

# **The Media and Success: Challenging and Changing the American Success Syndrome**

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Try not to become a man of success, but rather try to become a man of value. Albert Einstein  
Everybody can be great. Because everybody can serve. Martin Luther King, Jr.  
Ask what makes you come alive and go do it. Because what the world needs is people who come  
alive. Howard Thurman  
What will it benefit a man if he gains the whole world yet loses his life? Or what will a man give  
in exchange for his life? Jesus

## **Introduction**

Striving for success is as American as apple pie, Chevrolet, baseball, hot dogs, and motherhood. Failure is especially traumatic in a hypercompetitive society that glorifies both individual achievement and national acclaim. America has long been viewed as an exceptional place geographically, historically, socially, economically, and politically. From the Puritan quest to construct a city upon a hill to the United States gaining independence from Great Britain, framing a venerated Constitution, rapidly industrializing, becoming a world power, and playing the principal role in the Allies' victories in two world wars, America has enjoyed a string of successes.

Stan Nussbaum argues in *American Cultural Baggage* that “success is probably the highest value in American life.” It is connected with many other highly prized characteristics, including individualism, freedom, progress, social mobility, affluence, pragmatism, and optimism.<sup>1</sup> Our nation seems to be “obsessed with winning at everything,” “often at any cost,” concepts abundantly evident in government, athletics, and business. American businesses, for example, employ “the vocabulary of the locker room and battlefield.” They fight to best

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<sup>1</sup> Stan Nussbaum, *American Cultural Baggage: How to Recognize and Deal with It* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 15-16; quotation from 15.

competitors, dominate their opponents, and seek to win the lion's share of their market.<sup>2</sup> In some nations, though, playing the game of life "well is more important than victory." The United States, by contrast, exalts success above all else, leading many to conclude that winning the game is paramount, regardless of what methods people employ.<sup>3</sup> The American Dream posits that through arduous efforts, innovative approaches, and perhaps a little luck, entrepreneurs can create new companies, find personal fulfillment, and enrich the economy, but more than 80% of new businesses fail in their first three years.<sup>4</sup>

Contemporary American society promotes the success syndrome by extoling individual achievement as measured primarily by wealth, social status, and reputation. From birth, Americans are taught to compete, accomplish, and accumulate,<sup>5</sup> leading many to "worship at the shrine of success." High schools promote the success syndrome by designating a student in their yearbooks who is "most likely to succeed." At high school and college reunions, classmates often evaluate each other by their jobs and estimated income.<sup>6</sup> Asked to identify "objectives considered to be essential or very important," 86 percent of respondents to the American Freshman Survey in 1967 chose "developing a meaningful philosophy of life," more than double the number of those who checked "being very well off financially." By 2014, finding meaning and making money traded places. The first plunged to 45 percent, while the second soared to 82 percent.<sup>7</sup> Another study of middle school and high school students "across a wide spectrum of

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<sup>2</sup> Ray Williams, "Why Do We Have an Obsession with Winning?" <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201208/why-do-we-have-obsession-winning>.

<sup>3</sup> Seymour Martin Lipset, *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword* (New York: Norton, 1996), 47-48.

<sup>4</sup> Jack Boozer, *Career Movies: American Business and the Success Mystique* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002), 95.

<sup>5</sup> Juliet Schor, *The Overspent American: Upscaling, Downshifting, and the New Consumer* (New York: Basic, 1998), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Dan Reed, "5 Symptoms of the Success Syndrome," <http://ministry127.com/christian-living/5-symptoms-of-the-success-syndrome>.

<sup>7</sup> Mark Bauerlein, "What's the Point of a Professor?" <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/05/10/opinion/sunday/whats-the-point-of-a-professor.html>.

racess, cultures, and classes” reported that almost 80% of them ranked “achieving at a high level” or “feeling good most of the time” over “caring for others.”<sup>8</sup>

Irvin G. Wyllie argues that success is defined in various ways, but none of “these concepts enjoys such universal favor in America as that which equates success with making money.”<sup>9</sup> For millions of Americans, economist Juliet Schor asserts, “their personal identity” is closely connected with “what they acquire and own.” “Driving a certain type of car, wearing particular designer labels, living in a certain type of home . . . create and support a particular image of themselves to present to the world.” They communicate to others whether or not they have taste and sophistication.<sup>10</sup> Today many Americans compare themselves with others whose income is four or five times their own, thereby becoming “participants in a national culture of upscale spending.”<sup>11</sup> This prompts many to consume and conspicuously display products both to demonstrate that they are successful and boost their self-esteem.<sup>12</sup> “The success gospel” has “inspired material longings” that only “a fortunate few” can attain while demeaning the majority who fail to achieve them.<sup>13</sup>

At the same time, the media is pervasive in American society; the average American spends almost ten hours per day interacting with various types of media.<sup>14</sup> As a result, media raises awareness, educates, and shapes public and personal attitudes<sup>15</sup> and has played a primary role in promoting this pernicious view of success. Those who make large amounts of money or

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<sup>8</sup> Rick Weissbourd and Stephanie Jones, “The Children We Mean to Raise: The Real Messages Adults Are Sending About Values,” [http://sites.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/making-caring-common/files/mcc\\_report\\_7.2.14.pdf](http://sites.gse.harvard.edu/sites/default/files/making-caring-common/files/mcc_report_7.2.14.pdf). They argue that this is the message most parents are communicating to their children: “About 80% of the youth in our survey report that their parents are more concerned about achievement or happiness than caring for others.”

<sup>9</sup> Irvin G. Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man in America: the Myth of Rags to Riches* (New York: The Free, 1954), 3-4.

<sup>10</sup> Mike Featherstone, *Consumer Culture and Postmodernism* (London: Sage, 1991), 86.

<sup>11</sup> Schor, *Overspent American*, 3-4; quotations in that order.

<sup>12</sup> Arthur Asa Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture: Advertising's Impact on American Character and Society*, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2015), 35.

<sup>13</sup> Wyllie, *The Self-Made Man*, 151.

<sup>14</sup> Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 75.

<sup>15</sup> Heather Bullock, Karen Frazer Wyche, and Wendy Williams, “Media Images of the Poor,” *Journal of Social Issues* 57:2 (2001): 229.

achieve social recognition through athletic accomplishments, celebrity notoriety, or entrepreneurial triumphs are deemed successful. Movies, television shows, print and online books and articles, advertising, and social media have all contributed to this damaging definition of success as principally involving possessions, power, and prestige. This distorted perspective motivates many to pursue goals and espouse values that clash with biblical teaching. Instead of seeking to please and honor God, express compassion, and model integrity, the media encourages many Americans to focus primarily on their own wants and reputations. Sadly, many consider an ordinary life to be a meaningless life. Instead, as the media constantly exhorts, Americans strive to be successful—to stand out. This frenetic quest to obtain money and fame leads millions to work excessively, sleep with their smart phones, miss important moments with their families, and suffer from numerous physical and psychological problems.

Television, movies, books, magazines, sermons, commencement addresses, and such social media as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram all contribute to the glorification of success in America today. The media teaches us to want it all now—riches, a lavish home, stylish clothes, an expensive car, and extravagant vacations. Many media moguls further urge us to “look out for number one” and to view life as a game, race, or competition we should strive to win.<sup>16</sup>

Numerous television shows feature characters who flaunt their wealth. Hollywood produces dozens of movies that extol the lifestyles of the affluent. *Books in Print Global Edition* (2015) lists 14,421 books that focus on “Personal Growth and Success.”<sup>17</sup> Thousands of motivational speakers and “life coaches” instruct audiences and clients about how to succeed in life.

Prosperity preachers promise their parishioners that God wants them to be wealthy and

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<sup>16</sup> Stephen Covey, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People: Restoring the Character Ethic* (New York: Free, 2004), 8-9; quotation from 9.

<sup>17</sup> <http://www.booksinprint.com/Search/Results?q=quicksearch-subject%3A%5Bpersonal%20growth%20and%20success%5D&op=1&q=1>

successful. “Ostentatious displays of wealth” allegedly visibly display God’s blessing and people’s worth, especially for those who have been discriminated against because of their race, ethnicity, gender, or lack of education and culture.<sup>18</sup>

Many movies, for example, depict rags-to-riches stories and imply that success can be invariably achieved through hard work. Books, including classics such as Napoleon Hill’s *Think and Grow Rich*, Warren Wattles’ *The Science of Getting Rich*, and Norman Vincent Peale’s *The Power of Positive Thinking*, and such current best sellers as Bob Proctor’s *The ABCs of Success: The Essential Principles from America’s Greatest Prosperity Teacher* and Tony Robbins’ *Awaken the Giant Within: How to Take Immediate Control of Your Mental, Emotional, Physical and Financial Destiny!* provide principles and formulas for success and supply examples of people who have achieved great fortune and fame. *Success* and other magazines feature similar ideologies and inspirational stories. Many ministers and churches extol material success by advancing a Prosperity Gospel. Instead of exhorting Christians to serve others sacrificially, witness to others through their words and deeds, and prepare for heaven, its proponents accentuate, in the title of a Joel Osteen book, achieving *Your Best Life Now*. They explicitly state or imply that God will reward faithful Christians with wealth and worldly acclaim.

