



An Easter Message: The Transfer Portal and the Ultimate NIL Deal

Chapel message by Head of School Lee Burns '87
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As a Tennessee Vols fan, I have especially enjoyed this year's basketball team, who were regular season SEC champions and are a number two seed in the upcoming March Madness NCAA tournament. They certainly have the ability to win it all, and I hope they do.

While Coach Rick Barnes returned a very talented team from last year, the key for them going from a great team to an elite team has arguably been the addition of Dalton Knecht, who transferred to Tennessee this year as a senior from Northern Colorado. Knecht is a dynamic and versatile player who is as adept at finishing strongly on drives to the basket as he is burying threes from well beyond the arc. Shooting 47% from the floor, including 41% from three point range, he averaged 21 points a game, 26 in league play. He has both touch and tenacity, finesse and ferocity, and this unique blend of talent and competitiveness earned him recognition as SEC player of the year, possibly national player of the year, and a likely lottery pick in the NBA draft.

Last year, Knecht was playing for a Northern Colorado team that finished 12-20 in the Big Sky conference. Now he's on a national championship-contending team that went 24-7. It was, by all accounts, a good move for him and for Tennessee. And it was enabled by a change to NCAA transfer rules in 2018 when they established a transfer portal which opened up a relatively easy path for college athletes to switch schools on an annual basis. Last year, over 1,000 college basketball players entered the transfer portal, enabling them and coaches to connect and explore changing schools. The 2024 basketball transfer portal opens March 18 for 45 days.





And it's not just basketball players who can seek greener pastures through stronger teams, more playing time, and greater visibility. About 2,000 football players entered the most recent transfer portal, including marquee players at elite football schools like Alabama, Ohio State, and Georgia. All schools have the vulnerability and promise of the portal. It can decimate a team or turn it around quickly. All players entering the portal have both risk and reward. If a player enters the portal, the school already giving him the scholarship can revoke or reduce the scholarship, and the player might not get a scholarship from another school.

The transfer portal is but one of several dramatic changes to the landscape of college athletics, with the other being the approval in 2021 of college athletes making money on their name, image, and likeness, commonly referred to as NIL. If Arby's thinks that Carson Gentle endorsing their roast beef sandwiches will sell more of them around Tennessee, they can pay him to do so. 2022 Heisman winner Caleb Williams has made millions of dollars for being in Dr Pepper ads. In the past, a college athlete would have been ineligible for making any money connected to his athletic prowess. No longer.

NIL and the transfer portal are often closely linked, as college athletes seek new college teams where they can make more money through NIL. Retired Alabama football coach Nick Saban recently lamented that the two main questions prospective players ask him are "how much money will I make and how much playing time will I get?"

My point here isn't to pass judgment or ascribe blame to players, coaches, or schools, but to explore for several minutes what perhaps underlies this dynamic. The easy answer would be to say money. College athletics is a big business, after all, and it seems to me reasonable that the athletes should, to some degree, share in the monetary fruits of their labors. But I think the explosion of transferring and NIL speaks to something deeper and more universal we all share.

We, as human beings, are inherently dissatisfied. We want something better and different. More glorious. More glamorous. We are restless. We are in a perpetual state of longing, of wanting to upgrade, to transfer. I'll be happy when I get a car...or a new car...or a girlfriend...or a raise...or a promotion...or a remodeled kitchen. Things will be different and better when I'm a senior...or when I get the lead in the play...or more playing time...or have a different teacher or coach...or more likes...or when I'm more muscular...or when I'm home...or when I'm in college...or when I'm on my own...or when I move to another part of the country.

We all want to transfer.

Why are we perpetually dissatisfied, in search of the newest, the next, the better, the best?

And will any transfer ever fulfill us?

The Biblical view on our chronic restlessness is that we were created ultimately not for earthly citizenship in a broken world, but we were made for heavenly citizenship in a perfect one. The prolific British author and Oxford and Cambridge professor, the late C.S. Lewis, puts it this way: “If we find ourselves with a desire that nothing in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that we were made for another world.” We were designed to love perfectly and be loved perfectly. We were designed to live in a paradise, to walk in the presence of God, to marvel at the beauty of creation, of one another, of God. We were designed, as our motto states, to glorify and enjoy God forever.

But we don’t fully experience any of that. Yes, we get glimpses or foretastes of it on occasion, but we, as fallen, sinful men and women, are selfish, prideful, and greedy. We live in conflict, individually and collectively, and in regular disobedience to God.

The incongruence between what we were created for and what we experience is a vast chasm that produces disequilibrium, distress, and dissatisfaction.

Somewhere, though, in the recesses of our hearts, souls and minds, we sense that there is something better than who we are and how we live. Paraphrasing, I think, C.S. Lewis and Tim Keller, we hear echoes of this something better—of where we came from, of what we were designed for, of what we’ve lost, of what we long for, of what we are destined for. Thus, we are all inherently restless and dissatisfied, hard-wired and programmed with a desire for an upgrade, for a transfer.

