

Series: HOLY COWS: The Idols Nobody Wants to Talk About

June 13, 2010

THE IDOL OF SUCCESS

1. Has anyone here **never** seen the show, “American Idol?” My sense is that it represents our culture better than just about any other TV show. In one of the 60 million sites that come up when you google **American Idol**, it was called, Television **Without Pity**. Of course, we **all** know who they’re referring to! And to be on the show, you have to sign a waiver, giving up your right to sue them for being publicly ridiculed or humiliated. Think that might happen?

-You have to admit that **American Idol** is western culture in a capsule. It has it all! Survival of the fittest. Intense competition. The glorification of talent—and even a little bit of blood sport. Money. And it all comes with a short-cut to instant success that has **everything** to do with talent and glamour—and nothing to do with depth of character. Why? Because **success is one of the most-worshipped idols in our culture**.

- a. Now, let’s be clear about what the worship of success is. We were created in God’s image to manage—rule all He had made. To create. To do great things. Ever since we defected and wrecked everything. But God stepped right into the wreckage at Ground Zero—and made it clear that He was going to restore everything.

-But as we’ve studied His mission, sometimes things have hit a crescendo and gone well. Sometimes they haven’t. The Book of Joshua ends with Joshua’s challenge to worship God—not idols. And everyone said, “Yea, God! We will!” But as you read the Book of Judges, you find that God’s people got hopelessly entangled in worshipping the idols—the counterfeit gods of that culture. And it spirals downward until, at the end of the book, some of God’s people look more like Sodom and Gomorrah—than a nation that will bless all nations.

- b. For the past 3500 years, I think it’s safe to say that the main thing that has lured God’s people away from His mission—is the idols of the culture. We **talk** about worshipping God. A **lot**. But when it comes to what we actually pursue as worth giving our lives, our devotion—and making our sacrifices? Sometime’s it’s God; but a **lot** of times it’s the idols of our culture. Like the idol of success?

2. I mentioned last week that idol worship always means taking a good thing—and making it god. And **that’s** what makes the worship of idols so tricky. What we want out of life is pretty widespread—and they’re good things; a good job, strong friendships; to honor God, have fun, experience love and intimacy—those are some of the things, right?

-But there is something deep in our lives that goes beyond that. We want to succeed. Do well. Accomplish a lot. Achieve great things with our lives. Where this gets **really** tricky—is that we want **others** to see us as successful. And I’ll prove it. Anyone here who wouldn’t really mind if other people looked at your life and thought, **What a LOSER!**

- a. And there's a reason why that bothers us. Listen to our original calling at Creation:

So God created human beings in his own image. In the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. Then God blessed them and said, "Be fruitful and multiply. Fill the earth and govern it. Reign over the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that scurry along the ground. (Genesis 1:27-28 NLT)

-What you realize is that God didn't create us to be park rangers—just making sure that everything stayed the same. He created us as **gardeners**—to make his original creation better. To be creative; to take good things and make them better; to create with excellence; to find a deep sense of fulfillment in doing the very best with what God has given us.

- b. Success is **not** evil; it is a **good** thing. So, what does it mean to make success an idol? Well, it means that our ego, our need for the applause of others, our need for admiration, for being a star, for being right—or even getting someone else's stamp of approval—is exchanged for pleasing and honoring God—or gets mixed in with that. We want success for our own ego needs—because we crave the applause and approval of others.

-We can do spectacular things. We can amaze everyone with our brilliant accomplishments—but it's all about worshipping the idol of success. And this can get into the spiritual arena—where it's even more ugly and corrupt. People will do incredible acts of sacrifice for others—but not because they love them or God; it all circles back to **their** needs--this inner craving for approval, respect and admiration.

-This idol of success is probably **the** most demanding idol—and the **sneakiest** idol that exists.

