

# ACHIEVEMENT AND THE CHRISTIAN LIFE

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“Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and cometh down from the Father of lights, with whom is no variableness, neither shadow of turning.”

—James 1:17

If you are reading this essay, I can be sure of one thing: You have achieved something of significance, and you hope to do still more. You wish to write a book, start a company, help the poor and disadvantaged, become a doctor or lawyer, or make a scientific discovery. In contemporary parlance, you want to change the world and chase your passions.

Perhaps you will go to Washington, DC, and work on Capitol Hill or in a think tank; to Los Angeles to sell your screenplay; to New York to be an intern at the *New York Times*; or to Harvard to do that MD-PhD program you have been dreaming of. Or perhaps you will win the Marshall or Rhodes scholarships or be admitted to Juilliard.

Of course your parents and professors praise you for your success. We tell you that value is bound up with your personal excellence. We push you to do your best work, which we grade, criticize, and revise. Then we congratulate you when you win scholarships and gain acceptance to prestigious postgraduate internships and degree programs. Such glory reflects well on us, and we feature you on our university webpages and in glossy alumni magazines. We love to say that we placed you at Harvard or that you are now working at the Mayo Clinic or writing for the *New Yorker*.

But are you happy? Do you feel calm and fulfilled?

Or are you full of anxiety and perhaps even clinically depressed? Do you constantly feel inadequate, that past achievements quickly lose

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their meaning, and that you must always strive for the next accomplishment? Perhaps Albert Camus' famous aphorism seems apt: "Every achievement is a burden. It compels us to a higher achievement."<sup>1</sup> Maybe you wonder when the cycle will end, when at last you will feel adequate, good enough, accomplished enough, and finally worthy of respect and love.

And you long to think about your life differently. Maybe the dissatisfaction emerges when you suddenly realize how others perceive you. You sense that they are using you as a measure of their own achievements. The famous speaker glances past you as she shakes your hand, looking toward the person she considers more important. The off-hand disclosure of an acquaintance reveals exactly how he tallies up your virtues and vices compared to his own, and his are always more impressive.

A young friend (and recent graduate of Georgetown Law) recently described to me the inevitable assessment that ensues whenever she meets a fellow lawyer from an elite school. She watches as the new acquaintance mentally tallies up his relative ranking in relation to hers. Then, quickly, conversation resumes. She and her friends call it "the pause," and it is ubiquitous among people in their social set.

Or perhaps you have begun to notice the people on social media who advertise their books and articles and talk about their amazing accomplishments in the "humblebrag" mode. You then see that they are assessing themselves by asking for your attention and admiration. Are they doing more? Are they smarter? Funnier? More handsome? Healthier? More successful athletes, musicians, chefs, or interior decorators?

It is not so much that these people are full of pride, though of course they may be. Rather, they are desperate for attention, recognition, and, most of all, love. They want to be noticed, affirmed, and told "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."<sup>2</sup> Only the rare genius (and I have never met one) can be so confident in his abilities that he needs no encouragement or approbation.

But does this approbation really satisfy? Or does it too become an addiction, accompanied by the compulsion to top our past achievements: attending better schools, working for ever-more-prestigious

companies, publishing in better venues, buying more expensive but understated clothes and cars, and having more people talk about us and reference us in various ways? We then become not good and faithful servants but slaves to our own sense of honor, continually dissatisfied because we never get everything we think we deserve. Pride has a way of creeping into our hearts, even—perhaps especially—if we think we can guard against it. Then, despite what may be a long list of accomplishments, we remain unhappy and unfulfilled. And we long to think about our lives differently.

The political philosopher Michael Oakeshott has said that achievement “is the ‘diabolical’ element in human life; and the symbol of our vulgarization of human life is our near exclusive concern with achievements.”<sup>3</sup> For a majority of the American educated class, this is undoubtedly true. The virtues of achievement are spoon-fed to us from kindergarten through college in the slogans “be excellent,” “never stop striving,” “just do it,” and the patently false “if you can dream it you can achieve it.” We internalize the message that our value depends on our successes and our single-minded focus on things the world esteems. Grit, persistence, and determination are fundamental American values.

But this vision of human fulfillment is not actually fulfilling. In fact, it often becomes a species of idolatry, insofar as we idolize success and distinction. In our dogged pursuit of achievement, we forget (or never learn) the true meaning of leisure. We are handicapped in our capacities for enjoyment and happiness. And we cannot sit quietly alone or with those we love. We can hardly resist the aimless busyness that promises to move us closer to the next achievement, however small it may be.