In our achievement-oriented society, most commencement speakers exhort college graduates to dream big, establish ambitious goals, follow their hearts, and become successful. As journalist David Brooks argues, “We now live in a culture of the Big Me, a culture of meritocracy where we promote ourselves and a social media culture where we broadcast highlight reels of our lives.” As he notes, social media has provided new self-promotion

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<sup>18</sup> Jonathan L. Walton, *Watch This!: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 208.

opportunities for people of all ages.<sup>19</sup> Many use Facebook, Twitter, and other sites to tout their own achievements. Numerous studies report that teenagers who spend long hours on social media are more likely to be narcissistic. Moreover, many people judge their success by comparing their lives with those of others. Consequently, Facebook provides new possibilities of social envy as people selectively post information about their new girlfriends, material acquisitions, fabulous vacations, and job promotions.<sup>20</sup>

The advertising industry emphasizes that people can acquire what they need to achieve success. Ads exalt success by proclaiming that people deserve everything they want; they insist that buying cars, clothes, and other material items brings happiness; and they promise that purchasing the right products will boost our self-confidence, thereby enabling us to have better lives. Moreover, media messages about body shape and image, physical attractiveness, and sexual allure lead many, especially teenage girls and young women, to concentrate on their physical appearance rather than more important character traits, thus contributing to eating disorders, depression, and other physical and emotional problems.

At the same time, the mass media encourages Americans to idolize sports stars by portraying them as larger than life, as superheroes who can lift entire cities out of the doldrums, as LeBron James of the NBA Cavaliers attempted to do with Cleveland. The media often promotes an obsession with winning that obscures the lessons that can come from failure and defeat.

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<sup>19</sup> David Brooks, "When Cultures Shift," <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/17/opinion/david-brooks-when-cultures-shift.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Ray Williams, "Do Facebook and Other Social Media Encourage Narcissism?" <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201306/do-facebook-and-other-social-media-encourage-narcissism>; Jamie Chamberlin, "Facebook: Friend or Foe?" <http://www.apa.org/monitor/2011/10/facebook.aspx>; Larry Rosen et al., "The Media and Technology Usage and Attitudes Scale: An Empirical Investigation," *Computers in Human Behavior* 29:6 (2013): 2501-11; Cheryl Wetzstein, "Vanity, thy name is Facebook?" <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2013/jun/11/vanity-thy-name-is-facebook/>; "Social Networking Fact Sheet," <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>.

This glorification of success, which much of the media fervently promotes, prods many parents to fret about whether their children will get into the best nursery schools, creates tremendous competition over admission to elite colleges and universities, encourages belief that the end justifies the means, and often undermines people's integrity. Many parents praise their children to an unprecedented degree and meticulously groom them for success. Sadly, many of these same children experience a conditional love that is directly tied to their level of achievement. The pressure to succeed is immense in America today as reflected in parenting styles, the competition for admission to the best preschools, K-12 schools, and colleges. For many children and their parents, social critic Frank Bruni argues, being accepted by an elite university is not simply just another challenge or goal. "A yes or no from Amherst or the University of Virginia or the University of Chicago is seen as the conclusive measure of a young person's worth, an uncontested harbinger of the accomplishments or disappointments to come."<sup>21</sup>

## **Television**

Television promotes the success syndrome by its focus on affluence, greed, fame, and achievement. Game shows, sitcoms, soap operas, primetime dramas, sports programming, reality shows, competitions like *American Idol* and *The Voice*, and television preachers all promote these values. As Todd Gitlin, a sociologist who studies the impact of television, argues, the television supplies a "funhouse mirror" of American society, exaggerating many cultural elements that are already extreme.<sup>22</sup> *Let's Make a Deal*, which has aired continuously since

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<sup>21</sup> Frank Bruni, "How to Survive the College Admissions Madness," <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/15/opinion/sunday/frank-bruni-how-to-survive-the-college-admissions-madness.html>.

<sup>22</sup> Lena Williams, "It Was a Year When Civility Really Took it on the Chin," <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/12/18/us/it-was-a-year-when-civility-really-took-it-on-the-chin.html>.

1965, epitomizes what social critic Karl Meyer calls the “epiphany of greed.”<sup>23</sup> Another commentator labels *The Price Is Right*, which began in 1972, “an institutionalized Monument to Greed.” These and many other game shows, watched by millions of Americans each week, fuel a “consumption-oriented ecstasy of yearning for products” people do not have and a “fantasy-consuming orgy of coveting possessions” they do not own. These shows exalt materialism, glorify “avaricious competition,” and promote consumer culture.<sup>24</sup> Game shows and many dramas assure viewers that consumer products and services can fulfill their deepest needs and supply excitement, emotional intimacy, joy, and well-being.<sup>25</sup>

Since the 1980s many dramas including *Dallas*, *L.A. Law*, *Falcon Crest*, and *Beverly Hills 90210* have depicted mansions, opulent furnishings, luxurious cars, and upscale neighborhoods, prompting many Americans who have considerably more than previous generations to feel deprived.<sup>26</sup> So did *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*, which aired from 1984 to 1995, MTV’s *Cribs*, and VH1’s various *The Fabulous Life of* shows, which all featured the sumptuous residences and the glamorous everyday life of the affluent.

The central characters in many earlier television dramas, including Ben Cartwright, the patriarch of *Bonanza*, which ran from 1959 to 1973, got ahead “by working hard and making prudent investments after careful consideration combined with superior intuition and mature judgment.” Jock Ewing, the protagonist of *Dallas*, which aired from 1978 to 1991, by contrast, succeeded “through a cynical mixture of common sense, hard work, and often questionable

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<sup>23</sup> Karl Meyer, “The Gaming of America,” *Saturday Review*, October 28, 1978, 37.

<sup>24</sup> Morris B. Holbrook, *Daytime Television Game Shows and the Celebration of Merchandise: The Price Is Right* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1993), 51, 55-56, 57; quotations in that order; Kristen Schweizer, “Game Shows Are Back as Viewers Yearn for TV Comfort Food,” <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2014-10-13/game-shows-are-back-as-viewers-yearn-for-tv-comfort-food> (*Jeopardy!* has a weekly audience of 25 million). See also Lisa Bernhard, “At the Game Show Network, Winning Is Everything,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/31/business/media/31adco.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2010/08/31/business/media/31adco.html?_r=0).

<sup>25</sup> Elayne Rapping, *The Looking Glass World of Nonfiction TV* (Boston: South End, 1987), 64.

<sup>26</sup> Schor, *Overspent American*, 18.



business practices.” He and other Texas millionaires lived ostentatiously, repudiated traditional moral values, and displayed no concern for their community.<sup>27</sup>

Describing Jock’s son J. R. Ewing, David Jacobs, the creator of *Dallas*, wrote: “His unapologetic commitment to self-interest” and “unabashed belief in the corruptibility of others linked him to a generation that would soon be told that greed was O.K. and read on bumper stickers that Jesus wanted people to get rich.” While *Dallas* focused on the pursuit of money, *Dynasty* (1981-1989) accentuated the good life that money could provide. *Dynasty* was arguably “the most extravagantly produced series in the history of episodic television” with its opulent sets, expensive wardrobes, and ostentatious lifestyles.<sup>28</sup> Another 1980s drama, *Miami Vice*, unabashedly applauded style, wealth, and celebrity-hood.<sup>29</sup> Meanwhile, *The Jeffersons* (1975-1985), *Different Strokes* (1978-1986), and *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992) portrayed prosperous, successful black families that African Americans could emulate.

This 1980s “search for personal wealth and status at the expense of others” has continued to the present day<sup>30</sup> and is evident in such modern dramas as *Scandal*, *House of Cards*, and *The Sopranos* among others. *House of Cards*, for example, is centered on an utterly ruthless South Carolinian politician who is willing to use anyone and anything to become president of the United States. Aided by his conniving wife, he devises secret plots and diabolical schemes to achieve his goal, exposing the corruption, greed, and quest for success and power that plague American politics. Meanwhile, *Sex and the City*, *Desperate Housewives*, the *Real Housewives* shows in various locations, and most notably, the *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, glamorize

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<sup>27</sup> Hal Himmelstein, *Television Myth and the American Mind* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1994), 223-25; quotations from 223.

<sup>28</sup> David Jacobs, “When the Rich and Powerful Were Riding High,” <http://www.nytimes.com/1990/04/15/arts/tv-view-when-the-rich-and-the-powerful-were-riding-high.html>.

<sup>29</sup> Himmelstein, *Television Myth*, 229.

<sup>30</sup> Himmelstein, *Television Myth*, 225.

the affluent lives of American women. Critics denounce the “vanity, greed, promiscuity, vulgarity and over-the-top conspicuous consumption” and the use of sexuality to gain fame and fortune these shows featured.<sup>31</sup> Other television shows such as *Extreme Makeover*, *What Not to Wear*, and *Extreme Makeover Home Edition* tout plastic surgery, exercise, diet, an attractive wardrobe, or an appealing home as the best route to personal success and higher status.<sup>32</sup>

Meanwhile, the Christian community, like the secular world, sadly also uses television to portray “a world of champions” to downtrodden viewers. Christian programming often profiles believers who have achieved fame and fortune and sports stars like Oakland Raiders receiver Tim Brown, Buffalo Bills quarterback and Republican politician Jack Kemp, boxer George Forman, neurosurgeon and presidential candidate Ben Carson, actress and movie producer Roma Downey, actors Patricia Heaton, Stephen Baldwin, Kathy Lee Gifford, Chuck Norris, Andy Griffith, and Mel Gibson, and singers Carrie Underwood, Natalie Cole, Wynonna Judd, and Smokie Robinson.<sup>33</sup> This has been reinforced by a “Christian lifestyle marketing strategy” that appeals to “achievers—prosperous, middle-aged Christian materialists—and emulators—ambitious young Christian adults.”<sup>34</sup> Since the 1980s, televangelists such as Jim Bakker, Pat Robertson, and Robert Schuller have promoted the American Dream, exalted material prosperity, and implied that “an ordinary life is contemptible and . . . there is a magical way out.”<sup>35</sup>

Religious television programs prominently portray luxury products and church websites use

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<sup>31</sup> See, for example, Maura Kelly, “How About Not Keeping Up with the Kardashians?” <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2011/nov/23/how-about-not-keeping-up-with-the-kardashians>; Ginia Bellafante, “Keeping Up with the Kardashians: The All-Too-Easy Route to Stardom,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/13/arts/television/13bell.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2007/10/13/arts/television/13bell.html?_r=0).

