

McCabe United Methodist Church

The Idols We Love: A Holy Tug-of-War

Lent 2017, Sermon and Worship Series

“Achievement & Success: Idols for “Winning” at Life”

Sermon on Mark 10:17-41 (March 18 & 19, 2017)

Pastor Jenny Hallenbeck Orr

I am a singer. I sang in church choirs from the time I was very small and I always loved my music class at school. By the time I was in middle school, I was in chorus and I occasionally sang solos at church and school. The trend continued in high school.

I began taking formal voice lessons and, not only was I in school chorus, but I made it into auditioned ensembles, show choirs, and all-state choirs. I was *good* and, in high school, I enjoyed a sort of “Queen of the Choir” status. (That might sound ridiculous to you, but, if it does sound ridiculous, I suspect that's because you are not, in fact, a choir nerd!)

When it was time for me to look at colleges and consider what I might study, the choice was clear: I would go to Augustana College (now Augustana University) in Sioux Falls where I would study vocal music education... *and* where I would sing in *The Augustana Choir*. The Augustana Choir is, arguably, one of the top college choirs in the Midwest, for sure – possibly in the country.

I had grown-up hearing the Augustana Choir and had dreamed of the day when I would sing in it. So, very early in my first year as a student at Augustana, I eagerly auditioned for *The Choir*. (Of course, there were other choirs at Augustana... but *The Augustana Choir* was the *top* choir and, frankly, it was the only one I cared to join.)

I felt great about my audition and was thankful – though not particularly surprised – when I saw my name on the call-back list for the second and final audition. That audition was the big one.

During the call-back audition, the Choir hopefuls joined the current choir members. I auditioned with the second sopranos. One-by-one, we hopefuls sang next to each current member while the director listened to how our voices sounded together. He needed the “perfect” blend.

After each auditionee had been placed within the line of singers, the audition was over. Then, we waited a few days for the final list to go up. When it did go up, my name was *not* on it the list. I hadn't made it into *The Augustana Choir*. I was beyond disappointed.

If I'm being completely honest, I let that disappointment virtually ruin the majority of my first year of college. In many ways, I also let that disappointment steal the joy singing brought to me. And, when I *did* make it into The Choir my second year at Augustana, I was frankly more relieved than excited.

Nearly 20 years later, I still occasionally look back on all that and wonder what was wrong with me. Why had it been so important? Somewhere along the line in my youth, my love of singing had gotten far too wrapped-up in my achievements and success as a singer.

Plus, my perspective was way off; if I was not successful as a singer, I felt I was somehow *less* as a human being. I was “Jenny, the Good Singer.” If I wasn't “good” by certain standards of musical success and achievement, I wasn't *good enough*.

I couldn't help but think back on all this as I prepared for this weekend's message in our Lenten series... this message on the idols – the false gods – of achievement and success.

Achievement and success would have us define our lives in terms of *winning*; in terms of *being* the best, of *having* the best... sometimes with little to no consideration of the cost involved, or of the collateral damage that may incur on our journey to the top.

When we worship the idols of achievement and success – when we sacrifice at the altar of “winning” - cost and collateral damage seem not to matter. We are blinded by the prize at the end of the race and we don't care who gets pushed to the side – or if our hearts give out on us – as we run. The *win* is what matters most.

Interestingly enough, however, we who call ourselves “Christian” claim Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior – and the way Jesus “won” was through ultimate loss. In fact, that's what the season of Lent is all about.

It's also what our Gospel reading from Mark chapter 10 is all about. The human desire to “win” is in practically every verse of it.

Our Mark 10 reading begins with the story we often call “Jesus and the Rich Young Ruler.” This young man approaches Jesus on the road one day and asks Jesus what he can do to have eternal life. He had been following the religious law to a “T” since he was young... he wanted to know how to get the ultimate frosting on his cake.

Jesus' answer to the young man was clear – and it was very specific:

“Go sell everything you own. Give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. Then come back to me.”¹

In response to that, Mark writes:

“When the man heard Jesus say this, he went away gloomy and sad, because he was very rich.”²

And, you know? My guess is that it wasn't the loss of his money that mattered so much to him... my guess is it was the loss of status, the humbling it would take to give away all that which he had *won* in his journey of achievement and success.

¹ Mark 10:21

² Mark 10:22

The pull of those idols was strong for the rich, young ruler – but he wasn't the only one worshiping those idols in today's reading from Mark 10. Nope... Jesus' own disciples were fighting that battle, too.

