

No Excuses (Serving - Chapter 7)

n/a

Ready:

Based on the gift they have received, everyone should use it to serve others, as good managers of the varied grace of God. If anyone speaks, [his speech should be] like the oracles of God; if anyone serves, [his service should be] from the strength God provides, so that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To Him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.

1 Peter 4:10-11

Set

There's something about purpose, something about buying into the concept of destiny that inherently evens the odds.

Nowhere will you find more examples of this principle than in the Bible, where unlikely heroes saved entire nations. Moses was a self-conscious exile with a speech problem, yet God used him to free the Israelites from Egyptian slavery. David was an undersized shepherd boy living under the shadow of his strong, able-bodied older brothers; still he was empowered to kill the mammoth Philistine warrior Goliath and rescue his people from certain defeat. Mary was a teenage girl from a nondescript lineage, but God called her to be the mother of Jesus, the Savior of the world.

Michael Chang knows a little something about purpose and destiny. The former international tennis star—often compared to David—spent 16 years on the court, slaying proverbial giants that literally stood head and shoulders above his 5' 9", 160-pound frame. He did so with the understanding that God had blessed him with quickness, accuracy and lightning-fast reflexes—the abilities necessary to be a competitive force.

Most tennis historians will likely agree that Chang's most famous match took place in the fourth round of the 1989 French Open. As the fifteenth-seeded player, the 17-year-old Chang was given little chance to pull off the upset against the number one player and three-time former French Open champion Ivan Lendl. True to expectations, Lendl won the first two sets 6-4, 6-4 and was up a break in the opening game of the third set. Chang broke Lendl's serve on the next game, however, and came back to win the set 6-3.

Even then, most believed Lendl would ultimately prevail. This was further solidified when during the fourth set, Chang began suffering from severe leg cramps. He fought valiantly, using creative tactics such as repetitive lob shots, devouring bananas and guzzling down liquids during every break in the action. Chang won the fourth set 6-3 to even the match at two sets apiece, but he quickly found himself losing 2-1 in the fifth. The cramps were

especially painful when sliding hard on the red clay or charging after the ball. That's when Chang's mind gravitated toward the thought of bowing out of the match.

"I thought it wouldn't be so bad," Chang recalls. "I'd get a lot of pats on the back in the locker room; and the press would say, 'Great valiant effort, but bad luck that you lost.' And I thought, *You know, it wouldn't be such a bad thing.* I mean, I wasn't supposed to win under those circumstances anyway.

"So I actually started walking toward the chair umpire, and I got to about the service line; and the Spirit just totally convicted me. It was interesting because, the first thought that came to my mind was, *Michael, what are you doing?* And I thought to myself, *Well, I'm going to default this match.* So the Spirit convicted me by kind of saying, 'Well, Michael, you've got to understand that the winning and the losing have never been your job to take care of. The winning and losing have always been God's job to take care of. But your job has always been to go out there and compete and give 100 percent.'"

Still very unsure of his physical status and with the outcome very much in doubt, Chang walked back onto the court. It might sound cliché, but he literally began to take the game point by point, relying on an acute sense of focus and determination. If Chang had the opportunity to go for a winner, he'd hit the ball as hard as his body would allow. And one time, he even resorted to the outlandish tactic of using an underhand serve, which took Lendl by surprise and broke his concentration.

Then the unexpected happened. The momentum began to swing in Chang's direction. He started winning points, and those points turned into games; and before he knew it, he had won the fifth set (6-3) and the match (3-2). To this day, Chang occasionally goes back and watches video of the contest and admittedly "can't understand or comprehend how that match was won." He has, however, been able to decipher multiple purposes achieved as a result of the victory, one of which was the uplifting of an entire culture—the Chinese people.

"The match with Lendl is evidence of what God can do and [evidence of] His power," Chang says. "Certainly, being 17, I was not expected to win; and I wasn't expected to come back from two sets to love down against Lendl. But God has His funny ways of showing His power, and He has His funny ways of allowing the weak things of the world to shame the strong and allowing the ordinary things of the world to become extraordinary. That match was one of those times."