But we seek shallow transfers. The problem is that our earthly transfers won’t ultimately fulfill or satisfy us. No matter what we may achieve, no matter our relationships, no matter our power or prestige, no matter our games or grades, no matter our money or muscles, no matter our ages or stages, we will long and want, be thirsty and hungry. We will want another transfer. And then another. And then another.



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The band U2 titled a song, "I still haven't found what I'm looking for." That's an apt anthem for our age. Mick Jagger sang, "I can't get no satisfaction."

Jesus put it this way in talking to a woman at a well about to draw her daily water: "Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, but whoever drinks of the water that I will give him will never be thirsty again."

What we need are not the usual, worldly transfers we seek that leave us thirsty and dissatisfied. We need a very different transfer. A transfer we can't earn, buy, or win. A transfer made for us, done for us, paid for us...a transfer into the purpose and essence and beauty of who we are...a transfer to that ultimate something better our souls sense.

Later this month, while we are on spring break, Christians around the world will celebrate Easter, which commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus, whom they believe to be the Son of God. The Bible teaches us that God sent Jesus on a mission to rescue us because we are helplessly and hopelessly alienated from Him and His purpose and plan for us in perfect fellowship with Him and harmony with one another. Despite our best efforts, some of which are good and noble, we have no capacity or path or worthiness to reach God. So He sent Jesus to us, as a transfer, from the glory of heaven to the mess of the earth. On paper, it was a terrible transfer for Him, like going from the starting QB for national champs Michigan to being a third stringer on a community college's flag football team. It makes no sense. Why would Jesus possibly leave the glory and comforts of heaven to be marginalized, mistreated, mocked, and murdered? Why would God send Him to do this? Why would Jesus agree to this awful transfer?

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Because of love. Personal, powerful love for each one of us. Because He's our Father. Because He made each of us in His image. Because we need the love. Because we need to be rescued.

Jesus transferred in humility. He could have struck the ultimate NIL deal from heaven. He was the Son of God after all, present for and involved with the creation of the universe. He has a majesty and power we can't possibly grasp. But He was born in a dirty manger and grew up in a backwoods town. He had no physical beauty. He wasn't a member of the upper class, educated, or elite. Instead, he served, healed, and taught. He washed the dirty feet of His disciples. He hung out with the downtrodden and disenfranchised. He didn't seek fame or celebrity...or even comfort. He said the first would be last. He chose not to have the stuff that NIL sponsors want...the stuff you and I usually crave.

And then He died for us, a brutal, unfair death on a cross, even though He'd lived a perfect life. He died for us to take on our sins, to pay for them, to have them removed from our records. And then three days later, He rose from the dead, that we too one day would also rise. And He gave us His perfect record, so that we could be reconciled to God, so we could return one day to enjoy the purpose and perfection of fellowship with God.

It was the ultimate transfer. Jesus gave us His perfection and paid for our sins. God's wrath was transferred to Him, absorbed by Him, and His perfection was imputed to us.

He transferred down so that we would be transferred up.

With Jesus making the ultimate transfer for us, we should have less attachments to the shallow earthly transfers that can so easily captivate and capture us. We may still strive for excellence and achievement, and that's fine and good, but it's different when it's not your North Star...when it's not your purpose, your god, when you don't have consuming pressure to perform. It's good to seek friendships, relationships, and love, but it's different when you already know you are perfectly loved by a perfect God. It's fine to enjoy fine things in life, including money and material possessions, but it's a totally different thing to enjoy God. It's good to have freedom in life, but it's a very different freedom to be freed from your sins, guilt, and shame. It's good to be a moral person, but it's different to experience God's grace and extend grace and gratitude to others. There is an unmatched peace, joy, and freedom that only God can give. And He wants that for you. He loves you and wants you and pursues you.



And He invites you into the transfer portal. His transfer portal. Unlike the college transfer portal, you don't have to be good or strong or talented or elite to enter His transfer portal. To the contrary, you just have to be humble and hungry, acknowledging your shortcomings and sins. It's an easy transfer portal, open to all.

He invites you to join His team. Transfer your worries and burdens to Him. Transfer your sins to Him. Transfer your affections and focus to Him. And receive His transfer to you. His love. His beauty. His guidance. His future. Even His name, image, and likeness. He offers it all to you...at no cost to you, for He has paid it for you, through Jesus' sacrifice, as the ultimate act of love and grace.

On Monday night, April 8, some college basketball team will cut down the nets around 11:00 pm in Glendale, Arizona, as they are crowned NCAA champions. As much as that crown means and represents, God gives us a far greater crown—a crown of conquering sin and death, a crown of resurrection...an eternal crown...an Easter crown. As hard as the basketball champions will have worked and sacrificed to earn their crown, God gives us His crown—one we didn't have to work for and one we could never win. He simply gifts us a perfect and eternal crown. He simply transfers it to us, along even with His name, image, and likeness. We get not just the crown; we get the perfection and beauty of Jesus.

It's the greatest transfer in human history...and the ultimate NIL deal. "Do you want it?" He asks. "Do you want it?"