<sup>32</sup> Micki McGee, *Self-Help, Inc.: Makeover Culture in America Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 17.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www1.cbn.com/700club/guests/>; “Interviews and Features on Christian Celebrities!” [http://atlantachristianweb.com/celeb\\_features/main.asp](http://atlantachristianweb.com/celeb_features/main.asp). See also “Christian Celebrities: Are We Obsessed?” <http://www.cbn.com/tv/1686273530001?mobile=false>; Stephanie Bennett, “Christianity and the Cult of Celebrity,” <http://www.colsoncenter.org/features-columns/articles/entry/12/9234>.

<sup>34</sup> Himmelstein, *Television Myth*, 322.

<sup>35</sup> Himmelstein, *Television Myth*, 327; Dick Dabney, “God’s Own Network,” *Harper’s*, August 1980, 40 (quotation). See also John Marianai, “Television Evangelism: Milking the Flock,” *Saturday Review*, Feb. 3, 1979, 23.

expensive cars as their central “visual focal point.”<sup>36</sup> Trinity Broadcast Network, the self-declared largest Christian television network in the world, features interviews with dozens of Christian celebrities, including Kirk Cameron, M. C. Hammer, and Carol Lawrence; Christian dramas and television movies; worship services of megachurches; coverage of large Christian concerts; and holiday specials that all promote the success syndrome in one way or another.<sup>37</sup>

## **Movies**

Like television, movies help shape the attitudes about success that permeate American cultural narratives and underlie our national self-image, public discourse, and personal ideals. While numerous movies critique traditional views of success as “spiritually, morally, and relationally bereft,” many others exalt affluence, achievement, and adulation.<sup>38</sup> One scholar argues that “success has been one of the central themes in cinema” from its beginning.<sup>39</sup> Both fictional and fact-based movies seek to show that people can attain upward mobility through hard work and the deserving can obtain great success. Many protagonists, argues Julie Levinson, perform impressive deeds and defeat numerous challengers to obtain “the holy grail of success.” Varying “little over the years,” “these archetypal success myths” have allegorically fulfilled “our belief in the promise of America.” “In genres ranging from the Western to the gangster film to the road movie,” Levinson contends, by relocating to another city, a better neighborhood, or a sunnier climate, people improve their lives and achieve self-realization and renewal.<sup>40</sup>

In many recent films careerism has replaced the notion of calling, and work is often portrayed principally as attaining “the riches and recognition that are the emblems of success.”

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<sup>36</sup> Walton, *Watch This!*, 207.

<sup>37</sup> Milmon F. Harrison, *Righteous Riches: The Word of Faith Movement in Contemporary African American Religion* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 14-15.

<sup>38</sup> Julie Levinson, *The American Success Myth on Film*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 37.

<sup>39</sup> Hannu Salmi, “Success and the Self-Made Man,” in *Columbia Companion to American History on Film*, ed. Peter C. Rollins, 596 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>40</sup> Levinson, *Myth*, 22 (first two quotations), 32 (third quotation).

The quest for material and professional gain has replaced reverence for God. While numerous movies present “professional achievement as the principal measure of success,” others equate success with adulthood, masculinity, social mobility, and individual initiative. The “rags-to-riches saga,” Levinson argues, “is firmly rooted in the mold of the American success myth, which is among our most widespread and ideologically significant exports.”<sup>41</sup>

Dozens of movies, including *The Story of Alexander Graham Bell* (1939); John Ford’s *Young Man Lincoln* (1939), and *Edison the Man* (1940), have extolled self-made men.<sup>42</sup> Many other films, most notably *Citizen Kane* (1941), *Meet John Doe* (1941), *The Great Gatsby* (1949, 1974), *Executive Suite* (1954), *The Sweet Smell of Success* (1957), and *Network* (1976), all trumpet the gospel of success.<sup>43</sup> *The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006), which was inspired by a true story and grossed over \$300 million worldwide, illustrates this theme. Despite his intelligence, industriousness, and charm, Chris Gardner (played by Will Smith) cannot support his family and bounces from one homeless shelter to another. He overcomes great adversity, however, to obtain a position as an intern in a very competitive stock brokers training program. Gardner does not simply want a better, more stable life for himself and his son; instead he wants “a life of luxury, stadium box seats,” and an expensive sports car. Upward mobility is insufficient; he covets affluence.<sup>44</sup> At the end of the movie, viewers learn that Gardner achieves his goal: He later started a business and became a multi-millionaire. “Anyone with the gumption to grab for it,” the movie contends, can attain success. Neither social factors, structural barriers, nor personal limitations can prevent those with resolute faith, indomitable will, and prudent tactics from

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<sup>41</sup> Levinson, *Myth*, 66 (first two quotations), 174 (third quotation).

<sup>42</sup> Salmi, “Success and the Self-Made Man,” 597.

<sup>43</sup> Joe Dorinson and George Lankevich, “New York City,” in *Columbia Companion to American History on Film*, Peter C. Rollins, ed., 441 (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004).

<sup>44</sup> Manohla Dargis, “*The Pursuit of Happyness* (2006): Climbing Out of the Gutter with a 5-Year-Old in Tow,” [http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/15/movies/15happ.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2006/12/15/movies/15happ.html?_r=0).

succeeding.<sup>45</sup> *The Pursuit of Happyness* teaches that “poverty is a function of bad luck and bad choices” while heroic labor and big dreams bring success.<sup>46</sup> It also fails to recognize that devotion to one’s family and commitment to career are often difficult to reconcile.<sup>47</sup> While Gardner has phenomenal success, America’s “almost religious devotion to individual self-initiative in work as a ticket to upward mobility,” Jack Boozer asserts, is not realistic for many who face discrimination based on class, race, ethnicity, or gender.<sup>48</sup>

Since the 1920s movies including *Charge It*, *Ladies Must Dress*, *Gimme*, and *Why Change Your Wife* have promoted consumerism, acquisitiveness, and self-indulgence as barometers of success and the good life.<sup>49</sup> Movies portray sumptuous estates, deluxe cars, exotic vacations, and expensive jewelry as emblems of success.<sup>50</sup> Films help prod many people to spend beyond their means to appear successful.<sup>51</sup> Numerous movies, most notably *Wall Street* (1987) and *The Wolf of Wall Street* (2014), glorify materialism, money, and avarice. In Oliver Stone’s *Wall Street*, the principal character, Gordon Gekko, is a millionaire predator, “a corporate raider,” and “a Wall Street shark.” He has a beautiful wife, a family, an estate, a pool, a limousine, and priceless art objects, which he treats as simply “additional entries on the scoreboard.” Gekko plays the game of life to win.<sup>52</sup> His protégé is Bud Fox, a recent college graduate from a working-class family. Enraptured with a corporate culture that exalts ambition and immediate gratification, Fox tells his father, an aircraft mechanic and union leader, that he cannot live on only \$50,000 a year. Gekko convinces Fox to give him some insider information

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<sup>45</sup> Levinson, *Myth*, 24-25; quotation from 24.

<sup>46</sup> Dargis, “*The Pursuit of Happyness*.”

<sup>47</sup> Levinson, *Myth*, 28.

<sup>48</sup> Boozer, *Career Movies*, 6.

<sup>49</sup> Loren Baritz, *The Good Life: The Meaning of Success for the American Middle Class* (New York: Perennial, 1990), 97.

<sup>50</sup> See David Desser and Garth Jowett, eds., *Hollywood Goes Shopping* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>51</sup> Schor, *Overspent American*, 152.

<sup>52</sup> Roger Ebert, review of the movie *Wall Street*, <http://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/wall-street-1987>.

he obtained from his father and to spy on a competitor. Gekko considers his booty as “the just reward for his hard-fought, decisively won acts of plunder.”<sup>53</sup> Stone critiques the value system that elevates profits, affluence, and self-serving transactions above all else. *Wall Street* condemns the ferocious financial competitiveness that is driven by “the challenge of a deal and by the desire to win” and considers ethics irrelevant and does nothing to provide beneficial goods and services.<sup>54</sup> Gekko’s mantra “greed is good” expresses what is “wrong with the culture of avarice and rapaciousness.” Nevertheless, viewers find it difficult “not to ogle and covet” Gekko’s opulent possessions. In the movie “the pleasure principle trumps the work ethic.”<sup>55</sup>

Martin Scorsese’s *The Wolf of Wall Street* presents a much more ambiguous picture of wealth, greed, and the “good life.” Based on his memoir, its central character, Jordan Belfort, another dishonest stock trader, enjoys the things money can buy—drugs, women, and cars—and “the rush of acquiring more” and cares little about everything else. Although Belfort is depicted in the movie as despicable, his charm and success make it difficult to despise him. Belfort is “an evangelist for easy money and unbridled pleasure” who entices hundreds of brokers with his promises of large bonuses and unending debauchery. It is not clear whether Scorsese is condemning or celebrating Belfort’s lifestyle and actions, whether the movie’s portrayal of conspicuous consumption “is meant to provoke disgust or envy.”<sup>56</sup>

## **Advertising**

Advertisements in newspapers and magazines and on billboards, television, radio, and the Internet also encourage Americans to measure success by their accomplishments, social recognition, wealth, power, and appearance. Since the 1920s, advertising has conveyed the

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<sup>53</sup> Boozer, *Career Movies*, 5.

