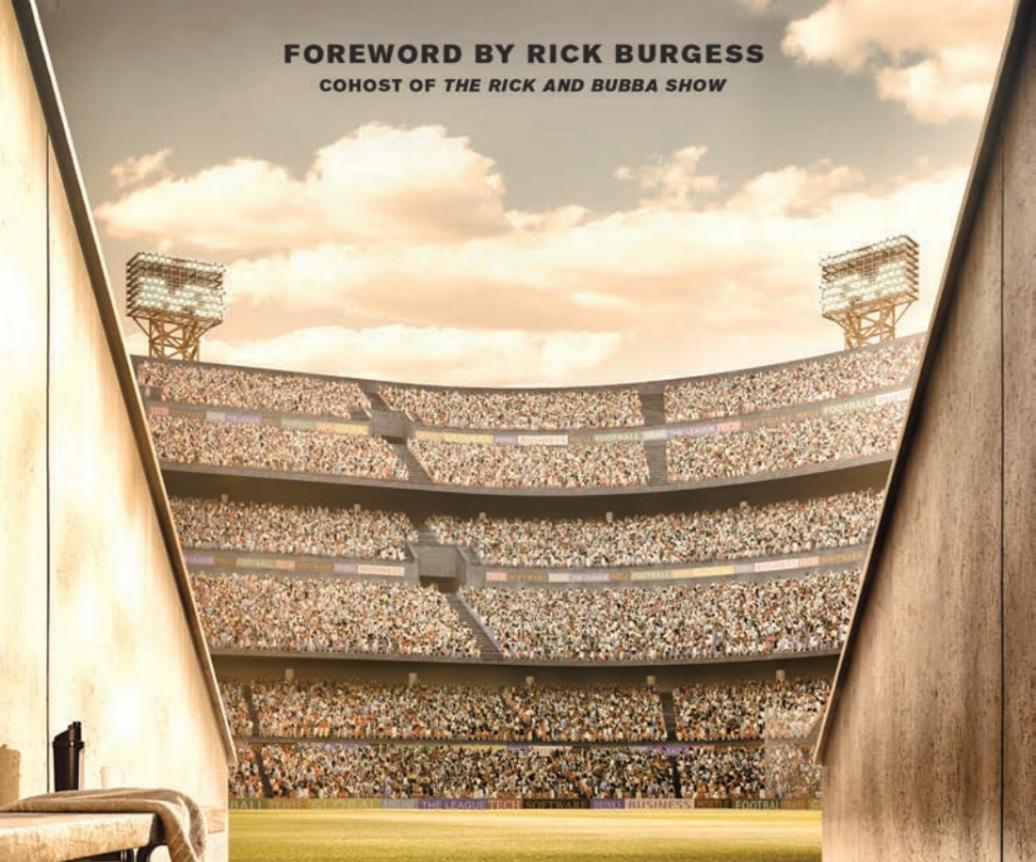


**FOREWORD BY RICK BURGESS**  
COHOST OF *THE RICK AND BUBBA SHOW*



# ALWAYS FALL FORWARD

*Life lessons I'll never forget from "The Coach"*

**TODD GERELDS**  
AUTHOR OF *WOODLAWN*

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T O D D G E R E L D S  
AUTHOR OF WOODLAWN

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## FOREWORD

Football is a great game, but it's a lousy god. I grew up the son of a coach, just like Todd Gerelds, and like him I had to learn this valuable lesson. It's true that anything we love more, serve more, fear more, or value more than God Almighty is an idol. However, this game can really teach us some life lessons that are of great value.

I have always considered football to be the greatest sport ever invented, because it teaches lessons that other sports just don't teach. Like many of you who are reading this devotional, I often go back to the lessons I learned from not only playing football but also having football as the family business throughout my childhood and young adult life. I love this devotional that Todd has put together because it uses football to teach biblical and life truths that are much more important than the sport itself. God has really pressed upon me a passion to see men come to know Christ and impact their families, their churches, and their society by truly understanding why God made them men

in the first place. This devotional can be a great resource for men to be disciplined and then be equipped to disciple other men.

