely a Christian, someone who trusts in Jesus's life, death, and resurrection for their salvation.

Calling on Jesus as Savior assumes that you could not fix your broken relationship with God on your own. The wages of sin is, after all, death (Romans 6:23).

And while Jesus is absolutely (and amen) the Savior of anyone who puts their faith in him, he is Lord of them as well.

Jesus's finished work on the cross is not just a ticket to an eternal life spent worshiping him. It's also a daily call to die to self and follow him on this earth (Luke 9:23-24). It's a call to lay down your life for something bigger than yourself. It's a call to define legacy more like Olive Smith did, rather than through stats piled up in old record books.

This book aims to help you do just that—to serve Jesus as Lord daily, on his terms, within the context of sports. It answers the question, "how do I live for God's kingdom instead of my own kingdom?"

God gave Olive the gifts of hospitality, resilience, and courage. She stewarded those gifts well.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/05/11/health/11first.html>.

God has given you gifts as well. Yes, you have your athletic talent. But God's gifting goes beyond what you do with your hands and feet. And God doesn't give you those gifts like a driver giving a dollar to a homeless person at a stoplight. He expects a return on his investment.

**INVESTING YOUR SPORT  
AND LIFE IN GOD'S  
KINGDOM ALIGNS YOU  
WITH GOD'S MISSION  
IN THE WORLD.**

God invites us to make a total investment of our talents and gifts today in exchange for an eternal return tomorrow. Investing your sport and life in God's kingdom aligns you with God's mission in the world. In the Gospels, Jesus asks this piercing question: "For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul" (Mark 8:36, also Matthew 16:26 and Luke 9:25)? This rhetorical question helps us to see the tragedy of "winning" temporarily in this life while losing what really matters eternally.

But Jesus doesn't just tell us the path of life to avoid. He shows us a way forward.

Are you ready to experience a "victory beyond competition" in your life and sport?

# 1

## **EXAMINING YOUR TALENTS**

A few days before he was crucified, Jesus's disciples peppered him with questions about what would happen next. While preparing himself for death, Jesus sought to prepare them to live with a proper perspective. He explained that the coming days would be full of wars, tribulation, and all sorts of evil, but, at the proper time, he would come back and take his place as the rightful ruler of the universe (Matthew 24:3-31). In light of this, Jesus encouraged them to wake up, stay alert, and live as one expecting the return of the King.

He implored them to have a heavenly focus, not an earthly one.

Even if the disciples didn't ask it, the text begs the question, "how should this practically play out in our lives?"

Jesus addressed that question by telling a series of parables. A parable is a short story, usually about something that did not actually happen, meant to drive home one illuminating message or theme. Timotheus Pope, Director of Citikidz ministry, often notes that parables are earthly stories with a heavenly meaning.

Jesus often told several parables at a time, focusing in on his point with each successive story. They built on one another.

This particular series of parables spans a chapter and a half of Matthew's Gospel. The first was about a fig tree (Matthew 24:32-35), conveying the importance of being watchful and alert. Later, Jesus told a parable about a watchful servant (Matthew 24:45-51), again communicating the priority of being well-prepared, as well as the call to faithful and obedient stewardship. The parable of the ten virgins (Matthew 25:1-13), with key themes of attentiveness, wisdom, and faithfulness, followed.

**JESUS IMploRED  
HIS DISCIPLES TO  
HAVE A HEAVENLY  
FOCUS, NOT AN  
EARTHLY ONE.**

The next parable in the series was a bit longer and more detailed. It's known as "The Parable of the Talents." Jesus started by introducing the main characters and the beginning of the plot:

"For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property. To one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away." (Matthew 25:14-15)

There are four main characters: an owner and three servants. The owner is leaving on a journey for an undisclosed period of time. He's expected to return even though the servants don't know when. He gives each of them responsibility over a portion of his talents.

To us, *talent* means something we're good at or gifted in, but during this time it was actually a sum of money equal to about 20 years of wages. That's potentially millions in today's currency.

OK, don't check out. You have probably never been given a million dollars. But you have been given *something*.