<sup>54</sup> Ebert, review of the movie *Wall Street*.

<sup>55</sup> Levinson, *Myth*, 92, 96; quotations in that order.

<sup>56</sup> A. O. Scott, “When Greed Was Good (and Fun),” [http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/25/movies/dicaprio-stars-in-scorseses-the-wolf-of-wall-street.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/12/25/movies/dicaprio-stars-in-scorseses-the-wolf-of-wall-street.html?_r=0).

message that buying the right products enhances people's status and aids their upward mobility.<sup>57</sup> On the radio and in print, advertisers trumpeted that acquiring their products brought pleasure and "preached that almost everyone could live an abundant and better life now." The good life was increasingly seen as resting on obtaining things that made life more pleasant and easier. The creation of installment buying enabled millions to purchase many new products.<sup>58</sup>

Today Americans are exposed to more advertising than the citizens of any other country because of how much television we watch and how much we listen to the radio and because both media are primarily financed through advertising.<sup>59</sup> The typical American encounters more than 3,000 advertisements each day and during her life sees three years' worth of television ads. As Katherine Tolland Frith argues, "Advertisements sanctify, signify, mythologize, and fantasize." Advertising both shapes American culture and "Americans' images of themselves."<sup>60</sup> The messages these ads transmit—various products can make people happy, attractive, fulfilled, more youthful, more self-confident, and successful—are pernicious, especially to youth. They falsely promise that a finely sculpted body, a luxury car, designer clothes, or a younger-looking appearance can provide contentment and enhance one's status. Ads for alcohol, soda, clothes, automobiles, and home furnishings appeal to people's innate desire to appear successful, well-liked, and impress others.<sup>61</sup> The advertising industry repeatedly drives home the point that

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<sup>57</sup> Hazel Warlaumont, *Advertising in the 60s: Turncoats, Traditionalists and Waste Makers in America's Turbulent Decade* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2001), 26.

<sup>58</sup> Baritz, *The Good Life*, 77-80; quotation from 79.

<sup>59</sup> Berger, *Ads, Fads, and Consumer Culture*, 34.

<sup>60</sup> Katherine Tolland Frith, "Preface," in *Undressing the Ad: Reading Culture in Advertising*, ed. K. T. Firth, xiii (New York: Peter Lang, 1997).

<sup>61</sup> Heather Addison, "Hollywood, Consumer Culture, and the Rise of 'Body Shaping,'" in *Hollywood Goes Shopping*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), ed. Desser and Jowett, 4; Lee Eisenberg, *Shoptimism: Why the American Consumer Will Keep on Buying No Matter What* (New York: Free, 2009), 108; Joshua Becker, "7 Life Misconceptions Portrayed in Popular Television Advertisements," <http://www.becomingminimalist.com/superbowl-ads-mistruth/>.

people can purchase what they need to achieve success.<sup>62</sup> Ads for wine and beer associate their products with affluence, romance, and high status.<sup>63</sup> Many ads portray lifestyles available to only the wealthy, causing many to covet what the rich have and/or be dissatisfied with their own lives.<sup>64</sup> Ads suggest that using various products will make people more witty, sexy, desirable, or respected. They promise that individuals can have “a much more exciting and glamorous and colorful life, instantly” and offer an escape from “the horror of being ordinary in a culture that equates that with failure.”<sup>65</sup> Ads delude many into thinking that certain products can transform their dull and dreary lives, and they promote compulsive behavior and greed.<sup>66</sup>

Ads also encourage people to work long and hard so that they can enjoy the emblems of success. Consider an ad for Cadillac, which has “long been a quintessentially American symbol of wealth and status.” In other countries, a middle-aged man proclaims, people stop at cafes after work and take the whole month of August as vacation. Americans are different, he claims. We are driven and hard-working. This ad for a 2014 Cadillac ELR, Carolyn Gregoire maintains, sells a version of “the American Dream at its worst: Work yourself into the ground,” and “take as little time off as possible” so that you can afford to buy luxury products. All else pales compared with owning status symbols that testify to one’s success.<sup>67</sup>

The “lure of consumerism” ads, Juliet Schor argues, “is hard to resist.” America has so accentuated the value of money that its lack often produces “feelings of deprivation, personal failure, and deep psychic pain.” In the 1950s most Americans simply sought to achieve middle-

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<sup>62</sup> Michael R. Hyman and Jeremy J. Sierra, “Sport Celebrity Idolatry: A Problem?,” <http://www.westga.edu/~bquest/2009/idolatry09.pdf>.

<sup>63</sup> Christine Lubinski, “Are We Addicted to Alcohol Advertising?” <https://www.ministrymagazine.org/archive/1989/11/are-we-addicted-to-alcohol-advertising>.

<sup>64</sup> Dinyar Godrej, “How the Ad Industry Pins Us Down,” *New Internationalist*, September 2006, 4.

<sup>65</sup> Jean Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion: Why Women and Girls Must Fight the Addictive Power of Advertising* (New York: Free, 1999) 223-24; quotations in that order.

<sup>66</sup> Kilbourne, *Deadly Persuasion*, 229.

<sup>67</sup> Carolyn Gregoire, “Cadillac Made a Commercial about the American Dream, and It’s a Nightmare,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/this-commercial-sums-up-e\\_n\\_4859040.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/02/26/this-commercial-sums-up-e_n_4859040.html).



class status. Today many consider this insufficient; only an upper-class lifestyle is satisfying because possessions have become crucial to developing positive “self-image, personal identity and social connections.” “What people own and consume is thought to signal their skills and talent; they have to dress, drive, and even eat the part.” Consequently, to appear successful, many Americans purchase luxury items they cannot afford and go into debt or fail to supply their everyday needs.<sup>68</sup>

Meanwhile, advertising, television, movies, and books have combined to enable “a multi-million-dollar-a-year diet, fitness, and medical establishment” to define success for women as involving nearly impossible-to-attain and unhealthy standards of female beauty. NFL and NBA cheerleaders, supermodels, Barbie dolls, Internet images, television shows, and films have all left many women with negative feelings about their bodies, eating disorders, and psychological problems as they struggle to meet unrealistic and detrimental societal benchmarks for the female figure.<sup>69</sup> Through hosting a late-night infomercial *Stop the Insanity!* and publishing her autobiography with the same title, fitness guru Susan Powter helped lead these efforts. Although Powter repudiated “the diet industry’s unhealthy prescriptions for weight loss and the fitness industry’s unreasonable workout regimes,” she promoted many of the same beauty standards they do. Our society expects self-made, successful women not only to earn lots of money but to

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<sup>68</sup> Schor, *Overspent American*, 39 (first two quotations), 96 (third quotation), 100 (fourth quotation), 148. See also Juliann Sivulka, *Soap, Sex, and Cigarettes: A Cultural History of American Advertising* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 2012), 203-8.

<sup>69</sup> Amy L. Ahern, Kate M. Bennett, Michelle Kelly, and Marion M. Hetherington, “A Qualitative Exploration of Young Women’s Attitudes Towards the Thin Ideal,” *Journal of Health Psychology* 16:1 (2011): 70–79; K. Harrison, “Television Viewers’ Ideal Body Proportions: The Case of the Curvaceously Thin Woman,” *Sex Roles* 48 (2003), 255-64; J. A. Cattarin, J. K. Thompson, C. Thomas, and R. Williams, “Body Image, Mood, and Televised Images of Attractiveness: The Role of Social Comparison,” *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 19 (2000): 220-39; Nancy Etcoff, *Survival of the Prettiest: The Science of Beauty* (New York: Doubleday, 1999); Naomi Wolf, *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2004); Keren Eyal and Tali Te’eni-Harari, “Explaining the Relationship between Media Exposure and Early Adolescents’ Body Image Perceptions: The Role of Favorite Characters,” *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications* 25:3 (2013): 129-41.

look attractive while doing so.<sup>70</sup> Evidence suggests that the media prompts many women to associate having a slender, sexy body with greater satisfaction and success in life.<sup>71</sup>

## Sports

Sports, which are covered extensively in newspapers and magazines and on websites, television, and radio, promote an emphasis on winning and success and glorify high-achieving athletes. Many movies feature the stories of individual athletes and teams who triumph over adversity and often against long odds including *Knute Rockne—All American*, *Rudy*, *We Are Marshall*, *Hoosiers*, *Coach Carter*, *Glory Road*, *The Babe Ruth Story*, *The Lou Gehrig Story*, *Jim Thorpe—All-American*, *Cinderella Man*, *Miracle*, and *Moneyball*.<sup>72</sup> “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing” is one of the best known sports quotations. These words are posted on the walls of innumerable locker rooms and used by many coaches in pre-game pep talks and speakers at sports banquets. Although usually attributed to Green Bay Packer coach Vince Lombardi, the statement was first uttered by UCLA Bruins football coach Henry Russell (“Red”) Sanders in 1950.<sup>73</sup> Championship teams receive accolades and parades, while losing teams are often booed and forgotten. The media’s glorification of victors “helps reinforce the importance of winning” and success in American society.<sup>74</sup> University of Virginia professor Mark Edmundson complains that Americans treat sport stars as gods. After years of being

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<sup>70</sup> Jeffrey Louis Decker, *Made in America: Self-Styled Success from Horatio Alger to Oprah Winfrey* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 113 (first quotation), 115 (second quotation), 119.

