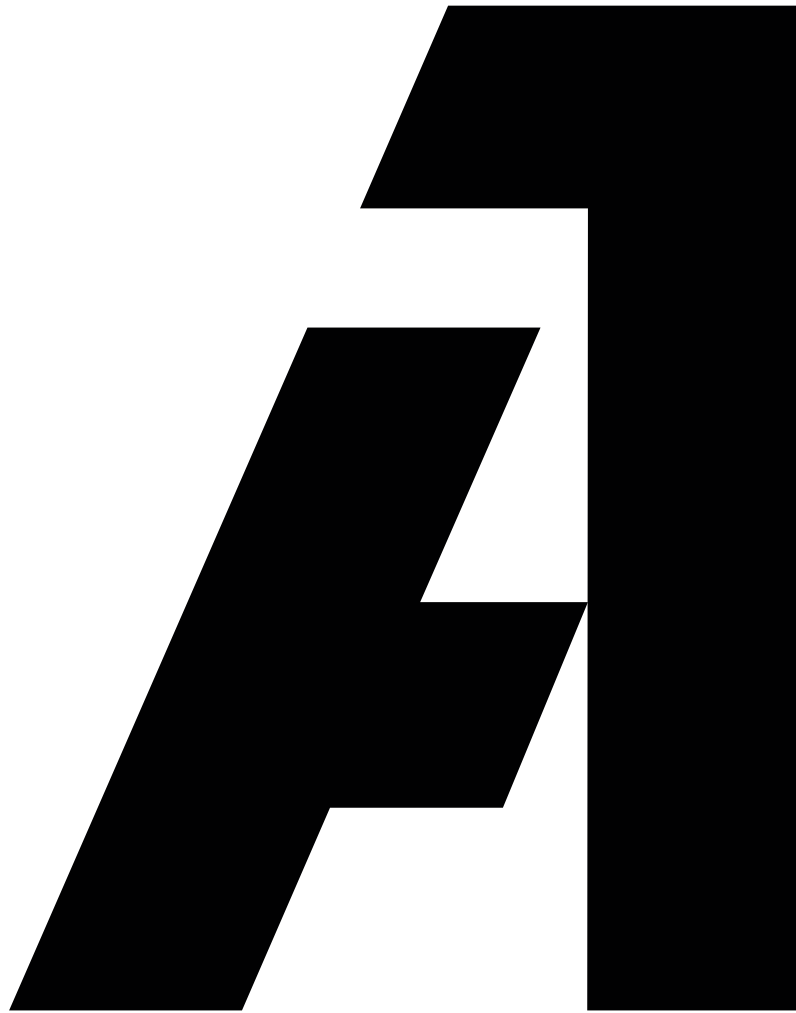


AUDIENCE OF ONE



WHO OR WHAT DO I WORSHIP?

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PREFACE

This is the first book in the Ultimate Training Series—a series aimed at unpacking the five principles taught almost predominantly at Athletes in Action's Ultimate Training Camp.

“The Principles” are the Gospel applied to sport, experienced through sport, and spoken in the language of sport.

These five principles are part of a unique curriculum developed by our Athletes in Action staff over the last 45 years. They will give you a biblical framework to help you see sport as an opportunity to worship God, so that you can participate in sport in a way that honors Him.

Each principle takes a different story from the Bible and applies the biblical principle from that story to sport and competition. They cover topics like: idolatry, motivation, identity, growth, pain and perspective.

The beautiful thing about these principles is that they are God's principles from His word and apply to life beyond sport as well. Don't limit them to your athletic career. Apply them to your studies, business career, relationships, finances—every area of life.

INTRODUCTION

God created us to worship.

Worship is not just what we do, it's who we are. In the same way that we need to breathe to keep living, God has hardwired the need to worship into our DNA. Worship is about giving ultimate worth or value to someone or something. It's bowing down with our heart, mind, and soul to something or someone. Worship is the foundation that the phrase "Audience of One" rests on. Because our propensity to worship never stops, we need to take aim and direct it at the proper target. We need to direct it towards an Audience of One.

Decades ago, *Athletes in Action*—and subsequently other organizations—began talking at their camps to collegiate and professional-level athletes about playing with an "Audience of One" in mind. The intent of the phrase is to help Christian athletes remember that everywhere in life—even in a stadium full of people—"in [God] we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), and it's his pleasure we should pursue above all else.

Easier said than done, of course, since it's normal to get caught up in the evaluation of the many audiences that surround us each day—the friends, family, coaches, social media followers, fans, etc.—but ultimately, there's only One whose opinion about us really matters.

