

### PICKING A WINNER!

OK, WHO is going to WIN today? It's the big GAME! It's the SUPER BOWL! So, how many of you want the STEELERS to win? And how many want the CARDINALS to win? Come on, people! Let's get INTO this! This is a **HUGE** game! MILLIONS of people are going to be WATCHING it! ADVERTISERS will be spending BILLIONS of dollars on it! I'll bet you'd be EXCITED if the PATRIOTS were IN it, or maybe even the GIANTS! So, LET'S get INTO it! Let me ask you AGAIN! How MANY want the STEELERS to win? Shout it out! And HOW many want the CARDINALS to win? Shout it out! Now, THAT'S at least a LITTLE better! After all: WINNING is really IMPORTANT, isn't it? I mean: after today, NOBODY'S going to talk about the LOSERS anymore! So, it's IMPORTANT to be WINNERS! AND, it's important for us to BACK winners!

WE do it all the TIME, don't we? Before we buy a CAR or an ENTERTAINMENT system, we check out *Consumer Reports*! We TALK to people! We do RESEARCH! WE want to own WINNERS! We want to work for a COMPANY that's a WINNER! We want to buy STOCKS that are WINNERS! We want to send our KIDS to SCHOOLS that are WINNERS! WE love WINNERS! And THAT'S why UNIVERSITIES pay untold MILLIONS to hire WINNING coaches, who will build WINNING athletic teams, because THEN, their school will MAKE millions, because people LIKE winners!

And THAT was true in JESUS' day TOO. In fact, THAT'S what Andrew and Philip are doing in our SCRIPTURE lesson today from JOHN'S gospel. They've BEEN disciples of John the Baptist, who was CLEARLY a winner. People came for all OVER to be baptized by JOHN. But NOW, John is telling them that JESUS is even BIGGER than John, that JOHN'S not even worthy to untie the thong of His SANDAL! So, OFF go Philip and Andrew to CHECK out this NEW preacher, this NEW winner, this JESUS, because THEY want to follow a WINNER!

WELL, I think it's all well and good to back WINNERS, but I suspect that IF we could x-ray our SOULS to see what REALLY makes us TICK, to see what REALLY gives our lives MEANING and purpose, we'd ALL find OUT that every ONE of us has chosen ONE particular winner that is more IMPORTANT to us than any OTHER; that every ONE us has, CONSCIOUSLY or UNCONSCIOUSLY, has made a SUPREME investment in ONE particular SUPER-winner, or ULTRA-winner, that we've made into the MEANING-GIVER of our lives. And friends, THAT'S what gets us into TROUBLE!

You see: for MOST Americans today, our ULTRA-winner, our MEANING-GIVER in life, has been, and IS, our affluent LIFESTYLE. Now, the Bible NEVER says that money is BAD! Money is NOT bad; it's morally NEUTRAL. In fact, money CAN be a POWERFUL instrument for GOOD in this world! However, money and affluence make LOUSY meaning-givers! And we've all KNOWN people who WORSHIP their money and their affluence. However, have you figured out yet that they can NEVER get ENOUGH! And THEREFORE, they NEVER feel SECURE! They always WORRY about LOSING it -- that THIEVES, or in OUR case, these day, the STOCK market, or something ELSE, will TAKE it away. I've ALSO realized, over the years that, the MORE people WORSHIP their money, the LESS they enjoy SPENDING it. SO, in the LAST analysis, the WORSHIP of money and affluence just ends up SHRIVELING up our SOULS -- as WELL as our DISPOSITIONS, because it MOCKS us at midnight, DENYING us the very PEACE of mind that WE thought it would BUY!

ANOTHER super-winner these days is our STATUS, or our REPUTATION. SOME people focus their PRIMARY attention on having a positive PROFILE in the community. And AGAIN, that's not bad as a SECONDARY aim in our lives. Even the BIBLE says that *a good NAME is to be SOUGHT after above SILVER and gold*. But, IF it's what gives our lives MEANING and PURPOSE, then we stand on VERY shaky ground! One problem with the CHURCH sometimes is that WE often PRETEND to be BETTER than we ARE. SOMETIMES we get holier-than-thou and judgmental, as if WE are somehow BETTER than everyone ELSE! Oh yes, in our prayers of confession, we CALL ourselves SINNERS, but

HOW often do we really MEAN it? How often are we just POLISHING up our HUMILITY? One day an elderly woman came out to the Narthex after worship and said to me: *WHY do we ALWAYS have to pray a prayer of CONFESSION? I'm not the ONLY one around here who doesn't FEEL like a SINNER! The WAY we CONFESS all the time, you'd THINK that we were a church full of lustful PAGANS and adulterers, crooked politicians and PORNOGRAPHY addicts! WHY do we need to CONFESS so much?*

