



THE “GOD” OF SUCCESS

BY KYLE IDELMAN

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A Note from the Editors

The concept of idolatry often conjures up images of stone and clay statues worshipped by the superstitious, but for Christians it is an all-encompassing idea covering anything that consciously or subconsciously substitutes for our loyalty to God. One of the most prevalent of these substitutes is perhaps the idea of being successful. Pastor Kyle Idleman's acclaimed treatise on the subject of modern day idolatry, and in particular on the “god of success,” refocuses modern day Christians on the subtlety of this idolatrous form of worship. It is a perfect introduction to the theme of the current issue of the CBR. We are therefore excited to reprint excerpts of Chapter 8 of Idleman's book to help set the tone for the discussions in this “No Other Gods” issue. We greatly appreciate the author and Zondervan for the permission to reprint this material.

King of the Hill

The god of success has no problem finding followers. He is attractive, compelling, charismatic. He walks into your everyday, rat-race world and shows you what life could be at the top of the heap. And what he's selling is hard to ignore. He offers us the applause and envy that makes life sweet.

This god gives us a line as old as the Garden of Eden: “You can run the whole thing. It's your life, so why shouldn't you be at the wheel? Why not put the pedal down and see how fast you can get to the finish line?”

He plays on the most basic problem of humanity – that pull toward doing it our way, aka pride.

The gods of success are all about personal achievement, rewards we chase and get for ourselves. Is life going to be good? Are we going to be satisfied? The gods of success give us very convenient ways to keep score: the title after our name, the sum on our paycheck, the square footage of the new house. We put our hope and find our identity in

what the god of success offers. And so we climb and claw our way to the top...

In Luke 18, Jesus has a conversation with a king of the hill. That's not exactly what he's called, but pretty close. He is described by three words, rich, young, ruler. He was a man who had accomplished, achieved, and accumulated. He was the very definition of success. Nothing wrong with that, unless those were the things he was living for.

Luke 18:18 reads, "A certain ruler asked him, 'Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?'"

Pay attention to that question. In essence, he wants to know what he must do to be successful. That's a good question to ask Jesus, but did you notice where he puts the emphasis? He asks, "What must I do to *inherit*?"

The Greek word for inherit could also be translated as "acquire" or "earn." Verbs reveal a lot, don't they? This man is assuming that eternal life is something he can achieve, something he can add to his resume. It's a red flag signaling that the god of success might be the king of the hill in someone's life. It's looking at things and thinking, "I can grab that."

For this rich young ruler, salvation is one more trophy, an earned reward. Worshipping the gods of success isn't just about secular accomplishments and commendations. It's not just getting caught up with job titles and social status. In fact one of the most common gods of success is the worship of religious rules. We put our trust in our own mastery of rule-keeping.

The god of success invites you to save yourself instead of depending upon Jesus to do it. This is one of the reasons I believe the most successful of people often have the hardest of times becoming followers of Christ. Being a devoted disciple means they must acknowledge their own helplessness and their ultimate need – the need for rescue. It's not easy for a successful person to admit the need for help.

This is why Bill Maher, the TV pundit, says this of the crucifixion: "I just don't get it. The thought of someone else cleansing me of my sins is ridiculous. I don't need anyone to cleanse me. I can cleanse myself."

This is why Warren Buffett, after donating 85 percent of his forty-four billion dollars to charity, would say, "There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way."

Sure, it would be a great way: just save up enough bucks, brownie points, box tops, soup labels, or Chuck E. Cheese tickets and redeem them at the golden gate. That makes sense to us, because life as we know it is all about earning things, making our own way. If you want something, you work for it. You pay for everything in blood, sweat, and tears, and economic systems are always based on getting what you pay for.

In most walks of life, that's a good system. When it comes to guilt, however, there's one problem: sin has put all of us hopelessly in debt. We'll never be successful enough. There are not enough deeds or donations in the world to buy an ounce of the purity we need.

So in God's economy, success only comes when we declare spiritual bankruptcy.

Back to the rich young ruler. He wants to know what he must do to be successful, and Jesus replies, in so many words, "You know the commandments, right?"

This is exactly the answer the successful man wanted. He bursts out that he's kept all the command-

ments since he was a boy. The commands were a checklist, a list of merit badges that he had devoted himself to. Through hard work and determination, he has kept the rules. Add spiritual as a fourth word to describe his success. He was the rich, young, spiritual ruler.

The Bible tells us that Jesus "looked at him and loved him" (Mark 10:21). He did so even as he observed, "One thing you lack."

And then he dropped the bomb.

Jesus told him to sell all his possessions and give the money to the poor, thus accumulating treasure in heaven. I wish I could've seen this guy's face when Jesus told him to sell all that he had. Picture Gary Coleman from *Diff'rent Strokes* saying, "Whatchoo talkin' 'bout, Willis?"

This wasn't the standard prescription from Jesus. This was a particular word for a particular individual. In fact, in Luke 19, Jesus makes no such requirement of Zacchaeus,

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an evil tax collector who repents. So why does Jesus go so hardcore here?

Here's why: he looks into the heart of this passionate, successful young man, so well-dressed and energetic and well-meaning, and he sees that the Lord isn't on the throne. So Jesus puts himself in direct competition with the man's trophies of success. He says, "You choose."

The young man couldn't do it. "At this the man's face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mark 10:22).

His face fell. He doesn't seem to have taken much time to mull it over. He abruptly turned and sadly walked away, much like a kid at a carnival who walks up to the best ride in the park but discovered it will cost him all the money he has.

Sociologists tell us that our culture defines success as the prestige that comes from attaining an elevated social status. It's winning a big, public game of King of the Hill. Your hill might be slightly different than mine, but there's a broad consensus today about the ingredients that add up to success...