<sup>71</sup> See, for example, Peggy Chin Evans, “‘If Only I Were Thin Like Her, Maybe I Could be Happy Like Her’: The Self-Implications of Associating a Thin Female Ideal with Life Success,” *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 27:3 (2003): 209-14.

<sup>72</sup> See Murray Sperber, *Onward to Victory: The Creation of Modern College Sports* (New York: Macmillan, 2014).

<sup>73</sup> See Joe Sayre, “He Flies on One Wing,” *Sports Illustrated*, Dec. 26, 1955, 29; Steven J. Overman, “‘Winning Isn’t Everything. It’s the Only Thing’: The Origin, Attributions and Influence of a Famous Football Quote,” *Football Studies* 2 (October 1999): 77-99; David Maraniss, *When Pride Still Mattered: A Life of Vince Lombardi* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000), 356-96.

<sup>74</sup> Ron Woods, *Social Issues in Sport* (Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics, 2007), 186.

worshipped, is it not surprising that many professional athletes are “spoiled, bullying and selfish.”<sup>75</sup>

Today 45 million children and adolescents are participating in various youth sports programs in the United States. About 3/4s of American families with school-aged children have at least one child who participates in organized sports.<sup>76</sup> Unfortunately, many of these programs inordinately stress competition and winning and thereby have detrimental effects on the children involved. In many leagues an extremely competitive, win-at-all-costs approach prevails. Countless coaches and parents excessively emphasize winning, and the young players, imitating the behavior of professionals, eagerly comply. A *60 Minutes* show on youth football reported that, because of the focus on winning, many players did not have fun. Scholars have reached the same conclusion: An obsession with winning occurs frequently in youth sports. How children compete, personal integrity, and the pleasure of playing often are less important than winning.<sup>77</sup> Some researchers urge coaches to create a climate “where kids feel cared about, valued, safe and supported.” They also exhort coaches to teach children to do their best rather than compare themselves to others. Focusing on beating others, they argue, is associated with “negative peer influences and inappropriate adult behavior.”<sup>78</sup>

The mass media fuel the public’s fascination with sport celebrities. Biographies of sports heroes written for children are popular. Sport stars are often depicted as larger than life. They are featured on Wheaties boxes, sold as life-size decals by Fathead, portrayed as transcendent by EA Sports ads and video games, referred to by journalists and broadcasters by a single name or

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<sup>75</sup> Mark Edmundson, “Stop Glorifying Football Players and Start Glorifying Soldiers,” Sept. 18, 2014, <http://time.com/3399562/stop-glorifying-football-players-and-start-glorifying-soldiers/>.

<sup>76</sup> Donna L. Merkel, “Youth Sport: Positive and Negative Impact on Young Athletes,” *Journal of Sports Medicine* 4 (2013). <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3871410/>.

<sup>77</sup> Ray Williams, “Is It Time to Reconsider the Purpose of Amateur Sports?” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201202/is-it-time-reconsider-the-purpose-amateur-sports>.

<sup>78</sup> Daniel Gould, Larry Lauer, and Ryan Flett, “The Relationship between Psychosocial Development and the Sports Climate Experienced by Underserved Youth,” *Psychology of Sport and Exercise* 13:1 (2012): 80-87.

nickname (Ichiro, Kobe, or King James), and paid exorbitant salaries. The annual average salary of athletes who play in America's top four professional sports leagues—the NBA, MLB, NHL and NFL—is about \$3 million. Our society encourages adolescents to highly value and identify with athletic heroes, which can lead to a form of celebrity worship, unrealistic ideas of their own future success, and devoting their time and energy to pursue career possibilities and roads to success that are highly unlikely to pay off.<sup>79</sup>

### **Parenting and Education**

As a result of the media's explicit and implicit promotion of success and America's emphasis on achievement, winning, and wealth, millions of adults feel great pressure for themselves and their children to attain society's approval and accolades. This powerfully affects parenting and education. Columnist David Brooks argues that children today are praised and honed "to an unprecedented degree." Parents give their children "food, shelter and applause" and incessantly tell them "how special they are." Deeply concerned about their children's admission to prestigious colleges and getting onto promising career paths, most parents invest much more time and energy than their predecessors did in developing their children's skills, building their résumés, and driving them to rehearsals and practices. Consequently, many parents shower their children with affection, "but it is meritocratic affection" that is closely connected with a "desire to help their children achieve worldly success." Their love is conditional; it is dispensed most enthusiastically when their children study hard, practice diligently, win first place, or are admitted to an elite college. As a result, many adolescents come to view their childhood as a performance in the classroom, athletic field, and auditorium in which they seek to please their parents. They frequently conclude that they do not deserve to be loved "because of who they intrinsically are" but rather that love "is something they have to earn." Many parents

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<sup>79</sup> Hyman and Sierra, "Sport Celebrity Idolatry."

unconsciously see their children as projects; they want their children to go to highly ranked colleges and get impressive jobs that will enhance their own status and validate their effectiveness as fathers and mothers. Scholarly studies report that children who receive conditional love often do very well in the short run, “but they suffer in the long run.” They often resent their parents, are afraid to take risks, lose a sense of personal agency, and “feel less worthy as adults” than their peers whose parents loved them unconditionally when they were children. “The culture of the meritocracy, Brooks contends, “is incredibly powerful.” Parents naturally want to help their children succeed through every means possible. “Meritocracy is based on earned success” and achievement, however. Parental love, by contrast, should provide “unconditional support” regardless of their children’s accomplishments.<sup>80</sup>

To maximize their children’s potential, friends, neighbors, the media and the “child improvement” industry advise parents to use “brain boosting” baby formula, have them take gymnastics to develop their gross motor skills and music classes to enhance their mathematical ability, and start playing soccer and learn a second language by age three. Parents who do not expose their children to a wide variety of enriching activities are considered negligent. Despite complaints that overscheduling children is a major national problem, societal pressure to excel continues. Most parents feel compelled to do everything they can to enhance their children’s ability. Viewing children’s test scores, grades, and class rank as objective indicators of their future success, parents worry that their children may not be working hard enough or that their curriculum is not sufficiently challenging. Encouraged by the media, both parents and children often focus on achievements rather than personal growth and character development and view

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<sup>80</sup> David Brooks, “Love and Merit,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/24/opinion/david-brooks-love-and-merit.html>.

“awards and accomplishments as the primary measure of worth.”<sup>81</sup> Many parents fret that unless their children attend the finest preschools, they will not be admitted someday to an Ivy League university. Sadly, we are creating a generation of children who are likely to be plagued by anxiety and to define themselves based on their test scores rather than their love of learning, kindness, and service to others.<sup>82</sup> Our narcissistic age especially hurts bright children who are tempted “to define themselves solely in terms of their accomplishments.” If their peers perform better than they do, however, or if they struggle to learn a subject, or fail at a task, they may “feel inadequate or even worthless.”<sup>83</sup> In *The Drama of the Gifted Child: The Search for the True Self*, psychologist Alice Miller documents how some exceptionally intelligent and sensitive children do whatever they can to fulfill their parents’ expectations often at “the expense of their own feelings and needs,” which frequently leads “to emotional emptiness and isolation.”<sup>84</sup> To counter this, we need to help children recognize that their self-worth is based on being created in the image and likeness of God and encompasses all their talents.

Denise Clark Pope, the author of *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students*, argues that “flawed and miscommunicated definitions of success” are causing great stress to many American children today. The expectations of parents, “the media frenzy over status, money and success,” and the pressure to get into and graduate from prestigious colleges and universities is generating

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<sup>81</sup> Eileen Kennedy-Moore, “Lifting the Burden of Potential,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/growing-friendships/201111/lifting-the-burden-potential?collection=118506>.

<sup>82</sup> Amy Przeworski, “Creating Generation Anxiety,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/dont-worry-mom/201204/creating-generation-anxiety?collection=118506>.

<sup>83</sup> Kennedy-Moore, “Lifting the Burden.”

<sup>84</sup> Julie Scelpo, “Campus Suicide and the Pressure of Perfection,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/02/education/edlife/stress-social-media-and-suicide-on-campus.html>. See also Christopher Bergland, “Is the Intense Pressure to Succeed Sabotaging Our Children?” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201503/is-the-intense-pressure-succeed-sabotaging-our-children>; and Kathleen Burge, “A Newton Boy Left This Life Without a Note or Clue: City Mobilizes After Heart-rending Suicides,” <http://www.bostonglobe.com/metro/2014/03/02/newton-mobilizing-after-suicides-teens/ddoqf9XlrCPhEl6fbd2KYI/story.html>.

substantial anxiety and tension. When students at Stanford, where Pope teaches, are asked “How do you define success?” most answer “money, grades, [and] test scores.”<sup>85</sup>

This powerful pressure to succeed prompts many high school and college students to cheat and contributes to a high suicide rate among these groups. In a *Psychology Today* survey, 76 percent of high school students admitted that they had committed some form of academic dishonesty.<sup>86</sup> The Center for Academic Integrity at Clemson University reports similarly that more than 75 percent of college students cheat on academic assignments or exams at least once during their undergraduate careers.<sup>87</sup> Cheating scandals have recently rocked Harvard, Dartmouth, and numerous other universities. High school and college students are bombarded with a barrage of messages proclaiming how hard it is to find a good job. The media constantly “portrays society as a dog eat dog world” and the need to achieve at high levels feels overwhelming to many American youth, encouraging them to cheat to improve their grades and job prospects.<sup>88</sup> Moreover, when youth prioritize personal success over caring and fairness, they are more likely to be dishonest as well as disrespectful and cruel.<sup>89</sup> Accounts from Duke, Stanford, Penn, and other elite universities describe the enormous pressure students, especially females, feel to succeed. Duke reported that its female students felt compelled to be “smart, accomplished, fit, beautiful and popular, all without visible effort.” The quest to accomplish this

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<sup>85</sup> C. M. Rubin, “The Global Search for Education: On Success,” November 15, 2011, <http://www.educationnews.org/education-policy-and-politics/the-global-search-for-education-on-success/>; Denise Clark Pope, *Doing School: How We Are Creating a Generation of Stressed Out, Materialistic, and Miseducated Students* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2003). See also Denise Clark Pope, Maureen Brown, and Sarah Miles, *Overloaded and Underprepared: Strategies for Stronger Schools and Healthy, Successful Kids* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2015); Tony Wagner and Ted Dintersmith, *Most Likely to Succeed: Preparing Our Kids for the Innovation Era* (New York: Scribners, 2015); and Vicki Abeles, *Beyond Measure: Rescuing an Overscheduled, Overtested, Underestimated Generation* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015).

