

Matthew 5:17-19 (NRSV)

¹⁷“Do not think that I have come to abolish the law or the prophets; I have come not to abolish but to fulfill. ¹⁸For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth pass away, not one letter, not one stroke of a letter, will pass from the law until all is accomplished. ¹⁹Therefore, whoever breaks one of the least of these commandments, and teaches others to do the same, will be called least in the kingdom of heaven; but whoever does them and teaches them will be called great in the kingdom of heaven.

Matthew 22:34-40 (NRSV)

³⁴When the Pharisees heard that he had silenced the Sadducees, they gathered together, ³⁵and one of them, a lawyer, asked him a question to test him. ³⁶“Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?” ³⁷He said to him, “‘You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.’ ³⁸This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹And a second is like it: ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ ⁴⁰On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets.”

Luke 19:1-10 (NRSV)

He [Jesus] entered Jericho and was passing through it. ²A man was there named Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was rich. ³He was trying to see who Jesus was, but on account of the crowd he could not, because he was short in stature. ⁴So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore tree to see him, because he was going to pass that way. ⁵When Jesus came to the place, he looked up and said to him, “Zacchaeus, hurry and come down; for I must stay at your house today.” ⁶So he hurried down and was happy to welcome him. ⁷All who saw it began to grumble and said, “He has gone to be the guest of one who is a sinner.” ⁸Zacchaeus stood there and said to the Lord, “Look, half of my possessions, Lord, I will give to the poor; and if I have defrauded anyone of anything, I will pay back four times as much.” ⁹Then Jesus said to him, “Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost.”

Greatness. Success. Celebrity. What do we think these can bring us? What do we sacrifice in their pursuit? Their allure can blind us to the sin of idolatry.

Let's face it, we all seek success. And we often define it as something like this: getting straight-A's and making the varsity, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to one person for your whole life, having well-adjusted children who are themselves successful, staying thin, and, of course, the big house and SUV.

When I change the word from “success” to “greatness,” we may begin to feel some discomfort, but who doesn't want to be a great mom or dad or have a great career or live in a great neighborhood. And many among those less than 30 seem obsessed with the possibility of celebrity via YouTube or, you guessed it, *American Idol*.

We have trouble even entertaining (pun intended) the notion that there may be something wrong here. After all, success and even greatness are the American dream, to which we've now added celebrity. It is all just very . . . well, seductive.

But when we turn to the Bible, to the four gospels, we quickly discover that Jesus very often warns the wealthy and powerful about the dangers of their success. Why? Because such success can feed our delusions of self-reliance and independence. Wealth and status can cause us to believe our own press, that we actually are kings of the world. But the path of discipleship leads us toward the recognition that we are dependent upon God, that all our treasured stuff and the success that bought it, is a gift from God. This is why many Christians come to true faith in Christ at a difficult time, when it seems that we've been afflicted by life, when all our delusions of independence

have been shattered. With apologies to Jack and to James Cameron, there is only one king of this world and that is Jesus.

But, what does any of this have to do with *American Idols*. Do our conceptions of success really feed idolatry? As I shared in last week's study, this business of idolatry is a challenge for me. We looked at the idol of work last week and paid heed to Eugene Peterson's warning that when we enlist God's aid we run the risk of reducing God to what we can use for our purposes.

But success? Here is an exercise. Read the following list and substitute the word "success" everywhere there is an "X":

- X sustains me
- X encourages me
- X comforts me
- X lifts me up
- X strengthens me
- X is with me everywhere

You might try "recognition" or "admiration" – which, for many, is what they mean by success or greatness. I remember a very wealthy business associate telling me that his lifelong pursuit wasn't really the money or even what it could buy – the money was merely a way of keeping score. He simply loved to win and to be seen as the biggest winner of all. His self-perception as a "winner" sustained him, encouraged him, comforted him, and so on. For him, that was success.

Now go back to the list and substitute "God." There are many verbs we associate with God that, in truth, we more readily apply to success or wealth or our possessions or any of a host of things that we feel sustain us, encourage us, and so on. God sometimes just seems so darn remote.