Well, I hope that you're NOT one of those people who DON'T think we NEED to confess, because GOD sees the HEART! And which ONE of us can HONESTLY claim that we NEVER feel any pride or selfishness, envy or lust, prejudice or desire for revenge? And friends, THESE are the very SINS that sent JESUS to the cross! As the great Protestant reformer, Martin LUTHER, used to say: *WE carry His very NAILS in our pockets!* Yes, Jesus is CRUCIFIED again and again – DAILY – by OUR sinful world, and NONE of us is guilt-free! SO much for our all-important STATUS and reputation! Yes, WE are sinners like everyone ELSE! Remember: the church is NOT a haven for SAINTS! It's a HOSPITAL for sinners!

ANOTHER super-winner these days is APPEARANCE! Being BEAUTIFUL, handsome or YOUTHFUL is what gives MEANING to MANY people's lives. Just look at that new SHOW, *True Beauty*, where they don't even REALIZE that their INNER beauty is being judged. Or consider how MUCH people will SPEND these days on COSMETIC surgery and MAKE-UP and other appearance-related items? Yes, we ALL want to be BEAUTIFUL! SO, is it any WONDER that teenagers sometimes STARVE themselves nearly to DEATH, becoming psychologically TROUBLED -- ALL because they're STRIVING to look like the MODELS? Friends, what a FICKLE meaning-giver APPEARANCE is! IMAGINE the TERROR of those who believe that IF they put on a few POUNDS, or LOSE some HAIR, grow a few WRINKLES, or wear BIFOCALS, they will somehow be LESS worthy and LESS loveable! How SAD to believe that our ESSENCE is the OUTSIDE of the package, rather than what's INSIDE.

And although there are many OTHERS, the LAST super-winner I will mention may SURPRISE you. It's FAMILY! For SOME, it is their FAMILY that gives their lives MEANING and PURPOSE. Now, I know that family sounds WHOLESOME, because IS a wonderful BLESSING, but LIKE the OTHER things I've mentioned, it makes a LOUSY meaning-giver! When you make your SPOUSE or your CHILD what gives your life MEANING, you are LOADING up your family relationships with EMOTIONAL baggage that they are NOT meant to BEAR. NORMAL people DON'T want to be WORSHIPPED; they just want to be LOVED! And IF someone who is NOT perfect -- and who makes MISTAKES, as we ALL do -- is what gives your life MEANING and PURPOSE, then you are setting yourself up for a HUGE fall, because your GOD (the thing that gives your life MEANING) is too SMALL! And ONE day, your whole UNIVERSE will TEETER (or is it TOTTER – teeter totter – I don't know), because we CANNOT worship PEOPLE or RELATIONSHIPS! WHEN we DO, our relationships become DISTORTED and UNHEALTHY. Friends: FAMILY is a GREAT and wonderful GIFT, but it makes a LOUSY God! So, be CAREFUL! You DON'T want to lose your life's meaning and purpose when your NEST empties, or when your child REJECTS you, or when, God forbid, someone in your family DIES....

So you SEE: we ALL pick our own WINNERS, don't we? And we GIVE them ultimate importance and ALLEGIANCE! And there is NO lack of CHOICES! There are MULTITUDES of *WANNABE gods* in this world, MULTITUDES of *wannabe SUPER-WINNERS!* But every ONE of them is BOUND to let us DOWN and disillusion us! And WHEN they DO, it HURTS! They MAY bring us JOY for a TIME, but they CANNOT sustain it. And it's SIMPLY because they are NOT God!

Remember Nancy Kerrigan, the former U.S. figure skating champion, who was BRUTALLY attacked by Tonya Harding, because Tonya wanted to ELIMINATE Nancy from Olympic competition? But DO you remember Nancy Kerrigan's REACTION to that attack? I was VERY impressed with her. She said: *I want to TELL the people who are WORRIED about me that I'm OK! Skating is NOT the most IMPORTANT thing, so IF I can't SKATE, I'll have to DEAL with it. It COULD have been a lot WORSE!* Friends, here was the U.S. Figure Skating CHAMPION, who had spent most of her waking hours on

SKATES, and who was favored a WIN the Olympics, PUBLICLY declaring that SKATING was NOT her super-winner. It was NOT her life's meaning-giver, NOT her god! And it was FANTASTIC, because if skating HAD been her GOD, and IF that attack HAD shattered her KNEE-CAP, that her GOD, the thing that GAVE her life MEANING and purpose, would be DEAD and GONE!

