

Saturdays during the fall it's easy to tell what's important to people around here. They wear it. The crimson and cream of the University of Oklahoma. The orange of Oklahoma State University. Even the burnt orange of Texas. These schools take the field and it almost feels like we take the field with them. They're our team. We back them, cheer for them, and watch them battle. When they break the huddle we get excited, not sure how well the next play will work. When the game gets tight at the end we bite our nails or pace our living rooms not sure how it will end. And when they win we jump and scream and smile.

As the team breaks the huddle in the game they face an opponent. There's no confusion. It's the team in opposing colors. On that day they're the enemy. The whole goal is to score more points and win the game. Everyone on the team prepares for that moment, the moment when each one does their job and the game plan is carried out and the victory is secured.

Your life, I mean real life not associated with sports, is like that. But in your life, as in mine, things can get confusing. Who is the opponent we face daily? What game plan can we use to secure the victory? As we break the huddle each and every day those questions are extremely important. Jesus shares with us as he teaches his disciples in the gospel how to...

**Break the Huddle: as a team
Know who the opponent is
Know God's winning game plan**

If your high school was anything like mine there were plenty of cliques. You probably found one, a group of people that dressed, talked, and had the same interests as you that you ended up spending most of your time with. The thing about cliques is they're hard to get into. Those inside the clique look down on those outside like they don't belong. The disciple named John thought the same way, and he wasn't the only one. **"Teacher we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we told him to stop, because he was not one of us."** Can you hear John whining a little? "Jesus. Tell this guy to stop doing the same thing we're doing." John may have thought he was in the right sticking up for Jesus or trying to stop this outsider from doing damage to Jesus' reputation. John saw him as the opponent, and he had to be stopped.

John was confused but we can understand why. This little band of disciples and their leader Jesus did have many enemies. There were a lot of people out to get him, discredit him, and make life difficult. In that climate knowing the opponent was hard. Plus this man driving out demons was doing what earlier the disciples had been unable to do. And you might remember their discussion on who was the greatest. Inside a clique of twelve they were competing with eleven others. They didn't need to compete with outsiders too. Jesus corrected all this false thinking. **"Do not stop him. No one who does a miracle in my name can in the next moment say anything bad about me, for whoever is not against us is for us."** This man wasn't the opponent. He was using Jesus' name which made him a friend. If he wasn't against Jesus then in one way he was already for Jesus and part of the team.

Jealousy is a very dangerous emotion. When uncontrolled it has the potential to do major damage. Jealousy often is misplaced and identifies someone as the opposition when they're not. For us as a congregation jealousy can lead to identifying other denominations or other churches as the opponents. It can lead to frustrated feelings when we seem to be losing a competition with them. It can bring hurt when they have success and we don't. It can tear us apart inside when we see ourselves losing to them. I know these are sinful thoughts you have sometimes. I know you must because I have them. I want to be faithful to the Bible and the Savior, but I wrestle with these sinful thoughts. Jealousy is a dangerous thing.

Recognize Satan's scheme behind jealousy. Whether as a congregation towards another church or as an individual towards another person, Satan wants you jealous of their success. "That should've been you. It isn't fair," he'll say. Then Satan schemes so you'll feel sorry for yourself. Self-pity and jealousy go together. Then criticism starts which often leads to something worse. You might verbalize something harsh or post it on social media. Your true feelings might spill out at the worst possible time and you wouldn't be able to take them back. That's Satan's scheme. See how he's the true opponent? He's had centuries of practice and he knows your weak points.

The opponent is really dangerous, but there is a teammate who helps us stand against this opponent. Jesus stands with us and for us. Jesus identified the opponent and knew you and I wouldn't be able to fight him alone. So Jesus came to take the field of battle in our place. He alone stood up against Satan. He battled with sin daily throughout his life and won. He stood up to suffering coming at him from all around at his trials and while hanging on the cross. And when Jesus died it brought to an end any success Satan's schemes might have. The battle was over. The opponent had been defeated. Jesus rose again to prove the defeat was total and it was final. Your Savior, your substitute, stood in against the opponent for you and gave you the benefits. Your real opponent is forever defeated.

Teams need to clearly know the opponent. The disciples had trouble. It wasn't the guy using Jesus' name to cast out demons. That guy was on their team and with Jesus. But no victory comes without a winning game plan. A relaxed view of sin wasn't in the game plan. In the game plan Jesus laid out drastic measures would be needed. **"If your hand causes you to sin, cut it off. If your foot causes you to sin, cut it off. If your eye causes you to sin, pluck it out. It is better for you to enter the kingdom of God with one eye than to have two eyes and be thrown into hell."** God's winning game plan always involves getting rid of any sin that could drag you down.

Jesus isn't saying we have to hack off body parts. He does want us to be honest about sin though. Is there a sin you're ignoring, minimizing, or rationalizing away? "It doesn't hurt anyone else. It's just between me and God. I can do whatever I want in the privacy of my own home." Sin is serious because we're talking about hell. Deny hell and it's a dangerous game of chicken you're playing with the almighty God. Just as dangerous is not taking the Savior seriously. Thinking you can win the battle against sin yourself or taking Jesus for granted will leave you off his team. And for a congregation that might be going into survival mode, they look to protect the institution or end up arguing over building improvements. Jesus described all of this as sin when he said, **"Salt is good, but if it loses its saltiness, how can you make it salty again?"** The church or person who's lost saltiness, that is their connection to the Savior because of sin, is going to find it impossible to come back to God on their own.

God's got the winning game plan. Jesus describes it with salt. **"Have salt in yourselves, and be at peace with each other."** Salt is the gospel message of Jesus. Getting it back is essential to your eternity. The saving gospel message of Christ Jesus and what he's done for you and me are the game plan from God found in his Word. Everything you need in order to be saved is there. Jesus identifies himself with you. The suffering, the cross, the empty tomb, all the benefits of Christ are free to you. Jesus considered you worthy of saving. Believe that he came after you. Believe he gave you the winning game plan to get you to heaven.

Focusing on the individual rather than the team hurts on college football Saturdays. It also hurts in your spiritual life or the spiritual life of our congregation. If we as individuals or the church start thinking other churches or other people are the opponent we'll lose our mission focus and stop working as a team. The Savior draws us back to identify the real opponent. Satan is against you and wants nothing more than for you to be with him forever in hell. The Savior also gives you the game plan from God. Because your teammate Jesus Christ played the game Satan has been defeated and now you're the winner. With our many different gifts we gather with a common mission to break the huddle as a team to win souls for eternity through Christ.