We recognize this idolatry, at least at certain moments, because we also have experience of another mode of life—one where we do not exist at the center of everything, where others take first place, and where self-forgetting comes as a blessed relief.

Often this recognition comes as the result of something quite unhappy. When a spouse, parent, or child is in acute physical or emotional pain, our worries about ordinary daily concerns recede completely. While standing outside in the cold at midnight with a child

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who has croup and cannot breathe, I have wondered how I could have occupied myself with so many trivial things (career, budget, and troublesome colleagues) when I now see clearly that happiness consists in loving others and in seeing *them* happy and well. Crisis has a way of sharpening vision, making us perceive in stark relief the differences between the trivial and serious things that are ordinarily jumbled together in our lives. Yet when the crisis has passed, we return to our normal thinking.

These different varieties of experience show that human beings possess contrasting orientations toward the world. The one may be understood, in Christian terms, as the love of God and love of neighbor—love or *caritas* for others. This love constitutes us as parents, daughters, sons, teachers, pastors, counselors, husbands, wives, and friends. In these relationships, we are concerned with the good of others. We would gladly sacrifice for them. Our love is pure and noble, informed by reason but not always reasonable. Virtuous actions flow naturally from such love.

A supreme example of this is the experience of parenthood, in which the goal is emphatically not the mother's or father's well-being, but the child's flourishing. But an inclination toward loving others can manifest in many different ways. It might be caring for an elderly relative or relinquishing some personal benefit. It might be undergoing suffering on someone else's behalf. Sometimes it might be taking punishment in someone else's stead.

The contrasting impulse is not necessarily selfish, but it requires the investment of self in satisfying desires, which range from base to noble. This realm encompasses simple tasks, such as mopping floors and organizing closets, and difficult and complex endeavors, such as restructuring corporations and producing blockbuster movies. In this mode, we do the grocery shopping, write the essay, submit the proposal, host the party, negotiate with others to achieve an end, "curate" our image, and advertise ourselves and our projects. This is the realm of productivity, getting things done, and accomplishment. We may or may not do these things selfishly or pridefully, but we undoubtedly see ourselves as agents of activity and change, and some part of us desires to engage in these projects.

Are these two orientations—love and achievement—fundamentally at odds, or can they ever be brought together? How is it that we can recognize the priority of love while continually and relentlessly being pulled back to achievement? After all, the realm of love would seem to be unambiguously morally good, while achievement appears morally questionable at best and pride-filled and soul-killing at worst. The desire to achieve yields a host of pathologies: constant attentiveness to work, email, one's job, one's body and appearance, and comparative evaluation of ourselves and others, all at the expense of paying attention to those around us whom we actually do love. At times this problem seems intractable. In *The World Beyond Your Head*, Matthew Crawford has described it as “weariness with the vague and unending project of having to become one's fullest self.”<sup>4</sup>

I want to suggest that one can see this quest for achievement in a different and even positive light, which can suck out some of the poison of pride and self-congratulation that so often accompanies it. But we do not often observe these ways of being. The temptation is rather to go to other extremes.

One extreme is exemplified by those eccentric people we may know who wish to live “off the grid” or who construct utopian colonies for alternative ways of living. They reject the entire project of modern technology and the achievement it facilitates. The other extreme, much more common, is the person who lives to add lines to his resume. This person is the workaholic, the friend so many of us have who constantly references himself and whose so-called “private life” is just a footnote to his professional life.

What would a real alternative to achievement culture look like? It cannot simply be to get right the tiresome work-life balance question that has been so endlessly discussed in recent years. It also has little to do with gender, marriage, and the equitable division of tasks. It is no mere matter of self-care or wellness. Rather, any such alternative requires a fundamental adjustment in how we think about achievement itself and how love may actually inform and structure achievement.

In truth, renouncing achievement altogether is an artificial and unsatisfactory solution. Real and long-lasting happiness consists in

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purposeful activity, not rest or pleasure. Almost everyone wants to do something meaningful, and all meaningful things require discipline, hard work, investment, and patience. Often they require confidence and even, at times, fairly blatant self-promotion.