When we grow in our understanding of that truth and direct our daily worship to God through our sport, we experience the contentment we long for—and God gets the glory. But we often drift in our worship. We become obsessed with the attention offered to us from lesser audiences. Their opinion of who we are supersedes God's, forcing us to live and play primarily for them instead of him.

So what happens when our worship is not directed at God? What happens when we worship created things rather than the creator? The Bible has a word for this type of misplaced worship: idolatry. And it stands in direct opposition to an Audience of One.

Throughout this book, we will interact with a story in the Bible from 1 Kings that speaks into the issue of idolatry and divided worship. Although this story took place thousands of years ago, we can relate to the text as we still fall into similar misplaced behavioral and heart patterns.

The story pushes us to make a decision. If sport has become an unhealthy idol for us, are we willing to make whatever adjustment is necessary to let God have his rightful place in our lives? Will we put our idols to death and direct our worship towards only God?

It's worth noting that in putting your idol to death, we are not advocating for you to quit your sport. Take a deep breath. What God wants is for you to repent of the idolatrous role that sport has played in your life and then to view your sport differently moving forward. Our sport isn't the problem. We are the problem.

Most idols start as good gifts that God has given us that we misuse by turning into gods. Sports are one of these good gifts from the Lord. What if we began to use sports as a vehicle to drive us closer to God, instead of using God to get more out of our sport? We get this backwards. For God to be our Audience of One, we need to use his gifts, like sports, to draw us deeper into relationship with him.

1 KINGS 18:20-40

So Ahab sent to all the people of Israel and gathered the prophets together at Mount Carmel. And Elijah came near to all the people and said, "How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him." And the people did not answer him a word. Then Elijah said to the people, "I, even I only, am left a prophet of the Lord, but Baal's prophets are 450 men. Let two bulls be given to us, and let them choose one bull for themselves and cut it in pieces and lay it on the wood, but put no fire to it. And I will prepare the other bull and lay it on the wood and put no fire to it. And you call upon the name of your god, and I will call upon the name of the Lord, and the God who answers by fire, he is God." And all the people answered, "It is well spoken." Then Elijah said to the prophets of Baal, "Choose for yourselves one bull and prepare it first, for you are many, and call upon the name of your god, but put no fire to it." And they took the bull that was given them, and they prepared it and called upon the name of Baal from morning until noon, saying, "O Baal, answer us!" But there was no voice, and no one answered. And they limped around the altar that they had made. And at noon Elijah mocked them, saying, "Cry aloud, for he is a god. Either he is musing, or he is relieving himself, or he is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and must be awakened." And they cried aloud and cut themselves after their custom with swords and lances, until the blood gushed out upon them. And as midday passed, they raved on until the time of the offering of the oblation, but there was no voice. No one answered; no one paid attention.

Then Elijah said to all the people, "Come near to me." And all the people came near to him. And he repaired the altar of the Lord that had been thrown down. Elijah took twelve stones, according to the number of the tribes of the sons of Jacob, to whom the word of the Lord came, saying, "Israel shall be your name," and with the stones he built an altar in the name of the Lord. And he made a trench about the altar, as great as would contain two seahs of seed. And he put the wood in order and cut the bull in pieces and laid it on the wood. And he said, "Fill four jars with water and pour it on the burnt offering and on the wood." And he said, "Do it a second time." And they did it a second time. And he said, "Do it a third time." And they did it a third time. And the water ran around the altar and filled the trench also with water.

And at the time of the offering of the oblation, Elijah the prophet came near and said, "O Lord, God of Abraham, Isaac, and Israel, let it be known this day that you are God in Israel, and that I am your servant, and that I have done all these things at your word. Answer me, O Lord, answer me, that this people may know that you, O Lord, are God, and that you have turned their hearts back." Then the fire of the Lord fell and consumed the burnt offering and the wood and the stones and the dust, and licked up the water that was in the trench. And when all the people saw it, they fell on their faces and said, "The Lord, he is God; the Lord, he is God." And Elijah said to them, "Seize the prophets of Baal; let not one of them escape." And they seized them. And Elijah brought them down to the brook Kishon and slaughtered them there.

1

DIVIDED WORSHIP

*Choosing Between the Living
God or Counterfeit Gods*

The Bible doesn't really talk about sports. Hopefully that isn't a huge surprise for you. Occasionally, the Apostle Paul, who wrote the bulk of the New Testament, uses athletic-type imagery to make his point. But organized sports have come a long way since the Isthmian games (the first form of organized sports in Corinth and potentially the backdrop for much of Paul's athletic imagery in scripture).