But look again at the list. What's missing? How about:

- X loves me
- X forgives me

I'm sure that even my business friend wouldn't try to say that his reputation as a winner "loved" him or "forgave him." It is the intensely *personal* nature of love and forgiveness that is missing from work, success, or the other idols we'll talk about in this series. Hear Peterson again:

- "An idol is god with all the God taken out. God depersonalized, God derelationalized, a god that we can use and enlist and fantasize without ever once having to (maybe "getting to" is the better phrase) receive or give love, and then to go on to live, however falteringly, at our most human. The essence of idolatry is depersonalization. The idol is a form of divinity that requires no personal relationship. The idol is a form of divinity that I can manipulate or control. The idol reverses the God/creature relationship: now I am the god and the idol is the creature."

We make idols of success or anything else because we begin to imagine that they provide us with what we think we most need. And of course, they can't. Success or greatness or achievement will never love you. But we were created to love and to be loved. It is why any of us are here. When Jesus is asked to sum up the Law of Moses, he does so by turning to two instructions, one from Deuteronomy, "Love the Lord your God," and one from Leviticus, "Love your neighbor as yourself." Love God and love neighbor – that's the center of it all. This is not a surprise, for God is love.

Let's meet a man who was certainly successful by most of the measures our popular culture seems to use today. If there was anyone who could afford lots of bling, it was Zacchaeus.

Tax Collectors

Zacchaeus was a tax collector, but the Roman tax system was nothing like our IRS. Rome would contract out the collection of taxes in geographic areas. The winning entrepreneurial bidder would agree to pay the contracted amount of taxes to Rome. The tax entrepreneur would then put together an organization to do the actual collection. The winning bidder would employ chief tax collectors, like Zacchaeus, who made the whole thing work. Zacchaeus would have employed lower-level collectors, like Jesus' disciple Matthew, who would man toll booths and other small tax collection businesses. It was one of the largest enterprises of that time.

In the Roman system, tax collectors would be free to collect all the money they could and keep whatever wasn't owed Rome under the contract. Thus, not only were they agents of the Roman oppressors, we can only imagine the methods they employed in gaining their wealth. Not surprisingly, in the Gospels tax collectors are usually lumped in with the prostitutes.

A lesson in "success"

Zacchaeus live in Jericho and was a chief tax collector (see p. 3 text box), a very rich man at the top of his chosen trade. Yes, in the eyes of fellow Jews he was an unsavory character or worse. But perhaps even that wasn't bad so far as Zacchaeus was concerned. We Americans, after all, have had a constant fascination with *la Mafioso*. Perhaps Zacchaeus enjoyed the notoriety or the feigned respect that his money could buy.

One day, Zacchaeus hears that this Jesus from Nazareth, the talk of the town, is passing through Jericho. This little tax collector, for he was a short man, runs to catch a glimpse of Jesus even though it was most unseemly for a Jewish man to run. He was probably long past worrying about being unseemly. Zacchaeus even climbs a tree; something else unbecoming for a grown man. Perhaps because Zacchaeus has made such a spectacle of himself, Jesus spots him in the tree and, as was his custom, goes to Zacchaeus' home. In fact, Jesus even invites himself.

Can you imagine the joy Zacchaeus must have felt as he welcomed Jesus? What would this do for his reputation. Talk about success! Of course, the townsfolk didn't much like Jesus entering the home of the hated tax collector, but Jesus always

seemed to hang around with the wrong sorts of people. Having invited himself into Zacchaeus' home, what happens next will be Jesus' miracle.

Zacchaeus asks nothing of Jesus, not even an answer to a question. He simply steps forward and, without prompting, commits to giving half of his ill-gotten possessions to the poor – not all, but half. Then, in keeping with the most stringent interpretation of the ancient Judaic law, Zacchaeus promises that he will repay four-fold those he has defrauded. Zacchaeus' repentance and generosity demonstrate that he is a "son of Abraham" (v. 9) He was lost, but now is found.

Notice that Jesus does not ask Zacchaeus to give up all he has. Nor does it seem that Zacchaeus abandoned his life to follow Jesus. Rather, Zacchaeus is redeemed *in* his life. He is transformed within the life he is living. By God's grace, Zacchaeus points his transformed life toward repentance and away from exploitation. He will be generous to the poor. He will make amends to those he has wronged. He will stay a tax collector, but he will now conduct himself with honor and justice. He will heed John the Baptist's teachings to tax collectors: "Collect no more than the amount prescribed for you" (Luke 3:13). Zacchaeus will "bear fruits worthy of repentance" (Luke 3:8). Even after giving away half of his wealth and making reparations, Zacchaeus would have still been a wealthy and powerful man. But now, he will use his wealth and power and talents for

God's purposes. He will be a force for good, pointing others toward just and generous lives. His success will no longer be his idol.