3. We see what I believe lies at the core of the success idol in Adam and Eve's attempts to cover up their rebellion against God. When they believed Satan—and disbelieved God--the results were astounding:

At that moment their eyes were opened, and they suddenly felt shame at their nakedness. So they sewed fig leaves together to cover themselves. When the cool evening breezes were blowing, the man and his wife heard the Lord God walking about in the garden. So they hid from the Lord God among the trees. Then the Lord God called to the man, "Where are you?" He replied, "I heard you walking in the garden, so I hid. I was afraid because I was naked." "Who told you that you were naked?" the Lord God asked. "Have you eaten from the tree whose fruit I commanded you not to eat?" (Genesis 3:7-11 NLT)

- a. This is an **amazing** passage. These two people had **everything**. And they blew it. Why? The title to the James Bond movie comes to mind: **The World Is Not Enough!** So God steps in to begin redeeming the whole mess.

-First He has to get Adam and Eve to own the truth—which, like us, they really don't want to do. God asks three questions here. And they aren't designed to give Him information He doesn't already know. The first two questions are **profound**. Where are you? And **Who told you that you were naked?**

-When probed about where they are, Adam excuses his absence by saying, "I heard you coming...so I hid. **I was afraid because I was naked!** Now, God could've rightfully said, "Adam, your answer isn't helping me. You've **never** had clothes! Something's changed. Someone's been messing with you. You used to be naked and unashamed—so why is nakedness now something you can't stand?"

-Know what nakedness originally meant in the Bible? To be so known that you are vulnerable. But that kind of vulnerability is too much—so they stitch fig leaves together and hide behind the trees. They have to completely control information about themselves.

- b. I don't want to extend the metaphor too far—but does anyone here, besides me, ever feel **naked** when you lose control of the information about yourself—information that makes you feel small and weak and sinful and unacceptable? Let me illustrate; you're saying something really nasty behind someone's back—and you realize that someone has overheard the conversation. It's an **awful** feeling. You feel naked. Small. Someone can see **your** flaws and inconsistencies, but you can't see theirs. And they **ain't about to show you!**

-See, we want to be known and loved. And we think, "The best I can hope for is to be loved." We do not live up to our own expectations. We don't **want** people to see how upset we are, how anxious we are, how depressed, unhappy, weak and disappointed we are. And therefore—we have this **desperate** need to control what others know and see.

-Adam and Eve hid behind fig leaves. And **success** in all of it's forms becomes the leaves **we** hide behind. Success as it's defined in whatever world we want to be accepted in--is the mask that keeps us from feeling naked.

- c. Success, in the eyes of our world, covers, masks the feelings of inadequacy and unacceptability. And so we find ourselves doing what we have to do, telling ourselves the lies we need to tell—to make others believe we're better, smarter, wiser, more hardworking, more composed, more profound, more spiritual, more altruistic, more talented—and less selfish, small, and flawed than we really are. At it's core, the worship of the idol of success is about being **admired, desired and listened to.**

-I'm telling you, friends—this core—this sense of nakedness runs through **every person**. Madonna—in her own words—describes the seduction of success in her own words:

I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy...I push past one spell of it and discover

myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting...Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm **SOMEBODY**. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will. (The Misfit, *Vanity Fair*, 1991.)

-Do you see it? The driving force behind the idol of success is almost always fear. The fear that **someone** will know who I really am—and reject me.

4. And when we fall for this idol, we ultimately put our worth on the auction block. Think about it. What happens when you put your personal worth as a human being on the stock market of success? Well, you always have to be checking to see if your stock is up or down. It could sound like this. Today I am worth **more!** Today I am worth even **more!** Today I am worth **less.** Today I am worth less. Today I am worthless. I am **worthless!** And time and age don't help in that market. How does time and age affect your appearance? Does stock go up—or down? How about your creative powers—up or down? How about your cool factor?

-And unless you see what you're doing to yourself—that you are addicted to the idol of success, you will do what all idol worshippers do. You will do whatever you have to do to manipulate the powers behind **success** to get what you want. You will hide what you shouldn't hide. You will sell out where you shouldn't sell out. You will refuse to hear the voices of people who love you. And you will lie, manipulate the truth—mold it to fit what you want to do—**need** to do—to raise your stock.

-And we **live** in a culture of sell-out. There's an old saying from the world of sports, "It's not whether you win; it is how you play the game." Now the opposite is true. It doesn't **matter** how you play the game, **just so you win!"** And that's the success idol, isn't it? Do whatever you have to do to win. To get up the ladder. To spin your image to what you **want** people to believe about you.

