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THOUGHTS ON JASON COLLINS, HOMOSEXUALITY, AND ATHLETICS

by Joe Dallas

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Professional basketball center Jason Collins announced this past May that he was homosexual, making him the first pro ball player to come out of the closet while still, in fact, playing. His revelation generated more applause than shockwaves—first Oprah Winfrey then President Obama called to congratulate him upon his announcement. His post-announcement life seems to include newfound activism, along with an already established and celebrated career. Amidst the chorus of support he’s received, voices of dissent have been few and muted. Collins is, after all, accomplished and likeable, and few want to judge him harshly, much less with contempt. Fewer still wish to be seen as bigots, a risk taken whenever one objects to homosexuality on moral or doctrinal grounds. But were I given the chance to express my views and concerns to him, I would have expressed them like this:

Dear Jason,

This past spring there were weeks of media buzz about an unnamed pro player getting ready to come out of the closet, and speculations abounded. After all, professional sports is an area of public life not normally associated with homosexuality, so the nation’s ears were pricked, and our attention was focused on the obvious question: Who is it? Now, of course, we know that you’re the man. No doubt there’ve been other members of the NBA, NFL, or NHL who were also gay but who chose to keep it private, so while you’re probably not the first homosexual pro athlete, you are the trailblazer when it comes to the “I’m Gay” public declaration. And not only did you come out, but you did so while still playing, a decision that can’t have been easy for you but, by your own account, felt necessary.

And that made you big news, and big news means volumes of analysis, so no doubt both you and your sexuality will continue to be discussed and debated ad infinitum. Plenty of folks have praised you, with President Obama himself calling to offer you support,¹ and the applause shows no sign of fading. Others object,² citing negative views of homosexuality based on Scripture, tradition, or personal taste. Then

there are some, myself included, who have mixed feelings about all of this. May I explain why?

I realize, first of all, that men coming out of the closet is business as usual. But pro athletes coming out of the locker room are another matter, one that makes ripples and headlines everywhere. So much so that even before your big announcement, in anticipation of your coming out, the National Hockey League officially offered its support³ to gay Americans in general and gay athletes in particular. Not to be outdone, the National Football League chimed in, with former cornerback and current president of the National Football League Players Association Dominique Foxworth publicly committing himself to making the league a safe place⁴ for openly gay members.

It must be getting safer in other leagues and sports as well. Within the past twelve months, boxer Orlando Cruz, former Redskins and Seahawks player Wade Davis, and Olympic silver medalist Ji Wallace have joined other notable athletes in declaring their homosexuality,⁵ and briefs supporting same-sex marriage have been filed⁶ by New York Giants co-owner Steve Tisch, Oakland Raiders punter Chris Kluwe, and former Baltimore Ravens linebacker Brendon Ayanbadejo.

So the word is out: Gay ain't sissy anymore.

Well, I think we both know that it never was, not really, and certainly not completely. Homosexual men who are stereotypically effeminate have always stood out, but anyone familiar with the territory knows there's no such thing as a typical gay man. A stereotypical one, yes, but typical? Hardly. And as for homosexual athletes, surprise over a masculine competitor's attraction to other men is more of a modern than classical phenomenon, ancient Greece being an easy and obvious case in point. Regardless, in the aftermath of your "coming out," I think we can realistically expect many more similar and well-publicized announcements from pro athletes, along with lectures from all quarters—media, entertainment, education—admonishing us to drop our ancient prejudices against homosexuality because, after all, if the burly quarterback from the NFL is gay, then real men can be gay, so gay's OK.

Let's unpack this. Prejudice against homosexuals, based on false ideas about them, is falling away, and I'm glad. Because if people opposed homosexuality only because they thought all gay men were girlish, and if the exposure to more masculine homosexual men has challenged that myth, then such people may have a necessary change of perspective. Likewise, if some considered homosexuality wrong because they assumed gays were child molesters, and then discovered the vast majority of homosexual women and men would never harm a child, then the more accurate viewpoint they get as a result is indeed a good thing. In that vein, at least from where I'm sitting, it seems that a large part of the culture's shift from anti- to pro-gay sentiment reflects a shedding of false stereotypes, and a more accurate picture of the people in question.

So if your announcement helps shatter myths about homosexuality—that all gay men are effeminate, for example, or weak, or incapable of manly pursuits such as basketball, then fine. I find it incredible that anyone still clings to those stereotypes in 2013, but some do, and maybe your revelation will educate them. Not all of them—the

God Hates Fags and So Do I crowd has no interest in mental growth—but your accomplishments as a man in such manly endeavors will probably cause some to think more realistically about the difference between homosexual men and effeminate men, a difference you of all people can appreciate. And if young people looking up to you develop more consideration for their neighbor, be he gay or straight, because of your announcement, then good certainly has come of it. The last thing any of us wants is yet another gay teen suicide evoked by inhuman bullying from classmates, so if you've prevented that, you've done some good.

Regarding the shedding of stereotypes and the shift toward approval of homosexuality, I applaud the shedding. It's the shift I oppose. Legitimate objections to homosexuality were never based on stereotypes, but rather on a biblically based view of our Creator's design for the sexual union. Believing that sexual relations outside heterosexual marriage are wrong, be they adulterous, incestuous, premarital, or homosexual, doesn't require us to paint all the people involved in these behaviors with the same brush. I can recognize that couples living together apart from marriage, for example, may be responsible, likeable citizens. And I can still recognize the wrongness of their relationship, a wrongness not cancelled out by their virtues, just as their virtues aren't cancelled by their wrong.

