

FIRST BAPTIST POWELL, 2-2-14 AM NOTES  
"THE IDOL OF SUCCESS"  
VARIOUS SCRIPTURES  
#2 in Series, "Idol Wars"

**Romans 1:29-32 (NKJV)** <sup>29</sup>being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, <sup>30</sup>backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup>undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; <sup>32</sup>who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them."

**Romans 1:18-23 (NKJV)** <sup>18</sup>For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup>because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. <sup>20</sup>For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, <sup>21</sup>because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup>Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup>and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things."

**Romans 1:24 (NKJV)** "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts..."

**Hosea 4:17 (NKJV)** "Ephraim is joined to idols, Let him alone."

"[The lost] enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved."

—C. S. Lewis

**1 Thessalonians 1:9b (NKJV)** "...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God."

**1 John 5:21 (NKJV)** "Little children, keep yourselves from idols."

I. The Idol of Success—The Illusion

**Matthew 16:26 (NKJV)** "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?"

**2 Kings 17:33a (NKJV)** "They feared the Lord, yet served their own gods..."

"These days, the best people don't abuse alcohol. They abuse their lives...You're successful, so good things happen. You complete a project and you feel dynamite. That feeling doesn't last forever, and you slide back to normal. But you love feeling the euphoria, so you've got to have it again. The problem is that you can't stay on that high. Say you're working on a deal that doesn't get approved. Your self-esteem is on the line, because you've been gathering your self-worth externally. Eventually, in this cycle you drop to the pain level more and more often. The highs don't seem quite so high... Next time, you don't even get back to normal, because you're so desperate about clinching the next deal...An 'achievement [success] addict' is no different from any other kind of addict." —A Counselor Who Works with Executives

“Of all the subjects we obsess about...success is the one we lie about the most—that success and its cousin money will make us secure, that success and its cousin power will make us important, that success and its cousin fame will make us happy. It’s time to tell the truth: Why are our generation’s smartest, most talented, most successful people flirting with disaster in record numbers? People are using all their means to get money, power, and glory—and then self-destructing.”  
—Helen Rubin

## II. The Idol of Success—A Biblical Example

**Matthew 19:16 (NKJV)** “Now behold, one came and said to Him, ‘Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?’”

### A. The Request to Jesus

### B. The First Response by Jesus

**Matthew 19:17-19 (NKJV)** <sup>17</sup> So He said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ <sup>18</sup> He said to Him, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus said, “*You shall not murder,’ ‘You shall not commit adultery,’ ‘You shall not steal,’ ‘You shall not bear false witness,’* <sup>19</sup> *‘Honor your father and your mother,’* and, *‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’*”

### C. The First Response to Jesus

**Matthew 19:20 (NKJV)** “The young man said to Him, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?’”

**Matthew 5:48 (NKJV)** “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

### D. The Second Response by Jesus

**Matthew 19:21 (NKJV)** “Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’”

**Colossians 3:5b (NKJV)** “...covetousness, which is idolatry.”

### E. The Final Response to Jesus

**Matthew 19:22 (NKJV)** “But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

## III. The Idol of Success—The Replacement

**Genesis 2:15 (NIV)** “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.”

We replace the idol of success with a passion for doing the will of God in the power of God for the glory of God.

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Even though there are about 1,000 references to idols in the Bible, there are very few Christian books and very few sermons from pulpits dealing with idolatry. As we saw in the last message, three of the Ten Commandments deal directly with idolatry. When you understand what idolatry really is, you begin to discover that idolatry is not "an" issue; idolatry is "the" issue! Idolatry is the great sin that most other sins come from. Until every false god is dethroned in your life, the one true God does not take His throne in you.