-And **winning** drives more of life in our world than we would ever want to admit. We **must** win—so we exaggerate, cheat, backstab, gossip, overwork, overstress, over medicate—all to blow away the competition, find the attention our heart craves—and drive away our feelings of mediocrity and inadequacy.

5. So, **how do you know?** What are the signs that success is the real idol you're worshipping in the shadows of your life? Well, no surprises, really.
- a. Just like Madonna, people with a success idol are driven by a relentless sense of inadequacy. To build your life on how **well** you're doing—or how well **others** think you're doing is a very shaky foundation. I recently read about a guy who had been sending resumes out to all these companies looking for a job. And he kept getting these rejection letters. He finally kind of snapped and wrote this letter in reply to his most recent rejection.

"To whom it may concern: Thank you for your recent letter. After careful consideration, I regret to inform you that I am unable to accept your

refusal to offer me employment with your firm. This year, I have been particularly fortunate in receiving an unusually large number of rejection letters. With such a varied and promising field of candidates, it is impossible for me to accept all refusals. Despite your company's outstanding qualifications and previous experience in rejecting applicants, I find your rejection does not meet with my needs at this time. Therefore, I will initiate employment with your firm immediately. I look forward to working with you. Best of luck in rejecting future candidates.”

-It's funny—but it illustrates how desperate we are to avoid feeling inadequate. See, we don't mind wearing a bathing suit at the beach—because everyone is exposed there. Some more than they *should* be for the sake of humanity. How does it feel when you're at a banquet—you're in a bathing suit and everyone else is wearing evening gowns and tuxes—and plastered in make-up?

-We all have this inner fear that we are NOBODY. And yet we are made in the image of God; we are made to live significant lives—to *truly make a difference in the world through the power of God*. But sometimes, without even *thinking* about God, we ask,, “How do I build a bridge between *Nobody* and *Somebody*?”

-Of course, to figure that out, you have to know what a *Somebody* looks like. Is Madonna a *Somebody*?—because that's apparently her goal. The world system has a very clear plan for building the bridge from *Nobody* to *Somebody*. It's called *success*. And appropriate worship at the altar of success requires *sacrifice!* If you want it, you have to *pay!* Up front! It involves doing what you *have* to do to look better, achieve more, accomplish, win—whether it's in the arena of music, business, sports, parenthood, politics, activism, or spirituality. It's being known; standing out; catching other people's eyes, being cool, having all the signs of success.

-Of course, where in the Bible does it say that being successful—achieving—is what makes you significant—a *Somebody*? It doesn't. Science tells us that we are just unusually complex and sophisticated complex bags of chemicals—and what when we die we become fertilizer. And inside we *know* that's not true! There's a *greatness* about us! Know why we feel that way? It's this faint residue of memory—that we are created in the image of God. Psalm 139 says:

I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. (Psalm 139:14 TNIV)

-That's the basis for being *Somebody!* We were created to be *Somebody*—to be a unique, irreplaceable person—loved, valuable and important to God. If our greatness, our being *somebody* is based on what we accomplish and achieve, that has huge implications. It means that those of us who are in a position to achieve and accomplish are better—more important to this world—than a child born in poverty in Indonesia. Does anyone think that's true?

-It **also** means that if we get disabled, or lose our attractiveness—or our edge—that we are **less** of a **somebody**. That being a **Somebody** peaks at 40, 50, or 60—and then slowly declines. And that, friends, is a **terrifying thought**. That as you age, as your strength and brain power declines—the bridge between being Nobody and Somebody collapses.

-**That** is a roller-coaster you don't want to be on. And it is the lie that the success idol tells us to keep us worshipping. Achievements are not bad things—but they **don't** have the power to make you significant. Only God has that power—and He gives it freely. The irony is that if you worship the God of success—you will lose your chance to live with significance.

- b. The second sign; **if you are obsessed with personal achievement, you are probably worshipping the idol of success**. Does anyone see any signs of this in our area? **Saturated** is the word that comes to mind. Think about how we talk about ourselves—and what's implied in the questions we ask ourselves. How are you doing at work? What's your job title? Are you doing well financially? Have you been promoted—or are you still in cubicle-land? How are people feeling about you these days? Do they see you as profound, unique, amazing, talented—or interesting? Are you gaining in popularity and respect—or losing?

