

The Climb to The Top

Luke 10:40-42, Jeremiah 17:9-10

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Today wraps up this series on idolatry. Over these past few weeks, we've talked about exposing the golden calf in our lives by looking at surface and root idols.

Then we talked about a couple of specific areas of idolatry that commonly affect us, family and money.

As this series comes to a close, today we're looking at one final idol that can be incredibly pervasive, as it is woven into the fabric of our culture.

It manifests itself under different names: power, success, or achievement. To start, I'd like to show you a photo of a man you've probably never seen or heard of:

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This man is Nathan Hatch and, in the world of education, he's pretty successful. He was a leading historian of religion in the United States before becoming a provost at Notre Dame.

He left that position to serve as President of Wake Forest University in North Carolina until 2020.

But not only was he the president of Wake Forest, he was also on the board of American Higher Education, a board-member of the NCAA, and was Vice Chairman of the Council of Independent Colleges.

The Council of Independent Colleges consists of about 600 colleges and universities nationwide. It represents, overall, several million college students.

At this point, I don't blame you at all if you're wondering, “*Why is he showing us a photo of some random guy and giving you his resume.*”

I'll tell you why... when a man with this level of expertise and reputation talks about higher education, people listen. They take note because he knows what he's talking about.

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In 2009, and you can read this for yourself on Wake Forest's website, Nathan Hatch gave a keynote address to about 600 college presidents at the Council of Independent Colleges, titled *Renewing the Wellsprings of Responsibility*.

This keynote address started with some notes that educators had observed regarding trends dating back over the last 20-30 years. Here's what was observed.

Out of all the enrollment across these 600 colleges nationwide, there's been a disproportionate number of students who're choosing to study a few specific majors.

These majors include corporate and investment finance, banking, corporate law and business consulting, and specialized medicine.

This was interesting to him because he realized that there's way more students that are signing up for these majors than would statistically have a gift, talent, or natural skill toward that particular study.

Now it's not necessarily rocket science to figure out why so many students are funneling into these careers.

They make money. A lot of money. But further, they serve as the benchmarks of success and status in our culture.

Nathan Hatch doesn't simply look at this and say, *"Look at the drive and ambition of our young people. Look at how many are shooting for the highest levels of success! Look at how many are shooting for the stars!"*

Instead, he says, *"...young people have been defining success and choosing careers with less attention to larger questions of meaning and purpose. The stratospheric salaries in investment banking, in consulting, in premier law firms, and in specialized sectors of medicine have bedazzled a whole generation of our best students. Yet, despite their financial success, there are signs of acute frustration by many young professionals. Often, their work does not satisfy or sustain."*

He continues talking about career burnout, saying that the people in these highly prestigious and competitive careers are looking at total burnout.

This is due to people flooding into these life choices and careers, not because of a calling, but because they're success-struck.

Now the question that I think naturally arises is this - why? There's no way that this happened out of nowhere. This success-struck pursuit that embodies our culture had to start somewhere.

Here's what he continues to say about it, *"This culture of achievement can be all-pervasive. ...the quiet revolution in the way Americans are raising their children [is the] professionalization of childhood. Even grade school children are pushed into a culture of competition, with great attention given to which school they should attend, what grades they should achieve, and how many activities they should pursue. The message is loud and clear: identity at any age is formed by what we do and accomplish."*

Now, while there may be bits and pieces there that you may disagree with, since every single family in America doesn't operate in the way that he describes, there's something truly profound in the phrase, *"identity at any age is formed by what we do and accomplish."*

Think about parents of young children who say things like: *"Is your child walking yet?"*, *"Ha! Walking? He's already talking."*

This results in potential danger. The danger is a generation of people making life decisions out of a worldly desire rather than out of a talent, gift, or passion.

The problem with this is the danger of exchanging one king for another. Because we're built to bow, we need to find someone or something to serve.

Maybe in high school you got a letter jacket for playing a sport or being involved in an extra-curricular activity.