Many men have been told over and over that they need to be the spiritual leaders of their homes but have no idea what that looks like in their daily lives. This devotional takes the cue from Jesus Himself by using parables that relate to football terminology to drive home a much bigger and more important biblical truth.

Do you have to play football to be a real man? Of course not—some of the most devout followers of Christ I have ever known have never played football—but you can still learn many great principles from the sport. The bottom line is that true biblical masculinity is found in the example of the “new Adam,” Jesus Christ. So I encourage you to consume this devotional with one goal in mind: to become a disciple of Christ who advances the kingdom of God. I don’t know of any man who would go onto the gridiron and never desire to be put in the game. You have been in the stands long enough—time to get on the field of battle.

*Rick Burgess*

*Cohost of The Rick and Bubba Show; coauthor of  
How to Be a Man: Pursuing Christ-Centered Masculinity*

## INTRODUCTION

My dad, Tandy Gerelds, was a football coach. He began his coaching career at Woodlawn High School in 1965. He actually graduated from Woodlawn just four years prior to coming on staff as an assistant coach. During those four years, he attended Auburn University, where he walked on and became a leader for the 1963 Southeastern Conference Championship baseball team. Dad was an assistant football coach at Woodlawn until 1971, when then-head coach Bill Burgess decided to take a job as head coach at Oxford High School in Northeast Alabama. So in 1971, Dad became the head football coach at one of the largest, most prestigious schools in the state of Alabama. He was twenty-nine years old and doing what he loved.

Dad's first year as head coach coincided with the federal government's decision to begin busing African American students from all-black high schools to predominantly white high schools in inner-city Birmingham, Alabama.

To truly understand what a chaotic, yet significant, time this was, one would need to have a better understanding of the years preceding this decision.

Every bad thing you've ever heard or seen regarding the South, and Alabama in particular, was on full display in the decade before Dad became head coach at Woodlawn High School—police dogs, fire hoses, bombings, Martin Luther King Jr. being put in a Birmingham jail cell. Black kids had no reason to believe that anything good could come from being forced to go to school with white kids. Everything they had ever seen regarding “white folks” came from television. And none of it was good.

After a rough two years, in August of 1973, Dad decided to have his first “camp.” This was his term for his team practicing two to three times a day and eating and sleeping in the Woodlawn gym. He thought that having the team all eat, sleep, practice, and literally *live* together might bring about some much-needed team unity. It was at this time that an evangelist named Wales Goebel requested permission to share the gospel with the football team. Dad initially declined his request. At the time, Dad believed that faith in Christ would make you soft. He was sure that if his players placed their faith in Jesus, they wouldn't be tough enough to be good football players. Dad's conversion was well documented in my book *Woodlawn* and the subsequent movie by the same name. The Woodlawn story details how a cynical young

coach was overwhelmed by the supernatural love that transformed his football team. He came to recognize that his earlier assumptions about toughness were completely incorrect.

My dad began to realize that putting others before self was the true mark of a man. He also knew that no one did that perfectly except Jesus Christ. God's Word teaches us that "there is no greater love than to lay down one's life for one's friends" (John 15:13). And that rather than making us weak, God's Spirit does the opposite: "God gave us his Spirit. And the Spirit doesn't make us weak and fearful. Instead, the Spirit gives us power and love. He helps us control ourselves" (2 Timothy 1:7, *NIV*).

One day while Dad and I were talking about Jesus, Dad said, "I'll bet Jesus would have been a great football player." I smiled and agreed. I wondered aloud, "What position?" Dad, without hesitation, replied, "Free safety." A free safety is sometimes called the quarterback of the defense. He generally calls the coverages in the secondary. Great free safeties are known for being smart and tough and are usually big hitters. Dad went on to explain that Scripture teaches that Jesus was a carpenter and the son of a carpenter (see Mark 6:3). He had worked hard physically from the time he was a kid. His response to adversity throughout His life showed a remarkable character and grit. He would be fearless, tough, and dependable. He was strong (see Luke 2:40).

