

gods that Fail (and the only God who Satisfies) “*Liberation from the Idol of Achievement*”

Daniel 4:1-37

~ Delivered at Central Baptist Church on March 5, 2017 by Pastor Barton Priebe

INTRODUCTION

- **(SHOW SLIDE 1)** Please open your Bibles to Daniel 4.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 2)** Charles Barkley is a Hall of Fame basketball player. He has been the MVP of the NBA and chosen as one of the 50 greatest basketball players of all time. I watched an interview with him where he fired back at reporters who said he is too lazy to pursue the role of a General Manager with an NBA team. Barkley said,
 - ***“I’m in the basketball Hall of Fame. Ain’t no lazy people in there. Funny thing about it, it’s reporters calling me lazy. Reporters are the laziest people in the world. They’re going to call me lazy? I’ve actually accomplished something in my life.”***¹
 - Charles Barkley’s self-worth is wrapped up in the pride of his achievements and he uses his achievements to push down those who have not achieved.
- This morning I want to look at how achievement or success can become an idol in our lives. The desire to achieve is a good thing. God calls us to work hard. But success can be an idol when it becomes the controlling factor that drives our lives and the thing we base our self worth on.
 - This is true whether you achieve or fail in life. It’s not the result – it’s what is driving you. The person who fails can be even more driven by this idol than the person who succeeds. But both are enslaved by this driving need to achieve so they will be worth something.
- So in order that we might be liberated from this idol, I want to look at a man who achieved far more than any of us ever will. This man lived in the 6th century B.C. and his name was Nebuchadnezzar. He was the undisputed king of the known world. He built an empire and was wealthy beyond imagination. Nebuchadnezzar had achieved everything but then God caused his whole life to fall apart.
 - To our amazement though, we read that he was glad it happened. Daniel 4 is a letter that he writes to the entire world about what God has done for him. Look back at verse 2.
READ 2 - *It has seemed good to me to show the signs and wonders that the Most High God has done for me.*
 - Nebuchadnezzar is glad that God stripped him of everything because only then did he see that he was enslaved to a false god who was slowly killing him. This god is alive and well today enslaving children, parents, business people, students and famous basketball players like Charles Barkley. The idol, the god, is achievement.
- In Daniel 4 God graciously, but painfully, delivers Nebuchadnezzar from the enslaving power of this false god and God intends Nebuchadnezzar’s story to liberate us as well. So let’s follow the pattern for how to deal with idols in our hearts. We will identify the idol, expose the idol and defeat the idol.

IDENTIFYING THE IDOL OF PRIDEFUL ACHIEVEMENT

- First then: **(SHOW SLIDE 3)** identifying the idol of prideful achievement.

¹ Jay Leno, November 23rd, 2009.

- In the beginning of the chapter God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream. Look at verse 11. **READ 11-12** - *The tree grew and became strong, and its top reached to heaven, and it was visible to the end of the whole earth. Its leaves were beautiful and its fruit abundant, and in it was food for all.* Later Daniel reveals that Nebuchadnezzar is that tree. He is the great king who rules the whole world. He really has achieved.
 - It was Nebuchadnezzar who made Babylon into one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The walls he built were wide enough for a four-horse chariot to pass by another. But what he is most famous for is the hanging gardens of Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar would fit right into Victoria's eco-values. **(SHOW SLIDE 4)** Essentially he made the city into a giant park. Gardens were multi-leveled reaching 75 feet high complete with machinery for circulating water. Nebuchadnezzar had achieved but he was full of pride in his achievements.
- In the dream God called for the tree to be cut down but not to uproot the stump. Daniel tells the king the meaning. He says that God is coming to humble Nebuchadnezzar, that he will go insane for 7 years. In verse 27 Daniel calls this great king to repent, to stop being a tyrant, and care for the oppressed.
 - God gives him a year. But then we read in verse 29, **READ 29-30** - *At the end of twelve months he was walking on the roof of the royal palace of Babylon, and the king answered and said, "Is not this great Babylon, which I have built by my mighty power as a royal residence and for the glory of my majesty?"* Do you see the pride? In Romans 11:36 Paul praises God saying, *"For from him and through him and to him are all things. To him be the glory forever!"* Nebuchadnezzar's words are the very opposite.
 - James Boice writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 5)** *"He thought Babylon was 'of' him, because it was his idea; he was the architect. It was 'from' him, because he had the wealth and power to build it. Therefore, it was 'for' his glory and his glory alone."*²