**HOW HAS GOD  
UNIQUELY  
WIRED YOU?**

Conveniently, the talents in the parable represent more than just money. They refer to a broader category of things: your abilities, opportunities, personality, possessions, experiences, passions, and, well, your talents. It has to do with the entirety of your life. In a way, these talents are far more valuable than money. They're priceless.

It's important to know what "talents" God has given you. If you don't know what you have, how can you invest it in a way that glorifies him?

What talents have you been given? How has God uniquely wired you? For many, these are difficult questions to answer.

**WHAT'S YOUR SHAPE?**

In his bestselling book *The Purpose Driven Life*, Rick Warren used the acrostic "SHAPE" to help people identify how God had uniquely created them and all he had entrusted to them. While this list isn't exhaustive, it

provides enough categories to get the ball rolling. Your SHAPE consists of your Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, and Experiences.<sup>1</sup>

**Spiritual Gifts (1 Corinthians 12:8-10, 28-30; Romans 12:6-8)**

When you entrust your life to Christ, his Spirit comes to dwell within you and equip you with special gifts: things like teaching, serving, evangelism, mercy, discerning, healing, and administration. These are more than just skills. God gives these spiritual gifts as means through which we serve the body of Christ and those around us in need of him.

You may not have the same gift as another Christian in your life. But that's the point. A track team wouldn't really be a team if it only consisted of javelin throwers. It takes a variety of gift sets to create a successful track team. It's the same way with God's church. God has uniquely created you, on purpose, with spiritual gifts that compliment those around you. If you want a better understanding of the potential spiritual gifts that God has entrusted to you, the test in the Appendix can help guide you.

**Heart**

What are you passionate about besides sports? What do you get excited about? What makes you angry? What irritates you about the world around you and gets you dreaming about ways to change it? What fills up your mental space when you have down time? What makes you laugh or cry?

God has given each of us a heart that gravitates towards specific things. And you don't have to wait until your athletic career is over to explore what those are.

**Abilities**

Abilities are a bit more tangible than the first two. Abilities are God-given skills—natural talents as well as skills we learn and develop over time. Athleticism absolutely fits in this category. Your God-given gift to play whatever sport you play is not an accident. It's something God has entrusted to you. Yes, you have worked your tail off to get where you are, but you didn't get a say in your DNA before you were born. God gave it to you.

<sup>1</sup> Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life: What on Earth am I Here For?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan; 2002), pp. 235-236.

But ability goes beyond athletics. It extends to anything falling under the category of “what you are good at.” Are you naturally good at fixing things? Are you good at helping others through difficult situations? Are you someone who perseveres when things get tough? Are you musically, administratively, or intellectually inclined? Can you cast vision or rally a team?

#### Personality

Your personality includes the unique way you think, act, and feel about things around you. Are you the life of the party or more laid back and introspective? Are you more prone to optimism or pessimism? Extroverted or introverted? Do you make decisions quickly or need all of the necessary evidence before coming to a conclusion?

Again, there is no right or wrong answer to these questions. Part of being made in God’s image is reflecting different facets of his personality.

#### Experiences

God gives each of us a story—a narrative context. Nothing happens by accident and nothing is wasted by God. Where you were born, your family of origin, your ethnicity, things that have marked you, access to resources and money, even your struggles—all of these combine to create your distinct life experience.

Not only do these cumulative experiences shape you, they also become a resource for you to potentially bless others as you empathize with them, teach them, or empower them, fueled by your own experiences.

#### **BACK TO THE STORY**

Before we examine the rest of the Parable of the Talents, two things about the talents given to the servants are worth noting.

First, each servant is given a different amount. One was given five talents, another was given two, and another given one. Despite these differences, no servant was given priority or set apart from the others as leader. Also, these talents didn’t offer more inherent value or worth—they are still on equal relational footing with the master.

Second, the talents belonged to the master. He gave them *his* possessions. What did they each do with the master’s possessions?

“He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more. So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master’s money.” (Matthew 25:16-18)

#### **INVEST OR BURY**

God gives his people a choice: invest his talents or bury them.

Investing means using your talents in a way that brings honor to God and serves other people. It implies putting time into growing and developing that talent so you can use it in a greater capacity.

