



Tony Dungy, the Gentle Giant

There are many coaching styles among the coaches of the NFL. Some coaches have high energy and low tolerance for mistakes; some coaches are known for their temper tantrums and “in your face” attitudes to challenge their football teams; some coaches use intimidation to motivate their teams to victory; and then there are the coaches like Tony Dungy of the Indianapolis Colts who model self control and a humble spirit. It is hard to imagine that a big rough and tough NFL coach would ever come across that way, but that exactly describes the “gentle giant” who is Tony Dungy.

After watching Dungy’s career and interviewing him on several occasions, I recognize that he is a coach who can be described as submissive, humble and teachable, all the characteristics of gentleness, which is a characteristic of godly fruit of the spirit. It is Dungy’s grace of the soul and his calmness and submission toward God that exemplify all of his actions.

From the study I did when I was a pastor on the fruit of the spirit as described in the book of Galatians, I deduced that gentleness is an ability to “put other people at ease.” Tony Dungy is one of those people who makes others feel at ease.

During a November 2006 phone interview with Tony Dungy, I asked him what he thought about the characteristic of gentleness. Dungy answered, “Gentleness is part of the picture I have of biblical leadership.” Dungy referred to the twenty-third Psalm, “The Lord is My Shepherd,” as a model of this strong but gentle style of leadership. Dungy said he sees himself as a shepherd who leads his team, but does not force them to do things his way. Dungy says he wants his team to follow him because they believe in him as a person and in his principles and values. Dungy added, “Today that kind of leadership is not known in America.”

Dungy said that “it was Jesus Christ himself who taught the importance of having a meek and gentle spirit when he taught in the Sermon on the Mount, ‘Blessed are the meek for they shall see God’” (Matthew 5:5). Dungy went on to say, “America has lost the concept of biblical meekness, but that is what is involved in following the leaders of your organization. Even if I disagree with some of the things in the NFL and the Commissioner, I am still to submit in meekness...I do that as a testimony to God’s Word and I do that for God’s glory.”

Through my interviews with Coach Dungy over the past several years, he has made it clear that he loves the game of football. But he has also experienced the pain that goes along with a career in sports. It is this pain and suffering that give Dungy the empathy of gentleness to coach the athletes who are on his team. Since Dungy has experienced his own tough times, he is able to

understand and empathize with his team members when they experience the ups and downs of football.

Dungy says he came from a close knit family who lived out their Christian values. Dungy's father was a college professor and Sunday school teacher and two of his uncles are now pastors.

Dungy started experiencing his career ups and downs of NFL early in his football career. After a record setting season as the quarterback for the University of Minnesota his senior year, Dungy was understandably disappointed that he did not make the NFL draft, even after the twelve rounds of picks that year. However, the characteristically optimistic Dungy told me that he was eventually drafted by the Pittsburgh Steelers and it was here that one of his spiritual mentors, Donnie Shell, got him involved in some Bible studies, which Dungy said had a great impact on his later life.

In another series of ups and downs, after Terry Bradshaw took the Steelers to a Super Bowl win in 1978, Dungy was traded to the San Francisco 49'ers and then finally traded to the New York Giants where he was cut from the squad. Enduring the suffering of the constant rollercoaster ride of professional sports, Dungy developed great character and faith, and remarkably, these circumstances also contributed to his characteristic of gentleness—his ability to learn to wait on what God has to offer. Dungy said that it was while he suffered these major disappointments by bouncing around from team to team that God became more important to him, and Dungy started asking for God's will on his life.

Dungy's rollercoaster ride started going up again when Pittsburgh Steelers' Head Coach Chuck Noll found out about Dungy's availability and immediately hired him as his defensive

coordinator. This made Dungy, at 28, one of the youngest assistant coaches in the NFL. Noll was quickly rewarded as Dungy put together some stellar Steelers defenses.

Dungy next assisted well-known and successful coaches like Marty Schottenheimer and then Dennis Green before becoming the head coach of the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Dungy took this team from being a poor team to a team that had playoff potential.

I remember when I interviewed Dungy while he was the head coach at Tampa Bay before a Buccaneer and Bengals game a few years ago in Cincinnati. I had the privilege to talk with this coach for nearly thirty minutes as we walked up and down the football field. We enjoyed a half hour of “God talk” before the game.

Dungy explained to me that “the Lord has really blessed me to be an NFL coach.” He went on to say that God gave him a strong family background, and then gave him the experience as assistant coach under prominent NFL coaches, including nine years with Chuck Noll. Dungy said God did all of this—and then he “put me in the right place... at the right time” to be able to coach the Tampa Bay Buccaneers.

Shortly after that, to the surprise of many, Dungy experienced another jolt of disappointment when he was fired by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers. Dungy took this firing in his stride by telling me that he claimed Romans 8:28: “And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.” Dungy knew that God would use this experience as He had the other experiences in Dungy’s career to develop him into the man God wanted him to become.

Later, in my 2006 phone interview, I asked Dungy, “What is it like to be a Christian coach working with young men who do not come from Christian families or embrace Christian principles, like possibly the young men of earlier generations?” Thinking carefully about his answer, he paused a moment and replied that now he has to show his team what is important and then give them personal examples by living out his values and his faith. He said that he has to show them how his faith “works out in my own life.”

Then he said he had to make himself available to talk about his faith with those who were interested. He added that it is important to communicate how he feels about moral integrity and about the Lord Jesus Christ. He said he then tells them, “If you are still interested, hey, I am still available!”