HOW A GOOD THING BECOMES AN ULTIMATE THING

- Now let's identify the idol. Remember that we make idols when we take a good thing and make it into a god thing.
 - There is a good type of achievement and pride. In her classic book *Out of Africa*, Isak Dinesen spoke of good pride: **(SHOW SLIDE 6)** *"Pride is faith in the idea that God had, when he made us."* God's idea was for us to work hard, to create, to shape, to form, to increase in knowledge that we might know Him and serve Him. In fact, God has uniquely gifted each of us for particular works. **(SHOW SLIDE 7)** Good pride then works hard but recognizes that everything is a gift. Therefore all credit for personal achievement is due to the Author of the gifts.
- But this good pride can quickly become an idol. Tim Keller, whom I am borrowing some thoughts from today, says that idolatrous **(SHOW SLIDE 8)** pride is claiming to be the author of what is really a gift. Since all you are and all you achieve is a gift from God every act of personal boasting is really an act of cosmic plagiarism. It is taking credit for something that you do not deserve credit for.

² James Boice, *Whatever Happened to the Gospel of Grace*, 164.

- You teachers and students know this well. Why is it wrong to copy an essay from the Internet and put your name on it? It is wrong because you are taking credit for something that you are not the author of.
 - So how do you know if achievement has become an idol in your life?
- **(SHOW SLIDE 9)** You can see that achievement has become an idol in your life by how you respond to success.
 - When you do well and others applaud you, what goes on in your heart? You know achievement has become an idol if you forget to exalt the other people who helped you achieve or if you find yourself boasting in your accomplishments. Pride says with Nebuchadnezzar, *“I did it. I worked hard. I achieved and therefore I deserve the credit.”*
- You can also see that achievement has become an idol in your life by **(SHOW SLIDE 10)** how you respond to failure.
 - The plain fact of the matter is that most of us will not reach the top of our fields. When you fail to achieve do you fall apart emotionally? Do you think, *“I am due so much better than this?”* Pride believes that it is owed good things and gets angry when it is not give what it believes it is due.
- You can also see that achievement has become an idol in your life by **(SHOW SLIDE 11)** what you are willing to do to succeed.
 - Are you willing to sacrifice your family to work insane hours to get ahead? The gods always demand sacrifices. Are you willing to lie, to cheat, to slander others in order to get ahead?
- You can see that achievement has become an idol in your life by **(SHOW SLIDE 12)** how you view others who do not achieve.
 - If you look down on others who not achieve because they are not as smart as you or do not work as hard as you then achievement has become an idol. You may be smarter but who gave you your mind?
 - Or think of achievement as parent. If you look down on other parents because their children are not as well behaved as yours have you not idolized your achievement as a parent? What makes you differ from them? Could they find parenting difficult because, unlike you, they have not had the gifts of a good upbringing and good mentors to help them?
- Finally, you can see that achievement has become an idol in your life by **(SHOW SLIDE 13)** where you get your sense of self-worth. In our culture self worth is found in what we achieve. Think about it: when you meet a new person what is the second question you ask after their name? “What do you do?” We evaluate a person immediately based on where they stand on this. If you have to achieve in order to feel like you are worth something then achievement is your god. Madonna, the worldwide pop icon, revealed in an interview what drives her to achieve:
 - **(SHOW SLIDE 14)** *“I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy...I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I’m mediocre and uninteresting...Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that’s always pushing me, pushing me. Because even*

though I've become Somebody, I still have to prove that I'm Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will."³

- How about you? How much of your self-worth is bound up in succeeding and achieving?

