

# Dump Your False Gods: Success

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2 Kings 5:1-15

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I'm a big fan of success. I've spent as much time and energy and worry as anyone else trying to be successful—probably more than most. The drive to be successful is a God-given gift: each of us is created by God in the image of God: to be creative; to succeed and to make a difference in the world; to enjoy close relationships with others. We disciples of Jesus are called to allow the Spirit to transform our hearts and lives to become more and more like Him.

None of us was created to sit on the sidelines, take up space, whine and make excuses, think it's holy or pleasing to God to watch other people live exciting and fulfilling lives while we defer. We are here to use our gifts and talents as the Spirit directs, supporting our families and encouraging others and strengthening Christ's Church, being careful steward of all God has entrusted to us, changing lives and changing the world.

The only problem is we all get confused, somewhere along the way. This toxic cocktail of fear and greed and the desire to be special and to make our own rules and our own destiny and our own goals and our own lives gets brewed up within each of us. God's desire for us to worship Him and love His direction for our lives gets morphed into the desire for us to direct ourselves and others. The Kingdom of God becomes the Kingdom of Me. "I've worked hard, I deserve it, I've earned it all." (I wouldn't admit to daydreaming, as Joseph did, about other people bowing down to me as all those other lesser sheaves of wheat did to his, but I will admit not only to thinking it would be nice to preach a great sermon but would be nice to hear other people, like you, tell me "that was a great sermon.")

This distortion of God's purpose for our lives into my own internal toxic one is how we end up with another false god. We make an idol of success. Another gift from God gone wrong. This idol leads to fear, to exhaustion, to suspicion, to bondage, to self-justification. God wants our life to be simplified and we make it hard; God wants us to love others and we see them as rivals; God wants us to know we are each one a dearly beloved "somebody" and we see ourselves as "nobody."

We read this morning of Naaman, one of the most successful men in his day (mid-9th Century B.C.) He had it all: power, wealth, position, influence. Naaman was Prime Minister, second in command, in Aram (where

Syria is today.) He was Commander-in-Chief of their Defense. He was honorable and favored by the King—very much trusted. He was unspeakably wealthy—the quantities of silver and gold he packs up and hauls over to Israel might be valued at tens of billions of dollars. He could buy a lot of stuff.

Naaman had it all...then we also hear, "although a mighty warrior,...Naaman had leprosy." This was a gradual death sentence, like stage-4 cancer. It was incurable and fatal. All his power and all his wealth couldn't stop his leprosy.

This one factor exposes all the lies of the false god of success. Success can buy us a lot of what pleases us and gives us satisfaction in life, for a while. Everyone loves to be able to buy a lot of stuff. But the idol of success always comes up mute before life's biggest questions: Who am I? How am I significant? How will my life be measured? How shall I face my death? (Philip II of Macedon was the father of Alexander the Great and himself one of the most powerful military leaders in antiquity. He recognized that all his success failed before final question, observing, "O how small a portion of the earth will hold us when we are dead, who ambitiously seek after the whole world while we are living.")

I Dump the false god of success because it will exhaust you. I mean it will exhaust you, wear you out, even if you're successful. (We would expect this idol to be cruel to all those who are not successful or even not lucky: how about those who do not rise to the top of the pyramid, or even to the top 50% of the class? Those whose IQ is just not that high? Those who are laid off, or laid up flat on their backs? Those whose kids are overweight, or whose financially productive years are behind them? Of course false success curses all of them—many of us.)

One fellow was having trouble finding a job; he kept getting rejection after rejection. After the most recent letter, he composed and sent this letter: "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 strong and varied field of candidates, it is simply impossible for me to accept all refusals. Despite your company's outstanding qualifications and previous

experience at rejecting applicants, I find your rejection does not meet with my needs at this time. Therefore, I will initiate employment with your firm at once. Best of luck rejecting future candidates.”

This is a nice fantasy, but I’m talking about the insatiable demand of the idol of success so that our sense of worth, of our identity, always rests on our being successful. False gods are always insatiable; if our sense of self is tied up with succeeding and coming out on top that’s a battle we have to win almost every day. We can’t get off that treadmill. We can change the channel on the TV as we’re running, but we need to feel we are somebody, we have value. God has made us that way. The problem is that running the treadmill of success will never get us further along the Way, into the Kingdom of God.

Remember Madonna? (If we were Catholics I’d have to specify which one.) You’d think, with her hundreds of millions of dollars and millions of fans and thousands of shenanigans she would have felt successful, and enjoyed a little peace and quiet in her troubled soul. But she describes her spiritual exhaustion in these 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 stage...and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and I think I’m mediocre and uninteresting. Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear...and that’s always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I’ve become “somebody,” I still have to prove I’m “somebody.” My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.” [from *Vanity Fair*; quoted in *Counterfeit Gods*, Timothy Keller, Dutton, 2009. As I mentioned last week, Keller’s work has been helpful to me in preparing these sermons.] She feels she will be running on the treadmill trying to get from “nobody” to “somebody” all the days of her life—and then, like Philip of Macedon, she’s going to die.