However, Dungy did say that it is a balancing act. He said that he had to be sensitive about how he proclaimed his faith because he has fifty-eight other guys on the roster to think about. He said, “It takes real discernment to know when to talk to my guys about this subject and who to talk to, but my first responsibility is to God!”

Dungy demonstrated his gentle spirit and quiet demeanor as he explained how he dealt with this delicate matter of religion and faith. As he spoke, he reminded me of an old Indian proverb that says, “Gentleness controls force; nothing is as strong as gentleness; nothing so gentle as real strength.”

I then asked the coach what he thought about mental toughness. Dungy replied, referring to the challenge of leadership regarding the Colts 2005 and 2006 seasons, that it is “the mental part of the game.” He said, “Consistency in this game comes from mental toughness!” He explained that it is with mental

toughness that one can get through the ups and downs of the NFL schedule, traveling, pressure, and stress. He said that mental toughness allows you to not be affected by all of this. Again, he emphasized that “mental toughness leads to consistency and it is that consistency that leads to Super Bowl wins.”

After that Dungy shared his favorite verse in the Bible as Proverbs 16:3, which commands us to “Commit to the Lord whatever you do and your plans will succeed.” Dungy actively demonstrates this principle in his life as he commits everything in his life to God.

I discovered another example of Dungy’s gentleness when I heard him speak during the 2005 Christmas for Kids party headed up by the sports chaplain for the Indianapolis Colts, Ken Johnson. The purpose of this party was to give Christmas gifts to some three hundred to four hundred kids from the inner city of Indianapolis. I will never forget one of the statements Dungy made during this occasion when he said to these kids, “You may not get all the Christmas gifts you want this year, but you can get the greatest gift of all when you receive Jesus Christ as your Savior.” Dungy’s desire was for these kids to have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

Not many days after this party, Dungy’s son James committed suicide. For Dungy, who saw his family as one of the top priorities of his life, losing his son in this way was the worst form of suffering. I remember recalling how Dungy had remarked to me at the Christmas banquet that it was such a blessing to watch how Tampa Bay Buccaneer Trent Dilfer and his wife were handling the loss of their four year old son. Now, the world would watch Dungy as he suffered the loss of his own son. God is sovereign and in His grace gives us modern examples of how to go through the tough times.

When Dungy returned from his son's funeral to prepare the Colts for the Super Bowl, his message was one of thanks. He thanked everyone for "the love, the prayers and the support" that his family received from Tampa, Indianapolis and all over the country. Dungy's message was full of the gentle strength he has exhibited in all the circumstances of his life and a witness and testament to his reliance on God. He was indeed living out his values for the world to see. Dungy said, "Our family will stand strong. The strength that we have in the Lord will allow us to get through this just as we get through times of victory."

Dungy came back a few short weeks later to coach the Indianapolis Colts against the hard charging Pittsburgh Steelers in the AFC Divisional Playoffs at the RCA Dome in Indianapolis on Sunday, January 15, 2006. During this game he witnessed his team's "sure fire touchdown run" by Colts defensive back Nick Harper annulled by a desperate tackle by Ben Roethlisberger. Colts quarterback Peyton Manning led the offense down the field to set up a field goal attempt by Mike Vanderjagt for the game-tying field goal attempt with seventeen seconds left on the clock from 46 yards out. Vanderjagt's record showed that he had never missed a kick at home in the playoffs, but on that day he kicked the ball to the far right. The game was lost to the Steelers. This loss simply heaped more disappointment on Dungy. It had just been weeks before this game that his Indianapolis Colts seemed to have a lock on the Super Bowl. The Colts were being compared by some of the most noted sports icons to one of the best football teams in the history of the NFL. Next to his family, the Super Bowl was the biggest thing in Dungy's life and now he had lost his bid for the Super Bowl as well as his son James in a matter of weeks. While Dungy has had to endure his share

of suffering, he definitely exhibits a gentleness that stands out in the world of professional football.

In wrapping up our phone interview, I asked Dungy his thoughts about his future after sports. Dungy said he wants to get involved in some kind of ministry. He mentioned the possibility of doing a prison ministry. With the suffering Dungy has had to endure, he will be great at helping others to get through their trials.

Dungy concluded our recent phone interview by saying that “most Christians today are suffering; it is not unique. God is looking for ‘tough minded people’ who can persevere through these tough times.” Dungy has lived through tough times and he has persevered. Throughout his personal ups and downs and his career highs and lows, he has walked firmly with God and allowed God to develop in his character a strong gentleness of spirit.

As we walk through our own hills and valleys, God has given us a model to follow. Whenever we face what we believe might be our last game, we can look to Tony Dungy as an example of how God can develop His character aspect of gentleness in us through our own suffering.

Yet the “beat goes on” for Coach Tony Dungy as he led his Indianapolis Colts to a Super Bowl XLI victory. The Indianapolis Colts beat the Chicago Bears 29-17 on February 4, 2007, in a rain soaked Dolphin Stadium in Miami, Florida.

When interviewed about this win, Dungy repeatedly glorified God by pointing out in his interviews that a coach does not have to use profanity or break the rules to be a winner—that you can lead by respecting the players and that the 2007 Super Bowl victory proves that you can build a winning team using fundamental Christian values as a guide for success.

What made this Super Bowl so unique was that both Head Coach Tony Dungy of the Colts and Lovie Smith, head coach for the Chicago Bears, were the first African-Americans ever to “face off” for a world football championship. They coached together at Tampa Bay and they both employ the same leadership style. But they are also bound together by something that goes much, much deeper and more profound than a love of football. Both of them, in their own unique ways, are driven and motivated by a love of Jesus Christ. Dungy concludes, “We believe if you do things the way God tells us to, you can still win in this league!”