Despite this reality, there is a story in the Old Testament that has many elements of a classic sports rivalry—even if it has nothing to do with sports.

It can be found in 1 Kings 18:20-40. Before we parachute into the story, let's get caught up to speed on the context preceding it. In the book of Genesis, we learn a few foundational truths that are essential to the story God is telling in his Word:

1. God created everything, and it was good (Genesis 1-2).
2. Mankind sinned and fractured everything, including our relationship with God and the world around us (Genesis 3).
3. God told Abraham that he would bless everyone through Abraham's lineage (Genesis 12).
4. Abraham had a son, Isaac; Isaac had two sons, Jacob and Esau. Jacob, who was renamed Israel, had twelve sons and became the patriarch of the Israelites, God's chosen people (Genesis 21-36).

BIBLICAL CONTEXT

As God's plan begins to unfold—to fix what we broke through our sin—we see God using the Israelites as his chosen people to bless the nations. God's method has always been to use people to reach people.

The Israelites became a nation, Jewish in both ethnicity and religion. They were tasked with following the one true God. Surrounding nations were supposed to see the Israelites and notice something different about how they thought, spoke, and lived. And when these nations asked what was going on, the Israelites were supposed to explain: "We follow the one true God, and you can follow him, too. Let us help you do that."

The problem is the Israelites were human. And just like us, they continued to mess up and not live as God had called them to live. Instead of influencing culture around them, they became the ones being influenced by other nations. The people of Israel saw that other cultures were worshipping other gods and they had kings, too.

Instead of being a leader, Israel became a follower. They saw other nations with kings, and suddenly cries of "We want a king, too!" became commonplace. The irony is that they already served the King of kings, but they refuse to treat him like it. But God wasn't surprised by their cries for a king and he gave them one to satisfy their demands: a guy by the name of Saul.

Saul was an awful king. To the detriment of everyone, he led out of his own insecurity and encouraged people to do ungodly things. He made life worse for Israel. Shocking, right?

After Saul came David. King David led the people of Israel well. We can see God's mercy with David, who the Bible says was "a man after [God's] heart" (Acts 13:22)—even though David committed adultery and murdered. There is no one outside the reach of God's grace and forgiveness.

The next king is David's son, Solomon, who also wound up being a mixed bag as a leader of God's people.

That brings us to the book of 1 Kings. All these different kings after Solomon, king after king, are listed. And some do what's right in the Lord's eyes and some do what's really evil in the Lord's eyes.

What becomes evident is that as the king goes, so go the people. Just envision any team you've ever been on. The culture and atmosphere of the team usually reflects the person who is leading it. That's what is happening in the book of Kings.

**THE CULTURE AND
ATMOSPHERE OF
THE TEAM USUALLY
REFLECTS THE PERSON
WHO IS LEADING IT.**

When we get to Ahab in chapter 16, we learn that he is not a good king. He pursues all sorts of evil in the sight of the Lord, including his choice of Jezebel as a wife. She's serving side-hustle gods—idols—to get what she wants. She doesn't worship the God of the Bible. Ahab takes her as his wife, and she begins to influence the culture to follow these different idols. Again, God is not surprised. He sends a prophet named Elijah to be his mouthpiece and communicate to Ahab that what he is doing is wrong and there will be consequences.

One of these consequences would be a drought, a catastrophic occurrence for people who depend on regular rain in order to eat and drink every day. This is a big deal. Imagine if Amazon suddenly didn't exist, and there were no more grocery stores or restaurants. This is "I hope you have everything you need to survive on your property because nothing else is available for a long time." The Israelites didn't see rain for three years. God finally tells Elijah to go meet Ahab.

This is the context as we enter into 1 Kings 18:20-40. A showdown is about to take place between the prophets of the god that Ahab serves, and the one true God.

Take a second before moving forward and read those twenty verses on your own. As you read it, understand this: the story really happened—but it's also a metaphor for our lives. It's a story about our current predicament.

The story represents a confrontation between our idols and the one true God. It's a story about whatever is competing for the number one spot in your life. Is it sports? A relationship? A career or money? Sex, food, gadgets, knowledge? It's a story about us putting our full trust in anything other than God himself.

DIVIDED WORSHIP = IDOLATRY

What's happening in the text that you just read? Divided worship. It reads like an anecdotal tennis match where the people of God keep going back and forth between choosing the living God or counterfeit gods. The people of God want to follow him. But when God doesn't show up on *their timetable*, they put their trust in the god called Baal instead.