Perpetual struggle to prove we’re “somebody.” Even lovers are not immune. A young man named Bill finally worked up the nerve to ask his girlfriend Jill to marry him. “Sweetheart, love of my life, I know I’m not as wealthy as Ryan, or as handsome as Ryan, or as well-educated as Ryan, but I want you to know I love you and I want to spend the rest of my life with you.” She said, “I love you, too, Bill. But I’d really like it if you’d introduce me to your friend Ryan.”

Our kids are not immune: our homes are meant to be relief from the stress of life, and we have turned even our homes into pressure cookers increasing the stress of life. We teach our own kids to be stressed out, to aim for success and perfection. Our own children, God help us. (David Brooks writes of this in *Paradise Drive*—he

calls it “the professionalization of childhood.” Parents, teachers, schools all conspire to produce students who see everything as competition, who are taught to excel, and Brooks calls this conspiracy “a massive organic apparatus...a mighty Achievatron.”)

I’m sure not immune. I have many memories of feeling as if I were nobody—even just after I had graduated with honors from a name college and achieved a certain success in my chosen field. I was in my mid-twenties and one of my good friends in college, a wonderful guy, had stuck around in Silicon Valley as an engineer and entrepreneur. He had done very well for himself financially. When I’d visit my family in Palo Alto my mom kept nudging me to make an appointment to go see my friend Larry for lunch. I remember intentionally not doing so because I felt the discrepancy between what he’d done and managed and become by his mid-20s and what I had done by my mid-20s was too great and too painful. Fortunately this all sounds silly now—especially because Larry is the kind of guy who wouldn’t have noticed or cared what I was up to—but I was worshiping the false god of success, and it distorted my spirit and exhausted me and left me feeling I was a “nobody.” I couldn’t even bear to visit my friend.

II Dump the false god of success because it will exhaust you. Dump the false god of success because it will keep you away from the true God. The false god will keep you from the true God. We see this is true of Naaman over and over again. Remember how the chapter starts: he has leprosy, and a young slave girl, captured from the Israelites, tells her mistress how Elisha the prophet could easily cure Naaman’s leprosy.

Does Naaman go see the prophet Elisha? Of course not: everybody successful knows there’s a way successful people go about these things. There’s a protocol. Naaman goes not to Elisha but first to his king, who writes him a letter of recommendation to be presented to Israel’s king. Does he then go to ask Elisha to please consider healing him, as he was told? No. He takes a king’s ransom in silver and gold (tens of million or billions of dollars worth, depending) because he’s successful so he knows money talks and he knows how to get things done. Even then he goes not to Elisha, but to Elisha’s king. Naaman knows how these things work: the gods always work through the successful, the well-connected. Thru people like kings and generals.

The king of Israel (probably Ahaz, but that doesn’t come up) does no better. He knows all about the living God; as king of Israel he is sworn to uphold and honor and obey the living God. He even invokes the name of God—but he’s so deep into the worldly success game he, too, is far from God. He reads Naaman’s letter and suspects the

worst. Everyone is a threat, a rival, when success is your idol. “The king of our enemies the Arameans are using this stratagem as an excuse to start another war. I can’t heal leprosy, and he knows it. What am I supposed to do?” He tears his clothes, being extremely distressed, and he even says the right words: “Am I God, to give life or death?” He says the right word, but this false god has such a hold on him that he’s forgotten what he’s there for. Does he offer to pray for Naaman? Does he remember even to send him to the prophet, who can work wonders in the name of the God who does give life or death? No. The little servant girl has more faith in God than he does.

You and I know all about God. We know to invoke His name. Maybe we even believe He can do signs and wonders of healing. Help us find the work we need. But do we turn to Him with expectancy? Why not? Could it be because we, too, have ideas about how it ought to work—what God ought to heal, and when—and how God ought to be approached? God says, “Come to me empty, no character reference, no sterling record of worship and small group participation. Those things are fine—but if you think they impress Me or carry any weight with Me or make Me feel somehow obligated, they’re worse than nothing. I only want you come to Me as a little girl, trusting that I am your only hope in the most important things.”

