

## Don't Make Football Your Life

In his senior year at the University of Minnesota, Tony Dungy had to make a choice—take an offer to quarterback in the Canadian league with a signing bonus and lucrative contract or one from the Pittsburgh Steelers for a defensive back position starting at \$20,000 with no guarantee to play. For no good reason, other than fulfilling a dream to play in the NFL, Tony took the Steelers offer.

On his first day in 1977, Coach Chuck Noll addressed the new players. Tony was sitting in the front row with his note pad ready. Chuck began, “Gentlemen, welcome to the NFL. You’re now being paid to play, so football is your profession—but don’t make football your life.” Tony wrote those words on his note pad—“DON’T MAKE FOOTBALL YOUR LIFE.” Up until that point, football was pretty much Tony’s whole life. Little did he know that those words would help shape the rest of his life and career as a legendary player, coach, mentor, commentator, author, speaker and role model to countless young men and fans.

That advice, while important and impactful, would not have been enough to turn Tony into the man whose life and example so many would want to emulate. The other advice was the Scripture verse his mother often quoted to him as he was growing up and which the Steelers chaplain quoted in his talk to the players before Tony’s first Super Bowl his second year with the Steelers: “For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world, and forfeit his soul?” Mark 8:36

How did one Scripture verse and a coach’s simple words direct the course of Tony’s entire life? He took them seriously, internalized them, allowed them to become a compass—a North star. He passed them on throughout his career to help direct the lives of those under his influence. It’s simple, uncomplicated, effective.

Tony’s life challenges us to consider the example we are giving to those under our influence. What are they hearing from us and seeing in us? Are we like the team owner who wouldn’t hire Tony as his head coach because the team would not be his first priority? Maybe we’re like the owner who didn’t hire him because he didn’t raise his voice to his players or use obscenities to get their attention and scare them into performing at peak? Let’s be honest, how many of us are like Tony—soft spoken; never using foul language; leading by loving and not by power and intimidation; making Christ our first priority in all things?

Tony is not a perfect man. He’d be the first one to tell us that. However, it’s very clear that he has incorporated enough of the only perfect Man—Jesus—into his life that he’s able to represent Him well and allow others to be drawn to and influenced by Him.

What can we learn from Tony? Humility, love, gentleness, a willingness to put others first and a desire to help people meet and be drawn to the Lord through the example of our life. Is that too high a bar? Are we too far away from that place now to realistically get there? As Christians, we work in the realm of the impossible—the “impossible” possibility of being transformed from people of this world into ambassadors for Christ who spread the fragrant aroma of His kingdom wherever we go. That’s the definition of what it means to become New Men in Christ. Tony is a great example of what is possible. You can be, too.

So here’s the question—what do you see in Tony that you want to start to emulate? It’s not too late to begin. That’s exactly what Coach Dungy would tell you.

Click on the link to watch Tony’s 9 minute story

<https://vimeo.com/341343866>