Chang went on to defeat Stefan Edberg in the finals to become the youngest winner of a Grand Slam tournament. More importantly, he learned a number of lessons. First and foremost, he learned to never give up. He says that truth has stayed with him for years. His French Open experience often reminds him to stick with it when difficult circumstances abound. But another piece of Chang's education during those two weeks in Paris came from the realization that the words written in Romans 8:28 are absolutely true: "We know that all things work together for the good of those who love God; those who are called according to His purpose."

"I certainly walked away with a better appreciation for how God made me in stature or being Chinese," Chang says. "I used to question that when I was younger. But I realize now that both of those things were all to give God greater glory. I think if I was 6'2" or 6'3" and could overpower everybody, then it would be much easier for people to say, 'Well, Michael did it in his own strength.' But instead there's no question about why things happened the way they

happened.”

Chang has never been one to make excuses for why or how things happen. This invaluable principle was imparted into his life at a very young age. He was born in Hoboken, New Jersey, to Chinese immigrants who met in the United States. Joe Chang was born in Taiwan and came to America for graduate school. Betty Chang was born in New Delhi, India. Her father was a Chinese diplomat to the Dominican Republic. Her being born in India was a result of her parents' frequent international travel. Like Joe, Betty's family ultimately migrated to the United States as a matter of protection from political, civil and social unrest in their homeland.

Chang's parents settled into new jobs and started a family. By the time he was seven years old, Chang was playing tennis along with his brother, Carl. The siblings had grown up watching his mom and dad play recreationally. Joe Chang, in fact, played in several company tournaments.

As Chang developed his game, he began playing in public events around town. That led to entries in some junior tournaments and eventually the national amateur circuit. At the age of 12, he claimed the United States Tennis Association Junior Hard Court singles title. A year later, he claimed the Fiesta Bowl 16s bracket championship. In 1987, a 15-year old Chang won the USTA Boys 18s Hardcourt event and the Boys 18s National title. He also became the youngest player to win a main draw match at the U.S. Open by defeating Paul McNamee in the first round.

Before then, Chang had never considered turning professional. If anything, his parents thought their sons might be good enough to secure tennis scholarships for college. But now, he was on the road to a full-blown career in tennis. Strangely, Chang was unlike many of the day's young stars who came from affluent backgrounds and were practically bred to succeed in the sport.

Instead, his family charted a more difficult path. His mother quit her job and followed him for the first four years of his career. Eventually, Carl—who played doubles with Chang early on—would set aside his personal aspirations and serve as his brother's coach. Those sacrifices have given the International Tennis Hall of Fame inductee a greater appreciation for all of his achievements.

“I think that everybody has to go through a learning process,” Chang says. “I'm certainly no different than that. But I think the difference for me was the things that I learned through the Bible and through being in church and from those people around me who are in leadership roles. My mom and dad are probably two of the best examples of that. Growing up, neither of my parents came from wealthy families. They were very much middle-class families, and they didn't have a honeymoon until their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary. All of their extra money would also be put toward my brother and me for tennis lessons or gifts that we wanted and different things like that. My parents sacrificed everything they had for us.”

It didn't take long for Chang to realize that his small stature wasn't the only thing that made him stand out on tour. He was one of the few Christians in the game. In fact, Chang says he can count on one hand how many believers he came across in 16 years as a professional. Although he never felt persecuted or rejected—most of his peers actually respected him for his beliefs—he certainly had moments when being an outspoken defender of the faith put him at a disadvantage. His experience at the 1989 French Open was particularly difficult.

“After the match [against Lendl] was over, people asked, ‘Michael, why did you win today?’” Chang remembers. “And I said, ‘Well, I won because of the Lord Jesus Christ.’ The following day, the press that I got was unbelievably negative. My next three matches were played under conditions that I’ve never experienced in my career. I’ve never had crowds literally boo me. When I walked onto the court and warmed up, they weren’t just rooting for my opponent, they were actually rooting against me. It was a really strange feeling.”

Fortunately, Chang wasn’t alone. While he had no one to lean on in the locker room, his family did provide the spiritual support he needed to press forward. Throughout his career, he always had at least one member of his family traveling with him.

