

Super Bowl Champions Not Shy About Their Faith

On February 4, the Philadelphia Eagles defied the odds to win their first Super Bowl. Following the game, Philly coaches and players were not shy about praising God for the victory and thanking Jesus for giving them the ability to persevere through adversity.

Similar to many athletic teams, the Eagles' roster overflows with Christians who are passionate about Jesus Christ, including the Head Coach and many star players.

Ted Winsley Sr., who became an Eagles chaplain in the early 2000s, said many players who attended Bible study "had everything, but didn't have anything. ... They may have come in because they wanted God to help them with their [g]od -- football. They'd think, 'I'll be in here and get lucky on the field.' Instead, they developed a relationship with God, and their lives changed."

Opinions vary on the public way that the Eagles and other teams express their faith. As long as their team wins, most local fans seem unperturbed by Eagles who want to use their success to spread the gospel.

"If we lose, they'll say -- stop praying and start playing," said Derwin Gray, a former NFL player turned pastor who became a Christian when his teammate on the Indianapolis Colts shared the gospel with him. Gray said athletes need to match their words with hard work, integrity and kindness. If those qualities are not present, "no one will care."

The Eagles star quarterback, Carson Wentz, acknowledged that some people are critical of the way some team members express their faith publicly. "Jesus was persecuted everywhere he went," Wentz said. "So if Jesus, who is our ultimate example, endured that then I can endure a couple tweets."

About his teammates who are also Christians, Wentz said, "We're always challenging each other [to not] lose sight of the bigger picture ... the ultimate prize, and that's living for the Lord." When he was a rookie, Wentz created the slogan #AO1 to indicate that he plays for an "Audience of One" -- that is, to please God.

Chaplain Winsley sometimes reminds the team that football is their "platform," not their "purpose."

Tight end Zach Ertz echoed the sentiment: "My priority is to glorify God each and every day, each and every situation. ... Our No. 1 goal on this Earth is to make disciples. That's the only job we want to do. So this is a platform we have to draw people to the Word, to Jesus."

Football, to NFL players, is both a job and a way of life. How can we live out our faith every day in our work and in our lives?

Here are some Bible verses to guide your discussion:

John 19:38-39

After these things, Joseph of Arimathea, who was a disciple of Jesus, though a secret one because of his fear of the Jews, asked Pilate to let him take away the body of Jesus. Pilate gave him permission; so he came and removed his body. Nicodemus, who had at first come to Jesus by night, also came, bringing a mixture of myrrh and aloes, weighing about a hundred pounds. (For context, read 19:38-42.)

After Jesus was executed, two disciples approached Pilate to ask permission to give Jesus a proper burial. Both Nicodemus and Joseph were religious and political leaders whose view of Jesus did not align with that of most of their peers. While they kept their beliefs about Jesus to themselves at first, this point came, when they risked exposure in spite of the danger.

Questions: Are there legitimate reasons to keep quiet about your faith at times? If so, what reasons do you think are valid? How do you determine when to speak up about your faith and when to keep silent?

Matthew 6:26, 28-30

Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ... Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you -- you of little faith? (For context, read 6:25-34.)

Journalist David French observed that some people feel that public professions of faith on the part of athletes "diminish ... the God of the universe and relegate him to the status of a divine football commissioner, dispensing gridiron glory for the sake of rewarding the 'hard work' or 'grit' of his favorite children." Those who object to such expressions of faith find "the notion that God cares in the slightest about which millionaire athlete wins which sporting contest ... as slightly obscene" in a world troubled by myriad manmade and natural disasters affecting millions.

French suggests that "it's obscene only if one thinks of God as a limited being, with a finite amount of attention. ... In reality, the notion that God is intimately involved in the lives of his children magnifies his glory. The God who created the universe

has the capacity of infinite attention and care, including attention and care for the lowliest of his creatures."

Question: In what ways does God show attention and care in your work or everyday life?

Acts 4:18-20

So they called them and ordered them not to speak or teach at all in the name of Jesus. But Peter and John answered them, "Whether it is right in God's sight to listen to you rather than to God, you must judge; for we cannot keep from speaking about what we have seen and heard." (For context, read 4:1-31.)

After Peter and John healed a crippled beggar in the name of the resurrected Christ, they were arrested and brought before the religious council to explain their actions.

Peter and John were in a dilemma: they had been given conflicting orders by two different authorities. Before Jesus ascended into heaven, he told his disciples that they were to be his witnesses (Acts 1:8) and to "proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mark 16:15). But the religious council, which claimed to speak for God, wanted them to keep silent about Jesus.

Their reply to the council reminds us of how Jesus answered critics who wanted to trap him into saying something for which he could be condemned. The critics couldn't very well say, "You should listen to us instead of to God," for such a statement would only condemn them. But if they said, "Of course, you should listen to God rather than to us," the disciples could say, "Then we will go on speaking and teaching in the name of Jesus." The council had no choice. They had to let Peter and John go.

Questions: In what ways do you speak and teach in the name of Jesus in your life? Does one need to invoke the name of Jesus to be speaking or teaching in his name?

Prayer of Self Dedication (BCP p.832)

Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to *thee*, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated unto you; and then use us, we pray you, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. *Amen.*