God has made it clear that being a man goes far beyond muscles and testosterone. “Physical training is good, but training for godliness is much better, promising benefits in this life and in the life to come” (1 Timothy 4:8). Manhood’s best example is Jesus Christ. He was a man’s man. He was the fiercest lover of people who ever lived. He *always* loved. He gave Himself up for His bride, the church. And I’ll bet He’d have been a great free safety.

Over the following pages, I’ll share with you things my dad said in his unique way as he coached his players and trained me to become a man. My goal is to communicate in a way that will engage you as a real man. I believe all aspects of our manhood are meant to be addressed as we grow in our relationship with our Father (see Luke 10:27). I will incorporate Scripture so that the truths Dad taught will be combined with God’s Word to give you a meaningful, thoughtful, and powerful Bible-based theme you can take into each week.



————— PART 1 —————

“Whatever work we are called to  
can be a means for us to honor God.”





WEEK 1

# See What You Hit

*I run with purpose in every step.*

*I am not just shadowboxing.*

1 CORINTHIANS 9:26

It felt like a lightning bolt had run from the base of my skull, through my neck and shoulders, and down my right arm. The pain was excruciating. I'd just received my first "stinger," or "burner," an intensely painful nerve injury. It was football spring training during my sophomore year of high school. I had taken on a senior fullback named Chris Haynes in a drill known as the Oklahoma. Normally, the Oklahoma drill pits three offensive linemen against three defensive linemen. A coach tells the running back behind the offensive line where to run. The same coach lets the offensive linemen know where to block the defenders. There is also a wide receiver positioned to take on a defensive back several yards behind the defensive line. We were running a scaled-down version of the Oklahoma

where it was one on one between an offensive and defensive lineman with a defensive back—me—positioned about five or six yards off the line of scrimmage. My job was to see which way the running back cut from the line of scrimmage and to stop him. Chris’s job was to get past me. There was no question who won our encounter. As Chris cut to his left, my right, I came flying up to meet him, head down. He planted me on my back as he continued on to score.

After my stinger, Dad taught me that I need to be looking at the ballcarrier when I tackle him. “See what you’re hitting!” he would bark.

In recent years, more and more emphasis has been put on player safety in an effort to avoid catastrophic injuries in football. Dad’s coaching was ahead of his time in this regard. Back when Dad coached, it was common to hear, “Put your head down and go!” Somehow, Dad knew this wasn’t the best way. Seeing who you are tackling might mean that you don’t deliver as devastating a blow as you want, but it also means that you are far less likely to miss the tackle. As an incredibly important bonus, injury is *far* less likely when your head is up.

God designed us with a yearning to have an impact. We want to make a difference. In our day-to-day lives, this desire for impact needs to be controlled by the Holy Spirit to ensure we have the kind of impact God intends. Scripture teaches us that discipline, self-control, and keeping our eyes

on our target (not running aimlessly) help us to avoid missing the mark. When I was managing sales reps for a large pharmaceutical company, I used to tell the reps, “Don’t mistake activity for achievement.” Oftentimes in the work world we allow ourselves to get very busy with activities that seem necessary but are not actually moving us toward our objectives. Whatever our jobs, seeing what we hit means establishing clear objectives and then aligning our actions with them.

In the Scripture passage from which today’s verse is taken, Paul compares his spiritual life to athletic training. He says that he doesn’t act without clear purpose in mind.

We need to be like Paul and know what we are trying to hit spiritually. Putting our heads down and plowing through is our natural instinct, but we may miss God’s objective when we do that. Let’s ask God to give us discipline and self-control. Let us be imitators of the examples of godly character God has given us in Scripture and in the people around us.

I challenge you to read the Gospels to see Jesus’ perfect character. I suggest reading a chapter of the Gospels every day until you’ve read through all of them. Once you’ve finished them all, you can start again. That’s what I do. It keeps the heart and character of Jesus right in front of me. I also encourage you to seek the counsel of a godly mentor in your church. Know what you are aiming for and keep your eyes on your target. You are far more likely to hit it. And you

are far less likely to give yourself a spiritual stinger or injure others in your efforts.

