

The Jersey Effect

A Distracted Heart

Frankton – 9/14/14

Scripture: Luke 15.11-20a Prodigal comes to his senses and goes home

Proposition: A distracted heart causes us to build our foundation on the sand, not the rock.

Remember, we are in a sermon series that's the reason for your wearing your jerseys today, and for the next several weeks. [SLIDE] The series is titled: The Jersey Effect, and it comes from a book of the same name by Hunter Smith. Hunter was the Indianapolis Colts punter during the 2006-7 NFL season, the one when the Colts won the Super Bowl. Yes, Hunter the punter. Hunter is a devout Christian still living in Zionsville. He wrote his book by inviting several players and coaches he knew were Christian to write to him and tell him the effect wearing a pro football jersey had on their lives. Hunter's purpose for writing the book was to write about the effect that wearing the jersey can have on a pro athlete, and also about the impact a pro player can have because of his jersey. You might be surprised to find out about the struggles all of these men had, even though they were successful professional athletes, adored by so many people. We're looking at their struggles and how we struggle with the same things, and how, with God's help, we can overcome those struggles.

[SLIDE] Ben Utecht was a tight end for the Colts during that championship season. Ben graduated from the University of Minnesota before being drafted by the Colts; he ended up playing four seasons with the Colts and a couple of seasons with the Cincinnati Bengals. The role he played with the Colts was as Dallas Clark's back-up. He also got in a lot when the Colts went with a two tight-end set-up, but he was never the star tight-end, Clark was. But he was one of those solid back-ups that every team needs at every position in order to have one of those magical seasons. He and Hunter Smith became close friends during Utecht's years with the Colts. And they have kept up their friendship since their separation as players.

Last week I talked for a few minutes about the AFC championship game which the Colts won, over the dreaded New England Patriots. It was a comeback win that was the Colts very own version of USA Hockey's "Miracle on Ice" 1980 Olympics hockey game. Ben wrote that during halftime of that championship game, when the Colts were down 21-6, Tony Dungy walked into the locker room and calmly told his players what would happen. That the offense would score to open the second half, the defense would hold New England and the Colts would score again to get back into the game and give them a chance to win. And that's exactly what happened, just like Tony said. The Colts went on to take the lead with a late touchdown and then a later interception sealed the deal. Great game – if you're a Colts fan.

That win propelled the Colts into Super Bowl XLI (41), played on a rainy evening in Miami against the Chicago Bears. Ben Utecht tells the story that that the Colts' wives were originally going to be able to stay with their husbands in the hotel during the week before the Super Bowl. However, during a team meeting, Peyton Manning stood up and said that he didn't think their wives should stay with them. He had two reasons: 1) they hadn't done that all year, so why switch horses in mid-stream. And 2) They were playing in the most important game in their life, maybe their one shot at a Super Bowl win, and he feared their wives would be just one more distraction in a week

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filled with distractions. They were going to spend the week trying to minimize distractions and wives would be a distraction from their primary purpose – to win the Super Bowl. The result was that the wives were not allowed to stay with their husbands. Looking back, it may have been a wise decision – who can question Peyton Manning – especially since the Colts won.

Utecht told the story of how distracted he had personally become because of the Super Bowl, and the end is a little bit differently than the wives and hotel rooms I just mentioned. Now, I can't imagine what it would be like to be on that big of a stage – over one hundred million people watch the Super Bowl. And the two weeks before the game are nothing but a media circus. For players, coaches and owners, everyone wants one minute of your time. Everyone is saying how great you are as a player or coach or how smart you are as an owner to hire the right people in your organization. The distractions can actually take you away from your game if you let them and that would be easy. That's why Peyton wanted no wives in the hotel so there would be less distractions.

