

Things don't always turn out the way we expect. Take Sean Mc Hugh for example. He survived the final cut day this past season with the Detroit Lions only to be called into the office by president Matt Millen early in September. He knew what was coming. The team had signed someone else to a contract and decided to cut McHugh to make room on the roster. He wasn't considered good enough to play for the worst team in NFL history. What was he going to do? The answer came a few days later when he was signed by the Pittsburgh Steelers. McHugh will most likely get into today's Super Bowl as a blocking back. In early September McHugh looked like a big loser. Regardless of who wins the Super Bowl today, he is a big winner. As McHugh said, "A door closed and a world opened."

You might say that is exactly what happened one day when Jesus went to the synagogue, the Jewish house of worship. While Jesus was teaching the people, a man who was possessed by an evil spirit interrupted the service and began shouting, **"Why are you interfering with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are—the Holy One sent from God!"** (Mark 1:24 NLT) The man looked like a loser. I'm sure that he had a rough time just trying to get by, being accepted, finding a place in his home town. We don't talk much about demonic possession today. We have other more scientific terms and diagnosis for people's behaviors. But people who can't control their actions or emotions still have a tough time finding their place in society.

When Jesus encountered the man and the demonic spirit, He turned everything around by ordering the evil spirit to leave the man. And it did. The demonic spirit had no choice. Despite its apparent power over the man, it couldn't stand up against Jesus.

So who won that day in Capernaum? First of all, the demon possessed man did because Jesus freed him and gave him a new life. The demon who possessed the man was the big loser because he was silenced and forced to leave the man. We need to remember that. The devil and all the fallen angels cannot stand up to God. Jesus defeated Satan on the cross. Even when it appears that evil is winning, it isn't. God has already won the ultimate victory.

Jesus was a winner that day because He should the power and authority of God. The people in Capernaum should have been winners, too, because they witnessed what Jesus did. But were they? Their amazement didn't turn into faith. Later their unbelief prevented them from believing in Jesus' power to make changes for the good in their own lives. Knowing who Jesus is and what He can do is not enough. But knowing who Jesus is, taking His words to heart and trusting in His words and promise is something totally different. Jesus has the power to make all the difference in our lives if we will let him.

There was one more group of losers that day. They were the religious leaders. The Gospel of Mark tells us, **“The people were amazed at his (Jesus’) teaching, for he taught with real authority—quite unlike the teachers of religious law.”** (Mark 1:22 NLT) This event took place early on in the ministry of Jesus. As time went on, the religious leaders would become jealous of Jesus, threatened by His power and popularity. Eventually they turned on Jesus, tried to make Him look bad, and plotted to kill him. Because the religious leaders rejected Jesus, the promised Savior, they became the big losers.

When you get right down to it, Jesus is the one who makes the difference in our lives. Jesus may have looked like a loser to the religious elite of Israel. Jesus may have been treated like a loser by the Roman soldiers who mocked him and lead him to the cross. The enemies of Jesus may have thought they were winners after Jesus died on the cross and his body was placed in the tomb. But they were wrong. Because Jesus won the greatest victory of all on Easter Sunday morning when He left the tomb behind, empty. Jesus defeated sin and death. He gives new life to all who believe in Him.

Jesus is the winner who makes new winners. But just claiming the name doesn’t make someone a winner. In a Texas high school girls basketball game played on January 13, Covenant defeated Dallas Academy 100 to 0. This game has turned out to be a real embarrassment for Covenant, a Christian school, because Dallas Academy hasn’t won a game in four years, only has 8 girls on their varsity team and specializes in teaching students with “learning differences.” Despite the final score, Covenant was the big loser that day. The head coach said that the school has made **“a formal request to forfeit the game recognizing that a victory without honor is a great loss.”** When Christians act like the coach at Covenant, they give Christians a bad name.

On the other had real winners are the people who trust God and live the new life of faith. That was the case this past fall in a high school football game also in Texas. When the players from the Gainesville State School took the field, the Faith fans made a 40-yard sprint line for them to run through with a banner for the players to crash through that said, “Go Tornadoes!” 200 plus Faith fans sat on the Gainesville side of the field and cheered the Gainesville players on by name.

This was the first ever game between Faith and Gainesville. Coach Kris Hogan of Faith wanted to do something for the Gainesville team. Faith had a 7-2 record going into the game, 70 kids on the team, 11 coaches and all the latest equipment. Gainesville has a lot of kids with convictions for drugs, assault and robbery. Many of the players had been disowned by their families. They wore seven year old shoulder pads and ancient helmets.

Coach Hogan asked half of Faith’s fans to cheer for the Gainesville team just this one night. He wanted to send a message to the players on that team that, **“You are just as valuable as any other person on Earth.”** The message got through. Although Faith won the game on the scoreboard,

Gainesville scored the final two touchdowns of the game, doubling their total number of touchdowns for the season, thanks to third string players from Faith playing out of position. The coach of the 0-9 Gainesville state team was given a Gatorade squirt bottle bath after the game.

When the players gathered in the middle of the field to pray, the quarterback for the Gainesville team offered this prayer, “Lord, I don’t know how this happened, so I don’t know how to say thank You, but I never would’ve known there was so many people in the world that cared about us.” The Gainesville coach grabbed Coach Hogan by the shoulders and said, “You’ll never know what your people did for these kids tonight. You’ll never, ever know.”

As the Tornados players walked back to their bus, they were each handed a bag with a burger, fries, a can of pop, some candy, a Bible and an encouraging letter from a Faith player. Everyone walked away a winner from the game that day. Real winners are people who know that God loves them and love God back. Real winners are people who love others in Jesus’ name. Amen.