TO GO DEEPER THIS WEEK . . .

» Read 1 Corinthians 9:25-27.

» Read Philippians 3:17.

1. What are some situations in which you might be tempted to plow forward without seeing what you hit?
2. Who are some possible mentors you could seek out for counsel in your life?

WEEK 2

# Outwork Your Opponent

*Work willingly at whatever you do, as though you were working for the Lord rather than for people.*

COLOSSIANS 3:23

As my junior year of high school approached, my friends and I spent the summer in the weight room and on the football field, preparing for summer practice. When the day came for practice to start, we boarded buses in Tuscumbia, Alabama, and set out for the remote, rural town of Cullman, Alabama. The destination? St. Bernard Abbey. That's right—a monastery located almost smack-dab in the middle of the state. We would spend the next week practicing twice a day in the August heat. At night, we would retire to our unair-conditioned dorm rooms. Dad wanted us to develop an unrivaled work ethic.

The demands Dad placed on his team were met with varying degrees of acceptance. Some players were eager to please the new coach, doing whatever they could to catch

his eye. Some were going to do their best regardless. It was just the way they were wired. Others were more skeptical. I think they may have wondered if the ends justified the means, so to speak. Some probably didn't think they needed the extreme level of conditioning required by this new coach. For me, it was a little easier. I knew this coach. I knew his track record. I knew that he knew what worked and that his plans were for *our* good.

Since I was a little boy, I had heard my dad emphasize the importance of *hard work*. He felt that this was the one variable that his team had a say in when a game was on the line. Out in the isolated heat of Cullman, Alabama, Dad explained to us that hard work might actually allow us to beat a more talented opponent.

If you have thirty-five players and your opponent has a hundred, there's nothing you can do about that. If your opponent's offensive line averages six feet four inches and 285 pounds and your defensive line averages six feet and 210 pounds, you can't change that either. Those are objective variables that you live with. What you can change is how hard you are willing to work for your goal. If you have trained yourself to work harder than your opponent, you may be in a better position to win. Dad's motivation for the legendary conditioning of his teams was not punitive. It was so that fatigue would not hinder his teams from accomplishing their goals.

More than halfway through that first season, our hard

work finally paid off. First, we fought from behind on the road against a rival team, Brooks, to win a 20–14 victory. Two weeks later, our scrappy, 2–5 team faced off against 7–1 Lauderdale County. They definitely appeared bigger and stronger. Nonetheless, when the final horn sounded, somehow we had eked out a 9–7 win. Hard work had prevailed!

Since graduating from college and moving out into the real world, I have found that Dad’s philosophy of hard work applies equally in business. Work ethic often separates people of similar aptitude in the workforce. I have worked with people who were enormously talented but lacked a strong work ethic. They never lived up to their potential. On the flip side, I’ve worked with people who weren’t as gifted but got everything they could out of their ability. I believe a team has a better chance at success with the latter type of person.

Our motivation for work should be to honor our Lord in everything we do so that we can accomplish those things for which He designed us. In New Testament times, people who owed a debt could sell themselves to the lender for the purpose of paying off their debt. The term for this position has been translated as “bond servant,” “bond slave,” or simply, “servant” or “slave.” The one to whom they’d sold themselves would be their master. Today Paul’s words would equally apply to anyone who has a boss who oversees his or her work.

In Colossians 3:23-24 Paul tells these servants to

give all they've got in obedience to their earthly masters, knowing that they are really working for their true Master, Jesus. He reminds them that their real payday is the eternal reward they will receive from Him.

Paul makes no distinction in what *type* of work we do. Whatever work we are called to can be a means for us to honor God. Our work shouldn't be good only when others are watching or done to win praise from other people. But instead, our motivation should be to glorify Christ because He is our *true* boss. As we do this, it is essential that we keep in mind that Christ's work on the cross is sufficient for our salvation. Our work "for the Lord rather than for people" should be freeing, as we are no longer bound by the opinions and expectations of people, but instead are able to joyously work from a heart of gratitude. Today let us approach our work with a grateful heart, seeking to bring honor to our Father as we excellently labor in whatever work He has called us to do.