-And this can get **very** superficial—down to living in the right house, in the right neighborhood, driving the right car the right 'look'—with your kids at the right school—performing in ways that are superior to your friend's kids. And if you're using this kind of report card, it will always say, "Not good enough." Someone is always doing better than you.

-And the success idol will drive you to make more sacrifices. A counselor who works with high achievers in the business world is very blunt about achievement. She says, **Achievement is the alcohol of our time**. And like any addiction, the achievement addiction takes more than it gives. And we've **all** watched people we know sacrifice **everything** to the success addiction.

-Jesus said:

For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will save it. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet lose or forfeit your very self? (Luke 9:24-25 TNIV)

-Now, we **all** know that if you trade your soul for something, it can't be a good deal, right? No one would ever consciously make that choice. But that is **precisely** the choice you make when the idol of success replaces God!

- c. A final sign that you're worshipping the idol of success is when you find yourself coveting—**wanting** the success of others—rather than celebrating them. Anyone here who, like me, is tempted to envy the person who seems to have more, or accomplish more, or achieve more than you—be more successful than you at what you're **good** at? It's **natural**—and it's **deadly!**

-When you start wanting, envying—being jealous of the success, the achievements, the popularity, the position, the influence of others, you have taken a step toward hatred. One of the clearest examples of this in the narrative of the Bible is the story of Saul—the first king of Israel. He was a great man in his own right—a head above everyone else. And yet when David came along, killed the giant—and had people singing songs about his success—He was filled with jealousy. And his jealousy turned to hatred. His hatred poisoned his heart and ruined the legacy he was so obsessed with leaving.

-When **any** idol takes the place that only belongs to God, we have started on a trail that will **not** end well. Success, in and of itself, destroys lives. And it's because we know we've had to sell out along the way. And when we actually get what we've been looking for, there's the profound sense, "This is **not** what I dreamed it would be!" The night before he died, Saul found himself consulting a witch to get direction—and having this profound confrontation with God that shook him to his core.

6. My sense is that this idol of success may be the single biggest deterrent to God's mission in the world. Most certainly **this** part of it. Achievement is a **huge** deal—and it's the gospel that gets preached from just about everything we read or watch. And the really **weird** thing is that somehow we think we can get God to sign on—and help us be the success we've always wanted to be. In other words—that God will help us worship a counterfeit god!

-And I'll tell you what really, **really** concerns me. It's how this obsession with achievement is driving how we raise our kids—especially in a high-achieving part of the world like this. A man named David Brooks has written a book entitled **On Paradise Drive**. In it he describes what he calls **the professionalization of childhood**. He says that an alliance of parents and schools has created a pressure-cooker of competition that is designed to produce students who excel in everything. He calls this system a **mighty Achievatron**.

-To be quite frank, I don't see any difference between the adoration of achievement in parents like us—and the worship of achievement in parents blatantly worship the idol of success. Think about it—when it comes to a choice between some form of achievement in sports, music, academics or the arts—and some act of worshipping or serving God and his mission—what gets dropped most quickly?

-Think of it. If we're as obsessed with achievement as everyone else—and drop everything for it—what chance do our kids possibly stand in escaping our cultures worship of the mighty idol of success? And if this idol drives their lives, what will it do to them? 3500 years ago, Joshua took a stand; drove a stake in the ground, went public before a whole nation and warned them about serving the gods of their culture. He said:

But if serving the LORD seems undesirable to you, then choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served beyond

the Euphrates, or the gods of the Amorites, in whose land you are living. But as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD." (Joshua 24:15 TNIV)

-And we have to do the same. We will have to choose. We will have to be really, **really** clear who and what we're serving—and not play games with it.

7. Know why I say that? Because the idol of success attends church more faithfully than you. Or me. It's just sneaky; it hides behind spirituality and altruism. See the idol of success is about achievement that leads to the admiration of others. It's about **out-doing** others. About **being better, more devoted, more spiritual, more sacrificial, more knowledgeable**. The Apostle Paul **saw** this, and made it crystal clear that unless **love** for God and others is at the very basis of our gifts, ministries and sacrifices—it's all noise. It's nothing. It's a bunch of hype and self-promotion.
 - a. I success goes to church because, sad to say—in reviewing my life—I've made my share of sacrifices and offerings there. I had two bookend experiences—one which helped me start down that track; and one that helped me understand it.

