

The Game Plan

The Big Win

Week 1

by Mandy Barkhaus

Good Morning Horizons.

We're on to a new sermon series, which is exciting. And for the next few weeks, we will explore the difference between winning in life and finding the big win. And there is a difference now. If only life could be like a championship football game with clear winners and losers, everyone would know who gets the trophy and who doesn't.

But Jesus's kingdom is not. It doesn't work that way. Jesus's kingdom does not have the same set of rules as the world does, and this is a good thing. Now, if you have trouble finding purpose in your life, if you feel like you're light in your life, nothing is going right. If you feel like you can't win at anything, or maybe you feel like you can win at something, but then it's just on to the next thing that you're chasing.

If you feel like your work life is okay, and your home life is fine, but you wish they were more satisfying. If any of those things resonate with you, then maybe what you are seeking in life are the wrong things. Jesus uses these words found in Matthew Chapter Six to caution us from focusing on the wrong things.

So, in Matthew, Chapter 6, Verses 19 through 21, Jesus says Stop collecting treasures for your own benefit on earth, where moss and rust eat them and where thieves break in and steal them. Instead, collect treasures for yourselves in heaven where moss and rust don't eat them and where thieves don't break in and steal them. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So, what does this big win look like? First, it's a change of heart. This word that Jesus used for heart is the Greek word *card*. Yeah. That is where we get the word *cardio* from. And it means the center of one's being. So when they read this scripture or when Jesus said this word, He included the mind and the will and your emotions, the whole core of your being.

When Jesus tells us this advice on where to store our treasures and how to store our treasure trove treasures, Jesus is not just talking about greed and possessions. It's way more than that. So, the big win looks like a personal relationship with Jesus. And that starts with an invitation from Jesus. Now, Jesus doesn't pressure you, and Jesus doesn't force you to follow.

Instead, Jesus invites you, and He waits until you accept it. We sing a song that, like, God's not scared about our doubts and our fears. God is not scared of our doubts and fears. Yet Jesus still stretches out his arm in his hand. And he's waiting for you to grab onto this outstretched arm that Jesus offers us.

This is something that we don't earn, something that we don't deserve, yet it's Jesus offers it anyway. So when we trust in Jesus, if we choose to trust in Jesus, if we choose to follow Jesus, not just learn about Jesus, but have Jesus as our guide in this life, He'll transform our hearts, the very center of our being.

So, winning this big win looks like finding the truth. And the truth is, is that Jesus is the light of the world. And we are all welcome to step into the light and step out of the darkness. The things we once cared about, the stuff where moths are currently eating as we speak, and the stuff where it's trusting that those things won't matter anymore.

When we place other things, whether it be material things or things like our egos or envy, when we place those things over Jesus, we might end up giving up some qualities like kindness, patience, and respect for others in pursuit of winning something in this world. Now, sometimes, it means that we even do things that dehumanize others just so that we can get ahead, just so that we can feel better about ourselves, even if that feeling only lasts a short time.

So the big win looks like following Jesus, but the big win also looks like turning back to God. Or sometimes we say this as repent hints. Now, you will hear some Christians say that Jesus preaches love, and that's all we need to do. All we need to do is love God and love others. And that's true, right?

Jesus's very words say that's what we need to do. But you'll also hear other people countering that kind of thinking, saying, well, of course, Jesus teaches love, but you have to turn away from sin and turn back to God. And both of those things are partly true. It's true when we turn to Jesus and give our lives to Jesus when we are open to it, Jesus allows us to see our character flaws, and we may realize that we are a jerk to our spouse or our children or that stranger in the grocery store or the stranger we just replied to on social media.

We may discover that we're angry at things that don't actually matter, but when we do collect treasures that matter to God when we focus on the things that God wants us to focus on, we win. And the great part of it is that others around us win, too. Now, this is my favorite part of the big win.