In Romans 1, the apostle Paul is laying the foundation for why mankind is under the wrath of God and so desperately needs a Savior. He shows in verses 18-32 the downward spiral into sinful depravity. That depravity is described in **Romans 1:29-32 (NKJV)** "being filled with all unrighteousness, sexual immorality, wickedness, covetousness, maliciousness; full of envy, murder, strife, deceit, evil-mindedness; *they are* whisperers, <sup>30</sup> backbiters, haters of God, violent, proud, boasters, inventors of evil things, disobedient to parents, <sup>31</sup> undiscerning, untrustworthy, unloving, unforgiving, unmerciful; <sup>32</sup> who, knowing the righteous judgment of God, that those who practice such things are deserving of death, not only do the same but also approve of those who practice them." How does this progression into depravity take place? It begins with idolatry. **Romans 1:18-23 (NKJV)** "<sup>18</sup> For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who suppress the truth in unrighteousness, <sup>19</sup> because what may be known of God is manifest in them, for God has shown *it* to them. <sup>20</sup> For since the creation of the world His invisible *attributes* are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* His eternal power and Godhead, so that they are without excuse, <sup>21</sup> because, although they knew God, they did not glorify *Him* as God, nor were thankful, but became futile in their thoughts, and their foolish hearts were darkened. <sup>22</sup> Professing to be wise, they became fools, <sup>23</sup> and changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image made like corruptible man--and birds and four-footed animals and creeping things." In other words, mankind refused to worship and give glory and thanksgiving to the true God that they knew existed, but refused to submit to. In pride they gloried in their own wisdom and in reality became fools (V22) by worshipping idols. Those in less sophisticated cultures worship literal images of animals or more human looking gods. The more sophisticated cultures worship things like money, sex, power, and success. The sophisticated idols are just as much idols as literal images of a person (like Nebuchadnezzar in Daniel) or the golden calf in the wilderness, or the grotesque idols of Hinduism. The bottom line evil that mankind has committed is in **Romans 1:23a (NKJV)** is that we have "changed the glory of the incorruptible God into an image..." – an idol! We have forsaken the incorruptible God and we have taken up corruptible idols! When the Apostle Paul goes to the root of mankind's problem, he does not first go to sexual sin or the other sins in verses 29-30; he deals with the fundamental problem which is that we have refused to give God the glory that He is due and that He demands. Instead of treasuring God and desiring to know God more deeply and intimately, we have exchanged God for idols of our own making. Verse 22 says that this stupid exchange makes us fools even though we try to convince ourselves that we are wise. My wife puts this truth in this simple way: "Sin short circuits people's brains". It goes deeper than the brain – verse 21 says "their foolish hearts were darkened". The light goes out and there is darkness and blindness. What is God's immediate judgment on this suppressing of the truth, this exchanging of the one true God for idols? **Romans 1:24a (NKJV)** "Therefore God also gave them up to uncleanness, in the lusts of their hearts..." In my opinion, that phrase, "God gave them up" is one of the scariest phrases in the entire Bible! One commentator said that the phrase, "God gave them up" sounds like clods of dirt falling on a coffin (Robertson). In the Old Testament, Hosea echoes the same truth in **Hosea 4:17 (NKJV)** "Ephraim *is* joined to idols, Let him alone." God's judgment of the sin of refusing to glorify Him as God and refusing to give Him thanks and then worshipping idols is that He abandons man to his sin; He gives man up to the sins he desires. What

we have described in these verses is the judicial abandonment of man by God. This does not mean that God just said, “Oh, all right, just go ahead with what you’re doing”. Perhaps a better translation of that phrase would be the NIV, “God gave them over to”. The sense is that He gives them over to the consequences of the sin they love. C. S. Lewis said, “[The lost] enjoy forever the horrible freedom they have demanded, and are therefore self-enslaved” [MacArthur Commentary, Page 98]. While hell is a real place, the hell of hell is that those there are abandoned by God. It is interesting that ever since sin came into the world in the Garden of Eden, natural man wants God to leave him alone so he can be his own god. A manifestation of the wrath of God is that God does just that. But when man gets what he wants, it doesn’t turn out like he thought it would. Man thinks that God is all about squelching happiness, and that by being free from God he can be wild, happy and free. However what he finds is misery instead of happiness and instead of freedom he finds himself in bondage to the sin he was pursuing. When a person refuses to glorify God, refuses to give Him thanks, refuses to submit to Him and then make their own gods (idols), at some point God abandons them (gives them over) to their sin.