#### TO GO DEEPER THIS WEEK . . .

- » Read Colossians 3:22-24.
- 1. In your daily activities, what are some things you can do to remind yourself who you're actually working for?
- 2. Can you think of times in your own life where you have seen hard work overcome obstacles?

WEEK 3

## Couch Sessions

*We will speak the truth in love, growing in every way  
more and more like Christ.*

EPHESIANS 4:15

A concerned father was sitting on the couch in the head football coach's office. My dad was sitting at his desk, listening. The man's son was a backup on Dad's state championship defense. Most of his playing time had been relegated to late in games when the outcome had already been decided. The player's dad loved his son and wanted to see him succeed. He pointed out that his son had made several interceptions in his limited playing time. "Coach, I'm just wondering why my son isn't playing more." Coach paused, then explained to the concerned father that, indeed, his son had made plays late in games when teams were launching Hail Mary passes. "But," he explained, "football is a violent game. When the game is on the line and things get really physical, we're not

confident that he is hard nosed enough to come sprinting up to where bodies are flying around.” With just a few words, Dad had given insight from his broader perspective that included hours of practice time. I’m quite sure that this conversation was eye opening for this father. It most assuredly helped him better deal with the real issues.

As believers we are called to “speak the truth in love.” When the parents of Dad’s players were unable to do this with their sons, Dad had to hold what he called couch sessions. During these sessions, caring yet often disgruntled parents would come into his office to voice their concerns. Dad would always listen. He loved the kids who played for him. But he also knew that allowing them to believe things that weren’t true wasn’t helpful for them. In fact, it would hurt them in the end.

My dad also loved me and my two sisters. And from the day he came to know Jesus, he made sure to tell us every day that he loved us. He also made sure to teach us things that frankly, as young people, we didn’t always want to hear. Dad was committed to helping us become the adults God intended us to be, and he wasn’t seeking to win a popularity contest with me or my sisters. Dad knew that God loved him. That was enough for him. Winning the approval of other people, even his children, wasn’t as important.

As a father, I have found that, in dealing with my four daughters, there are times when it would be much easier

to let things slide. There are definitely times when I know that I'm going to have to be the bad guy, by speaking the truth in love.

One such situation concerned a relationship one of my daughters had developed with a young man. The relationship seemed fine at first, but over time my wife and I began to notice behaviors from the young man that really concerned us. As I began to talk to my daughter about it, she *definitely* thought of me as the bad guy. Still, she needed to hear the truth. At various times over several weeks, I vacillated between speaking the truth in love and totally blowing it as my temper and pride got the best of me. Ultimately, God worked out the situation—sometimes by using me and my wife, and sometimes by lovingly working *despite* us.

In Ephesians 4:15-16 Paul describes the results of speaking the truth in love. Paul calls the church the body of Christ. He teaches us that speaking the truth in love allows this body to grow and work properly. This means that when I lose my cool, or avoid conflict, I may be depriving someone of the encouragement, correction, or instruction God intends them to receive through me.

The critical factor in these conversations is *love*. Love has the other person in mind. Love allows truth to have its intended impact. As we live, work, and love this week, we will inevitably have opportunities to be used by God to reveal truth to those around us. As these opportunities

arise, let us ask God for the ability to put the other person's interests above our own. Let us look for opportunities to encourage and facilitate growth. Despite the discomfort these kinds of conversations may sometimes cause, God tells us that as we “couch” them in His amazing love, they will be used to help His children “grow up in every way” (Ephesians 4:15, *ESV*)—into Christ.

**TO GO DEEPER THIS WEEK . . .**

» Read Ephesians 4:15-16.

1. Can you think of a situation in your life in which someone spoke the truth in love to you? How did you respond? What was the impact?
2. Are there any “couch sessions” you need to have with anyone in your life at this time?