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**“One sign that you’ve made success an idol is the false sense of security it brings. The poor and the marginalized expect suffering. They know that life on this earth is nasty, brutish, and short. Successful people are much more shocked and overwhelmed by troubles. I’ve often heard people from the upper echelon say, “Life isn’t supposed to be this way” when they face tragedy. I have never heard this language among the working class and poor. This false sense of security comes from deifying our achievement and expecting it to keep us safe from the troubles of life when only God can.”**

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**Timothy Keller**

## **The Idol of Success**

**By Paul David Tripp**

I listened as the father said to me in the presence of his teenage son, “Do you know what it’s like to go to church and know that everyone there has been talking about and praying for your rebellious son? Do you know what it’s like to enter a service with all eyes on you, knowing that people are wondering how it’s going and how you and your wife are coping?”

He continued. “This isn’t the way it’s supposed to be. We tried to faithfully do everything God called us to do as parents, and look what we ended up with! I ask myself, if I knew that this was the way it would all turn out, would we have ever chosen to have children? I can’t describe how disappointed and embarrassed I am.” That afternoon, with his son listening, that father spoke what many parents have felt but never verbalized. You see, we tend to approach parenting with expectations as if we had hard-and-fast guarantees. We think that if we do our part, our children will become model citizens. We tend to approach parenting with a sense of ownership, that these are our children and their obedience is our right.

These assumptions pave the way for our identity to get wrapped up in our kids. We begin to need them to be what they should be so that we can feel a sense of achievement and success. We begin to look at our children as our trophies rather than God’s creatures. We secretly want to display them on the mantels of our lives as visible testimonies to a job well done.

When they fail to live up to our expectations, we find ourselves not grieving for them and fighting for them, but angry at them, fighting against them, and, in fact, grieving for ourselves and our loss. We’re angry because they’ve taken something valuable away from us, something we’ve come to treasure, something that has come to rule our hearts: a reputation for success.

It’s so easy to lose sight of the fact that these are God’s children. They don’t belong to us. They’re not given to bring us glory, but him. Our kids are from him, they exist through him, and the glory of their lives points to him. We’re only agents to accomplish his plans. We’re only instruments in his hands. Our identity is rooted in him and his call to us, not in our children and their performance.

As parents, we’re in trouble whenever we lose sight of these “vertical realities.” Whenever parenting is reduced to our hard work, the child’s performance, and the reputation of the family, it becomes very hard for us to respond with selfless faithfulness in the face of our child’s failure.

God-ordained moments of ministry will become moments of angry confrontation filled with words of judgment. Instead of leading our needy child to Christ once again, we'll beat them with our words. Instead of loving, we'll reject. Instead of speaking words of hope, we'll condemn. Our feelings will be flooded much more with our own embarrassment, anger, and hurt than with grief over our wayward child's standing with God. I want to ask you today to be honest. Examine your own heart. Do you have an attitude of ownership and entitlement? Have you subtly become ruled by reputation? Are you oppressed by thoughts of what others think of you and your child? These questions – no, let me rephrase that – these idols need to be confronted if we're ever going to be the parents that God has called us to be.

So be honest. Confess to areas of parental idolatry. But be filled with hope, because Christ died to break the back of our self-absorbed idolatry. God is intent on owning our hearts unchallenged. His goal is that our lives would be shaped by our worship of him and nothing else. And, hear this: while God is at work in your own heart, at the same time, he has sent you to be his ambassador in the heart of your child.

## Three Reasons Success May Be Your Favorite Idol

By Sharla Fritz

When I traveled to Israel, I visited the famous Israel Museum where I saw many examples of idols. Molded bronze images. Carved wooden figurines. Statues of fertility goddesses. Even though God had commanded the Israelites, "You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:3-4), God's people often disobeyed. And we wonder: How could they worship an inanimate object—something so obviously lifeless?

We may not bow down to statues or figurines, yet our culture has its own idols. A counterfeit god doesn't have to be made of bronze or wood to become an object of worship. Martin Luther said, "Whatever your heart clings to and confides in, that is really your God, your functional savior." An idol is anything that captures our hearts, anything that becomes more important than God.

Using this definition, we can see that modern idols might include 3000-square-foot houses or big-screen TVs. Our culture sometimes worships social standing or advanced degrees. Instead of inanimate statues, we might put our favorite sports teams or entertainers up on pedestals.

### The Idol of Success

Another common modern idol is the god of success. Our culture tends to worship the winners. It idolizes wealth and fame. It places achievement and accomplishment above all else. You might not recognize this man-made god in your life, but here are three reasons why success may be your favorite idol.