The big win looks like the establishment of Shalom. Now, Shalom is a Hebrew word for peace. It's found all throughout the Old Testament and the New Testament and is often translated just simply as peace. But shalom means so much more than peace. It means completeness, it means wholeness, and it's used in different ways throughout Scripture. This same word is sometimes used simply as a greeting.

It peace be with you, right? Sometimes, it's used to indicate that there will be peace in the land, as in there will be no sword passing through the land. Sometimes, though, it means and it refers to restoring word relationships, not just getting along with others, but actually working together. It's a community where everyone belongs, and everyone contributes what they are supposed to contribute.

Shalom is the goal of the shepherd. The shepherd is not satisfied with making space for 99 out of the 100 sheep. Instead, this shepherd sets off to find that last sheep because there is no shalom. If

one sheep is missing, it's not complete if even one sheep is missing. So, the goal of Shalom is a world in which nobody is erased by somebody else's ego.

This is what repentance means. This is what compassion means. This is what finding the truth means. This is what shalom means. It's that God brings together to the world, to Himself, through Jesus. So how. How do we live this Shalom in this lifetime? Well, it's true for sports. And it's true in the life of a Christian like we need a game plan.

If we want restoration, if we want wholeness, if we are going to move toward the kingdom of heaven, we need a plan. We need the game plan. So we need a game plan. And I'm going to use this as an example. In the 1984 Orange Bowl, the number one ranked team, Nebraska, was losing to Miami 17 to 0 after the first quarter.

So the first quarter ends. Nebraska is down by 17 points, and they needed a plan. And so early in the second quarter, Nebraska coach Tom Osborne called for the play. He had an idea he had a game plan, and the plan was that the Nebraska quarterback, Turner Gill, effectively fumbled the snap from the center by setting it on the field, and the ball was picked up by the offensive guard who ran down for it, ran down with the ball 19 yards for a touchdown.

Now, this play is known as a fumble. Risky. Good job. And it worked, right? It worked for them to get a touchdown. It wasn't a great plan to win the game, but it worked for that touchdown. Now, here's a fun fact: As I was doing some research about a fumble, I thought it was risky. There are several variations of this play. There's a bomber, Rusedski, and a bounce, Rusedski.

I don't know. But all of these variations rely on the element of surprise and misdirection. So, a fumble Rusedski has this element of surprise, which is why it worked. So here is what I think we have: the football fumble fumble Rusedski. But here is what I think is a Jesus fumble. Bruschi, You ready for this? So when we start listening to Jesus, and we invite Jesus into our lives to change our hearts, like our whole being as he's talking about in the Scripture, pretty soon God says something like this to us: okay, here's the game plan.

I want you to love your enemies, right? Our enemies will not see that coming. And that is a good element of surprise. But it's good to have a game plan. We have to have a game plan in order to move forward in this journey in our faith so we can look to Paul's words to help us with our game plan.

Paul wrote this letter to the church in Thessalonica, which was a church that he had started. So he started the church, and then he went away to start some other churches. And then he sends this letter. Now, oftentimes, he sends these letters to these churches that he started, and usually, the people are kind of straying from God.

They're straying from the good news of Jesus, the teachings of Jesus. But the Thessalonians are actually doing pretty well in following the good news and teachings of Jesus. So, Paul uses this letter to encourage them to continue to be the church despite persecution. So they were doing well, doing well at following the way, but they were being persecuted.

And I'm sure at times they're probably thinking like we're losing at life by following Jesus. So 1 Thessalonians Chapter 5, verses 16 through 18, Paul says, Rejoice always. That's one whole

verse. Rejoice always, second verse. Pray continually in the third verse, and give thanks in every situation because this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus. So the game plan, Paul says, is to pray.

And if you feel like you're always losing at life, if you feel like you're continually failing or never, never able to achieve exactly what you want, then pray for this. The Thessalonians were being persecuted, and Paul told them to rejoice. Paul told them to give thanks, and then Paul said that this is God's will. That God's will for us is to rejoice and give thanks.