Success is finding out how the score is kept, and then scoring.

The word success is not found very frequently in the Scriptures, but one of the closest biblical equivalents is the word *blessed*. In ancient Greek culture, this term was used to signify "the state of happiness and well-being such as the gods enjoy."¹ Even today, we use that word as the more humble way of saying, "I'm successful." A guest comes by and says, "You have a beautiful home. I love your sports

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The rich young ruler had come to define himself by his success and accomplishments, whether they were counted in cash or commandments. He knew that no matter how much he wanted to go after Jesus, there was a price he would not pay; there was a god he could not overthrow.

Jesus exclaimed, "How hard it is for the rich to enter the kingdom of God!" (Mark 10:23)

I can imagine the sadness in Jesus' eyes as he said it. He loved that young man who had come after him with bright eyes and left in dejection. But Jesus doesn't chase him down and say, "Hey, hold up! Did I say 'everything'? You don't have to sell everything. I'm sure we can come to some kind of arrangement." Jesus doesn't treat this as a negotiation.

For some people, the idea of standing before God without an impressive resume is unthinkable. We want to show him our success, prove our worth. But to God, success is precisely the opposite of that. It's being willing to step away from all the stuff, all the achievements, and say, "None of that means a thing to me, Lord. I lay it all before you; you and only you are my success" ...

Keeping Score

What are we talking about when we say success? It's one of those words that could have a slightly different shade of meaning for each of us. We tend to attach it to a personal goal or objective.

cars and your yacht." You smile modestly and say, "I've been blessed."

So think about the difference between these two words, success and blessed. Success is a word we use to speak of something that we have done and accomplished. The circumstances of your life can be the same, but the word blessed is an indication not that you have done something, but that something has been done for you.

Let me put it this way: success is when we achieve; blessed is when we receive. If we say "I'm successful," we are giving the glory to ourselves. When we say "I'm blessed," we are giving the glory to God.

Jesus gives an in-depth portrait of what it means to be blessed when he begins the Sermon on the Mount. Beginning in Matthew 5, Jesus gives a rather shocking, counter-intuitive profile of the successful, blessed individual.

Who is blessed?

He says those who mourn are blessed, for they receive comfort.

He says the meek are blessed, and those who are hungry and thirsty for righteousness; the merciful; the pure in heart; peace-makers; people who are mistreated for doing right. Those are "the blessed."

And finally, he says that people are blessed when they're insulted, persecuted, and lied about because of their pursuit of Jesus.

This list, this redefinition of success, has an order to it that is very important – especially the first thing Jesus mentions. He begins by saying, "Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven" (Matt. 5:3).

IDOL ID



Blessed are the poor? I know some of you are thinking, "Yes! I win! I am completely broke!"

But Jesus isn't talking about money here. This isn't a reference to how much you either have or don't have. His words are "poor in spirit." Jesus is describing people who know they don't have it all figured out, people who are humble enough to ask for help.

This world's success puts the emphasis on being self-sufficient and self-reliant, acting as if we've got it all figured out. But Jesus redefines a successful life as one that humbly says to God, "I can't do this on my own. I need your help." From the world's perspective, that's the opposite of what successful people do.

So you've got to admit, it makes a pretty jarring contrast to our picture of winning business honors, moving into mansions, and being named *Time's* Person of the Year. Jesus takes success and turns it upside down. We think that success is about being the king of the hill. Jesus points

to the downtrodden, humble, and pure-hearted who refuse to play the world's game.

When our lives are defined by the world's definition of success, that's idolatry. So what's the *right* way to keep score?

There's a board game that has been around for a while called the Game of Life. If you've played that one, you know the object is to collect beautiful homes and expensive property. You win the Game of Life by landing the perfect job and driving the nicest vehicle.

My guess is that even if you never played that game, you're playing the game. And Jesus has a question for all game players. "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matt. 16:26). What's the point of the big promotion, the luxury car, and the second home if the price is your soul? Success would suddenly look like the deepest failure imaginable.

Maybe that's why we shouldn't be surprised when we read that as the rich young ruler walked away, he wasn't happy: "he went away sad, because he had great wealth" (Mark 10:22).

Taken out of context, that verse is almost funny. Why did he go away sad? Because he was rich! The way our minds are trained, it seems ludicrous, right? You don't go away sad because you're rich; you go away sad because you drive a seventeen-year-old three-cylinder Kia. Why would having so much make him sad?

Because he had too much to give up. He owned so much that it owned him. He was a rich young ruler, and Jesus was offering him an opportunity to be a poor young

servant. But the god of success took his hand and led him away.

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We don't even know his name. We have no clue what became of him. Chances are the rich young ruler went on to become the richer older ruler. My guess is that he went on to do pretty well playing the game of life.

But what if, instead of walking away sad, the man had said to Jesus, "Okay, I'll do it! I'll trade all that I have for all that you are."

If he'd have said that, I imagine we'd know his name. Maybe there would have been thirteen disciples rather than twelve. Maybe there would have been five gospels rather than four.

Notes

¹ D.R.W. Wood and I. Howard Marshall, *New Bible Dictionary*, 3rd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 143.

About the Author



Kyle Idleman is the Teaching Pastor at Southeast Christian Church located in Louisville, Kentucky, with over 22,000 in attendance every weekend. He is the best-selling author of *Not a Fan* and *Gods at War* as well as author and presenter of numerous video curriculum. Kyle's favorite thing to do is hang out with the love of his life, DesiRae. They have been married for 17 years and have four children: MacKenzie, Morgan, Macy and Kael.