When the rich, young ruler walked away from them, Jesus and his disciples had a conversation about “winning” in God's kingdom. The disciples reminded Jesus that, unlike the rich, young ruler who was so hesitant to give away all his possessions, *they* had given up everything to become his followers. They were clearly winners... right? Wrong.

Jesus acknowledged that the way the disciples had given up everything to follow him was, in fact, commendable. But then he offered that oh-so-sneaky line: that in God's kingdom,

“many who are now first will be last, and many who are now last will be first.”³

In other words, worshiping at the altar of achievement and success might get you first place in *this* world... but that kind of worship is gonna put you dead last in God's kingdom. Because God's kingdom simply is not about “winning” the way we so often think about winning.

Then, Jesus told them about his pending trial, torture, humiliation, death, and resurrection. Yes, there would be *winning*, in the end, for Jesus... but that winning would come at a high and precious cost – and it would come in a way the world would, by no means, understand as “winning.”

Crucifixion wasn't winning. The disciples thought Jesus was their king, but thrones were meant to be lavish, bejeweled – made of polished gold. Thrones were not meant to be gnarled, blood-stained wood. This didn't seem right to the disciples, so they blew right past it to talk more about glory. They wanted “winning” like they understood it.

³ Mark 10: 31

“Teacher, will you do us a favor,” James and John asked Jesus. “When you come into your glory, please let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left.”⁴

In other words, “Teacher, when you *win* your eternal gold medal, we want to stand with you on the podium. One of us will take silver and the other bronze.”

The other disciples got mad at James and John for asking Jesus about this. But you have to wonder why they got mad. Did they get mad because the request was ridiculous and unfaithful... or did they get mad because they hadn't won the game of asking it *first*?

This Lent, here at McCabe, we're exploring a series we're calling *The Idols We Love: A Holy Tug-of-War*. With the Bible as our primary resource, we're looking to a book called *Gods at War*⁵ to help shape the message themes for each week. (This book was written by pastor and author Kyle Idleman.)

This weekend, our focus is on the idols of achievement and success. In many ways, these two idols co-mingle quite well; if the idol of achievement is an idol you worship, it's very likely you worship the idol of success, too. (The idol of *money* also tends to relate to this weekend's idols of focus... but *money* is getting its own message next weekend!)

About these particular idols – these particular false gods – Kyle Idleman writes this: “The gods of success are all about personal achievement, rewards we chase and get for ourselves ... The gods of success give us very convenient ways to keep score: the title after our name, the sum of our paycheck, the square footage of our 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.”⁶

⁴ Mark 10: 35-36

⁵ “Gods at War: Defeating the Idols that Battle for Your Heart”, Kyle Idleman, [City on a Hill Studio, LLC, Louisville, KY, February 2013].

⁶ Idleman 133.

This is the “holy tug-of-war” named in our series title. As indicated by the first two of the ten commandments, our God is a jealous God who yearns to have our whole hearts. We were created to fully love and to fully worship the God who made us... the God who has loved us from before we were even born. Our God is *jealous* for us.

“Jealousy” is the fear of losing something that belongs to you. We *belong* to God. God is *jealous* for us... and, make no mistake, *God's* jealousy for us is not like the often-irrational jealousy we can experience.

God's jealousy is not like the irrational jealousy of a boyfriend who can't stand to see his girlfriend talking with other men – despite the fact that she has never remotely given him reason to worry. No. Rather, God's jealousy is more like the genuine fear a parent experiences when they witness their child venturing down a destructive path in life.

So, commandment number one is that we are to have no other gods but the Lord God Almighty. The second commandment is a fitting follow-up: “You shall not make for yourselves idols in the form of anything on the earth, in heaven above, or in the waters below ... you shall not bow down and worship idols, for, I, the Lord your God, am a jealous God.”

Our Creator God gave us unique talents and abilities for which we are meant to be thankful – and which we are meant to use in this life to do meaningful work, to serve our communities, and to raise children that might become compassionate believers.

But, all too often, instead of giving thanks to God for our talents and abilities, and instead of using those talents and abilities to the glory of God Almighty, our talents and abilities become the tools we use to worship *false* gods: the idols of achievement and success.

God Almighty deserves our whole heart in worship and devotion... but these idols we love to love create a holy tug-of-war with God pulling us upward on one side, our idols pulling us downward on the other, away from the God who created and loves us... and our hearts and souls are stuck in the middle, feeling the pressure of the battle.

In his book *Gods at War*, in the chapters about the idols of achievement and success, Kyle Idelman tells the powerful, true stories of Chuck Bentley and Chuck Colson – men who climbed to the top of their careers: Chuck Bentley was the CEO of a dot com in the 1990's, and Chuck Colson was a top aide in the Nixon White House.