Anyway, Utecht's story goes like this: His parents had flown to Miami for the game from his hometown in Minnesota. (Minnesota in February versus Miami in February – that's a no-brainer even if your son isn't playing in the Super Bowl.) Now, if you're a player you have to get to the field by running through a tunnel which leads from the locker room area to the field. Ben's parents' seats were not even close to the tunnel, but through dogged determination, Ben's dad managed to work his way through the crowd to find a spot just above the tunnel. He wanted to get Ben's attention as Ben jogged through the tunnel and onto the field to practice before the game.

The moment arrived. Ben jogged through of the tunnel and onto the field. He passed directly under his dad. Thousands were cheering as the Colts took the field, and Ben's Dad was yelling for him, "Ben...Ben...son!" Somehow over the crowd, Ben heard his father screaming for him. He looked back and saw his dad half hanging over the tunnel, waving and yelling to get his attention. He had a huge look of pride on his face and his arm was hanging down trying to get close enough for his son to give him five or grab it or just even touch it. This was the culmination of all those years of fatherhood, all those years of mentoring his son. Ben looked at his dad, waved his arm, and said, [SLIDE] "Not now, Dad!" He didn't want his dad to become a distraction. And with that he turned back around and continued out onto the field at Miami stadium. Here's his dad, who has been there for his son all along the way. Here's his dad who is busting with pride over his son's accomplishments. Here's his dad, just wanting a second of Ben's time, just to celebrate with him. And Ben blows him off.

Ben Utecht is 6'7" tall and had a playing weight of 250-260 pounds. And yet, don't you want to just do a Jethro Gibbs on him and smack him on the back of head? Thank goodness the story isn't over. Ben tells that he ran just a few yards before God stopped him. It wasn't as if God did a Gibbs on him; he said that it was like God put a brick wall in front of him. He began to think about everything that was occurring in his life at that moment. He said that when he hit God's wall, he realized he had lost his sense of purpose. The playing field in Miami stadium had become a field of selfishness in his life and his father was a potential distraction. Ben said that it was as if a quiet voice inside his head spoke to him (it was God), [SLIDE] "Go back to where you came from. Go back and see your father." He thought of all those practices, all those people who made everything possible, all the sacrifices that his parents gave up on his behalf, from his birth until that very moment. He realized that moment wasn't just about him. It was their moment, their accomplishment, their opportunity to be victorious.

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Ben turned around toward the tunnel and he saw his dad walking away, working his way back through the crowd to rejoin his wife, Ben's mom. He ran back yelling, "Dad! Dad! Dad!" Now how many of you know that even in a crowd, if your child calls for you, "Dad!" "Mom!" you hear them. Ben's dad heard him. He began making his way back down to his spot above the tunnel while Ben made it back to a spot just beneath his dad. In spite of the crowd, father and son got together. Ben thanked his dad, telling him that it was because of his dad and his mom that he was where he was at. He also told his dad that he loved him. Ben turned again toward the field with a completely different perspective on the game. He had realized that it wasn't just about him, it was about things bigger than himself. It wasn't just that his parents that got him where he was, but it was God also. And he almost missed the opportunity because he had let the distractions in his life, in this case the Super Bowl, become his priorities. He had failed to keep the main thing the main thing. He let the distractions occupy his attention.

This is not the first time in history that someone let the distractions win the battle for their attention and so failed to keep the main thing the main thing. I want to re-introduce you to [SLIDE] the Prodigal Son. A good Jewish farmer had two sons. The oldest son towed the line. The younger son didn't. In fact, he got so fed up with doing the chores day after day after blessed day, that he decided that he had had enough. He went to his father one day asked him for his inheritance in advance. I'm sure his father was a bit flabbergasted and I'm sure Dad tried to talk the son out of this request. But the younger son was dead set. He had let the distractions of a potential nice life elsewhere get in the way of his current life with his father and family. This younger son had neglected his roots and had focused on himself instead. In other words, he looked his dad in the eye and used Ben Utecht's words saying, "Not now, Dad"