<sup>86</sup> Alan Reitman, “Academic Dishonesty: Prevalent but Preventable,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-campus/201202/academic-dishonesty-prevalent-preventable>.

<sup>87</sup> [http://www.academicintegrity.org/icai/assets/Revised\\_FV\\_2014.pdf](http://www.academicintegrity.org/icai/assets/Revised_FV_2014.pdf).

<sup>88</sup> Joey LeMay, “Pressure to Succeed in America Causing Academic Dishonesty,” September 7, 2012, <http://www.mintpressnews.com/pressure-to-succeed-in-america-causing-academic-dishonesty/36674/>.

<sup>89</sup> Weissbourd and Jones, “Children We Mean to Raise.”

at Stanford is called the Duck Syndrome because “a duck appears to glide calmly across the water, while beneath the surface it frantically, relentlessly paddles.” A Penn task force explains that the widespread perception that students must “be perfect in every academic, cocurricular and social endeavor” produces great pressure and leads many of them to feel demoralized, alienated, anxious, or depressed. Meanwhile, innumerable students use social media to highlight their achievements and emphasize their happiness, thereby leading others to conclude that their peers are not struggling. A tragic manifestation of this pressure is an increased rate of suicide, especially among affluent, gifted youth. All of these trends prompted a *Huffington Post* article to ask “In the Name of College! What Are We Doing to Our Children?” and *New York Times* columnist Frank Bruni to publish a book titled *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania*.<sup>90</sup>

### **The Prosperity Gospel**

Proponents of the Prosperity Gospel use books, sermons, television programs, and conferences to tout their message that “one of God’s top priorities is to shower blessings on Christians in this lifetime.”<sup>91</sup> With roots in the New Thought movement of the 1890s, the Prosperity Gospel has a long history and is called by many names, including “health and wealth,” “name it and claim it,” “confess it and possess it,” and “Word of Faith.” While Christians should prepare to go to heaven, its spokespersons argue, they do not have to wait until the afterlife to receive God’s amazing blessings. Promoted by prominent 1980s televangelists Jimmy Swaggart and Jim and Tammy Bakker and closely connected with many contemporary

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<sup>90</sup> Scelpo, “Campus Suicide”; Michelle Rose Gilman, “In the Name of College! What Are We Doing to Our Children?” Mar. 21, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-gilman/in-the-name-of-college-wh\\_b\\_6912914.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/michelle-gilman/in-the-name-of-college-wh_b_6912914.html); Frank Bruni, *Where You Go Is Not Who You’ll Be: An Antidote to the College Admissions Mania* (New York: Grand Central, 2015).

<sup>91</sup> David Van Biema and Jeff Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?: A Growing Number of Protestant Evangelists Raise a Joyful Yes! But the Idea is Poison to Other, More Mainstream Pastors,” Sept. 10, 2006, <http://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1533448,00.html>.



charismatic movements in the United States and the Global South, its leading American proponents are Joel Osteen, Creflo Dollar, T. D. Jakes, Kirbyjon Caldwell, Kenneth Copeland, Gloria Copeland, and Paula White who collectively pastor megachurches, operate television ministries, and write numerous books.<sup>92</sup> In a recent TIME poll, 17% of Christian respondents declared that they considered themselves to be adherents of the prosperity gospel, and 61% said that they believed that God wants everyone to be affluent. Moreover, 31% of respondents agreed that if people give generously to God's work, He will bless them with more money.<sup>93</sup>

Proponents of the Prosperity Gospel emphasize several key points: God gives believers material benefits to lighten “the load of everyday living”; the promises God made to Abraham, the patriarch of the Jewish people, guarantee that Christians will be prosperous if they have the proper attitude and follow the right methods; and because Jesus possessed immense wealth, His followers can also.<sup>94</sup> Jesus' statement in John 10:10 is pivotal to the movement: “I have come that they may have life, and that they may have it more abundantly.”

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<sup>92</sup> See Simon Coleman, *The Globalisation of Charismatic Christianity: Spreading the Gospel of Prosperity* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2000); Gloria Copeland, *God's Will Is Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 1978); Paula White, *Birthing Your Dreams: God's Plan for Living Victoriously* (New York: Thomas Nelson, 2003); Paula White, *Ten Commandments for Health and Wellness* (Tampa, FL: Paula White Enterprises, 2007); Kenneth Copeland, *The Laws of Prosperity* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 2012); Kenneth Copeland, *The Blessing of the Lord: Makes Rich and He Adds No Sorrow With It* (Tulsa, OK: Harrison House, 2012); T. D. Jakes, *Maximize the Moment: God's Action Plan for Your Life* (New York: G.P. Putnam, 1999); T.D. Jakes, *The Great Investment: Balancing Faith, Family and Finance to Build a Rich Spiritual Life* (New York: Turnaround, 2002); T. D. Jakes, *Reposition Yourself: Living Life Without Limits* (New York: Atria, 2008); T. D. Jakes, *Destiny: Step into Your Purpose* (New York: FaithWords, 2015); Shayne Lee, *T. D. Jakes: America's New Preacher* (New York: New York University Press, 2005); Joel Osteen, *Break Out!: 5 Keys to Go Beyond Your Barriers and Live an Extraordinary Life* (New York: FaithWords, 2015); and Joel Osteen, *You Can, You Will: 8 Undeniable Qualities of a Winner* (New York: FaithWords, 2015); Creflo Dollar, *You're Supposed to Be Wealthy: How to Make Money, Live Comfortably, and Build an Inheritance for Future Generations* (New York: FaithWords, 2014). The Word of Faith Movement is a specific American religious subculture consisting of numerous independent congregations, Bible colleges, parachurch ministries, voluntary organizations, mass media broadcast networks, and entertainment production enterprises. See Harrison, *Righteous Riches*, 5.

<sup>93</sup> Van Biema and Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?”

<sup>94</sup> Kate Bowler, *Blessed: A History of the American Prosperity Gospel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 95-97; quotation from 97.

Today the Prosperity Gospel is selling “a compelling bill of goods” that many Americans are buying: People can enjoy a close relationship with God, wealth, and healthy bodies. Its “chief allure” is its “simple optimism.” Many think that it is “as American as apple pie.” Even television sitcoms employ its phrases such as “abundant life” and “I’m blessed.” Leaders of the movement like Creflo Dollar and T. D. Jakes furnish “powerful demonstrations of divine wealth” and “an idealized portrait” of how “to live victoriously.” Their chauffeured cars and private planes are “tangible reminders of their blessedness,” “embodiments of prosperity,” and visible reminders of “the abundant provisions” God wants to bestow on all believers.<sup>95</sup> Jakes lives in a \$5.2 million mansion in Fort Worth and owns several luxury automobiles including a Bentley.<sup>96</sup> Prosperity gospel proponents have organized dozens of conferences that promise to “improve attendees’ lives and fix their marriages, finances, and emotions.”<sup>97</sup> At these conferences, prosperity all-stars delight audiences by telling anecdotes about the luxurious lives that following God’s Word has produced: They cite their yachts, designer handbags, emerald and diamond rings, and vacations in Hawaii.<sup>98</sup> Moreover, a television reality show called *Preachers of L.A.*, which aired in 2013 and 2014, accentuated the “ostentatious lifestyles of some of the featured pastors, who sport glitzy jewelry, drive expensive cars, and appear to live in palatial homes.”<sup>99</sup>

Speaking for prosperity advocates, Bruce Wilkinson proclaims in his best-selling *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* that “God’s bounty is limited only by us, not by His resources, power, or willingness to give. . . . Those who ask for more blessing, more

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<sup>95</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 232 (first two quotations), 236 (third and fourth quotations), 134 (fifth and sixth quotations),

<sup>96</sup> Walton, *Watch This!*, 117.

<sup>97</sup> Bowler, *Blessed*, 196.

<sup>98</sup> Laurie Goodstein, “Believers Invest in the Gospel of Getting Rich,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16gospel.html>.