Idolatry is a serious sin – in some ways, it is the most serious sin. To be saved, a person must repent and turn from idols. Paul described the conversion of the Thessalonians like this: **1 Thessalonians 1:9b (NKJV)** “...how you turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God”. Even believers can temporarily get caught up in the old ways of idolatry that brings the severe chastisement and discipline of our Father. That is why John gave this admonition to believers in **1 John 5:21 (NKJV)** “Little children, keep yourselves from idols.”

In today’s message, we are going to focus in on one of the most common idols in America – success.

## I. The Idol of Success – The Illusion

Our culture defines success as the achieving or obtaining our heart’s desire. Success is viewed by the world as what we have when our fondest dreams come true. The god of success has no problem finding followers. The allurements of this god of success, the enticing lie that it propagates is that you can be in control; it’s really all about you. You can run the whole thing; you can look good, be admired, be envied by others, and get the respect that you think you deserve. The success god gives you ways to keep score – titles, yearly income, the square footage and neighborhood of the house you live in, the car you drive, and the friends you have in high places. The success god offers you a sense of worth and identity in what you have accomplished. Success is measured in the sports world by wins, home runs, touchdowns, average points per game, or the number of tournaments won. Success is measured in the business world by salary, title, the number of people who are “under” you, and the profit you have made for the company. Success in the religious world is attendance, twitter followers, books published, and invitations to speak in big venues [yes, the god of success stalks Pastors also]. The god of success preys on our pride and promises to make us look good and be admired by others. Oh what a seductive god is this god success. This false god starts early in life. In 2011, a team of UCLA psychologists studied the values of TV characters in the shows most popular with preteens over the years. For example, Andy Griffith and Lucy from the sixties; Happy Days characters and Laverne and Shirley from the seventies; and American Idol and Hannah Montana from recent times. The most frequent value of contemporary shows was found to be “fame.” Between 1967 and 1997, the top value had been “community feeling, or being part of a group.” That value suddenly dropped to eleventh place. The second most frequent value from 1967-1997, “being kind and helpful to others,” had plunged from second to thirteenth place. The predominant message of today’s preteen shows seems to be that a successful life is all about finding a way to be famous. One of the researchers said, “I was shocked, especially by the dramatic changes in the last ten years....” [Quoted in Kyle Idleman, *God’s at War*, page 165-166]. The god of success is winning many worshippers.

One counselor who works with high level executives says that achievement (success) is the alcohol of our time. She says, “These days, the best people don’t abuse alcohol. They abuse their lives... You’re successful, so good things happen. You complete a project and you feel dynamite. That feeling doesn’t last forever, and you slide back to normal. But you love feeling the euphoria, so you’ve got to have it again. The problem is that you can’t stay on that high. Say you’re working on a deal that doesn’t get

approved. Your self esteem is on the line, because you've been gathering your self worth externally. Eventually, in this cycle you drop to the pain level more and more often. The highs don't seem quite so high... Next time, you don't even get back to normal, because you're so desperate about clinching the next deal... An 'achievement [success] addict' is no different from any other kind of addict." [Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, page 74]. One of the main evidences that we are worshipping the idol of success is that we find that we cannot maintain our sense of well being unless we are always at the top.