We live in a success-worshipping world. People would think us very strange if we bowed down to a golden statue, but they applaud those who pursue success at all costs. Books about achieving success sell millions of copies. People flock to movies about the person who makes it big after years of struggle because it makes them believe someday that can be their story, too. We even have awards shows for the biggest successes in entertainment and present little statues to the stars. Success is an acceptable idol in the eyes of the world. Achievement makes us feel powerful and self-sufficient. In his book, *Counterfeit Gods*, author Timothy Keller writes, "More than other idols, personal success and achievement lead to a sense that we ourselves are god, that our security and value rest in our own wisdom, strength, and performance." Success gives us confidence. It makes us believe that nothing bad will happen because of our own abilities and ingenuity. We become the god we trust in.

Success promises to satisfy our thirsty hearts. The Israelites worshiped the idols of Baal and Asherah because they thought these false gods would give them what they wanted—fertility in their fields and their families. We may worship success because we think it will be the key to our deepest desires—self-confidence, self-assurance, and well-being. Surely the admiration and recognition that comes with success will erase all our self-doubt and insecurity. We thirst for purpose and applause and believe we will find it when we have reached a certain level of accomplishment, fame, or wealth.

Now that we've recognized that the pursuit of accomplishment and achievement can become a modern-day idol, how can we overcome our success-worshipping tendencies? God alone can de-throne this sometimes powerful counterfeit god in our lives. But are there steps we can take in the process? Here are three suggestions:

### **1. Recognize the Idol of Success in Your Own Life**

Because the world applauds high-achievers, we may not notice when accomplishment has taken the number one spot in our hearts. We may easily identify the counterfeit god of success in someone else's life. We see the business executive working excessive hours to get ahead. We notice the neighbor who seems to prioritize having the perfect home above all else. But how do we notice when success has usurped the Lord in our own souls?

Ask yourself some of these questions: What consumes my time and money? What gods do I see in my calendar or credit card statement? What most occupies my thoughts? What would hurt most for me to lose? What do I make sacrifices for? Patterns in your mind and activities might indicate what you worship most.

### **2. Work Behind the Scenes**

When we worship success, we may seek out recognition and acknowledgment. We crave attention, if not fame. We can counteract this by seeking out places to serve where our work may not be noticed by many people. Instead of looking for high-visibility positions, try jobs behind the scenes. Work in the church kitchen. Serve at a homeless shelter. Visit senior citizens at the nearby nursing home.

When we let go of our thirst for prominence, we can joyfully do small acts of kindness. We can mow the elderly neighbor's lawn, even though no one will give us a trophy. We can send an anonymous grocery store gift card to a hurting family, though no one else knows. Success loses its hold on our hearts as we work where we may not receive any rewards or recognition.

### **3. Daily Worship the True God**

When we bow our hearts to the Almighty, everything else finds its proper place in our lives. We worship God when we remember His almighty power in creation, His control over the timelines of the world, and His incomparable wisdom. We gain a true perspective of ourselves when we recall that no matter how much we accomplish in this world, we can never save our own souls. Only God's grace found in Jesus can do that. How can we worship the authentic God in the middle of our busy lives? Try reading a psalm of worship such as Psalms 8, 19, 29, and 103. Or closing your eyes while listening to a hymn or contemporary praise song. Assume a worshipful position by kneeling at a chair or lying face-down on the floor while pouring out your love for God. Take time to walk in nature to appreciate God's amazing creative powers.

As we worship God for His might, omniscience, and majesty, we realize our relative smallness. When we acknowledge Him as King and Lord of our lives, we let go of our own need for greatness. As we praise Him for His forgiveness, grace, and mercy, we acknowledge our great need for Him.

We may live in a world that constantly strives to get ahead, but we know success at all costs for what it is—a counterfeit god that can slay our souls. Achievement may make us feel powerful and self-sufficient, but knowing the God who truly is all-powerful gives us Someone to trust in when everything falls apart. Worldly success may look like it promises to satisfy our thirsty hearts, but we know that it will always default on its guarantee.

Instead, we can quench our thirsty souls in the knowledge that God loves us with an unconditional love. The Lord tells us in Jeremiah 31:3, "I have loved you with an everlasting love." He never says, "I will love you when you make a million dollars." Or, "My love for you will come when you become president of your company." Or even, "I will love you when you become the perfect mother." God's love is everlasting—not dependent on our performance. He doesn't dole out His affection based on how many awards we win. God doesn't define our lives by our successes. He measures us by His grace.