For reasons not stated in scripture, the father gave in and gave the young man his rightful inheritance. Soon thereafter, the younger son gathered all he had and left the farm to go to the big city in the neighboring country where he knew he would find happiness. And, boy, did he find happiness. Scripture says that he spent all his money on wild living; my translation: that means wine, women and song and probably a few other things. He was having a great time – right up until he hit Ben Utecht sized brick wall. His money ran out and then the great time stopped. He had no money, so he hired himself out to one of the local farmers. Now remember, the young man grew up Jewish; his new farmer boss was not. The new farmer boss sent the young man out into the pig pen to feed the pigs – not something a good Jewish boy would want to do. (Pigs are unclean animals to the Jews.) To make matters even worse, the young man was so hungry he was salivating over the slop he was giving to the pigs. That's what distractions can do. They are like **termites** on your house's **foundation**. They eat away at your house for as long as you let them, eventually destroying your house. Distractions destroy.

Ben was lucky, you might call it blessed. After Ben told his father, "Not now, Dad," he turned around and started jogging onto the field. But, with God's help, he recognized what happened. He recognized that he had let his distraction become a major player...and he tackled it right there. And I think that is part of the key. We cannot wait. Once we realize that we strayed from the path God would have us take, we need to make the U-turn and get back on course. We are people who are imperfect, in fact, we are quite imperfect. We sin – daily, hourly. We let the distractions of our lives – fame, family, friends, money, position, power, whatever the distraction is – we let it get the better of us. (Notice some of the things in that list are good things: family, friends.) So we need to do what Ben Utecht did: realize what we have done, stop in our tracks and make amends

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with God. We need to tell the distraction that is really just a distraction and not the main thing. God is the main thing.

Back to the scripture of the Prodigal Son. The scripture says something really interesting: [SLIDE] **When** *he finally came to his senses....* [17] Ouch! The young man had not been in his senses, he had been out of his mind. He had let the distractions run and ruin his life. But he came to his senses. He decided that even being a paid servant at his father's farm was better than what he was doing. So he walked back home ready to swallow his pride and take what he was due. You know the rest of the story. His father saw him walking up the road and went out and greeted his son with a hug and a kiss. He welcomed him back with open arms, regardless of what the son had done. God acts the same way with us. He welcomes us back, regardless of what we have done.

Hunter Smith talks about the distractions due to the jersey effect. He wrote that because of the jerseys he wore – Notre Dame and the Colts – he was faced with a lot of distractions. There were many times he could have let the distraction get the better of him – and some did. But he tried to always remember that the true value of his life was not caught up in his collegiate or NFL jersey. The true value of his life wasn't that he had a connection to Notre Dame or the Colts. It wasn't because of any person or position he experienced. [SLIDE] Your true value in life is found in your personal relationship with God through Jesus Christ. Now that he has hung up his jersey (he's retired now), he realizes that he has to live with the life he created based on the choices he made while he wore the jersey. And he reminds us too, that we have to live the life we created based on the choices we made along the way. And when we do, we'll be faced with the reality of life's **foundation**.

In Matthew's gospel Jesus said that we can either build our house on the sand or on the rocks. [7.24-27] If we build on the sand, life's distractions will eat away at the foundation and the house will fall. But, if we build our house on the rock – Jesus himself – then our house will be able to withstand all the distractions life throws at us. There are three things in this process: 1) our life is built on either sand or rock, 2) the distractions of life will come, and 3) our house will either be able to withstand them – or not. If we stand, it will be a great stand. If we fall, it will be a great fall. It won't be just a bump in the road. It will be a great fall – just like Humpty Dumpty. It will bring great and long lasting pain and great and long lasting destruction, and therefore it's nothing we should take lightly. It's important to build our lives on the right foundation. So remember this quote from Hunter, [SLIDE] “God doesn't need my jersey and me. I need God...I desperately need him.” Hunter is building his foundation on God, not his jersey. And if that's the case, which foundation are you building your house on?