

The Act of Worship (Serving - Chapter 6)

n/a

Ready:

And Jesus answered him, “It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.”

Luke 4:8

Set

If you want to know how much an athlete loves his or her particular sport, find out about that athlete’s daily routine. The basketball player might shoot hundreds of jump shots and free throws. The baseball or softball player will likely spend an entire afternoon in the batting cage. The weightlifter can probably be found doing reps in the gym before and after class. The cross-country runner can usually be spotted jogging along the city’s sidewalks.

Why do these athletes discipline themselves to such regimented and demanding workouts? They put in the time because they are driven to succeed. They are driven to be the best. And, ultimately, it’s this simple: They have a passion for athletic competition.

Ruth Riley can relate. She too is very passionate about her sport of choice—basketball. So for the WNBA star, working out during the off-season, staying late after practice to work on post moves, or watching a game film when everyone else has called it a day is certainly not a foreign concept. Going that extra mile and a half is fueled by passion, even when the hard work is far from fun.

It kind of reminds Riley of her days on the farm back in Macy, Indiana, where she and her brother and sister were raised by their mother, Sharon. She believes that her strict upbringing kept her on the straight and narrow, even when she fought the disciplinarian oversight as an older teenager. Riley also explains that “going to church was not optional,” and it was serving in the mundane things that taught her invaluable lessons that would fully apply to her life a few years later.

“We would stay late after church and vacuum or help out by doing other things,” Riley says. “And there were times when I’d think, *Gosh, I really don’t feel like doing this right now*. But that’s just when you have to take a step back and look at the big picture. Honestly, sometimes it’s just a matter of doing it because you know that’s what God has called you to do. It’s about being obedient.”

At the time, Riley didn't know that her willingness to fight through her selfish desires in order to serve was the first in a series of steps toward understanding the concept of worship. Just like the athletes who work on the boring fundamentals in order to improve their game and prove their love of their sport, she was worshiping God with her service.

But before she could realize that truth, Riley first had a different kind of growing to do. At birth, she was 25 inches long and jokes that she "really didn't stop growing." By the time she was 12 years old, Riley was already six feet tall. Although lanky and uncoordinated during her early teen years, she gravitated toward such sports as volleyball, track and—the most obvious choice for a Hoosier—basketball.

When Riley's athleticism finally caught up with her size, letters from NCAA Division 1 colleges started to trickle into her mailbox. After playing Amateur Athletic Union ball between her freshman and sophomore high-school years, coaching staffs really started to take notice. But the self-proclaimed homebody didn't want to go far from Macy, so Riley only took one campus visit—to Notre Dame, which is located in South Bend, Indiana.

Even though she was less than two hours from the farm in Macy, Riley's short-distance excursion was vital to her growth as a basketball player and, more importantly, as a Christian. At that point, she says her mom sat back and allowed her to choose which direction to go. Riley then "definitely chose to seek Him even more."

In 1997, Riley's freshman year, Notre Dame had a policy that did not allow ministries such as Fellowship of Christian Athletes to operate on campus. Instead, she and the other Christian athletes at Notre Dame would get together for independently led Bible studies and prayer times.

Ironically, that all changed in the fall of 2002—18 months after Riley's graduation—when first-year head football coach Tyrone Willingham (now with the University of Washington) petitioned the university to make such organizations accessible to its students. It was actually Willingham's secondary coach, Trent Walters (now with the Philadelphia Eagles), who urged the head coach to get involved.

Riley's college career met all of her expectations and then some. She was the starting center in all but seven games and became a force to reckon with on both ends of the court. Riley received First Team All-American honors as a junior and a senior, and in her final year she received the prestigious Naismith Award along with Associated Press Player of the Year honors.

But nothing can match the feeling Riley experienced in the 2001 NCAA tournament. After making its way to the Final Four and ultimately the championship game against Purdue, Notre Dame trailed the Lady Boilermakers 66-64 late in the second half, when Riley tied the contest with a field goal. Then, with 5.8 seconds remaining, she drew a foul and made both free throws to secure the win. Riley was also named the Final Four's Most Outstanding Player.