The expectation of joy, of contentment, of satisfaction at the altar of success is a myth. It never happens. Helen Rubin wrote an article in the magazine, *Fast Company* that said this: "Of all the subjects we obsess about... success is the one we lie about the most – that success and its cousin money will make us secure, that success and its cousin power will make us important, that success and its cousin fame will make us happy. It's time to tell the truth: Why are our generations's smartest, most talented, most successful people flirting with disaster in record numbers? People are using all their means to get money, power, and glory – and then self-destructing." Idols never deliver what they promise! After the global economic crisis in mid-2008, there followed a tragic string of suicides of formerly successful, wealthy and well connected individuals. The acting chief financial officer of Freddie Mac, the Federal Home Loan Mortgage Corporation, hanged himself in his basement. The chief executive of Sheldon Good, a leading U. S. real estate auction firm, shot himself in the head behind the wheel of his red Jaguar. A French money manager who invested the wealth of many of Europe's royal and leading families, and who had lost \$1.4 billion of his clients' money in Bernard Madoff's Ponzi scheme, slit his wrists and died in his Madison Avenue office. A Danish senior executive with HSBC Bank hanged himself in the wardrobe of his over \$800 a night suite in Knightsbridge, London. When a Bear Stearns executive learned that he would not be hired by JPMorgan Chase, which had bought his collapsed firm, he took a drug overdose and leapt from the 29<sup>th</sup> floor of his office building. [Tim Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, pages x, xi]. The promises of the success god are false. The promised benefits of the success god are phony – they do not exist. Jesus said in **Matthew 16:26a (NKJV)** "For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul?" I suspect that a good description of many American church members would be **2 Kings 17:33a (NIV)** "They worshiped the Lord, but they also served their own gods..." One of the most seductive god's is the god of success.

## II. The Idol of Success – A Biblical Example

In the account of Jesus' encounter with the rich young ruler, we see an example of what a worshipper of the god of success looks like. We read in **Matthew 19:16 (NKJV)** "Now behold, one came and said to Him, 'Good Teacher, what good thing shall I do that I may have eternal life?'"

### A. The Request to Jesus (V16)

This was without a doubt an exceptional young man. When we compare Matthew's account with Mark and Luke's account, we discover that he was characterized by three words: "rich", "young", and "ruler". Here was a young man who was very religious, very influential, and very wealthy, but the god of success had not fulfilled all that it promised. The successful young ruler realized that something was missing. There is nothing to indicate that he was not very sincere in his coming to Jesus. The thing he felt like he was missing was eternal life. He certainly didn't understand eternal life as we do on this side of the cross, but he evidently knew that it was a quality of life that he did not have. His request was to know what he had to do to have eternal life. The young ruler was assuming that eternal life was something he could achieve, something else he could be successful in obtaining through his intelligence, hard work, and great leadership skills. Eternal life was something else he could add to his resume. He felt that all he lacked was information. When he knew what to do, he could take it from there. Remember that the god of success feeds on human pride. The god of success tells you that you can save yourself; you are not a weakling who needs someone to do it for you. That "trust completely in Christ" kind of thinking is contradictory to human pride. Adrian Rogers used to say that most people are so full of pride they are strutting their way to hell thinking they are too good to be condemned. This is the reasoning behind recent comments of two well known people in America. Bill Maher, the comedian, television host, and political commentator

recently said 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 else to cleanse me. I can cleanse myself.” [Quoted in Kyle Idleman. *Gods at War*, page 160 electronic version]. Warren Buffet, the billionaire business man and the man called the most successful investor in America donated 85% of his 44 billion dollar wealth to charity. Here is his comment on that generous act: “There is more than one way to get to heaven, but this is a great way.” [Idleman, Page 160 electronic version]. This rich young ruler would have fit in well with Bill Maher and Warren Buffett. The “save yourself” mindset is tailor made for the pride motivated god of success.

#### B. The First Response by Jesus (V17-19)

**Matthew 19:17-19 (NKJV)** “<sup>17</sup> So He said to him, ‘Why do you call Me good? No one *is* good but One, *that is*, God. But if you want to enter into life, keep the commandments.’ <sup>18</sup> He said to Him, ‘Which ones?’ Jesus said, ‘*You shall not murder, ‘You shall not commit adultery, ‘You shall not steal, ‘You shall not bear false witness, ‘*<sup>19</sup> *Honor your father and your mother, ‘ and, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’”*

