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The Wide Circle of the Kingdom of God

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At the end of last year's soccer season, our oldest daughter who is six, was not recognized for scoring the most goals or having the best ability to kick or pass the ball. In fact, she likely spent more time cheering on members of the other team than running or passing the ball to her own teammates. Even as we called out to her from the sidelines to watch for the ball, she was often sitting on the grass chatting and laughing with a teammate.

On her last game of the season, several parents came up to my husband and me to let us know that they really appreciated our daughter being on the team because of her positive spirit and encouragement of others.

I left the game that day knowing that though she may never play soccer again if she doesn't wish to, she made important contributions to the team through her spirit of joy and encouragement of others. And we, her parents, are immensely proud of her and her contributions to the team.

As we experience more of life, we often lose that spirit of encouragement of others. We begin to see the “other team” or those that differ from us as the competition or our enemies, the ones we must push down to feel good about ourselves.

You may have seen that stunning and surprising viral photo of American Olympic gymnasts, Simone Biles and Jordan Chiles, bowing to Rebeca Andrade, the Brazilian gold medal winner, as the gold medalist took the podium. Though Simone Biles and Jordan Chiles had not won gold in this competition, they acknowledged and gave credit and support where it was due, even to a competitor from a different country.



In the letter of James in the Bible, he writes:

“Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. You ask and do not receive,

because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).”

When we argue or tear others down, it often stems from our own feelings of inadequacy and unworthiness. This is why it may feel tempting to put others down because then we can feel like we’re somehow better, higher up the ladder, and a little more worthy of love.

It's hard for us to have a spirit of encouragement when we may think that if another person wins, then we lose. Or, if we lift another person up, we think it somehow lowers ourselves. In fact, Jesus said the opposite. “Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all (Mark 9:35).”

In a time when it seems our nation and world are so divided, what a countercultural belief, that the Kingdom of God is a place where the people we least expect are lifted up, valued, and even honored. It can be strange, perhaps even frustrating, to think that heaven will be both full of people we have loved and even those who have made us downright angry on this side of the Resurrection. God’s Kingdom is larger and more extensive than we can even imagine.

Yet, Jesus is more than an encourager or cheerleader for us; he is the giver of life, the Savior of the world, who stretched out his arms on the cross so that all might come to him.

Following in the footsteps of our Savior Jesus, we are called to be peacemakers, and that can be quite difficult. We see war all around us, even within families and in our communities and schools. It doesn’t take much scrolling on social media or watching current TV ads to see the tearing down of others. Yet, we are called to seek peace, following the true peacemaker.

That doesn’t mean we have to agree with others, but it does mean we are to strive to understand where they come from.

It means listening.

It means asking questions from a place of curiosity.

It means seeking to understand.

It means validating and lifting up that person when something *is* good and right.

The Kingdom of God extends its reach far beyond what we can imagine in our own small circles; what a blessing that we have been included in that wide circle of the Kingdom of God.

Remember that though we see it dimly, God's Kingdom is breaking in, and with it, comes God's peace that surpasses all understanding. We strive to live into that promised peace now. So, seek to encourage someone, rather than tear them down.

Let us follow the life and teaching of our Lord Jesus. Let us look to the role models we see in our own life – like the Olympians and a six-year-old soccer player who provides joy and encouragement to all on the playing field. It can indeed make all the difference.