Back to Naaman, the foreigner. By now Elisha has gotten word of his request, and Naaman treks to Elisha’s home some 25 miles away from Samaria, the capital. I think this scene is meant to be humorous. Naaman shows up in front of Elisha’s tent with his retinue of servants and slaves, his soldiers and chariots and caravans of Brink’s armored cars and tanks and helicopters along with his best troops. And Elisha doesn’t even get out of his comfy chair; he sends a servant, who tells Naaman “Go, wash in the Jordan river seven times, and your skin will be healed and you’ll be fine.”

Does Naaman say, “That sounds pretty hokey to me, but since I’m the guy who’s dying and Elisha is famous for this sort of thing, I guess I’ll give it a shot and then come back and have words with him when it doesn’t work”? No: he goes storming off, insulted. He thinks he knows how Elisha should have come out and waved his hand. Naaman had in mind what should have happened—and missed out on being healed because he missed totally what God wanted to do to heal him.

The false god of success makes us prickly and defensive. We are competent at what we do, thank you. We have a lot to offer God. So we can’t hear what God is asking of us—for our own good. Naaman is insulted. “He wants me to go jump in the Jordan? Anyone could do

that—that certainly isn’t a prescription fit for a man of my wealth or talents. I’ve brought Fort Knox, and would pay handsomely for Elisha to cure me. I should be asked to do something like go to a cave in the Himalayas and live on water and organic basmati rice for six months—now that would be a proper quest and challenge. Is this prophet too stupid to recognize who I am?”

Let’s not be too hard on him. He’s very decent, he’s respectful. He doesn’t try to pay Elisha counterfeit gold, or to force him under threat of force to heal him. His servants call Naaman “father” and his king holds him in high esteem. It’s just that he treats God as he would any other person: he goes right to the top, pulls some strings, tries to grease the skids a bit. Naaman is looking for a god who can be bought off—but God doesn’t take bribes. Naaman’s looking for a God who can be put in our debt—but God is in the grace business—we are always in His debt. Naaman is looking for a god who will play favorites, since Naaman surely would be one—but God insists on treating everyone fairly. Naaman’s mistake is that he tries to treat God as he would treat any successful man.

No relationship with God can prosper on those terms and Naaman and every one who worships success will be stuck asking their idols to buy them security and significance...and they will surely fail, as surely as Naaman still has leprosy. “Just wash yourself” is so hard because it’s not. “But God, look at all I’ve suffered...” “Just wash yourself.” “But God, look at all I’ve done for You.” “Just wash yourself.” “But God, look at all I’ve accomplished.” “Just wash yourself.” Washing in the Jordan is admitting we have nothing to add, no leverage with God. It’s our willingness to show up empty and receive what God offers as grace, as a gift.

III. his god of success will exhaust you, wear you out. It will keep you away from the true God, and His transformation and healing within you. But don’t just dump this false idol—you must replace it with the true God. Replace it with the true God.

Identifying an addiction is not the same as overcoming it. We are wired by God to want to want lives of significance, to make a difference—to be successful. We can’t dump this deep need, so our hearts and ambitions will just choose another substitute if we don’t orient our lives with the purposes of God, directed by the Spirit of God. We can’t dump our need to feel like a “somebody”—God has created us to be somebody. God has created us for genuine success: to make a difference for the Kingdom of God; to live lives of power, of peace, of freedom from bondage. To live lives of significance.

The real question is how we manage it.

There's one unlikely heroine in our story—the one who started off all the action. Imagine the life of the little Israelite girl, maybe twelve years old. She's a slave, taken by the enemy. She has lost her family, or been abducted. Perhaps she's seen them killed before her eyes. Her life has been traumatized, and whose fault is it? The Arameans, and their top general is the Naaman in whose home she lives. It is he who has leprosy.

What a perfect, unlikely chance for her revenge. (Which of us, when we aim for the top and end up toward the bottom, is not tempted to blame, not tempted to plot our revenge against those who've done better?) She resists. All she has to do is stay quiet and silently think to herself, "I hope you lose more of your skin today, and maybe this'll be my lucky day and something will fall off! I'll be dancing on your grave, and soon, after what you did to my family..."

Instead, she tells Naaman's wife about the prophet Elisha, who could cure his leprosy and save his life. And she must be persistent—why would the Prime Minister trust a little slave girl? She's a nobody, a slave, a foreigner. Why would she not want him to suffer, after he has caused her to suffer? Did she truly trust in God to take care of judgment, and thus feel free to try to help Naaman rather than curse him? Could she possibly have trusted God enough to allow God to keep her spirit free from resentment?

(Two sisters were too busy and too noisy in their bedroom well past their bedtime, and their mom finally charged in—by now extremely unamused by their getting up for yet another glass of water, rearranging their stuffed animals, chattering loudly. She spoke to them stiffly, so that when she left the room her older daughter was crying. The mom waited. Eventually she went back into the room a second time. "Karen, what's the matter?" "Don't you love us any more?" "Of course I still love you. It's just that it bothers me when you don't do what I ask you to do at bedtime." The mother closed the door the second time. This time she waited outside. The crying continued. Then the younger sister, six, said, "It's OK. Be quiet, Karen. She said she loves us. She loves us.")