I heard ANOTHER example that touched me. It was the last time the Steelers were in the Super Bowl, 2006, against the SEAHAWKS. And I REMEMBER this story because it made Diane and I rout for the SEAHAWKS, even though we like the Steelers! It seems that Mike Holmgren, Seattle's coach, sent his wife, Kathy, on a medical mission trip to the Congo during SUPERBOWL week. Their daughter, Calla, was a medical missionary there, SO, for Kathy's BIRTHDAY, Mike bought her tickets to GO there. But SADLY, Kathy wasn't even able to WATCH the Super Bowl. SO before she LEFT, an interviewer ASKED her: *Isn't it upsetting NOT to be here for the MOST important day of Mike's LIFE?* And she said, in FRONT of Mike: *It's TRUE that Mike spends his days on FOOTBALL, and he thoroughly enjoys it. But in last analysis, we KNOW that it's ONLY entertainment. What's happening in the CONGO is about LIFE and DEATH.* You see: FOOTBALL, and even winning the SUPER Bowl, is NOT what gives the Holmgren family MEANING and purpose. And PITY those who DO find their meaning THERE.

And friends: THAT'S why Christ COMES to us, JUST as He came to those in the SYNAGOGUE at Capernaum. And BY His teachings, He confronts the DEMONS! He CONFRONTS the FALSE gods that we WORSHIP! And those demons RECOGNIZE His authority, and feel UNCOMFORTABLE in His presence. And RIGHTLY so, because WHEN we really LISTEN to the Gospel, we REALIZE that its DEMANDS are just incredible (and TERRIFYING), and that NONE of us can even BEGIN to measure UP! NONE of us CONSISTENTLY keeps GOD) (and God's WAYS and VALUES) at the CENTER of our lives! Friends, HAVE you ever felt CONFRONTED by the JESUS you meet in the Bible, and STRUGGLED inside, knowing that you're NOT really living UP to His DEMANDS? Well, I have! And the NEXT time you FEEL it, LISTEN to the FALSE gods WITHIN you! They literally start TALKING to you! They start making up EXCUSES for themselves! They start trying to CONVINCEN you that it's OK to WORSHIP them, because they're VALID and WORTHY to give your life MEANING. And THEN, if you begin to let GO of them, and they start to feel THREATENED, they'll EVEN cry out: *WHAT have you to do with US, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to DESTROY us?* And they'll start DEFENDING themselves! They MAY even take you AWAY from CHURCH, or from WHEREVER it is that the gospel is CONFRONTING you: *I'm going to QUIT that Bible study.* And why IS it that our demons DO that to us? It's because, deep down, they KNOW how WEAK they really ARE! Deep down, they KNOW who the REAL winner is, and WHO has the power to offer us REAL life, or *fullness of life*, as Jesus promises! Deep down they KNOW that St. Augustine was RIGHT when he said: *When we have traveled ALL ways, we shall come to the END of ALL ways, who says: "I am the WAY!"* Yes, deep down, THEY know who GOD is! And they are scared to DEATH that we will STOP worshipping THEM, and START worshipping GOD!

And the Christ, of course, wants to help us to do just THAT: to EXORCIZE those demons, those **WANNABE gods**, from their seats of HONOR in our lives! CHRIST wants to CONVERT us to the one TRUE God, the ONE who will NEVER let us down, and who will BRING us LIFE in all its FULLNESS! Yes, CHRIST wants to SHOUT at our demons: *be SILENT and come OUT!* And He wants to watch us CONVULSE, because it **WILL** hurt to let GO of them! Those DEMONS, those false gods, WON'T let go of us EASILY, or happily. Yes, CHRIST wants to BATTLE our demons! WHY? Because we are LOVED! And Christ wants us to HAVE the fullness of life that the REAL winner offers, rather than living an ILLUSION that will ultimately HURT or even DESTROY us, as our ADDICTIONS will, for example.

But the CHOICE is OURS! EACH of us has to CHOOSE, just as Philip and Andrew had to CHOOSE. But notice that ONCE they DO choose, it DOESN'T take them long to realize WHO He IS, OR to sacrifice EVERYTHING to FOLLOW Him! It doesn't take them LONG before they say: *Thy*

*Kingdom COME*, which REALLY means, *OUR kingdoms GO!* And THAT will be true for US as well, IF we will just choose to follow the REAL winner. Amen.