<sup>99</sup> “Preachers of L.A.’s Jay Haizlip: ‘It’s Going to Be Phenomenal for the Church,’” interview by Ruth Moon, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2013/october-web-only/preachers-of-la-jay-haizlip-sanctuary.html>. See also Carol Kuruvilla, “Televangelist Creflo Dollar Defends His Plans for \$65 Million Private Jet: ‘I Dare You to Tell Me I Can’t Dream,’” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/23/creflo-dollar-jet\\_n\\_7129548.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2015/04/23/creflo-dollar-jet_n_7129548.html).

territory, more power, and more protection receive it.”<sup>100</sup> In *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential*, which sold four million copies, Osteen insists that “to live your best life now, you must” see “yourself rising to new levels. See your business taking off. . . . See your dreams coming to pass.” “God wants us to constantly be . . . rising to new heights. . . . God wants to increase you financially, by giving you promotions, fresh ideas, and creativity.” God has equipped people with everything they “need to live a prosperous life”—“incredible potential, creative ideas, and dreams.” God, Osteen promises Christians, “didn’t make you to be average.”<sup>101</sup> In the book of Joshua, Kirbyjon Caldwell declares, God guarantees Christians “power, abundance, and good success.” He provides stocks and bonds, therefore, nice cars and homes, and healthy self-esteem for His children.<sup>102</sup> Because of God’s covenant with Christians through Jesus, avows Dollar, they “have access to everything He promises in His Word—divine healing, financial prosperity, a prosperous marriage, blessed children, a saved family, and long life.”<sup>103</sup>

To receive these earthly benefits, Christians, proponents of the Prosperity Gospel insist, must strongly believe that God will give them wealth and social advancement and work energetically to achieve these ends. Those who “have an abundance of faith” in their “spiritual accounts,” argues Gloria Copeland, “can enjoy plenty of *everything*—wealth, health, good relationships, peace, [and] success.”<sup>104</sup> “If you do your part, God will do His,” Osteen declares. “He will promote you. He’ll give you increase, but first you must be a good caretaker of what

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<sup>100</sup> Bruce Wilkinson with David Kopp, *The Prayer of Jabez: Breaking Through to the Blessed Life* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 2000), 29, 83; quotations in that order.

<sup>101</sup> Joel Osteen, *Your Best Life Now: 7 Steps to Living at Your Full Potential* (New York: Warner Faith, 2004), 4 (first three quotations), 5 (fourth and fifth quotations), 82 (sixth and seventh quotations).

<sup>102</sup> Kirbyjon Caldwell, *The Gospel of Good Success: A Road Map to Spiritual, Emotional and Financial Wholeness* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 186 (quotation), 165.

<sup>103</sup> Creflo Dollar, *8 Steps to Create the Life You Want: The Anatomy of a Successful Life* (New York: FaithWords, 2008), 303.

<sup>104</sup> Gloria Copeland, *No Deposit, No Return* (Fort Worth, TX: Kenneth Copeland, 1995), 4-5.

you have.”<sup>105</sup> “If you expect to move up the food chain of life,” Caldwell asserts, “you can’t just wish for it. You have to be prepared,” which may require getting more education. God has designed “a simple, yet practical formula for creating, and keeping, financial abundance” in people’s lives: “Faith + Good Stewardship + Giving = Abundance.”<sup>106</sup> Those who want God’s blessings, Dollar declares, must obey His word. When people give their best, they are assured of receiving God’s best.<sup>107</sup>

The Prosperity Gospel has been strongly condemned by Christian leaders of various traditions and ridiculed in comedy club monologues. *Christianity Today*, a leading evangelical magazine, for example, denounced it as “an aberrant theology that teaches God rewards faith—and hefty tithing—with financial blessings.” Rick Warren, the author of *The Purpose Driven Life*, denounces the “idea that God wants everybody to be wealthy” as “baloney.” The movement, he protests, makes money “a false idol.” Measuring “your self-worth by your net worth” is biblically wrong and harmful. “Millions of faithful followers of Christ,” he points out, “live in poverty.” Ben Witherington, another prominent evangelical who teaches at Asbury Seminary in Kentucky, urges Christians to “renounce the false gospel of wealth and health.” This cultural “disease” “is not a solution or answer to life’s problems.” Other critics protest that the prosperity gospel treats “God as a celestial ATM,” supports “full-blown American materialism,” and accepts the false message that success is properly measured by people’s affluence and

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<sup>105</sup> Joel Osteen, *Become a Better You: 7 Keys to Improving Your Life Every Day* (New York: Free, 2007), 208-9.

<sup>106</sup> Caldwell, *The Gospel of Good Success*, 22 (first two quotations), 29 (third quotation), 166 (fourth quotation).

<sup>107</sup> Dollar, *8 Steps*, 31-33, 304-5. While most books promoting the prosperity gospel have been penned by megachurch pastors who have often risen from working-class backgrounds and obscurity to wealth and prominence, a few tell rags-to-riches stories. For example, Thomas Shepherd’s *Jesus Wants You to Be Rich: Discover God’s Unique Plan for Creating Prosperity and Wealth in Your Life* (2012) chronicles his meteoric journey from being an alcoholic living on the streets of Detroit to an affluent financier in order to furnish Christians with a “blueprint for building a prosperous” life through the help of God’s grace. An early version of this theme is Frank Bettger, *How I Raised Myself from Failure to Success in Selling* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1949).

prominence.<sup>108</sup> Jonathan L. Walton, a professor of religion at the University of California Riverside, labels prosperity preachers “spiritual pickpockets.” Their printed publications, frequent television broadcasts, and mass video distributions have made African-American televangelists as popular as prominent entertainers and athletes in the African-American community and cultural icons for many.<sup>109</sup> Albert Mohler, the president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, protests that the prosperity gospel “turns God into a heavenly banker who is obligated to invest His people with material riches if they possess adequate faith and claim these blessings for their own.” Mohler censures prosperity theology as a false gospel. “Its message is unbiblical and its promises fail. God never assures his people of material abundance or physical health.” Christians are instead promised “the gift of eternal life” where they will bask in the “presence of the living God.”<sup>110</sup> Evangelicals add that prosperity theology minimizes “the consequences of Adam’s fall—sin, pain and death—and their New Testament antidote: Jesus’ atoning sacrifice and the importance of repentance.” Theologically progressive Christians protest that the Prosperity Gospel does little to remedy social ills, especially poverty.<sup>111</sup> In 2005 journalist Cathleen Falsani called prosperity theology a “pernicious doctrine” that transformed “Christianity into a vapid bless-me club.” Its central tenet amounted to “little more than spiritual magical thinking: If you pray the right way, God will make you rich.” It had led millions to purchase accoutrements of luxury they cannot afford “to

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<sup>108</sup> Van Biema and Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?”

<sup>109</sup> Walton, *Watch This!* See also Harrison, *Righteous Riches*; and Stephanie Y. Mitchem, *Name It and Claim It?: Prosperity Preaching in the Black Church* (Cleveland: Pilgrim, 2007); Robert Bowman, *The Word-Faith Controversy: Understanding the Health and Wealth Gospel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2001).

<sup>110</sup> Albert Mohler, “It Promises Far Too Little—The False Gospel of Prosperity Theology,” <http://www.albertmohler.com/2009/08/18/it-promises-far-too-little-the-false-gospel-of-prosperity-theology/>. See also Mark Galli, “Man Up, Christians: Resisting the Health and Longevity Gospel,” Mar. 26, 2009, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2009/marchweb-only/112-41.0.html>.

<sup>111</sup> Van Biema and Chu, “Does God Want You to Be Rich?” See also Russell Woodbridge and David W. Jones, *Health, Wealth, and Happiness: Has the Prosperity Gospel Overshadowed the Gospel of Christ?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2011); and Michael Horton, *Christless Christianity: The Alternative Gospel of the American Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012).

prove that they are blessed spiritually.” Some economists blamed the prosperity gospel for the past decade’s “spending binge” and the foreclosure crisis.<sup>112</sup> Omid Safi, a Muslim Professor of Islamic Studies at University of North Carolina, criticizes ministers for teaching that God wants to bless people with “faith, wealth, health, and victory.” Where do the poor, the homeless, and cancer victims fit into this false gospel of prosperity, he asked. “Give me the real God, a God that acknowledges suffering and redeems, instead of the God of the Market, the false God of higher tax brackets, the God of the good times.”<sup>113</sup>

### **Negative Consequences of the Success Syndrome**

America’s glorification and passionate pursuit of success has many negative effects on institutions and individuals. It can harm congregations and pastors by prompting them to focus on numerical growth instead of on the spiritual development of parishioners and ministry to their communities. In *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes contend that true success in ministry is not based on numbers but rather on “faithfulness, serving, loving, believing, prayer, holiness,” and a having Christ-like attitude.<sup>114</sup>

Many studies describe the deleterious consequences of focusing on success. Paul Pearsall argues that many Americans suffer from “toxic success syndrome,” making them “distant, detached, [and] distracted.”<sup>115</sup> Obsessed with getting rich quickly, many Americans invest in

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<sup>112</sup> Cathleen Falsani, “The Worst Ideas of the Decade: The Prosperity Gospel,” <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/special/opinions/outlook/worst-ideas/prosperity-gospel.html>.

<sup>113</sup> Omid Safi, “What Would Muhammad Do? Jesus Doesn’t Want You to Be Rich: A Response to Joel Osteen and ‘Gospel of Prosperity’ Preachers,” <http://omidsafi.religionnews.com/2013/11/09/prosperity/>.