Both men “won” in their fields... but, in the midst of that winning, they sacrificed relationships with their families and they sacrificed personal integrity. When the internet bubble burst in 2000, the value of Chuck Bentley's business plummeted... and, when Nixon resigned over the Watergate scandal, Chuck Colson went to prison. It was the price they each paid to win – the price they each paid to worship these idols.

It's possible you might see a glimpse of yourself in the stories of those two Chucks. Perhaps you know well the idols of workplace achievement and success. Perhaps not. If those stories of workplace achievement and success don't resonate with you, that's great, but it doesn't mean you don't worship these particular idols.

These idols are about winning and they're about *image*. So maybe the way *you* worship these idols is by constant fretting to make your house perfect... or maybe you have an obsessive need to check items off of your “to do” list.

In the Gospel of Luke, we learn the story of Jesus' visit to his friends Mary and Martha. While Jesus was at their house, Martha was so concerned about cleaning the house and cooking the perfect meal, that she missed out on spending time with Jesus. *And* she got angry with her sister, Mary, for choosing time with Jesus over helping with the housework.⁷

Martha was worshiping the idols of achievement and success – homemaker style. She was so focused on playing the perfect hostess, she forgot to spend quality time with the One she was hosting. Her way of winning was a perfect house and a perfect meal.

⁷ Luke 10: 38-40

Now. There is nothing wrong or inherently unfaithful about a lovely meal and a beautiful home. There is also nothing wrong or inherently unfaithful about doing well in your work. As I said a bit ago, God gave each of us unique talents and abilities to put to work in this life.

The trouble comes when we put our God-given talents and abilities to work for the wrong glory. Is our hope to glorify *God* or to glorify *ourselves*? We can discover the answer to that question by observing our life and relationships – by taking stock of the path we've chosen: who we've been, who we are, and who has come along with us.

Perhaps we look down and see all the people we stepped over or eliminated as we climbed the ladder of success... perhaps we remember the colleagues we used to enjoy, but who we no longer see because they got sick of needing to feed our already inflated ego – or because they grew weary of how we droned on and on about our accomplishments.

Or, perhaps, after years of workaholism, we take stock and realize our spouse never smiles at us and we no longer know our children.

Achievement and success are idols for “winning” at life. They are idols that seek rewards and that are often fueled by a “whatever it takes” perspective... even if “whatever it takes” means that, not only are your personal relationships sacrificed on the altar, but so is your very soul.

As luck or providence would have it, both Chuck Bentley and Chuck Colson experienced critical conversions. Both of them had people in their lives who did what they could to draw them away from their idols. And, thankfully, mysteriously, both men eventually paid attention.

Chuck Bentley's conversion led him to become the CEO of Crown Financial – a Christian ministry that teaches biblical wisdom about money... that seeks to faithfully focus people God Almighty, rather than on worldly idols like money, success, and achievement.

Chuck Colson's conversion didn't keep him out of jail, but that wasn't the point. While he was in prison, he developed positive relationships with fellow

inmates. His faith in Christ grew and he taught others what he was learning about a life lived for God's glory. And then, in 1976, upon his release from prison, he founded Prison Fellowship which, today, is “the nation's largest outreach to prisoners, ex-prisoners, and their families.”⁸

When we worship the idols of achievement and success, our lives can fall apart in ways we would never imagine. And, for the record, “falling apart” usually starts small and it usually happens slowly... choice by choice.

But, the good news is that God can work with things that have fallen apart. God *does* work with things that have fallen apart. That's what forgiveness is all about.

That's why, though we are in the midst of the season of Lent – the season of journeying to the cross of Good Friday – though we are in the midst of the season of Lent, we remain an *Easter people*. We remain people who find ultimate hope in the good news that sin and death do not get the final say in this life.

We are people who celebrate the good news that the idols we love to love *do* not and *cannot* and *will* not win the battle for our hearts.

As it happens, we *do not* know what happened to the rich, young ruler or to Ms. Martha. I don't know if Jesus' challenges to them caused conversions like the conversions experienced by Chuck Bentley and Chuck Colson. I don't know if God won the holy tug-of-war on their hearts.

What I *do* know is this: God *can* win the holy tug-of-war that is happening on our hearts. See, “winning” in this life doesn't really matter all that much to God. But winning our hearts *does* matter to God.

In this life, we can fight to do our own winning... we can fight to be first and best. Or. Or we can give up that fight, letting go of the idols that weigh-down our hearts. In that letting go, God promises a kind of freedom and joy we didn't know existed.

⁸ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charles_Colson#Prison_ministry