“That provided a great deal of fellowship and also an opportunity to pray together, to learn together and to grow together,” Chang says. “I didn’t get a chance to go to church as much as I would have liked, but I feel that God understood my situation. My Sundays were usually spent playing in a final or traveling to my next destination. But through listening to sermons and listening to music and fellowshiping with whoever was with me, God really taught us a great deal as a family about Him and who He is and what our purpose was out there on the tennis court.”

Supported by his family, Chang strung together one of the most decorated careers for any American player. He won 34 singles titles and finished second in 24 tournaments. Chang was a member of the 1990 U.S. Davis Cup championship team, and he helped lead the 1993 U.S. World Team Cup squad to victory. He was ranked as high as number two in the world during the 1996 season; and by the time he retired in 2003, he had more than \$19 million in prize earnings.

Aside from racking up impressive finishes and earnings during his career, Chang was also known as one of the most active players in the realm of community service and humanitarian-related causes. In fact, in 1999, Chang established the Chang Family Foundation as part of an effort to reach people for Jesus through local community and international programs.

In 2002, the foundation launched the Christian Sports League, which partners with local churches and ministries as a way to share the gospel through organized and competitive sports. The league is currently operational in Seattle, Washington, and Orange County, California, with plans to open branches throughout the western United States and beyond.

Just as it was during his career, Chang continues to have a “no excuses” mentality in life. This is particularly true when it comes to serving. In this realm, Chang’s efforts have only increased since leaving the game, and the topic is one for which he has an overwhelming passion. One thing Chang has observed is that many people use fear and uncertainty as an excuse for not helping others. He says this is a natural emotion but can be dealt with much easier after asking oneself some tough questions.

“Sometimes people are uncomfortable when they get outside of their comfort zone, and they don’t know how God is going to use them,” Chang says. “But the question isn’t how God is going to use you. The question is really, Are you going to have an open heart to serve and to be stretched? That’s the real question. It’s not, Am I old enough? Am I talented enough? Am I smart enough? Do I know the Bible well enough? It has nothing to do with these things. The question is, Are you ready to be used by God?”

But Chang contends that sometimes it just boils down to pride. This is especially true for those who are in positions of prominence or those who come from wealthy families where entitlement may be part of the equation.

“The world’s natural inclination for people in those situations is for them to want people to serve them,” Chang says. “But if you’re in a situation where you’re able to encourage people, to support people, to go out of your way to help people and serve them in various ways, it makes you stand out. People are going to wonder why you do things the way that you do. For me, the biggest reason is because my Lord and Savior is that way, and I try to be like Jesus.”

For those who, unlike Chang, were not blessed with strong examples while growing up, Chang quickly points to that ultimate model of serving: Christ. But he doesn’t stop there. In order to drive the final nail into a coffin full of excuses or reasons not to serve, Chang explains that a working relationship with the Holy Spirit is necessary so that we can all answer the call.

“The Spirit is the one that convicts you and gives you a heart to go out and use your gifts and talents to make a difference,” Chang says. “That in itself is serving. God doesn’t give you gifts and talents so you can use them for your own selfish purposes. He gives you those gifts so you can bless others.”

Go

1. Michael Chang is often compared to the biblical hero David. Who are some other people (from the Bible, from history or from modern day society) who have overcome immense odds to do great things? What character traits do you think those people might have in common?
2. Chang once questioned things such as his small stature and his heritage. Read Romans 8:28. Can you describe a time when you questioned God about certain aspects of your existence? How might this Scripture give you a peace about such concerns?
3. Read 1 Peter 4:10-11. What are some talents and abilities with which God has blessed you? How does this Scripture challenge you to use those to serve others? Peter tells us that our service should be “from the strength God provides.” How might that admonition make the challenge of serving easier to face?
4. Chang says, “Sometimes people are uncomfortable when they get outside of their comfort zone and they don’t know how God is going to use them.” What are some excuses you are tempted to give when it comes to serving? What are some ways you can move past the excuses into an attitude of humility and service?
5. Chang tells a story about how he was serving rice and was concerned that there wouldn’t be enough. He says, “When God sees where your heart is and you’re doing His work, He always provides.” How does the promise of provision empower you to serve regardless of the circumstances?

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Bible Reference:

1 Peter 4



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