<sup>114</sup> R. Kent Hughes and Barbara Hughes, *Liberating Ministry from the Success Syndrome* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway 2008) [http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1581349742?keywords=Liberating%20Ministry%20from%20the%20Success%20Syndrome%20R.%20Kent%20Hughes%20and%20Barbara%20Hughes&qid=1445086916&ref\\_=sr\\_1\\_1&sr=8-1](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/1581349742?keywords=Liberating%20Ministry%20from%20the%20Success%20Syndrome%20R.%20Kent%20Hughes%20and%20Barbara%20Hughes&qid=1445086916&ref_=sr_1_1&sr=8-1). See also Terry Forke, “The Success Syndrome: The Impact of Corporate America on the Church,” <http://www.mtdistlems.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/Success-Syndrome.pdf>.

<sup>115</sup> Paul Pearsall, *Toxic Success: How to Stop Striving and Start Thriving: Getting What You Want Without Losing What You Need* (Makawao, Maui, HI: Inner Ocean, 2002). See also Jane Austin, *What No One Ever Tells You About Leading for Results: Best Practices from 101 Real-World Leaders* (Chicago: Kaplan, 2006); Ray Williams, “Beware

mail-order scams, ask psychics for advice, purchase lottery tickets, gamble recklessly at casinos or online, or compete on television games shows.<sup>116</sup> Other studies report that most millionaires believe that “one misstep could cost them everything”; therefore, “instead of enjoying the fruits of their labor,” they experience great stress by trying to be even more productive.<sup>117</sup> Many applauded a 2014 *Time* article titled “Science Proves It: Greed Is Good.” Moreover, an obsession with wealth causes great envy, frustration, and anger among many of those who fail in the quest.<sup>118</sup> Evaluating one’s self-worth by vocational achievement, salary, or possessions eventually leads to despair because no amount of wealth or power is ever enough. Those who compete for status and stuff will eventually lose to younger, stronger, wealthier contenders.<sup>119</sup>

According to the *World Values Survey*, Americans have a more positive perspective of competition than do the citizens of any other highly developed nation. “Americans also believe more strongly” in rewarding those who succeed. A study of 42 nations, however, reports that “happiness decreases as the level of competition increases in a given society.”<sup>120</sup> In *Winning: Reflections on an American Obsession*, Francesco Duina contends that winning in and of itself does not give people satisfaction. Alfie Cohen asserts in *No Contest: The Case against Competition* that children achieve more when they cooperate rather than compete.<sup>121</sup> Moreover, winning is addictive; once people have tasted it, they crave more. Unlike the satisfaction derived

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of the Toxic Trap of Success,” <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/wired-success/201012/beware-the-toxic-trap-success>.

<sup>116</sup> Paulette D. Kilmer, *The Fear of Sinking: The American Success Formula in the Gilded Age* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1996), 164.

<sup>117</sup> Ashley Stahl, “How Your Childhood May Be Sabotaging Your Success,” <http://www.forbes.com/sites/ashleystahl/2015/08/27/how-your-childhood-may-be-sabotaging-your-success/>.

<sup>118</sup> Michael Snyder, “Greed Is Good? Where Will America’s Sick Obsession with Wealth and Money End?” <http://www.washingtonsblog.com/2014/06/32330.html>.

<sup>119</sup> Kilmer, *Fear of Sinking*, 165.

<sup>120</sup> Evert Van de Vliert and Onne Janssen, “‘Better than’ Performance Motives as Roots of Satisfaction Across More and Less Developed Countries,” *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 33 (July 2002): 380-97.

<sup>121</sup> Francesco Duina, *Winning: Reflections on an American Obsession* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011); Alfie Cohen, *No Contest: The Case Against Competition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1992). See also David W. Johnson et al., “Effects of Cooperative, Competitive, and Individualistic Goal Structures on Achievement: A Meta-Analysis,” *Psychological Bulletin* 89 (January 1981): 47-62.

from doing one's best, however, the pleasure that winning produces does not last. Focusing on the media attention, medals, and material rewards that winning provides leads people to look for external rather than internal validations of their worth. It prompts individuals to constantly compete and compare themselves with others to measure their value rather than basing it on being children and servants of God.<sup>122</sup> As sociologist John Brueggemann asserts in *Rich, Free, and Miserable: The Failure of Success in America*, our society's frenetic quest for success contributes to "overworked parents, overscheduled kids, unhealthy personal choices," fewer friendships, and less involvement in the community. It produces anxiety, anger, fatigue, depression, addiction, debt, and rude behavior.<sup>123</sup>

## Conclusion

"The moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess SUCCESS," Harvard philosopher William James complained to H. G. Wells in 1906, is "with the squalid cash interpretation put on the word success," "our national disease."<sup>124</sup> The fervent American quest for success as defined by money, material possessions, and status symbols is foolish, unbiblical, and destructive. God has so designed the world and us that having a personal relationship with Him, good friends, a loving family, and a sense of purpose (serving God and others and glorifying our Creator through all our actions) are the most valuable things in life and the ultimate basis of fulfillment. For Christians, to faithfully follow Christ is to be successful. Only by doing this can we truly experience the abundant life Christ promised us.<sup>125</sup> Fortunately, many polls indicate that large numbers of Americans are questioning the media-driven conception of

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<sup>122</sup> Williams, "Why Do We Have an Obsession with Winning?" The point about being children and servants of God is mine.

<sup>123</sup> John Brueggemann, *Rich, Free, and Miserable: The Failure of Success in America* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010), 6.

<sup>124</sup> William James to H. G. Wells, Sept. 11, 1906, in *The Letters of William James*, ed. Henry James (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1920), vol. 2, 260.

<sup>125</sup> See Nathan Grills, David E. Lewis, and S. Joshua Swamidass, eds., *Faithful Is Successful: Notes to the Driven Pilgrim* (Denver: Outskirts 2014).



success as defined by possessions, prestige, and power, and instead view success as having close personal relationships, a job they love, fulfilling experiences, pursuing their passions and interests, and “trying to learn and do new things.”<sup>126</sup>

Christians should partner with adherents of other religions and concerned secularists to renounce the traditional American perspective of success and promote an alternative conception based on justice, love, and service. David Brooks points out that most commencement speakers exhort graduates “to follow their passions” and to be true to themselves. Rather than focusing on ourselves and asking what do we want from life, Christians should instead inquire: “What does God ask of me?” How can we use our God-given gifts to meet the world’s greatest needs?<sup>127</sup> Fortunately, some commencement speakers are criticizing traditional conceptions of success. For example, Arianna Huffington told the Smith College class of 2013, “Don’t buy society’s definition of success, because it’s not working for anyone.” Huffington and some other luminaries are offering a different model of success that “emphasizes human connection over accumulating wealth, personal fulfillment over power, and health and well-being over stress and burnout.”<sup>128</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> “New Study: Americans Say Road to Success Now Paved More with Fulfillment Than Wealth,” <http://about.americanexpress.com/news/pr/2013/americans-say-road-to-success-fulfillment.aspx>. See also Jacquelyn Smith, “This Is How Americans Define Success,” <http://www.businessinsider.com/how-americans-now-define-success-2014-10>; “Statistics on American Views of Success,” <http://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2006/september/4090406.html>; Alina Tugend, “Redefining Success and Celebrating the Ordinary,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/your-money/redefining-success-and-celebrating-the-unremarkable.html?smid=pl-share>; Douglas Quenqua, “Lawyers with Lowest Pay Report More Happiness,” <http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/05/12/lawyers-with-lowest-pay-report-more-happiness/>; Debra Cassens Weiss, “Do Americans Define Success Too Narrowly?” [http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/do-americans\\_define\\_success\\_too\\_narrowly/](http://www.abajournal.com/news/article/do-americans_define_success_too_narrowly/); Katrina Kenison, *The Gift of an Ordinary Day: A Mother's Memoir* (New York: Grand Central, 2010).

<sup>127</sup> David Brooks, “The Moral Bucket List,” <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/12/opinion/sunday/david-brooks-the-moral-bucket-list.html>. Brooks casts this argument in secular terms.

<sup>128</sup> “Best Commencement Speeches 2013: 10 Speakers Who Are Redefining Success,” [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/10/best-commencement-speeches-2013\\_n\\_3416547.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/06/10/best-commencement-speeches-2013_n_3416547.html). See also Arianna Huffington, *Thrive: The Third Metric to Redefining Success and Creating a Life of Well-being, Wisdom, and Wonder* (New York: Harmony, 2015).

The Bible presents an alternative message to America's focus on success. God despises boasting and self-aggrandizement. Among other passages on the subject, Jeremiah 9:23-24 states: "Let not the wise boast of their wisdom or the strong boast of their strength or the rich boast of their riches, but let the one who boasts boast about this: that they have the understanding to know me, that I am the LORD, who exercises kindness, justice and righteousness on earth, for in these I delight," declares the Lord. God abhors pride, and the Apostle Paul instructs: "Let the one who boasts boast in the Lord." Proverbs 16:5 declares that "everyone who is arrogant is an abomination to the Lord." Ecclesiastes 5:11 proclaims that "whoever loves money never has enough; whoever loves wealth is never satisfied with their income. This too is meaningless." God commands us to eschew haughtiness and self-promotion, embrace humility, esteem others to be better than ourselves, and devote ourselves to advancing His kingdom, not our own personal reputations and agendas. Christians should emphasize that God calls people to be faithful rather than successful and that His measures of success are very different from those of the secular world. The Christian community's standards for what constitutes success must, therefore, be very different from those of the larger world.

Resisting media messages, we must recognize that no matter how high our standing in life is and no matter how many accolades we receive, we will never be happy. We will always desire even greater status and admiration. Career success never ultimately satisfies. Fame always leaves people hungry for more renown. Measuring self-worth by occupational achievement is a dead end. Created to have a personal relationship with God, serve others, and promote His kingdom, we will never truly be fulfilled unless we do.