Every year you worked hard to add pins and patches to your jacket, and it showed anyone who glanced at you what all you had achieved.

Maybe you were in Boy Scouts or Girl Scouts and had the vest wrapped with badges, or maybe it was trophies on the shelf.

Maybe it's the report cards, the diploma, or how many degrees you have. Maybe it's the promotions, the raises, the job title to which you unknowingly bow down.

While those things are fairly obvious, the idol of success is sneaky. Because it's usually gift-wrapped in virtuous traits and good values. Maybe it's a daily checklist that you complete.

Maybe it's a kitchen or home that is always perfectly clean. Maybe it's a lawn that's perfectly manicured, that's cut in opposing semicircles every 4 days throughout the mowing season.

Like I said, the idol of success is sneaky. In fact, it may be the sneakiest of any of the idols that we've talked about because these can all be acts of worship.

All of these actions should be things that we do with a heart of glorifying God, for recognizing Him for the talents and gifts that we've been given, for using our talents for His Kingdom.

But it's when we make our lives about getting things done, when our identity is in our achievements, we don't necessarily move God off the throne, but we make Him fight for space in the room.

Today we're going to be in Luke 10.

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At this point in Luke's gospel, Jesus has about 6 months left on earth. Not much time, and He knows it.

Now, I think that it's probably safe to say that as far as achievers go, Jesus is pretty high on the list. After all, it only took Him a few short years to redeem all humanity.

As we approach Luke 10, Jesus has a lot to do and only a little time to do it. So, it's a bit of a surprise that we see Him taking time to stop and visit with some friends of His, Mary and Martha.

In my wisdom, if I knew everything that was going to transpire, I think that I would've suggested to Jesus to skip Mary and Martha.

I would've told Him that He needs to do some stuff and there's some pretty important things to attend to. We still do that today.

When the disciples thought Jesus didn't have time for kids, because of a busy itinerary, Jesus said in Matthew 19:14, *"Let the little children come to me."*

As with the children, He's also intentional about spending time with these two women who clearly have a special relationship with Him. They're the two sisters of Lazarus, whom Jesus had raised from the dead.

As Martha opened her home to Jesus, here's the scene that took place: One is hurrying around frantically dealing with all the preparations.

Her desire is that the home needs to be perfect and worthy of Jesus. The other one is sitting quietly at His feet, and listening to what He has to say.

Luke 10:40-42, *"But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!' 'Martha, Martha,' the Lord answered, 'you are worried and upset about many things, but few things are needed—or indeed only one. Mary has chosen what is better, and it will not be taken away from her.'"*

There's a lot going on in these 2 verses. This section alone could easily be a sermon in and of itself, but today we're looking at these verses through the lens of idolatry.

As such, there are two important phrases that I want to make sure you don't miss:

"Martha was distracted"

"Mary has chosen"

Martha had great intentions. It's not bad to want to present our best to God, right? But how often do we live our lives with good intentions, like Martha, instead of spending time with Jesus, like Mary.

When we fill our lives with good intentions, we find at the end of the day there's one thing on our check list we didn't get to... spending time with Jesus!

Wrestling with the idol of success and achievement is a daily battle. Here's why: this idol offers a method of measurement. How much easier is it to give the vast majority of our time to something that we can tangibly see?

When the kitchen gets cleaned - guess what? It's clean. I can see that. It was dirty, now it's clean. If there's a pile of laundry that needs to be washed, and I wash it... guess what, now it's clean and that's tangible.

When the grass gets mowed. When the car gets washed. Those are all things that return instant gratification. As soon as they're done, they're done. We see that, and it's awesome, then we move on to the next thing.

How many times do you pray for something. You pray, and pray, and pray, and pray, and pray, and pray, and pray, and pray?

Often when we spend time in God's Word, when we spend time with Jesus, or spend time in prayer, we don't see immediate results.

Often when we pray, we want to see for what we're praying. A family member's sick, now they're not. Maybe a neighbor needs to come to Christ, but why is it taking so long?