In response, Elijah does what any good prophet should: he challenges the people to do away with their idols and make a choice to follow the one true God. Stop using God when he is convenient and backing out or

turning to other "gods" when things get difficult. Are you all in or all out? When God doesn't provide the rain for them immediately, then they jump back to trusting Baal to provide.

They ignored Deuteronomy 6:5 which calls the Israelites—and us—to "love God with all your heart, soul, strength." All the time, not just when it's easy.

And the result is a half-hearted commitment to God. It's lukewarm. It lacks conviction. It's spineless. And because of it, their worship is both divided and misdirected.

Before we look down on the Israelites' lack of trust, we would do well to look in the mirror and recognize this uncomfortable truth: we do the same today. We trust God to provide our needs for a short time and quickly shift to trusting our sport or something else the next. We are divided in our worship.

Why do we divide our worship? One potential answer: we want to get the most out of life, so we diversify our worship portfolio. Another answer: we fear what God would do if we gave every area of our life fully to him, so we keep a few worldly side-hustles just in case we perceive God is letting us down.

Do you remember walking through the line at the cafeteria with your compartmentalized lunch tray? One section for your vegetables. One section for dessert. One section for the main course. One section for a roll (or more dessert if you could sneak it). If we're not careful, we can treat God like another item at the buffet line. We'll give him a spot, because we know we should or maybe even because we really want him. But we position him as an equal to everything else going on in our lives. Our life ends up looking like an old-school lunch tray that positions God as one option among many. If one area lets us down, we have other areas to compensate for it. It feels safer, because it gives us the illusion of control.

In reality, the idols on our plate control us. And they paralyze us from moving forward.

CAN YOU HEAR THE SILENCE?

Athlete, what's our endgame? How long will we continue to give God a portion of our lives instead of all of it? When will our worship shift from an audience of many to an Audience of One?

If you struggle to answer those questions, you're not alone. Look at verse 21: "And Elijah came near to all the people and said, 'How long will you go limping between two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him.' And the people did not answer him a word."

The people did not answer him a word. Elijah challenges the people's divided worship and they respond with silence.

Don't miss this. The silence is significant. Why are the people silent? Because, like us, they want the answers before they commit. You see, Baal is the Canaanite god of fertility, promising to bring life to bodies and seeds in the ground and to water the earth so it can grow. The people want to know: who is the safer bet? Who will provide the rain they need for crops to grow? Elijah's God, who they can't see but who claims to be the creator and sustainer of all, or Baal, an idol they can see, who promises to bring fertility to the earth?

Like us, they want all of the information necessary when making a decision. And this works, when we are deciding what college to attend and what career path to take. But it doesn't work when deciding whether or not to trust God, because he rarely gives us the answers before we make the decision. The people are silent because they want proof that they can trust in God before they actually decide to trust him. It's a worldly, cheap, generic, Nerf football trust that says, "Show me, and then I'll trust." There is no risk in that. There is no faith.

Athlete, God says: "Trust me *first*—and *then* I'll show you."

That's the way the God of the Bible operates. It's important to note that this is not advocating for blind faith. It's recognizing that God has given us enough already to trust him, even when we don't have all of the answers. Remember, this is the same God who created the mountains, and the oceans, and life as we know it. It's the same God who entered into the world in the form of man (Jesus) to fix what we royally screwed up. It's the same God who gives us his Holy Spirit to help us better align with his image on a daily basis. He has proven trustworthy if we take a few minutes to think about who he is and what he has done.

Are we ready to start living and playing for an Audience of One? Or are we content to continue coexisting with our idols that bring temporary pleasure to our lives?

We cannot stay silent any longer. It's an important decision because much is at stake. From an earthly perspective, pushing all of our chips to

the center and betting it all on sport inevitably costs us relationships, opportunities, and joy. We'll address this in the next chapter. But the eternal consequences we risk when we look to sport for ultimate satisfaction are even greater.

When we allow sport to become an idol, we miss out on God's larger purpose for creating us as athletes in the first place (something we'll talk more about in chapter three). When sport becomes an idol and God takes a back seat, we miss out on having his power and pleasure at work in our lives.

Pastor and author, Timothy Keller, puts words to this unfortunate reality for many people: "The greatest danger is not atheism, but that we ask God to co-exist with idols."

God deserves wholehearted worship directed to him alone, not a divided worship that shares his glory with idols we create or lean on. But God's not going to force you to worship him either.