The next month, Riley was drafted by the WNBA's Miami Sol, where she played two seasons before the team disbanded. After spending the off-season playing in Spain, she was selected by Detroit in a dispersal draft. For the next four seasons, Riley was a key contributor to the Shock and enjoyed WNBA championship wins in 2003 and 2006. She was also named an Eastern Conference All-Star in 2005.

During that time, Riley kept busy during the off-seasons. She traveled to Athens in 2004 and helped the United States secure a gold medal at the Summer Olympics. She also played two years with the Colorado Chill, a National Women's Basketball League team and was part of a championship season in 2005. Riley's hoops excursions also sent her to the Polish League prior to the 2007 WNBA season.

Riley laughs when she recalls how tentative she was about leaving home for college. Since then, she has traveled throughout the United States and has visited many foreign countries. But the most important development, Riley says, has been her rapid spiritual maturity that may not have happened otherwise.

"It wasn't until I was on my own and I got into the professional world and had to take care of myself and had the pressure of playing professional athletes," Riley says. "That's when I truly relied on my relationship with God and became more diligent in seeking Him and reading the Word and trying to understand His will for my life more."

In February 2007, Riley was traded to the San Antonio Silver Stars. Since her arrival in San Antonio, she has enjoyed the unique environment afforded by the team. "Everyone on our entire team is a Christian," Riley says. "They're not only Christians, but they desire to get together and study and pray for each other. The coaching staff is made up of all Christians as well. It's an unusual setting, but it's pretty amazing to be in the professional world where you have so many pressures and outside forces and to come in and know that you have that common bond."

As a professional athlete, Riley has been afforded numerous opportunities to get involved with various communities. In Miami—where she still resides—she has worked with the city's Rescue Mission for the homeless and low-income families. Riley has also spoken at area schools and helped build a playground in a poor neighborhood.

But in 2006, Riley stepped out in a big way when she traveled to Nairobi, Kenya, as part of a group of people hoping to get involved in finding solutions for the HIV/AIDS pandemic. After falling in love with the people, she returned to Africa two more times, with trips to Mali and South Africa. These experiences opened her eyes to the true meaning of serving.

"Serving is putting everyone before yourself," Riley says. "To me it's more about humility and a willingness to be there for others. Service doesn't have to be an organized event. It's giving of your time, which for a lot of people is the hardest thing to do. It's honestly just making yourself available and willingly giving your time to somebody else."

Riley has drawn inspiration from biblical examples of servants such as Mary of Bethany, who selflessly blessed Jesus with her time and her possessions. She also thinks of the apostle Paul, who gave up his way of life to follow Christ and in doing so opened himself up to beatings, torture and, as Riley says, "every terrible thing you can imagine."

But for Riley, there is no greater example of a true servant's heart than the life of Jesus as

recorded in the New Testament's four Gospels. "You just have to open the book of Matthew and see that Jesus came not to be served but to serve," Riley says. "Throughout the whole New Testament, you see so many examples of Him serving others and putting others first. That's always been something that has been relevant to me in my faith and an understanding that serving is a part of [my faith]."

As part of Riley's spiritual growth process, she has also learned that the act of serving others from a pure heart and out of obedience to God is truly a form of worship. She points to Luke 4, where Jesus was fasting 40 days in the wilderness while dealing with a series of temptations from Satan. After the devil offered Jesus authority over the kingdoms of the world in exchange for Christ's worship (see Luke 4:5-7), Jesus rebuked Satan by responding, "It is written: Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only" (Luke 4:8).

It might not be obvious at first glance, but Riley believes that Jesus' correlation between worship and serving is quite clear. And the greater our love for God, the easier it becomes to step out and do those things that may not be fun and may not reflect our personal desires but are key to giving glory to the Father.

"If you love God, you'll obey Him," Riley says. "So your act of worship is service. If you're truly worshiping and loving and admiring who God is and what He's done in your life, it's going to be a natural process to serve. . . . My prayer is just, 'Change my heart.' I feel like your heart should be a true reflection of God and what He would want you to be doing. Just in your pure desire to follow Him, I think that service comes out of that by default—by just wanting to do what He's put before you. I just feel so blessed with what He's given me [and want to] use that in any way, whether it's talking about Him or just showing people who He is."