A person can likewise drop unwarranted ideas about homosexuals—assuming that they're all promiscuous, for example, or presuming they're all effeminate—while retaining the conviction that the thing itself is wrong no matter what sort of person engages in it. Because a biblically based conviction looks not at the nature of the sinner, but the sin itself, a sin no less sinful just because its practitioner is masculine, friendly, accomplished, or likeable. When an athlete such as you announces he's gay, as many surely will, that only tells us what we already know: that sin is an equal-opportunity experience, affecting great and small, mousey and manly. I see nothing in Scripture or common sense telling me that homosexuality is any more offensive to God than adultery, incest, or fornication, but neither do I see anything in either Testament telling me that a person's good qualities make his sin any more legitimate. So when a closeted athlete comes out in a manly way, nothing new, or even very relevant, is proven. It's only a reminder that wonderful people can feel and behave in less than wonderful ways; that the difference between sinful and legitimate impulses is determined by the Creator and not the creation; and that we can shed our misconceptions about people while retaining His conceptions about the human experience.

Please don't misunderstand—you've every right to be open about yourself, your sexuality included, and to decide for yourself how you'll conduct your life. But by your own account, you're not just another pro shooting hoops. You've also identified yourself on record as someone who, and I quote, "takes the teachings of Jesus seriously."⁷ I do, too, so I can't help but ask, with respect and even admiration for who you are and what you've achieved on the courts: *Really, Jason? All of them?* Well, then can we look at a few of them together?

He said we're not to judge (Matt. 7:1) and that we're called to love one another (John 15:12) and our neighbor as well, even as we love ourselves (Matt. 22:39). I'm sure we're both cool with those.

He also warned that hearing His words and not acting on them was akin to building on a flimsy foundation (Matt. 7:24–26) and that claiming to love Him without obeying Him is unacceptable (John 14:15). Obeying Him, in fact, means death to ourselves—His words, not mine (Luke 9:23)—and refusal to accept that part of the faith constitutes, according to Him, unworthiness to profess it (Matt. 10:38).

Maybe you and I part company here, maybe not.

Then there's the standard for marriage and sexuality, which He clarified in terms unmistakable: "But from the beginning of creation God made them male and female. For this cause shall a man leave his father and mother, and cleave to his wife. And they twain shall be one flesh: so then they are no more twain, but one flesh" (Mark 10:6–8 KJV).

He made no other provision for, or definition of, marriage and the sexual union. So here we're definitely in disagreement. You seem to feel your sexual attractions are natural and good, a conviction you hold so strongly that you're willing to put yourself on the line for it. I feel just as strongly that any desires taking us outside the standard He Himself set cannot be good, shouldn't be yielded to, and mustn't be celebrated. After all, there's quite a difference between admitting a sexual orientation versus expressing it, even legitimizing it, despite Christ's clear teaching to the contrary. That's why I scratch my head when you claim to revere His words, words that cannot, to my thinking, be seriously taken as anything but a condemnation of what you're now embracing.

Again, don't misunderstand. I'm not questioning whether or not you're truly a Christian, because only God knows your heart's state. I'm saying you're wrong about this, whether you're saved or unsaved, because we both know "Christian" doesn't necessarily mean "right," and "saved" is by no means synonymous with "in God's will." All of us, Christian or not, can kid ourselves into thinking what we feel is self-evidently God given, as Jeremiah aptly put it: "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?" (Jer. 17:9 KJV).

So looking at the many feelings we experience—some good, some not—I cannot imagine Him approving of us yielding to desires simply because we've always had them. That, it seems, would lead to the worst and most chaotic form of anarchy.

Anyway, I'm sure that during the current glare of publicity and even affirmation you're receiving, it may be hard—even painful—to give this viewpoint serious thought. But please, Jason, will you reconsider whether or not this is what God intended for you? Consider it not only in light of what you feel, or are being told, but by what we've already been told in the document He gave us when He inspired the Bible's authors with an infallible guide for all of life and conduct (2 Tim. 3:16).

Meanwhile, like so many others, I wish you the best. I wish you success, protection, and security. But mostly, I wish you the joy of hearing praise, when this race

we're all running is over, from the only judge who matters in the end. May your course be finished with Him declaring openly, "Well done, good and faithful servant."

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NOTES

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- 3 Jeff Z. Klein and Judy Battista, "Major Sports Leagues Prepare for the 'I'm Gay' Disclosure," *New York Times*, April 11, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/12/sports/hockey/nhl-announces-initiative-in-support-of-gay-athletes.html?hp&pagewanted=all&_r=1&.
- 4 Michael David Smith, "Dominique Foxworth Thinks Multiple Gay Players Will Come Out," NBC Sports, March 28, 2013, <http://profootballtalk.nbcsports.com/2013/03/28/dominique-foxworth-thinks-multiple-gay-players-will-come-out/>.
- 5 Frank Hagler, "10 Courageous Athletes Who Came Out as Gay in 2012," *Policymic*, <http://www.policymic.com/mobile/articles/21621/10-courageous-athletes-who-came-out-as-gay-in-2012>, viewed June 29, 2013.
- 6 Mike Freeman, "Some Believe Atmosphere Is Safe for Gay NFL Player to Come Out," CBS Sports, March 25, 2013, <http://www.cbssports.com/nfl/blog/mike-freeman/21946093/some-believe-atmosphere-is-safe-for-gay-nfl-player-to-come-outplayers>.
- 7 Paul Brandeis Raushenbush, "Jason Collins, Jesus and Coming Out," The Huffington Post, April 29, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/paul-raushenbush/jason-collins-gay_b_3180069.html.