

Dear Friends,

### 'The Spirit of the Rules'

A parliamentary select committee investigating doping allegations against Team Sky issued a devastating report at the beginning of March. The committee claimed to be in possession of "confidential material from a well-placed and respected source", which suggested that performance-enhancing drugs had been used on Bradley Wiggins and a group of other cyclists under the guise of treating a legitimate medical condition, and had been given in order to improve their chances of winning the 2012 Tour de France. The report also implicated the Team Sky manager, Sir David Brailsford, saying that he bore some responsibility for this, in allowing the hunger to win to prevail over the ethos of 'winning clean'.

Team Sky disputes the report's findings and Wiggins himself insists that his asthma drugs were administered for purely medical purposes. He regards the report as "a complete mess of innuendo and rumour". Its sources, he says, remain anonymous, and there are "no medical records to ... substantiate what [had] been said".

The parliamentary committee freely admits that it has found no evidence of the World Anti-Doping Agency (Wada) code being broken, but their concern is with the *spirit of the law*, not just the letter. "An *ethical line*," they argue, has been crossed. The rules may perhaps have been observed, but there is more at stake than this.

A debate on the issue recently took place on Radio 4's 'Moral Maze'. Some participants thought it was perfectly reasonable for competitors to do what they could within the rules to gain an edge ("Even the model sportsman Roger Bannister sharpened his running spikes and rubbed graphite on them before breaking the four-minute-mile barrier"). Others however felt that such an approach undermined the ideals of 'sportsmanship' and worried that respect for the spirit of the rules had "given way to making money, winning at all costs and cheating if you can get away with it".

Their emphasis on 'sportsmanship' and the '*spirit of the rules*' is striking, for simply obeying the rules, '*the letter of the Law*', was never enough for Jesus either:

"Unless", he said, "your righteousness *surpasses* that of the Pharisees [the archetypal rule-keepers] and teachers of the Law, you will certainly not enter the kingdom of heaven." (Matthew 5:20)

God's Kingdom entails love, peace, forgiveness and reconciliation – spiritual realities for which we can never adequately legislate. Even rules as important as the Ten Commandments can only take us so far. What ultimately matters to the Christian, says St. Paul in one of his letters, goes way beyond. It must be

"written not with ink but with the Spirit of the living God, not on tablets of stone but on tablets of human hearts; ... for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life".

(2 Corinthians 3:3b,6b)

If you focus only on observing the rules, the real benefits of the game or activity to which they apply may well be lost or forgotten.

In competitive sport people obviously need to do their best. But what matters is not winning but furthering God's Kingdom and helping people to flourish. If taking part brings us all together in a spirit of friendship and mutual respect, to engage in a healthy, mutually enjoyable activity, then well and good; but if this is all undermined by an obsession with winning, then we must surely question its value.

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