Just like every follower of Christ, Riley also has those moments when human nature gets in the way of serving. But that's when she says we must rely on the Holy Spirit to give us strength to push away from our selfishness and share God's message of hope and love with others through our actions and our words.

"When you don't feel like doing something, you can just pray and ask Him to create in you a heart for service," Riley says. "I think you have to be realistic that serving isn't always going to be the first thing on your list, but that's when you pray and ask God to change your heart about the situation and give you the energy to do it."

Another biblical truth that helps Riley is found in 1 Corinthians 12:4-6, where Paul writes, "Now there are different kinds of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are different ministries, but the same Lord. There are different activities, but the same God is active in everyone and everything."

"The thing I like about these verses is that God doesn't ask us to go out of our way and create a way to serve Him or serve others," Riley says. "We are just to remain available, and the opportunities come for us to use what He has already given us. Just like we don't all have the same gifts, we don't all serve the same way. There are so many ways to serve. Most of the time, God calls us to serve Him with what we are already passionate about and with the gifts that He has already given us. Don't compare yourself to others and think that we should all serve the same way."

Riley is especially attuned to the plight of athletes and coaches, whom she believes are automatically role models within their circles of influence, no matter how big or how small

those circles are. That status opens up the doors for countless opportunities to serve.

“People are watching what you do,” she says. “Your time and your words mean a lot to them. So the way you interact with people, you can use that as a testimony, and it’s such a small thing—whether it’s signing an autograph or spending time with some of your fans or just how you conduct yourself in general.”

As a professional athlete, Riley is able to serve in more ways than the calendar has days. She sometimes struggles to work everything into her already busy schedule, but she has discovered that serving isn’t always about massive, national campaigns or overseas ministry prospects. In fact, most of the time, it’s the small things that Riley finds end up meaning so much to those who need a helping hand or an encouraging word.

“It’s like sending a care package to a kid who’s sick, and it changes his whole day and his week,” Riley says. “It might be doing mission trips and just knowing that the small amount of time you’ve given does impact your life. You can make a difference. That’s probably the biggest thing—knowing that spending time with people and helping them really makes a difference in the world. I think a lot of people become desensitized to so much of what’s going on and think, *Why bother? It doesn’t matter.* But it does matter. It matters to those people, and it matters to you. That’s the beautiful thing about serving.”

Another benefit of serving that Riley has grown to appreciate is the life-changing effect it has on her priorities and her perspective. Daily issues and minor inconveniences that once seemed so important pale in comparison to the plight of the poor and the hungry. Selfish ambitions that drove her to achieve greatness now hold little significance against the backdrop of entire continents suffering from deadly diseases and devastating pestilences.

For the past decade, Riley has allowed God to perform ongoing surgical procedures on her heart. In the process, she has clearly noticed a difference in her prayer life. Instead of asking what God can do for her, she now asks God what she can do for Him as a servant’s act of worship.

“I look at where my life is going, and I’m just amazed at how God has used me and allowed me to share Him with others,” Riley says. “Just being a vessel is humbling, and it’s amazing that He allows us to do that. He allows us to be a part of who He is and what He’s trying to say to this world.”

Go

1. How much time do you spend pursuing your interests and hobbies? What ultimately drives you to give so much of yourself to those pursuits?
2. When you serve others, do you find yourself doing so out of obligation or with a greater sense of purpose? Read Luke 4:5-8. In this story, Jesus rebuked Satan’s attempt to garner His worship. Why do you think Jesus responded in the way He did in verse 8? What connection can be made between worship and serving based on His words?
3. Ruth Riley says, “When you don’t feel like doing something, you can just pray and ask Him to create in you a heart for serving.” Describe a time when selfishness hindered your desire to serve. How did you overcome human nature in order to fulfill God’s purpose?
4. According to Riley, one hindrance to serving is misperception about what serving is supposed to look like. Read 1 Corinthians 12:4-6. How might this passage open up the

doors to many more opportunities to serve? In what ways do you see yourself using your unique talents, abilities and interests to serve others?

5. Read John 21:15-17. In this passage, which takes place after Jesus' resurrection, Christ tells Peter what he must do to prove his love for Him. Why do you think Jesus asked the same question three times? What does this exchange tell you about the importance of serving others in God's eyes?

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Bible Reference:

1 Corinthians 12



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