And that's just part of the big win for us as followers of Jesus. Paul uses these words always continually, in every situation, without ceasing. We are supposed to do these things, but we need a little help in order to do this. I don't know about you, but praying without ceasing, praying continually, and rejoicing always is kind of hard to do.

Now, you probably remember back on Christmas Eve, Matt, Molly, and Mike were up here on stage, and they were telling us about the Super Bowl of caring. It's our challenge. It's our mission to collect 1000 soup and soup ingredients by Super Bowl Sunday. And it's not just about hitting our goal, of course. It's not just about winning.

It's actually much more than this. Now, I want you to think about this. The snow and the cold days that we have had the last few weeks. They have been they've canceled school. They've canceled some of our plans. And for most of us, it's annoying. It's frustrating. It may be a little inconvenient, but for others in our community, those snow days might mean missing work in order to stay home with kids, which means income is tight, which means food insecurity increases.

These meals, these soup cans that we're going to distribute to the little free pantries around Lincoln, become the difference between having a meal to eat and feeding your children or not. So I want to thank you. If you've brought food in so far or if you plan to, thank you for making a difference. Now we have a picture of this announcement that we had on Christmas Eve.

We have this picture. Yes. Okay. So here's the picture. Matt is getting ready to tackle Mike here, and he's getting ready to tackle Mike before he learns that he's actually supposed to be tackling food insecurity rather than people. And he learned his lesson. Matt has learned to control his random tackling, and he is ready to focus on a bigger role.

So, we can't have a sports-themed sermon series without a coach. So we have promoted Matt to head coach of the big win. So, Matt, where are you? Okay. All right, Brian, listen up. All right, all you down on top. I know we're down right now, okay? I know they got as good. They got as good as that first half.

But here's what's going to happen. We're going to come back, all right? We're not going to turn our backs. We're not going to turn our backs on each other. No, we're not. We're going to stay strong. All right. Here's what we're going to do. This game plan. All right? The game plan is that we're going to rejoice, offense. Remember, rejoice, rejoice.

Always. All right. They'll never see it coming. All right, all right. Defense, defense. All right, defense. All right. We're going to blitz, blitz, blitz. We're going to continue the blitz. We're going

to we're going to keep praying. We're going to pray all the time. We're going to blitz and pray. All right. Keep coming. All right. All right. That's what we're going to do.

Okay. And lastly, all right, at the end of the game, when we see victory, we're going to line up. We're going to give thanks. We're going to give thanks to all of them. All right. We're going to give thanks every because that is what Jesus wants to do. All right. All right. So let's get in their heart on the count of three.

Amen. On three, on three. One, two, three. Yeah. Hey, man. All right, let's go, Take. Thanks, Matt. Thanks, Coach. Matt. Sorry. Sorry. So now, maybe tonight, if you can't sleep, you can just remember Matt's voice, and you can pray. Or maybe if you wake up startled from a nightmare because Matt's voice woke you up, you can remember to pray.

So, regardless, we're going to remember to pray. Now, praying comes really easy for some people. Praying is difficult for others. Some people, when they pray, they're like, I feel like I'm just my words are just going out into to no nowhere land. Some peers and some people say, okay, well, I know this is supposed to be like a conversation between God and me, but I never hear from God.

I never hear God's voice. And so sometimes it's hard to pray. Some people have difficulty focusing on prayer or just don't know what to say or how to start. But what if we started thinking about prayer in a new way and not necessarily as communicating, although communicating with God? That's that's an important way that we describe prayer.

But what if we talk about it this week as communing with God? Communication means this exchange of information with God, but communing. When we commune with God, we start to care about what God cares about. Now, winning or this big win looks like compassion because God is compassionate and gracious. God is slow to anger and abounding in love.

It doesn't look like showing them any mercy or winning at all costs or steamrolling over others, as we often do to get ahead in this world. But what if instead we just sat in the presence of God asking for what we need and giving praise to God, but also thinking about what makes God weep? What if prayer or connecting with God?