The little sister "got it" just as the little servant girl did. Everyone can be washed clean; everyone can be healed; everyone is beloved. Jesus is the One who assures us of the love of God; "God says He loves you. He loves you," says Jesus. Jesus is the One who suffered for our sake and who has reason to wish suffering upon us who sin, upon us who harbor and then drink from the toxic cocktail in our hearts. Jesus is the One who trusted in God the

Father enough to allow the Father to judge, leaving the Son free to love us and invite us into the cleansing waters. (The waters of the Jordan, like the waters of Baptism, are available to everyone—everyone who will but be washed clean and humbly receive the gifts of God without cost.)

In the end, this is exactly where Naaman ended up. He listened to his own servant. He decided his money and his connections could not ever get him healed. He washed in the Jordan the same way the "nobodies" might have. He quit trying to make deals with God, and trying to tell God how his healing should be done. He finally came back, having stormed away twice, and found his skin not only to be healed, but clean and soft as a young boy's.

Once more he came before the "man of God," Elisha, along with his army and his moving vans full of his fortune. Now he understood: God didn't need his success; God healed him as a free gift of love. So this time Naaman offered his fortune not as a price to be paid in exchange for being healed but simply as a free gift to be offered in thanks. "Please accept, Elisha, man of God, a present from your servant..."

The truth of God upsets our worship of worldly success all along the way. The mighty Naaman, to gain his life, had to take direction from the little girl, a servant of Elisha, and two of his own. And so we, to regain our lives from the grip of false success, and to be made new, take direction from the One born not in the castle or the fortress, but in the manger behind the Inn. Not in Rome or Athens or Beijing or even Jerusalem—in Bethlehem. We give our lives over to the One whose success consisted of being ignored and frustrated and betrayed, captured and tortured and killed. He simply kept saying "Yes" to the God the Father, and trusted God for everything that mattered. God raised Him up to be "Somebody," alright—the Savior of the world.

Dear servants of God: your skills, your desire to make a difference and be successful, your ambition and your hope—they're all gifts from God. Keep saying "yes" to God; make God's Kingdom and God's priority for the world and for you your priority. God wants you to be successful and significant. Only God can turn you from a "nobody" into a "somebody," and Jesus assures us He already has.

Receive His love as a free gift.

## 2 Kings 5:1-15

Naaman, commander of the army of the king of Aram, was a great man and in high favor with his master, because by him the LORD had given victory to Aram. The man,

though a mighty warrior, suffered from leprosy. Now the Arameans on one of their raids had taken a young girl captive from the land of Israel, and she served Naaman's wife. She said to her mistress, "If only my lord were with the prophet who is in Samaria! He would cure him of his leprosy." So Naaman went in and told his lord just what the girl from the land of Israel had said. And the king of Aram said, "Go then, and I will send along a letter to the king of Israel."

He went, taking with him ten talents of silver, six thousand shekels of gold, and ten sets of garments. He brought the letter to the king of Israel, which read, "When this letter reaches you, know that I have sent to you my servant Naaman, that you may cure him of his leprosy." When the king of Israel read the letter, he tore his clothes and said, "Am I God, to give death or life, that this man sends word to me to cure a man of his leprosy? Just look and see how he is trying to pick a quarrel with me."

But when Elisha the man of God heard that the king of Israel had torn his clothes, he sent a message to the king, "Why have you torn your clothes? Let him come to me, that he may learn that there is a prophet in Israel." So Naaman came with his horses and chariots, and halted at the entrance of Elisha's house. Elisha sent a messenger to him, saying, "Go, wash in the Jordan seven times, and your flesh shall be restored and you shall be clean." But Naaman became angry and went away, saying, "I thought that for me he would surely come out, and stand and call on the name of the LORD his God, and would wave his hand over the spot, and cure the leprosy! Are not Abana and Pharpar, the rivers of Damascus, better than all the waters of Israel? Could I not wash in them, and be clean?" He turned and went away in a rage. But his servants approached and said to him, "Father, if the prophet had commanded you to do something difficult, would you not have done it? How much more, when all he said to you was, 'Wash, and be clean?'"

So he went down and immersed himself seven times in the Jordan, according to the word of the man of God; his flesh was restored like the flesh of a young boy, and he was clean. Then he returned to the man of God, he and all his company; he came and stood before him and said, "Now I know that there is no God in all the earth except in Israel; please accept a present from your servant."