

MUST IT BE 'EVERY MAN FOR HIMSELF'?

By Jim Mathis

As we pursue our livelihoods in the contemporary marketplace, should we take the approach of “Every man for himself,” or should our attitude be, “We are all on the same team?” This might be one of the fundamental questions of a society. A basic principle of capitalism is that everyone should run their own race. Even in the Bible, the apostle Paul uses running as a metaphor for life. In 1 Corinthians 9:24, he says, “Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize.”

Reading this, it seems as if he is saying we should all run our own race, without bothering to be concerned about other people. But is that what he means? In most industrialized countries for the past 200 years or so, people have been encouraged to look out for themselves. We talk in terms of individual responsibility, and if someone is falling behind, that is their problem, not ours.

Sadly, this attitude has resulted in all kinds of meanness. Everything from racism and slavery to predatory lending have taken place in the name of capitalism and the general understanding of laissez-faire – a matter of looking out only for your own self. Even Christians often use the term, “Personal relationship with Christ,” which would suggest this is just between us and Jesus.

But the overall understanding of Jesus’ teaching is quite the opposite. And we are probably taking Paul’s race metaphor too far. For instance, in Hebrews 10:24-25 we see the admonition for coming together in a spirit of unity and cooperation: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds, not giving up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but encouraging one another—and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Living in community and helping one another is foundational for all who wish to follow Christ. We know from Acts 2 that the early church took this seriously, seeing many examples of believers helping one other, including materially, so that there would be no one in need within their group.

In other words, rather than “Every man for himself,” their conviction was, “We are all on the same team.” In team sports, if one player insists on scoring all of the points, will not share the ball with others, or refuses to help the team, the team is eventually going to lose. When a team loses, everyone on the team loses. If the team wins, all the players share in the glory.

Much has been written about the benefits of strong relationships. People are healthier, live longer, and are generally happier if they have strong friendships beneficial for helping and encouraging each other.

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Personally, one big change that took place when I decided to follow Christ was shifting from a self-centered existence to community-centered living. My life changed dramatically for the better when I stopped looking out only for myself and started finding ways to help others with a sense of community. Life went from an individual sport like a race to a team sport, working toward our mutual benefit.

There is no such thing as a “lone wolf,” because even wolves live and work in a pack – a community – to help the entire pack to thrive. As human beings following Christ, we are called to be on the same team, striving to make the world a better place. That is one way we bring glory to God.

© 2020. *Jim Mathis is a writer, photographer and small business owner in Overland Park, Kansas. His latest book is The Camel and the Needle, A Christian Looks at Wealth and Money. He formerly was a coffee shop manager and executive director of CBMC in Kansas City, Kansas and Kansas City, Missouri, U.S.A.*

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Reflection/Discussion Questions

1. Have you heard the term “every man for himself” (or every woman for herself)? When you think about such a philosophy, what does it mean to you?
2. What do you think are some of the fundamental differences between the “every man for himself” and “we are all on the same team” approaches to our work and ways we interact with others – our coworkers, our employers or employees, customers and suppliers?
3. In terms of faith, how do you see these distinctives being worked out in a real sense? Is there a danger of putting too much emphasis on an individualized, “personal relationship with Jesus Christ”? If so, in what ways?
4. How can we all benefit from taking a more team-oriented approach in how we live out our faith, not only in religious and worship settings, but also in the workplace where we are called to be “ambassadors for Christ”?

NOTE: If you have a Bible and would like to read more, consider the following passages:

Proverbs 27:17; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; 1 Corinthians 3:9, 6:19, 12:12-27; 2 Timothy 2:2

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