The tyranny of the urgent is when we allow ourselves to become distracted in a sea of things that *"need to be done right this second."*

This breeds a subconscious mindset of... Because we have a list of things that we deem needs to be done "right now" then that means that when we ask God, He, too, should do them right this second.

Our time, not His. Our will, not His. In other words, He needs to have faith in us not the other way around. See how sneaky, yet dangerous this idol is?

It's wrapped in good, virtuous traits, but when we lose sight of the main thing then everything gets turned inside out and backwards.

The thing about God is that He's never early, and He's never late. That can be so hard to grasp at times. It's so hard to grasp in the middle of fervent prayer, but it should also be highly comforting, too.

What Martha was doing wasn't evil, she wasn't doing a bad thing. In fact, I'd even argue that it was a good thing. She was serving Jesus. She wanted her house to be as best as it could be for, literally, Jesus.

But Jesus said that what Mary was doing was better and there's a huge lesson to be learned here.

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We can be doing something good, but it could be bad when there's something better. Martha was busy and distracted by preparing the house for Jesus when He literally was walking through the front door.

Martha was cleaning the house for Jesus, when Jesus literally was speaking in her home. She's distracted. Yet how many of us do just that?

How often are we distracted with all the things we need to do that we don't take the time to talk with Jesus?

I'm guilty of it. I'm guilty of trying to do x, y, and z, then, when I go to bed, I realize - *"You know, maybe I should have read God's Word today,"* or *"Maybe I should have spent more time in prayer."*

So, as this is the last message in this series, it's time that we tackle what all of these idols all come down to. It's one word: Choice.

These idols don't lure us with something that's overtly or obviously sinful, rather these gods battle for our hearts with distractions of good things.

Distractions of good things made ultimate. Distractions of things that could be acts of worship and the answer comes down to one phrase: re-ordering our priorities.

Throughout scripture we hear about choices: we heard it from Moses, Joshua, Elijah, and now Jesus. In this passage, Jesus commended Mary for the choice that she made.

There's another trait that Martha demonstrates; another symptom of someone who struggles with an idol of success or achievement. Comparison. She compares herself to Mary. She keeps score.

Luke 10:40, *"But Martha was distracted by all the preparations that had to be made. She came to him and asked, 'Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me to do the work by myself? Tell her to help me!'"*

Teddy Roosevelt said this about comparison, *"Comparison is the thief of joy."* In terms of idolatry, there are two main symptoms of having an idol of success or achievement.

The first symptom is that you have a constant frustration with people in your life who, from your perspective, aren't getting it done or probably, or if you really want to be honest, they aren't getting it done your way.

Martha wanted Mary to be a better teammate and Mary didn't realize there was a game. This symptom often manifests itself as underserved criticism.

Martha is highly critical of Mary's lack of help. Mary is busy listening to Jesus talk. Different priorities, undeserved criticism.

Sometimes constructive criticism is deserved and necessary, but other times maybe a difference in perspective would also yield a different result.

The second symptom of the idol of success or achievement is being discontent. Discontent with yourself. Discontent with your life. Discontent with the results of putting hope in your future on the achievements of the past.

Thomas DeLong, a professor at Harvard Business School, in an article discussing high-achievement-individuals put it like this, *"When only external factors become our metrics for success, we are setting ourselves up for misery."*

Do you feel like you compare yourself to others constantly? *"I'm doing so much more than so-and-so, why don't they help more?"* Or maybe, *"I should have gone into medicine. So-and-so is driving that Mercedes and it looks great."*

"All of their posts on social media... They seem so happy, too. Why can't I be happy like that?" Does it feel like you're living your life always running to catch up?

Maybe you focus too much on getting things done, or getting things done right, that it becomes more important than anything or anyone else.

One of my favorite verses is Jeremiah 17:9, *"The heart is deceitful above all things, and beyond cure; who can understand it?"*

Most of the time we stop right there. We miss or don't even read the amazing and sometimes terrifying next verse.

