

We were all deeply saddened by the death of Derrick Thomas and of the others who lost their lives in icy traffic accidents several weeks ago. In all cases that day, the people who died were loved by a community of family and friends and they are dearly missed. In Derrick's case our community lost a man who had won admiration for his athletic ability on the football field and for his outreach to needy children off the field. Tens of thousands of mourners crowded the local sports facilities to pay their last respects. Television stations devoted hours of coverage; the print media gave up dozens of pages.

Since the accident other particulars have surfaced about Derrick's life. He was speeding that day. He was not wearing a safety belt. He had fathered at least seven children by at least five mothers. He died without a will. This man, as a child of God, deserves our prayers and his family merits our pity. But one does wonder about the nature of our community when we lionize a figure in this way. We overlook the way the man lived and the way he died because he had achieved the status of sports celebrity.

In baseball the John Rocker case bears some similarities. Rocker disparaged ethnic minorities, immigrants, and gays in sweeping statements published a few months ago. Baseball's commissioner fined him and put him on probation. However, on appeal, Rocker now must pay only a fraction of his fine and will be back on the playing field shortly. There has been little public outcry, because Rocker is a sports celebrity.

I play back these events wondering what would have happened if other people had performed them. Suppose it was Mayor Barnes speeding in the car that January day, not wearing a seatbelt, and word got out that she was the parent of a number of children by several different partners. Suppose it was Bishop Boland. Would tens of thousands of mourners have poured out for the funeral? Would people be sporting buttons to show their support for the deceased? Suppose your worst opinions of racial prejudice were printed in a national news magazine. Would you still have a job the next day?

In some professions we hold people to a high moral code of conduct. In other professions we let them get away with misbehavior, and we do it on a national scale.

St. Paul had a similar problem with the church at Corinth. He claimed to have the profession of an apostle. People expected a very high code of conduct out of apostles, and Paul didn't fit their bill. He seemed afflicted, perplexed, persecuted, and struck down. He suffered too much. People thought he was dying. They didn't want that kind of a leader. Paul argued this is precisely the kind of leader you do want in Christianity. It's the kind of leader Jesus was -- subject to persecutions, subject to death, but able to overcome it all.

Christians will always be held to a higher code of conduct for a very simple reason. We expect moral behavior out of others. In a society where heroes are few and political leaders are scrutinized for their faults rather than for their goodness, we create heroes out of some figures whose moral behavior is disappointing. Under these circumstances it is very hard for Christians to esteem good moral behavior, but essential that

we do.