Burying means playing it safe and avoiding any sort of risk. It means operating with a posture of fear around your talent instead of faith and freedom. You don’t want to lose it, so you neglect to fully use it or leverage it for God’s kingdom.

The Parable of the Talents dials in on the topic of stewardship. What is stewardship? In the context of the parable, it’s being entrusted with the responsibility of taking care of another person’s possessions. The master gave these three servants responsibility over his possessions for a certain time.

Let’s review what the servants did with their stewardship of his property:

1. The one with five talents went and traded and gained five more (invested well).
2. The one with two talents went and somehow acquired two more (invested well).
3. The one with one talent buried his, so he could give it back to the master (did not invest well).

When you think about it, each of us has been given a lot, including possessions, opportunities, time, resources, and more. The question is: *What will you do with the talents that have been entrusted to you?* How will you invest what has been temporarily delegated to you?

**THE PARABLE OF THE TWO SOFTBALL PLAYERS**

Let's consider our own athletic parable as we continue to examine our talents and how to best steward them for the glory of God.

Erin is a junior on the softball team at a division one university. She has played the sport for as long as she can remember. She is the first one at practice and the last one to leave. Erin knows she has a couple of years left to play before her athletic career is over, and she is intent on maximizing her time—and her talents. She is far from the most gifted athlete on her team, but what she lacks in skill, she more than makes up for with grit. Her teammates look up to her and her coach wishes the team had more players like her.

Natasha is Erin's teammate. She is a freshman and one of the top recruits from last year's class. She is easily the most gifted athlete on the team. Natasha is a natural. But she is also lazy. She's content with being the best on the team and does just enough to ensure her status quo. Her teammates despise her, but still want to be associated with her because she is the best. Natasha's coach is constantly annoyed with her attitude and knows that if she had Erin's work ethic, she could be the top player in the country.

Anybody who grew up playing sports is familiar with this dynamic. You have played with the Erins of the world—the grinders who squeeze out every ounce of talent given to them by God. You have also played with the Natashas—the highly gifted who seemingly do just enough to skate by.

You have probably been taught to “be like Erin.” You have probably understood stewardship within the context of sports as maximizing your skill set for the glory of God. But it's more than that. Being a good steward within the context of sports extends beyond being the best possible athlete you can be. It's about being the best possible Christ-follower you can be within the realm of sports.

Stewardship is more complex than the simple “Erin vs. Natasha” example. Let's tease out their character a little more.

What if sports is all Erin has in her life, and that's what drives her to grind day-in and day-out? What if her obsession with getting better and making the most of her last two years is preventing her from investing in the relationships around her?

What if Natasha comes from a broken home, and her lack of effort is really just her being distracted by her many responsibilities outside of sport? What if she is so burdened by caring for family members or dealing with crises that it looks like she doesn't care about sports at all?

Now who is the better steward of what God has given them?

The point is that stewardship is simple in its definition, but complicated when it comes to applying it in every area of your life. But that's what God is after. Yes, he cares about how you invest your talent in sport, but not at the expense of other categories in your life.

Like the servants in the Parable of the Talents, you also have the choice to invest or bury your God-given talents.

Do you know what God has given you? The acronym SHAPE can help. But what else? What relationships do you need to steward well?

What about your free time or opportunities? What about the body and mind God gave you? Are you getting proper nutrition, rest, and sleep? The point is not to overwhelm you with a weight of responsibility in each of these areas, but to begin to raise your awareness, so you can live intentionally, not passively.

If a financial advisor asks how you want to invest your money, you need to at least know what you have available. Each of the servants in the parable knew the exact amount they had been given by the master.

So what's the best path forward? What does it look like to invest your talents instead of burying them, or just locking in on your athletic skill set? Investing in a way that honors God is what we'll address next.

**GOD CARES  
ABOUT HOW YOU  
INVEST YOUR  
TALENT IN SPORT.**



**REFLECTION QUESTIONS:**

What category within your SHAPE (Spiritual gifts, Heart, Abilities, Personality, Experiences) was the easiest for you to identify? Why?

What category of your SHAPE was the most difficult for you to discern? Why?

What is the significance of understanding that our gifts are on loan to us from God?

How would you define the word stewardship?

What did you take away from the side-by-side comparison of Erin and Natasha?