Consider, for a moment, a literary illustration of these conflicting pulls: the Greek hero Odysseus, when we first see him in the *Odyssey*. He has been detained on an island by the eternally youthful and attractive nymph, Kalypso. All his needs are amply provided. Kalypso serves him limitless food and drink and offers him physical pleasures of other kinds, too. Yet instead of reveling in the enjoyment of it all, Odysseus sits “on the rocky shore [breaking] his own heart groaning, with eyes wet scanning the bare horizon of the sea.”<sup>5</sup>

Readers are meant, of course, to wonder why this hero is so miserable. I think it is because he possesses, at that moment, neither true love nor the possibility for achievement. He wishes to be reunited with his wife and son. But just as strongly, he wants an arena in which he can act meaningfully and do things: perform acts of valor, excellence, or kindness. And we are all like Odysseus.

How have we drifted from the praiseworthy desire to find meaning in both love and excellence toward the compulsive achievement mentality that is so widespread? Surely things have not always been as they are now—and our grandparents and great-grandparents did not share our laser-like focus on achievement. Some part of the current problem is undoubtedly due to the hyper self-consciousness that media, and particularly social media, have helped create over the recent past.

Yet deeper, longer-term historical and cultural forces are also at work. More than 70 years ago the Swiss theologian Emil Brunner diagnosed his cultural situation in terms that are strikingly applicable to the 21st century. In his 1948 Gifford Lectures, published as *Christianity and Civilization*, Brunner maintained that the West’s emancipation from Christianity—and the concurrent rise of romanticism and the cult of the creative genius—had transformed individual effort and productivity into the true measure of human worth.<sup>6</sup>

Beginning in the Renaissance and reaching its pinnacle in 19th-century romanticism, the cult of creativity became a substitute for both morality and religion. Our value as human beings no longer depended

on being created in the image of God, but rather required that we ourselves become autonomous creators. The creative genius was lionized in art, music, and literature, and pilgrimage destinations shifted from Chartres and Santiago to the houses of men of genius, such as Johann Wolfgang von Goethe and Ludwig van Beethoven. “To be a man, a human being, is something,” wrote Brunner in his appraisal of this transformation, “but to be a famous eminent creative man is much more.”<sup>7</sup>

Soon this romantic estimation of value trickled down from those few creative geniuses to the masses of ordinary people. If achievement in art or science was unattainable to most, productivity of a different sort was not. Thus the life of “mechanical or technical invention in the service of economic production”<sup>8</sup> gained prestige, and men such as Thomas Edison were considered the greatest of creative minds. In our day the famous inventors of digital technologies have taken Edison’s place, and millions of people strive to be like them. “The technical inventor becomes the adored symbol of creativity,” observed Brunner, “and new machinery is the measure of progress.”<sup>9</sup> This is precisely the sphere in which man feels himself most independent of his creator and builds towers of Babel, skyscrapers, or satellites. To paraphrase Karl Marx, we see ourselves as free only when we are our own masters. We cannot understand ourselves as beholden to some divinity who might place restrictions on us or chasten us.

Much more might be said here about the rise of individuality over the past five centuries, the burgeoning explanatory power of science, and other topics of recent intellectual history. Yet Brunner’s analysis illuminates a central component of our current predicament. To wit: We now believe that productivity and usefulness stand as the twin purposes of human life, and many of us feel that we must adapt our lives to these ends. Unfortunately, they do not make us happy.

I promised, however, a different, more positive way of understanding the human desire for achievement. So far I have focused on achievement’s negative aspects, its pathologies, and how it pushes us toward becoming self-absorbed, envious, and prideful. These are real dangers, and they have grown exponentially over the past few decades in America, especially among a subset of middle-class and affluent families.

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What is the origin of this desire to achieve? Sometimes, of course, achievement is plainly pursued for power, money, or honor. Significant accomplishments may also be generated not from confidence but out of insecurity, from a sense that our lives have little value until we show *what* it is that we can do. At other times we seek and find a sense of mission and accomplishment in solidarity with like-minded others, such as on a sports team, in a band, or in ideological and social movements.

But at its best, the desire for achievement and excellence emerges as the result of a vision of a good or perfection that works on us and to which we respond in turn. In perceiving excellence in others, and in the works that others create, we glimpse the transcendentals of truth, goodness, and beauty. We may even discover that we, too, desire to do, make, and create and to do so as perfectly as possible. In his *Nicomachean Ethics*, Aristotle describes such activity in accordance with virtue or excellence as, quite simply, happiness.<sup>10</sup>

It is what happens when we are profoundly inspired by a musical performance, a work of art, something beautiful in nature, an elegant theorem, or a person. Such inspiration appears in Platonic dialogues, a masterfully executed essay, certain gardens, the Chartres Cathedral, 17th-century Dutch still lifes, the Roman Colosseum, and even in a masterful bit of computer coding or the perfect bluegrass song. You no doubt would have your own list.