Not only would it open our eyes to the beauty of all creation, but what if it could slowly start to change the center of our whole being? That's what prayer does when we do it. Right now, prayer is an essential piece of our relationship with Jesus. Having a vibrant prayer life is really important. But again, what's the game plan to get there now? If you have a vibrant prayer life already, great.

That is so good. I invite you to lean into that. I invite you to add horizons to your prayers. Just allowing Horizons to pray continually. And if you struggle with prayer or maybe you simply just need a boost to get to the goal, I want to invite you to be in prayer for the next seven days, and we're going to do this seven-day prayer challenge.

It's going to be on social media. And if you are not on social media, we can send you the links to this seven-day challenge. It's a short devotional every single day. It's a really short devotional.

Then, you sit for 5 minutes communing with God, and I invite you to take a piece of paper and a pen and write down what you are feeling at that moment.

And I want you to do it for seven days. And I want you to compare the first day with the seventh day and see if you are connecting with God anymore. And then, as Brian announced earlier, we have a prayer class that is starting on February 13th. We would love for you to be a part of that class.

It's called the Prayer practice, and it's really about setting intentional time to be with God in order to become like God, in order to partner with God in the world. You can sign up for that at Horizons Dot Church slash events. The big win means making God a part of our stories. Now. I had the awesome privilege of teaching the confirmation class this week.

It was their very first week, and I have to say this is a great group of kids. I've taught or been a part of confirmation for like 12 years or something like that. And every time I'm in confirmation, I always ask them like, who's excited to be here? Right? Normally you have you have a few hands that slowly raise their hand. Now, this group, but this year, it's a smaller eighth-grade class than some of our other classes.

Every single kid raised their hand really high. I was like, I don't know if they were just trying to, you know, get in good with the pastor or if they were serious. But immediately, they all shot their hand up. So how exciting is that? All of these kids are so excited about learning more about Jesus and how Jesus works in their lives.

Anyway, what I thought about in confirmation was the story of the Bible, and I told them that the story of the Bible is kind of like a five-act play, a five-scene play. And in scene one, you have creation. God created everything. And it was good. It is a very short scene because we quickly see two, which is the fall or sin, and we realize in this scene that we're humans and that we've been given free.

And oftentimes, we turn away from God instead of talking toward God. And then you have seen three, which are God's chosen people, the Israelites. And this one's a long scene, right? You've got to get through a lot of books and chapters of the Bible to get to understand God's chosen people. Then you have seen four, which is Jesus and the New and the Kingdom of Heaven.

And Jesus says, okay, the Kingdom of Heaven is here. Then, Jesus shows us what the Kingdom of Heaven looks like by helping others, sitting with others, and including others. And Jesus says, This is what the kingdom looks like right here on this earth. And then you have the final scene, the fifth scene of the story of the Bible, and this is after Jesus dies on the cross and is resurrected and then ascends, and then the Holy Spirit is sent, and the church is formed.

This is the last scene, like we are living the last scene, but it's not over quite yet. So we're living this last scene, and now the church, when we follow Jesus, when we do what Jesus did, we become heaven on earth for other people. We get to experience heaven on earth when we do the things that Jesus did.

But this scene, again, is not over because God plans to restore the world back to the Garden State, where relationships with one another are restored, and our relationship with God is

restored. This is Shalom. This is what it's about. This is the big win of following Jesus. So the question is, will you be a part of it?

Would you pray with me? Gracious God, we come to you in prayer and God. For some of us, prayer comes easy and naturally. And for others, prayer is a little more challenging. Like, we want to hear you. We want to feel your presence. And we're asking that boldly that in this seventh day of prayer challenge that we would seek you and then we would listen, that we would try to commune with you, and in that time guide, you might reveal to us some of our character flaws.

You might reveal things in the world that make you weep. You might reveal to us things that are in the world that make you weep, that you want us to do something about God. Whatever it is that you revealed to us this week, help us be open to hearing from you, from sensing a closeness with you so that we can know the light of the world. Jesus, a little bit more. And we say all of this in Jesus' name, Amen.