EXPOSING THE IDOL OF PRIDEFUL ACHIEVEMENT

- We are now ready to move to our second heading: **(SHOW SLIDE 15)** exposing the idol of prideful achievement. Let's expose this idol for what it is – a false god that cannot satisfy our souls.
 - How does God expose Nebuchadnezzar's idol? He takes it all from him. But notice how gracious God is. Before God does this he reasons with him. He sends Daniel to talk. God always talks to us first. He gives us the Bible, teachers, and people to speak into our lives. Like any good father, God wants willing consent and cooperation. But like any good parent knows, if a child willingly persists in disobedience, the most loving thing you can do is apply tough love. Discipline hurts the child but it is motivated by love and its goal is redemptive.
 - This is what God did to Nebuchadnezzar and what he lovingly does with us when we refuse to leave our idols.
- Notice that God brings a very specific judgment on Nebuchadnezzar. He does not just get out his discipline list and say, "*Hm, what should I use today? Lightning bolt, famine, car accident? Eeny, meeny, miney, moe.*" No, God is intentional. He gives a very specific discipline.
 - **READ 31-33** - *While the words were still in the king's mouth, there fell a voice from heaven, "O King Nebuchadnezzar, to you it is spoken: The kingdom has departed from you, and you shall be driven from among men, and your dwelling shall be with the beasts of the field. And you shall be made to eat grass like an ox, and seven periods of time shall pass over you, until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will." Immediately the word was fulfilled against Nebuchadnezzar. He was driven from among men and ate grass like an ox, and his body was wet with the dew of heaven till his hair grew as long as eagles' feathers, and his nails were like birds' claws.*
 - It is likely that God gave Nebuchadnezzar the mental illness that the DSM-IV manual on mental disorders calls "clinical lycanthropy." This is a rare psychiatric syndrome where the person lives under the delusion that they are an animal. Such people eat grass and creep around on all fours. They neglect their hygiene, which leads to an animal like appearance.
 - Here is William Blake's depiction of Nebuchadnezzar. **(SHOW SLIDE 16)** God did this to humble Nebuchadnezzar. As one commentator says, "*A man who think he is like a god must become a beast to learn that he is only a human being.*"⁴ But in giving this specific discipline God exposed what happens when a person's life is driven by prideful achievement. James Boice says, "*God was saying by that punishment that this is the result when men give the glory of God to themselves. They become beastlike.*"⁵

³ Lynn Hirshberg, "The Misfit," *Vanity Fair*, April 1991, Volume 54, Issue 4, 160-169, 196-202.

⁴ Fewell. Cited in Tremper Longman III, *NIV Application Commentary – Daniel*, 122.

⁵ James Boice, *Daniel*, 52.

- Isn't this true? When we make achievement our god we become prideful. **(SHOW SLIDE 17)** Pride dehumanizes us. It makes us act in ways that are more akin to the beasts than to humanity. **(SHOW SLIDE 18)** So for instance, prideful achievement makes you like a beast in that you become difficult to get along with.
 - Cynthia Heimmel is a secular writer who lived in New York City. She knew a lot of people when they were struggling artists and actors and she knew them after they attained success. She writes, **(SHOW SLIDE 19)** *"I pity celebrities, no I really do – Sylvester Stallone, Bruce Willis, and Barbara Streisand, were once perfectly pleasant human beings. But now their wrath is awful. I think when God wants to play a really rotten practical joke on you he grants you your deepest wish and then laughs merrily when you realize you want to kill yourself. You see Sly, Bruce, and Barbara wanted fame. They worked, they pushed and the morning after each of them became famous they wanted to take an overdose. Because that giant thing they were striving for, that fame thing that was going to make everything OK, that was going to make their lives bearable, that was going to provide them with personal fulfillment and happiness had happened and they were still them. The disillusionment turned them howling and insufferable."*⁶
 - She is right that the worst thing God can do is give you what you want. This is what Romans 1 says. God's judgment is to give us over to the natural consequences of our desires - to let them so destroy us until we come to our senses. But she is wrong that God laughs. He weeps because he is trying to humble proud people so that they will return to Him. Proud people are always in conflict with others because like a beast they are always fighting for supremacy. This is bestial.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 20)** Pride in achievement makes you like a beast in that it drives you into isolation. Isolation in the sense that people are around you but you never know who to trust. Or isolation in the sense that you have to crush everyone else in order to get to the top.
 - I saw an amazing example of this a few years ago when Michael Jordan was inducted into the Basketball Hall of Fame. Before he gave his speech, David Robinson was inducted. Robinson's speech was amazing. He is a strong Christian. All his family was there. He praised his wife and exalted his sons. What is amazing about Robinson is that he intentionally gave up the leadership of his team to his younger superstar team-mate Tim Duncan. Together they won two championships. In his speech, Robinson praised Tim Duncan as the greatest power forward ever. What humility!
 - Then Jordan got up. His entire speech was about himself. He told about what drove him to succeed. It was the desire to prove others wrong. Throughout his speech he ran down other great players, exalting himself above them. At the end Michael Jordan proved that he was the god of basketball. But what was so striking to me is that he stood all alone at the top of Mt. Olympus. His wife left him. He burned bridges with just about everyone. He has achieved godlike status with his achievements but was left all alone.
 - Prideful achievement drives a person into isolation because it must knock others down to build the self up.
- I am giving you all these examples of famous people who have made it to the top of their respective fields because as one man says they know something that most of us deny.