Transformation

No amount of success or celebrity or even money can transform us into people who living as we were created to live. Idols are de-personalized gods, often promising great things that they can never provide. Far more people have been ruined by celebrity than have been improved by it. Patti and I have been watching the 80's show, *Wise Guy*, on DVD. Its star, Ken Wahl, whose life was wrecked by his celebrity, recently said the worst thing that ever happened to him was being named "Sexiest Man Alive."

But the good news is that we are never beyond the possibility of redemption and transformation. Take Zacchaeus . . . What could there be to salvage in a man who had sold his soul to the Romans? Yet, when Zacchaeus encounters Jesus, he is saved, for transformation is the essence of salvation. He was lost and yet is found.

At the heart of Christianity lies this transformation, this renewing of our entire selves so that we might each become the unique person that God created. Hence, Soren Kierkegaard's insightful prayer, "And now Lord, with your help I will become myself."

An idol, even an *American Idol*, can never provide such help.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Edlen Cowley is leading nearly two dozen St. Andrew Fellowship Groups through this series on *American Idols*. Edlen has written some discussion questions for the groups. They will be very helpful as well to those who are studying this series individually.

1. On the story of Zacchaeus
 - a) What does this scripture say to you?
 - b) How can success become an idol?
 - c) Is it an idol for you personally?
 - d) How do you think your or our collective drive for success affects our kids?
 - e) Can you identify with Zacchaeus or the people he wronged? How?
 - f) Do you or do we treat "successful" people differently than we treat others?
2. Striving for success is not a bad thing, however the exclusive drive for success can be. How can you (we) acknowledge, live with, and balance the idol of success within our society while continuing to grow as followers of Christ?
3. Read Mark 9:33-37: 33 "Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, 'What were you arguing about on the way?' But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest. He sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, 'Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.' Then he took a little child and put it among them; and taking it in his arms, he said to them, 'Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.'"
 - Is there an area in your life where you have childlike faith? What does childlike faith look like?
4. There is a saying that God doesn't call us to be successful, he calls us to be faithful. Can you be a faithful Christian without being successful? Share some examples.
5. Do you have any personal faith goals that you are currently trying to reach?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

Much of our problem with idolatry lies in the many attractions and pleasures of this world. The book of Ephesians lifts our eyes to the Cosmic Christ and speaks to the practicalities of living as newly transformed people. Thus, we are going to read through this letter by Paul in the coming days. We are going to read at a slow pace . . . so take the time to chew on God's word.

Monday, Ephesians 1:1-14 Paul's salutation; spiritual blessings in Christ	Tuesday, Ephesians 1:15-23 Paul's prayer
Wednesday, Ephesians 2:1-10 From death to life	Thursday, Ephesians 2:11-22 One in Christ
Friday, Ephesians 3:1-13 Paul's ministry to the Gentiles	Weekly Prayer List

Encounter

a time for fellowship, worship, and learning

Are you ready for a life with God that makes a real difference? Would you like to develop a passion for Scripture? Would you like to make new friends in a casual, Christian setting? The time has come . . .

Encounter is happening to St. Andrew
every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall

A few faq's

Do I need to be there each week to make sense of the lesson?

- No. Though we will be in a book of the Bible, each week's sermon/lesson will stand on its own. We know that many people will come to Encounter when they've had to miss church on the weekend. In fact, we hope you will make that your regular practice.

Will the lessons be posted on-line?

- Yes. Each week, the lesson will be posted along with the weekend's sermons at www.standrewumc.org/worship/sermonsonline.

Will we ever take communion at Encounter

- Yes. Beginning in October, we will share in the Lord's Supper on the third Wednesday of each month.

How can I help?

- Invite, invite, invite. Encounter is an outreach ministry of St. Andrew. We hope that you will come and invite friends and family. We are trying to make Encounter something that will appeal to those who are not interested in a more traditional church setting.

Sermon Notes