The things that touch us like this tend to be formative and compelling. We want to not only perceive and appreciate them but also engage in the activities themselves: architecture, writing, cooking, painting, musicianship, or scholarship. “These creative powers are gifts of God and therefore good,” as Brunner has observed. “Only their misuse is bad.”<sup>11</sup>

An early 20th-century writer, L. P. Jacks, has beautifully expressed this idea in his book *Constructive Citizenship*. “Our real interest in Truth, Beauty and Goodness does not begin until we are on the way to *creating* one or other of them,” he wrote. “Show me a man who is doing a piece of honest work, or one who is making something beautiful that might have been made ugly,” he continued, “and I know beyond a doubt that the Eternal Values have laid hold of that man.” Such a

person may be “governing a state, or steering a ship, or writing a book, or composing a sonnet, or laying bricks, but in any case the root of the matter is in him. The Eternal Values are not beautiful phantoms. They are the *active principles of human labour*.”<sup>12</sup>

Most compelling of all is the person who exemplifies something we want to become. At times, such an exemplar will appear in the teacher, mentor, priest, friend, or parent who possesses moral or intellectual beauty. By seeing such a person and loving him or her, we also desire such a character for ourselves—not so that we can show the world our excellence, but because we want it for its own sake. In other people we apprehend, to quote Edmund Burke, “patterns of the fair and good.”<sup>13</sup>

In this loving and inspired approach to achievement we are not simply obeying the diktats of the world (such as “be productive”) but are motivated by a desire for the work itself. This is not a new or original insight. Yet it bears repeating because we continually forget it or, perhaps, have never imagined it as a possible attitude at all. During World War II, Dorothy Sayers reminded her contemporaries of the proper attitude toward work along similar lines. “[Work] should, in fact, be thought of as a creative activity undertaken for the love of the work itself,” she wrote. Mankind, made in God’s image “should make things, as God makes them, for the sake of doing well a thing that is well worth doing.”<sup>14</sup> Love of something or someone can motivate us to attempt great things.

So far I have examined the origins of the desire to achieve. These may be base or noble, concerned with money, honor, or the vain hope of impressing other people. Alternatively, achievements may spring from our perceptions of truth, beauty, and goodness, in whatever ways these come to us.

But origins are not the only things that matter. In pursuing achievements—in becoming a masterful translator of ancient Greek, a skilled stonemason, or a brilliant tax attorney—we are also called to think about the part we ourselves play in these achievements. Do we imagine that we are self-made? Have we been successful solely because of our own hard work? Or is personal success a matter of luck or privilege, available to some and not others? Obviously the truth lies between these extremes and varies from case to case. But the point here is to

recognize that our accomplishments are never entirely self-generated. They emerge in part as a result of gifts we have been given.

Some people have innate athleticism, musicianship, or ability with numbers; others possess emotional intelligence, beauty, or philosophical acumen. But these innate traits are not in themselves achievements. Neither are they insignificant. They are something like capacities, which may be activated or not activated, used well or ignored. This is at root a Christian insight: God, like a human father, gives us many good things that we do not deserve. The challenge is to figure out which gifts we possess and then how we can use them to glorify God.

Recognizing this fact of givenness offers liberation from the tyranny of worldly achievement because it transforms our thinking. If a central task of human life is to apprehend and appreciate what has been given, and then to develop those talents, we are relieved from the burdensome assumptions that go with a compulsive achievement mentality that relies solely on our own unrelieved efforts. Achievements are then not wholly ours, but also God's. Human beings are the vessels through which God works, the facilitators for deeds in which we participate but do not act alone. The philosopher Josef Pieper has expressed the experience aptly: "One of the fundamental human experiences is the realization that the truly great and uplifting things in life come about perhaps not without our own efforts but nevertheless not through those efforts." Rather, he continues, "we will obtain them only if we can accept them as free gifts."<sup>15</sup>

Parenthood is something akin to this. A couple may open themselves to the possibility of life, but the actual creation of a new human being has little to do with their conscious efforts. Such a power inheres in the union of their bodies, but parents do not "make" the child. Instead, they are like cocreators, caretakers, or cultivators. They allow themselves to be channels through which a great thing is, indeed, created. And this, I believe, is the way all the best things come about. It is not so different from the gardener who plants something that she could not herself have created. Yet what she does *after* the planting makes a great deal of difference in whether she will have tomatoes and okra to harvest.