⁶ Cynthia Heimmel, "Tongue in Chic" column in The Village Voice, January 2, 1990.

- They have learned what many of us are still learning, namely, the fact that the human soul is so large that you can shovel into it whole empires, MVP trophies, fame, 200 million albums sold, and money, and you will not be able to fill it. These people who made it to the top are yelling at us that if we give our lives to achievement we will never find what we are looking for and we will find ourselves dehumanized in the process.

DETHRONING THE IDOL OF PRIDEFUL ACHIEVEMENT

- We are now ready for our third and final heading: **(SHOW SLIDE 21)** Defeating the idol of prideful achievement. I see three ways in this text that Nebuchadnezzar had his idol defeated and three ways that we can to.
 - We need to be stunned by the sovereignty of God, struck by the judgment of God, and be staggered by the grace of God.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 22)** First, be stunned by the sovereignty of God.
 - What defeated Nebuchadnezzar's pride and what will defeat ours, was that he came face to face with the sovereign power of God. That this is the point of the story should be obvious. It is stated over and over again. ***READ 17, 25b, 32b - the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will and sets over it the lowliest of men. . . till you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will . . . until you know that the Most High rules the kingdom of men and gives it to whom he will.*** What Nebuchadnezzar had to learn and what we need to learn is that God is sovereign over everything single event in our lives – from who is king over a nation to when a sparrow dies. Everything you have and everything you do not have are ultimately part of the sovereign will of God. When Nebuchadnezzar saw this he realized that the only reason he achieved anything was because God gave it to him.
 - When we succeed we tend to think it is because we worked harder, were smarter than others, or deserved it. But is it not far more complicated than that? In order to be where you are at you first had to be born in this century. Would you be so successful if God caused you to be born in Europe in the middle of the Bubonic Plague? And did you choose to be born in the western world with all its advantages? Did you choose your parents? Why were you not born with severe mental disabilities? And where did you get that personality that helps you succeed? They are all gifts and are given according to the sovereign purposes of God.
 - This is why Paul says in I Corinthians 4:7 – ***“For who makes you different from anyone else? What do you have that you did not receive? And if you did receive it, why do you boast as though you did not?”***
 - Defeat the idol by filling your heart with thankfulness to the sovereign God who has given you all these gifts that enable you to succeed.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 23)** Second, you need to be struck by the judgment of God.
 - Nebuchadnezzar was crushed by God. You must see that every expression of pride is an act of cosmic plagiarism. It is stealing glory that is due to God and claiming it for yourself. As the king of all, God will not yield his glory to another. We are all under judgment. But then you must hold this in tension with the third thing.
- **(SHOW SLIDE 24)** Third, you need to be staggered by the grace of God.
 - When God commanded the tree to be cut down in judgment he was still merciful. He said the stump was not to be uprooted. Nebuchadnezzar the proud king experienced grace and that grace changed him.

- As Christians we know this grace on a far deeper level for 2000 years ago a different kind of king rode into Jerusalem on a donkey. He rode into Jerusalem to achieve for us what we could not achieve for ourselves. He achieved the perfect life that we cannot achieve. He achieved the forgiveness of our sins by dying on the cross. He achieved our right standing with God and all that we will enjoy for eternity by rising from the dead.
- You see, this is what will liberate you from prideful achievement.
- Because of Jesus' life, death and resurrection, you do not have to achieve in order to be Somebody. In Jesus, you are Somebody. Because of Jesus' achievements, all who believe in him are loved and cherished by God. When you see all that Jesus has achieved for you it liberates you.
 - When you are staggered by this grace, like Nebuchadnezzar, your sanity is restored and you can see clearly. You see reality for what it is. You see that all that you have is a gift from God. You stop needing to boast in order to look better because you know you are fully accepted. This creates a security deep within that enables you to rejoice in the success of others and to treat them with love instead of pawns to help you succeed.
 - Jesus, the King and God over all, humbled himself and achieved for us what we could not achieve for ourselves, and gives it all to us as a gift. This frees you to work hard and serve others because you are no longer striving to become Somebody. In Jesus, you are Somebody.