Jeremiah 17:10, *"I the LORD search the heart and examine the mind, to reward each person according to their conduct, according to what their deeds deserve."*

The heart is deceitful above all things, who can understand it? God can, because I know I sure can't. I'm so glad that's not left up to me.

Timothy Keller puts it like this: *"You are more sinful than you ever thought you were, and you are more loved than you ever dreamed you could be."*

Achieving great things is amazing and wonderful until it replaces Jesus on the throne. Yet, achieving great and wonderful things helps make this world a much better place.

But in the end, we can't put our faith in what we personally achieve. We can't put our faith in our merits and achievements because they're not eternal, only Christ is.

2 Corinthians 4:18, *"So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen, since what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal."*

I thank God that His grace and mercy is available to us, not because we may be a great student or have great grades and all sorts of patches and pins.

Not because we've raised the best children, or because we have the esteem of everyone in cubicle-land. It's just grace. A gift.

If my sense of identity or value isn't based what I do, or what I've achieved, but on what has already been done for me through Christ's sacrifice on the cross... if that's my starting point, well that completely changes everything.

Again, work isn't bad. Our achievements aren't bad. But imagine if you had a gospel-centered approach to what you do, to your actions, to your work, to your responsibilities.

You could go about your day without making comparisons. You would no longer put yourself in the position of proving your worth to others.

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Conclusion

Clarence Jordan was a man of unusual abilities and commitment. He had two Ph.D.'s, one in agriculture; the other in Greek and Hebrew. He was so gifted he could've done anything he wanted, yet he chose to serve the poor.

In the 1940s, he founded a farm in Americus, Georgia, and called it *Koinonia Farm*. It was a community for poor whites and poor blacks. As you might guess, the idea didn't go over well in the Deep South of the 40s.

The town's people tried everything to get rid of Clarence. They tried boycotting him; then they slashed the workers' tires when they came to town. Over and over, for fourteen years, they tried to stop him.

Finally, in 1954, the Ku Klux Klan had enough of Clarence Jordan, so they decided to get rid of him once and for all.

They came one night with guns and torches and set fire to every building on *Koinonia Farm* except Clarence's home, which they riddled with bullets.

They chased off all the families except one black family that refused to leave. Clarence recognized the voices of the Klansmen, some of whom were church people.

One Klansman was a local newspaper reporter. The next day, the reporter came out to see what remained of the farm. The rubble was smoldering, but he found Clarence in the field, hoeing and planting.

"I heard the awful news," he called to Clarence, *"and I came out to do a story on the tragedy of your farm closing."* Clarence just kept on hoeing and planting.

The reporter kept poking trying to get this quietly determined man to get angry. Instead of packing, Clarence was planting.

Finally, the reporter said in a haughty voice, *"Well, Dr. Jordan, you got two of them Ph.D.s and you've got fourteen years into this farm, and there's nothing left of it at all. Just how successful do you think you've been?"*

Clarence stopped hoeing, turned toward the reporter with his penetrating blue eyes, and said quietly but firmly, *"About as successful as the cross. Sir, I don't think you understand us. What we are about is not success but faithfulness. We're staying. Good day."*

Beginning that day, Clarence and his companions rebuilt Koinonia Farm and it's still going strong today.

Chuck Colson, a highly successful man who was sent to prison as a result of the Watergate Scandal, was saved while incarcerated. He said this about coming to Christ: *"God doesn't want our success; He wants us."*

Out of everything we've talked about these last few weeks, out of all the idols we've encountered and convictions we've faced, God doesn't want our successes. He wants us. Our existence doesn't have to be justified by our accomplishments.

Our significance, our value has already been proven and paid for by God, Who gave His one and only Son so that we may have eternal life. So that we can have the life that He paid for... free of charge.

Thank God that, through Christ, we can be like Clarence said, "*as successful as the cross.*" What a wonderful response to a world trying to tear him down.

He is a perfect example of priorities being re-ordered. He not only destroyed that idol of success, but the idols of money, family, control, approval, power, and comfort.

"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life." John 3:16