Without such an appreciation of the givenness of our talents, we tend toward the compulsive achievement that I described earlier. We may even be inclined to view our accomplishments as the entire measure of our worth as human beings. We sense that we are fully responsible for those accomplishments, for good or ill. No wonder so many of us work so hard to be so excellent. For if we fail, what will our lives have been worth?

At the extremes, this attitude tends to produce either intense anxiety or intolerable pride. I suspect we all know people on both ends of this spectrum. In the academic world, it is the young woman who cannot get past her self-doubt to finish her graduate coursework or the student who is paralyzed by the notion that she will not be able to complete all her assignments as perfectly as she knows she can. At the other extreme, it is the senior scholar who cannot talk about anything but himself and his impressive publishing record or the young man who boasts of his exceptional civic engagement and all the prominent people he knows.

Yet if we can manage to see ourselves as curators and caretakers, whose job it is to develop and nurture what has been given as a gift, then this pressure is lessened. Or, perhaps, the character of achievement is changed altogether. We may begin to feel as if we live in a house that is far grander than we could have ever built on our own. Out of love and appreciation for this unearned gift, we want to preserve the house, ultimately working to make it better and even more beautiful.

One final point may help our thinking about achievement. I have proposed that we come to think of it not so much as the whole measure of a person, as the world encourages us to do, but as the experience of being drawn to something one loves or finds beautiful or valuable. This leads us to do creative work: We want to paint, write, build, or better some machine or process that already exists. And we are often (though not always) drawn to activities in which we have natural talents.

Yet sometimes, particularly in certain kinds of work, there is actually congruence with what I have called the other orientation—not achievement, but love. Sometimes the thing that draws us to an activity is not so much a transcendental as a person or group of persons.

The true teacher finds her reward not in honor or salary but in the students whose lives she improves. The missionary wishes for an “achievement” that actually consists in love. The doctor or therapist wants the betterment and flourishing of his patients.

There is even a way in which any occupation or vocation may, in the end, draw on and express love. To the extent that one becomes skilled or advanced in anything at all, he or she gains the power to influence and encourage those who follow in the activity. Thus we all look for the approval of those we admire. Our teachers’ and mentors’ opinions are of extraordinary value to us, and we care deeply about what they think.

In the same way, as we eventually become the teachers and mentors, we begin to see that others care about what we think of them. Then we have the power to do enormously beneficial works of love: to encourage, criticize, help, mentor, reassure, warn, and simply watch. In the academic world, the greatest kindness one person can do for another is to read their work and talk with them about it. Everyone who writes wants others to see what they are writing and to find it good. To do so is to use one’s gifts not just for oneself but for others, recognizing and encouraging them in their achievements. Loving others in this way is simply seeing them as they wish to be seen. We do not ask for their attention; instead, we pay attention. Anyone who has ever been a camp counselor or older sibling knows what this is like and can see that it holds true in almost every sphere of life.

So to summarize, there *are* specifically Christian ways of confronting the “diabolical” problem of achievement. The first lies in centering one’s desire for excellence in the love of truth, beauty, and goodness—in the transcendentals—not in the prideful desire for recognition, a desire that is both endless and unsatisfactory. The second is a humble understanding that we have much to be grateful for. We are inheritors of gifts and must, as curators or caretakers, develop them. The third is the eventual use of those talents in the service of others, essentially turning our works of achievement into works of love.

What might be the outcome of all this? Will the development of our gifts lead to fame and fortune, such that we might be “lucky” enough to enjoy all the secular rewards of accomplishment alongside

its intrinsic goods? Or will we die without knowing what, if any, impact our life's work has made on other people? Either outcome is possible, of course, and it will vary from person to person. Sometimes a quite modest achievement, undertaken at the right time and place, leads to wealth, fame, and honor. In other cases, profoundly important and selfless achievements are entirely, and perhaps unjustly, ignored.

But I think the proper attitude is one that C. S. Lewis recommended in his famous essay, "Learning in War-Time." Lewis remarked that we would do well to "leave futurity in God's hands." For after all, "God will certainly retain it whether we leave it to him or not." Happy work, he wrote, "is best done by the man who takes his long-term plans somewhat lightly and works from moment to moment 'as to the Lord.'"<sup>16</sup>

The more we keep this sentiment in the forefront of our minds, the happier, I believe, we will be. For we can then think of ourselves not as the center of everything, but as characters in a drama. It is a drama whose progress and outcome interest us greatly. But we may be freed from the tyranny of achievement culture into a broader perception of the world and all the people in it. And by ultimately directing our efforts not toward our own gain but toward the service of others, we may rightly have some hope of being good and faithful servants in the end.

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