In 1 Kings 18:22-24, Elijah calls the prophets of Baal—all 450 of them—to a showdown. The rules are simple. Each side gets a bull. Cut it into pieces and lay it on some wood. Then, call to the god you serve, and ask him to ignite the sacrifice on fire.

The terms have been set. Pick a side. Are you with the one true God of Israel or with Baal? No more back and forth. Commit.

A LESSON FROM KOBE

After Kobe Bryant retired, he wrote a poem called *Dear Basketball*. It became an animated short and won an Academy Award. Here a few of the first lines:

Dear basketball,

From the moment

I started rolling my dad's tube socks

And shooting imaginary

Game-winning shots

In the Great Western Forum

I knew one thing was real:

I fell in love with you.

A love so deep I gave you my all —

From my mind & body

To my spirit & soul.

Kobe loved the game of basketball. There was nothing divided about his worship. After his tragic death in 2020, athletes and coaches from all over the world spoke out about his greatness and commitment to be the best.

Jay Williams once did an interview where he gave us all a glimpse at the competitive nature of Kobe Bryant and his commitment to the game.

Before a 7:00 p.m. game against the Los Angeles Lakers, Williams, a guard for the Chicago Bulls, wanted to get on the court at 3 p.m. to practice. When he got there, Bryant was already on the court, working on his game. Williams got in ninety minutes of practice. When he left, Kobe continued to work. After the game (where Kobe dropped forty points on Williams's Bulls), Williams asked Kobe why he spent so much time in the gym before tipoff. Bryant responded:

"Because I saw you come in. And I wanted you to know that it doesn't matter how hard you work. That I'm willing to work harder than you."

There are very few people in the world who have the athletic drive that Kobe possessed. Yes, it came with a cost, but most people wired like that do not see it as a cost at all. That drive—and the sacrifices made to achieve the goal—is what made Kobe, and athletes like him, great.

The idea of hard work isn't simply a characteristic of all-time greats, it is a biblical concept that should be true of all godly people.

The author of Ecclesiastes boldly encourages his readers that, "[w]hatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might" (9:10).

Proverbs 22:29 asks: "Do you see a man skillful in his work? He will stand before kings; he will not stand before obscure men."

Proverbs 13:4 says "The soul of the sluggard craves and gets nothing, while the soul of the diligent is richly supplied."

Colossians 3:23 weaves the idea of both heart motivation and work ethic together, "Whatever you do, work heartily, as for the Lord and not for men."

We need to be careful not to demonize athletes who seek to maximize their skills by sacrificing things that the rest of us would never give up. Hard work and the pursuit of excellence is a biblical concept worthy of celebration. This is not a book encouraging you to dial back your work ethic.

And let's be clear about another thing: this is not about a book telling you not to love your sport, either. There's something beautiful about falling in love with the game. There is something beautiful in maximizing the talent God has given you and aligning it with an unbridled passion for your sport.

But did you hear the language that Kobe used in his poem? *I gave you my all, my soul*. While he played, everything in his life came second to basketball.

It's not that you can't love your sport, but when you give everything to your sport, it's going to become an idol and you're going to start to see that it can't fulfill you forever. Sport is beautiful. Marriage is beautiful. Kids are beautiful. But if they become the number one thing in your life, they become idolatrous.

This is a book about helping you worship God through your sport by keeping your primary focus on Him, as your Audience of One.

Elijah gave the people a choice: Stop limping back and forth and choose today whom you will serve. God gives us a choice, too. We may not feel the urgency to choose right at this moment, but that's what he wants us to do. The time to choose God or continue following other idols in your life is not next year. It's not next week or even tomorrow. It's right now. Before you decide, know this: there is great danger in defaulting to a back-and-forth allegiance. If you choose that route, a route that elevates a trust in things other than God, you are actively choosing idolatry.

Athlete, be certain of this: God's never shown any interest in sharing his throne.

**HARD WORK ... IS A
BIBLICAL CONCEPT
THAT SHOULD BE TRUE
OF ALL GODLY PEOPLE.**

DIVIDED WORSHIP

REFLECTION QUESTIONS:

Why do you think it's so easy to divide our worship between God and sports?

How did the passage from 1 Kings 18:20-40 open your eyes to how God views idolatry?

Do you think it's hard to fully trust God with your sport? Why or why not?

Choosing Between the Living God or Counterfeit Gods

How do you know when you cross the line from loving the sport you play to idolizing it?

What practical changes do you need to make to ensure that your worship is directed at God instead of sport?