

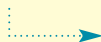
Zero-Sum Games



WANT TO CRUSH MY COMPETITION FOR JESUS," the speaker told the crowd. The audience laughed, especially because the speaker was better known for his compassion than his passion. Still, more than a few people in the audience exchanged quizzical glances at the oddity of the remark.

Later in the day, during a workplace Bible study, the remark resurfaced. "I loved that comment," a sales manager noted with a hearty laugh. "Put that guy on my team any day." A CEO in the room agreed. "In this culture, competition is king, and if you don't have the heart of a killer, you're going to lose." Over the course of the next half hour, the room echoed with positive feedback on this idea that "crushing the competition for Jesus" was a good thing.

What do you think?



Scripture Passages

Philippians 3:14
Matthew 5:5
Matthew 16:24-26
Matthew 5:16
I Corinthians 13:1-3
Leviticus 19:9
Exodus 20:8-10
Exodus 20:15
Exodus 20:16
Colossians 3:17
Colossians 3:23-24
Romans 12:3
Mark 10:35-45

Introduction

If you've followed this series of studies from the beginning, then it's carried you through suggested ways to make four shifts in how you serve God at work.

1. First, we explored ways to shift from being driven by ambition to having a healthy work ethic.
2. Next, we refused to accept the idea that truth and morality are relative, and drove ourselves toward steadfast character.
3. Third, we followed a path aimed at leading us from being spectators to being

ambassadors from God.

4. Fourth, we tried to move from serving ourselves in our jobs to a place where serving others and serving God in our workplace became the priority.

In this next series our objective is to become molders of our workplace cultures and mentors to those God places around us. Making such a change demands that we see our careers as places to serve instead of places to succeed.

Where might such a journey begin? Especially in a global economy that emphasizes competition as a fundamental ingredient to success, we think a Biblical discussion of competition is a good place to start.

What are some of the potential benefits of competition in a workplace?

What are some of the potential drawbacks of competition in a workplace?

How you would describe the following phrases in the context of competition:

- “Take no prisoners”
- “Crush the competition”
- “Zero-sum games”
- “Nice guys finish last”
- “Winning isn’t the most important thing, it’s the only thing”
- “It’s not whether you win or lose; its how you play the game”
- “Competition brings out the best in me”

In order to set the stage for a Biblical discussion of competition, let's apply some of the lessons we've learned through the first twenty studies of this journey to the ground rules of this discussion:

1. We exist to be in fellowship with God. Our work must never be an obstacle to our relationship with God.
2. The ethical and moral principles of God are unchanging. We must not allow circumstances to sway us into believing it's acceptable to bend or break those ethical and moral principles.
3. Not only does God expect us to work, but it is also one of the ways God accomplishes His purposes. But there's another side to work: While God works through our labors, other people are watching us as we represent Him. Lapses in ethical and moral behavior do not honor God, nor do they offer a positive view of God's impact on our lives to others considering the merits of faith.
4. The second part of the greatest commandment is to "love others." We honor God most when the work we do serves Him and serves others as well as ourselves.

These four points must inform our conversations on competition.

Most people we talk to in the workplace tell us they think the Bible is silent on competition. Do you agree with that statement? Why or why not?

- Competition turned ugly when Cain got jealous of Abel and killed him.
- Competition had a negative effect on the nation of Israel in the Old Testament when foreign gods and idols competed for their attention and loyalty.
- Competition among Jesus' disciples for who would be greatest gives us a disappointing but all too realistic look at human beings.
- Competition between Jacob and Esau led to deceit and broken relationships.
- Competition between the Sadducees and Pharisees produced distractions that prevented most of them from seeing the Messiah, even as He was standing before them.

The Bible is anything but silent on the impact of competition. The overriding impression we get as we study Biblical incidents of competition is that the result is usually negative.

How, then, should a Christian worker view workplace competition? React to the following observations as we seek to build a Biblical perspective on competition in the workplace:

- When life is viewed as a zero-sum game, competition is unhealthy. Why? (A football coach cheers for the opponents in their division to lose games because it means his team has to win fewer games to win the title. A sales manager exults when a competitor's chief product is recalled for safety defects. A worker is delighted when the other person being considered for the promotion they want makes a serious mistake and is chided by the boss.)

- When winning is the primary objective, competition is unhealthy. Why?

- When the competition serves only those competing, competition is unhealthy. Why?

- When competition glorifies the winner, competition is unhealthy. Why?

- When competition denigrates the loser, competition is unhealthy. Why?

Still, the real world values competition. Economic experience teaches us competition often produces goods and services which might not otherwise be produced; produces better goods and services than might otherwise be produced; produces them more economically or more efficiently than they might otherwise be produced.

Why? Competition is useful in protecting humans against the vices which beset us and in making use of our human traits to spur us into achievement and accomplishment.

- Competition forces us to be productive because somebody else will get ahead if we're lazy.
- Competition protects us from the greed which inevitably emerges when a firm or

business has a monopoly.

- Competition energizes us and motivates us to press ourselves more than we might if rewards weren't available.
- Competition builds on itself; each new victory, discovery, achievement becomes a platform for the next level of growth.
- Competition promotes excellence as the thrill of being the best lures us to press harder.

In a perfect world we would be motivated to accomplish these things to please God, or to serve others, but we don't live in a perfect world. Nor are we ourselves ever perfect.

Competition, then, would appear to be a necessary component of society. Rather than eliminating competition, Christians should seek to redeem their own competitive natures by focusing on the following timeless Biblical principles. In what way do these verses address competition in the points made below?

- The reward we compete for is the approval of God: Philippians 3:14.

- Our attitude during any competition must be characterized by humility: Matthew 5:5.
In other words, victory dances in the end zone have no place in a Christian worker's life.

- The way we compete matters more than the outcome of the competition:
Matthew 16:24-26.

- The way we compete matters more than the outcome of the competition, part two:
Matthew 5:16.

- The way we compete matters more than the outcome of the competition, part three.
I Corinthians 13:1-3

- Winner-take-all is never acceptable in competition, nor is crushing the competition, nor is survival of the fittest: Leviticus 19:9.

- Winning by violating God’s moral or ethical principles is not acceptable: Exodus 20:9-10; Exodus 20:15; Exodus 20:16.

- The outcome of competition should be service to something bigger than ourselves: Colossians 3:17; Colossians 3:23-24.

- The object of competition should not be to glorify ourselves: Romans 12:3; Mark 10:35-45.

How does the way you do your job conform to the principles of Scripture? Are there times when you compete on the world’s terms instead of God’s? What steps will you take this week to alter those things you do that don’t please God and don’t honor Him in the eyes of others?

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- In a perfect world workers would be motivated by a desire to serve God and others, reducing or eliminating the need for competition. This is not a perfect world. Even mature followers of Jesus Christ are not perfect.
- Competition serves a useful purpose in an imperfect world.
- Christians must be governed by Biblical principles in competitive situations, even if others are not.
- The way we compete must glorify God.
- Even in victory or success we must be humble.
- How we compete is more important than the outcome of the competition.