-The first experience was a feeling of failure; being told by the Senior Pastor in my first year as a pastor—that I didn't have what it takes—and that he thought I was lazy. I now realize that there was something in me that stiffened up to prove him wrong. I overworked to the point of almost ruining my marriage—and missing important parts of my kids lives. But, see, I was doing it for **the Lord**—at least that's what I told myself.

-And **man** did I want the churches I served to grow and thrive. Was I sincere? Of course I was—but as I see it now—it was mixed. When I left the church I'd served for 11 years—it was a crushing, agonizing experience. I had to dig down deep into my soul and ask, "Who was all that **for?**"
 - b. What I've realized is that God works deeply in every person He wants to use—but He does it in a way that makes us feel **very** unsuccessful. Sometimes he crushes our achievements. Remember King Saul's jealousy of David? He made David's life **miserable**. In fact, David lost everything. He lost his job, his wife, his best friend, his home land, the esteem of the people—**everything**. And it lasted for probably 10 years. But it crushed his ego and obliterated the idol of success. David became **the** stellar king of Israel—one by whom everyone would be judged. And he remained humble.

-And it's a pattern. You see it all through the Bible—where God works severely with a person, humbling them—so **He**, in time, can exalt them and save them from themselves. That happened with Abraham, Jacob, Moses, David, Peter, Paul. Interesting—that's even the path that Jesus took; moving from the most exalted place in the universe—to being laid in a manger, raised in the backwoods of Israel—and dying in shame on a cross. And then being raised to glory.

8. Remember the story about Adam and Eve being ashamed of their nakedness—and stitching together a bunch of fig leaves to cover themselves? There's an interesting story from the last week of Jesus' life. He was apparently on his way to Jerusalem, and stopped at—interestingly enough—a fig tree to get some breakfast. The narrative goes like this:

Seeing in the distance a fig tree in leaf, he went to find out if it had any fruit. When he reached it, he found nothing but leaves.... (Mark 11:13 TNIV)

-This is not a casual story about Jesus not getting breakfast; this is a story about Him coming to His people—people called to bless the nations. Times up, and God is looking for fruit. They've got the Bible; they know the teachings; they've got rituals; their temple is one of the wonders of the world—they're even fasting, praying and giving to the poor. They've got all the signs of a **successful** religion. But there's no fruit—just leaves. Surprisingly, in a symbolic way Jesus curses the tree.

- a. It's pretty clear, friends, that when God comes to our lives, he's looking for fruit. And He hasn't left that up to our best guess. It's the **fruit of the Spirit**. It's the interior work that the Holy Spirit does in us—which ultimately shows in how we treat God—and how we treat others.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law. (Galatians 5:22-23 TNIV)

-Jesus said that all of the law and the prophets admonitions could be summarized in two commands: **Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your mind, and with all your strength. And love your neighbor as yourself.**

- b. In a world that **adores** success and **rewards** success and **fawns over** success—it is the most tempting idol out there. And I'll tell you what our defining moment is: it's when we have to decide whether we will leave success as the world sees it—to follow God—wherever it leads—no matter what anyone thinks.

Q & A

-The rest of the story with Adam and Eve tells us that **God** covered their nakedness. The leaves weren't necessary. And Christ, through His blood, shed on the cross, has covered ours. Because of Him, we are accepted **just as we are** as God's children.

-But our temptation instead of producing fruit, is to try to cover our nakedness with leaves. To hide our sense of being exposed—our sense that we are unacceptable—with **leaves**. And we are **very** clever at doing that with things that make us appear successful in front of those by whom we **want** to be seen as successful.

-And the problem with that is the motive is off. Warped. It's not about loving God with all you are—or loving others—it all circles back to you.

- c. God comes looking for fruit, not leaves. See, the problem with leaves—is that fall always comes. You can't cover yourself, Cinderella; midnight is coming!