

## Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose

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In fictional Dillon, Texas, there's a big game tonight. The whole town is in the stands, flags are flying, the band is playing, fans are cheering and the pressure is on for a win. In the locker room, the players nervously shake their legs in anticipation of the night's contest. As the camera focuses in on each of their faces, we remember the adversities each brings to the field.

There's star Running Back, Brian "Smash" Williams, whose desire to go pro is so powerful he's been dabbling in steroids.

There's Fullback, Tim Riggins, abandoned by both his parents and being raised by his ne'er-do-well older brother; Tim struggles not to drown in self-hatred and alcohol.

And there's sweet and shy Matt Saracen, the reluctant Quarterback, who cares for his dementia-stricken grandmother and who is in love with the coach's daughter.

Enter Coach Eric Taylor: the leader of this team of broken heroes. As the boys gather around him in the pre-game huddle, Coach Taylor reminds them of what they most need to hear: focus, trust each other, leave it all on the field.

They break the huddle as they always do repeating the call and response team mantra:

*Coach Taylor:* Clear Eyes, Full Hearts-

*Then Team:* Can't Loose! (and again, louder)

Then the whole team, their voices loud and strong, in unison

***Clear Eyes, Full Hearts, Can't Lose!***

And so it goes, week after week in the critically acclaimed teen - sports drama *Friday Night Lights*.

The television series addresses many contemporary issues, larger than school extracurriculars-- including education funding, racism, alcohol abuse and a lack of economic opportunity. But what I love about the show, what I find most fascinating about it- is the football. *Friday Night Lights* offers both a scathing critique of football culture and its impact on the people of Dillon, while at the same time illuminating everything that is good and right about the wonderful game.

Football sits at the center of life in Dillon, Texas. The townspeople treat the players like celebrities when they win --and like pariahs when they lose. Each player has his own personal "rally girl"- to see to his every need: do his homework, bake fresh cookies and on occasion provide less honorable services.

The Dillon Panther boosters act like Mafioso, wheeling and dealing, applying pressure and exerting influence on the school board and city government, to advance their football agenda.

Over the course of the show the boosters have illegally recruited players from other districts; raised hundreds of thousands of dollars for a jumbo-tron (just as teachers are being laid off for lack of funds); and slandered rival players on an internet website.

Nearly everyone is an armchair quarterback- and Coach Taylor can't go to the grocery store without running into someone with an opinion.

The Dillon community, on some level has lost its way, distorting football's best, the townspeople over-invest their identity and sense of fulfillment in the outcome of every game. What ought to unify and edify the community become toxic. In an effort to control it, to demand it, to ensure they *cannot* lose- football ends up controlling them. The game perverts their reason, flares their passions, and provokes their bad behavior.

In Dillon, some have traded *the love of the game* for the *worship of winning*.

This is what we do. This is what people have done, as far back as the ancient Israelites, we take the good gifts that God has given us- (and make no mistake, football is a gift from God), we take those gifts-and instead of receiving them with love and gratitude, in freedom and in grace, we make ourselves slaves to them. Pouring our time, our talent and our treasure into what amounts to a great encumbrance. We seek ultimate fulfillment from that which cannot ultimately satisfy. Then, finding the victory hollow, we raise the ante once again- seeking that next object or win or even person who we believe will make us whole.

In Moses' absence, the Israelites lose their focus and their vision blurs. They forget their identity and purpose as God's chosen. Their hearts are empty and ill with want. Aaron's leadership is weak. He caves quickly to their demand for instant win. Down in the valley, the Israelites are casting an image of a calf- while up on the mountain, Moses is receiving from God instructions on how to worship and make sacrifice.

There is an ironic parallel between what is happening up on the mountain and in the camp down below. The liturgy is almost identical. In both cases- the treasure of the people is used to make sacred objects. The offering and treatment of the animals, the altar and the celebration, indeed, the rhythm of the ritual is in almost perfect resonance with the one God is at that very moment describing to Moses. With the notable exception that down below- they have oriented their praise in the wrong direction. They worship a false God, an image to be grasped, a golden calf. The gift and not the giver. The creation and not the creator.

Upon the Ark of the Covenant, there is no image of God. An angel stands on either side, but the mercy seat, the place where God dwells with his people remains not so much empty- as open. Idols/Statues/Images are crude substitutions for a god who is elsewhere. But

Yahweh means to dwell with his people, to be as real and as present to them as they will allow. Not a facsimile of some far off deity, but a living and true God: The God who brought them out of slavery, who set them free, and who will see them through to the greatest of victories.

But the people are impatient and stubborn; they will not be guided into this great unknown. They want certainty and something to hold on to, and so when their worship is done, it concludes not in victory, not in praise or thanksgiving, but rather devolves into revelry, a party without purpose or honor.

It's understandable how easily we become confused; mistaking the object for its source. There are vestiges of truth and beauty and traces of the Creator in all things. This world really is so good, so very, very good. We see it and we seek it and receive it, just as we should, just as God intends us to. But somewhere in the mix we cross a line and before we know it these gifts *define* us and then *confine* us and pretty soon we serve at the altar of "I", "me" and "mine all mine."

We trade true beauty for image, hard-earned excellence for superficial status, and gratitude for entitlement.

But then, there's football: Not football the idol- but football, the real thing. The hero of *Friday Night Lights* is of course, Coach Taylor. He, more than anyone, understands the purpose for which the gift of football has been given.

Football, he says, is about character and teamwork. His commitment to the boys on the team overrides his commit to winning every time. Not that winning doesn't matter to Coach Taylor, cause you better believe it does, but it is never an end in and of itself. Winning matters, because the prospect of victory calls forth the perseverance, the strength, and the courage of his players, his coaches and himself. The heat of the game forges the young men's character and steels their commitment to the team.

In the Christian tradition, we name Coach Taylor's love of the game as "rightly ordered." He understands that he is not the source of the gift (and neither are the powerful boosters), but rather he is a faithful steward of a mystery, entrusted with an honor and a privilege.

Again and again he is challenged to maintain his integrity and remember his true mission: but ***his eyes are clear***, he understands his purpose and what he is to do with gifts he has been given, and ***his heart is full*** – full of love for his wife, his family, his team and the community he serves. And so, he can't lose.

And neither can we, (*neither can we, we can't lose*), for our God intends to dwell with us, a living and true God, as real and as present as we will allow.

Now huddle up brothers and sisters: *all we have been given comes from God*. And we have been challenged to bear and to steward it for the good of God's Kingdom. This is the

purpose for which our gifts have been given- not to enshrine our own glory, but to be shared.

To be poured out in the pursuit of victory, not just our own, but for the life of the world.

Clear eyes, full hearts, can't lose.