First, Jesus informs the young man whom he is talking to. The Greek word for “good” refers to good in essence and nature. Jesus tells him that only God is good in that sense. In reality, Jesus was telling the young man that He (Jesus) was God. After letting the young man know to whom he was talking, Jesus begins to reveal what it is that keeps him from having the eternal life that he desires. In verse 17b, Jesus tells him to keep the commandments. This is strange to our way of thinking. Where is grace and forgiveness? This sounds like Jesus was teaching a works earned salvation. No, Jesus was revealing to this young man his need for grace and mercy and forgiveness because he was full of pride. His pride was manifested in his failure to be broken over his own sinfulness. Notice how Jesus did this. He held up before him the law. Jesus offered no immediate help for this young man’s felt need; He zeroed in on his real need which was to see his own sinfulness and his offense to a holy God. The god of success had to be torn down before he could experience eternal life.

#### C. The First Response to Jesus (V20)

**Matthew 19:20 (NKJV)** “The young man said to Him, ‘All these things I have kept from my youth. What do I still lack?’”

This may not be a hypocritical response. If he had the mindset of the Pharisees, he was referring to an outward obedience in keeping rules and did not look on the heart. He didn’t understand that God demands perfection in the outward obedience and also a heart that is in obedience. **Matthew 5:48 (NKJV)** “Therefore you shall be perfect, just as your Father in heaven is perfect.”

#### D. The Second Response by Jesus (V21)

**Matthew 19:21 (NKJV)** “Jesus said to him, ‘If you want to be perfect, go, sell what you have and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow Me.’”

This response by Jesus has confused many. It is actually very clear what He is doing. No where else does Jesus tell people that they have to sell all that they have and give it to the poor in order to be His disciple. He was revealing to this young man that he had broken the first and the tenth commandment. He had coveted material riches and they actually were a god that had first place in his life. Remember **Colossians 3:5b (NKJV)** “...covetousness, which is idolatry.” Jesus was saying, “You say you have kept the commandments, in reality your success your god. Go and sell it all and give it to the poor and follow me”. Had Jesus gone directly to this man’s felt need, he would have become a surface follower of Christ, but he would have still been lost because there was idolatry in his life that he never repented from and he would not have been saved.

#### E. The Final Response to Jesus (V22)

**Matthew 19:22 (NKJV)** “But when the young man heard that saying, he went away sorrowful, for he had great possessions.”

This young man only wanted something to fill the void in his heart, but he was not willing to tear down the idol of success. His idol meant more to him than having eternal life. He bought into the lie, the illusion of the god of success. Salvation is not for people who want to feel better about themselves and enhance

their lives; salvation is for those who recognize that they are sinners and justly condemned and see Jesus as their only hope and turn from every idol and trust Him alone.

### III. The Idol of Success – The Replacement

It is not enough to simply tear down the idols in our lives. Those idols must be replaced. I believe that God has wired us to achieve, to accomplish things. I don't see evidence that the desire to achieve is a part of the fall. The hint is that before sin came into the world, God gave Adam and Eve work to do – to dress and care for the garden. **Genesis 2:15 (NIV)** “The Lord God took the man and put him in the Garden of Eden to work it and take care of it.” The word translated “work it” means to till and to plow. The word translated “take care” means to guard, to protect, or to preserve. WE don't know all that this work involved, but it meant that man had some work that affected the outcome of the garden's fruits. That speaks of achievement. The curse after sin came into the world was toil, wearisome work. With that in mind, what do we replace the idol of success with? It is very simple: **We replace the idol of success with a passion for doing the will of God in the power of God for the glory of God.** That is true success! Our desire is to know the will of God. Our ability to do the will of God is found in the power of God mediated to us by the Holy Spirit as He fills our lives. Our motive for doing the will of God by the power of God is that God is glorified, made to look good because He is good! Don't fall for the devil's substitute – the false god of success that is never satisfied and results in a life of bondage with no genuine joy. Cast down the false god of success and replace it with a passion, a “whatever it takes” mindset to know the will of God and to do it in His power for His glory.