

## A DIFFERENT KIND OF LESSON

Most Sundays I can be found at church teaching a truth from God's Word to the children and congregation. This is where I prefer to be on a Sunday morning. Instead, this past Sunday found me on a basketball court in Unionville teaching another important truth. I do not like having to take a Sunday off for basketball, but it sometimes happens.

I knew heading to Unionville that morning that it would be two very challenging games for our team. Normally I have nine players for each game. Because one player was on holidays, another was ill, and another was limited in the number of minutes she could play, I would have only 6 players to play the majority of these two games.

Before the first game I reminded the girls about the importance of believing in one's self and maintaining hope even when we go into situations where we are outnumbered. I was so proud of how our girls played. Despite the disadvantage we were at, the girls competed right to the end and won 35-32. I thought this was the lesson that I was meant to teach them on Sunday about the importance of character.

Little did I know at the time there was a greater lesson to be taught on that subject. In the second game our girls competed very well against a more experienced team for the first 12 minutes. The other team played a very aggressive style of basketball. I wish this style on their part was just physical, but it crossed over into the emotional realm as well. Many disrespectful and profane comments were being made by their players to mine while on the court.

By half time I could see the impact these hurtful comments were having on my players. Their comments were taking away the fun and enjoyment my players usually have when playing. The other team's behaviour and comments just got worse as the game continued and did not stop even when they opened up a 20-point lead on us toward the end.

At the end of the game players will meet at center court to shake hands. When my players got back to the bench after the final whistle, they did not want to go

shake hands with the other team. It was not because they had lost that they felt this way but because of how rude and disrespectful the other team was toward them. The girls asked me if they had to go shake hands and I told them yes. I could see they did not like the answer and nobody was making the effort to go onto the court to do so. I had a tough decision to make at that time:

- do I force them to do what they did not want to (that can be a challenge with just one teenage girl, but I had seven on my hands!)?
- do I allow them to leave the court without shaking hands?
- do I take a different approach?

I wish I could say it was my idea to take a different approach, but I have to give the credit to God because I just acted at that moment without thinking. I walked out to center court on my own. There I was all by myself ready to shake hands with the other team and coaches. I was not sure if my players would join me, but I knew what I needed to do. Seeing me take the lead my daughter, who is one of the team captains, came over from the bench to join me to shake hands. When she made this move, my other co-captain followed right behind her. Soon my other five players left the bench and joined in as well.

It was not easy for my players to shake hands with the other team after the mean and hurtful things that were being said to them during the game, but they showed character by taking the high road and doing the right thing. What was taught in that moment was not lost on the parents of my players. Many of them thanked me afterward for helping their daughters to choose the high road and maintain their character after this unpleasant circumstance.

I appreciate they thanked me, but the One who needed to be thanked was God. He provided me with the opportunity to teach such an important lesson on Sunday morning in the midst of a very challenging situation. He was the One who guided my footsteps to go onto the court all alone with no idea how my players would respond. He was the One who taught my players and their parents how it is better to win when it comes to character, than on any scoreboard.

Challenging times and moments like I found myself in on Sunday are often the best times for us to teach character and also to discover the strength of our own. The apostle Paul understood this and taught about it in Romans 5:3-4:

**We can rejoice, too, when we run into problems and trials, for we know that they help us develop endurance. And endurance develops strength of character, and character strengthens our confident hope of salvation.**

First century Christians in Paul's time experienced their share of difficulties and suffering, just like we do. Paul wanted these new Christians to know **how God uses these difficult moments to help us grow in character. He explained that when our character strengthens in these moments it helps us to grow stronger in our hope and trust in the Lord.**

We are living in challenging times ourselves. Perhaps some of us are up against opponents in life that are trying to wear us down physically and emotionally, just like that other team did with my players. These opponents we are facing may not only be people, but may also be things like illness, grief, loss, isolation, or something else. As hard as these challenges are, let's make sure with God's help we use them to show to ourselves and others the strength of our character. In these situations, we may have to be the one taking the lead, just as I did. If that happens, hopefully we will discover that our walk teaches others to do the same.

I did not teach this lesson on the importance of Christian character in church on Sunday, but rather on a basketball court. God wanted it taught on a basketball court first, before sharing it in a mid-week message. Either way we learn it, character is an important lesson to get right.

Keep safe and God bless,

Pastor Dean