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Looking for “Deep Rest”: Confronting the Idolatry of Personal Success

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Abstract

"Despite our best efforts to build platforms and manage our personal 'brands', God is the one who gives ultimate meaning to our lives.

Posting about finding rest in God from *In All Things* - an online journal for critical reflection on faith, culture, art, and every ordinary-yet-graced square inch of God's creation.

<https://inallthings.org/looking-for-deep-rest-confronting-the-idolatry-of-personal-success/>

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Looking for “Deep Rest”: Confronting the Idolatry of Personal Success

Justin Bailey

Last week I had an experience that is becoming increasingly commonplace. I closed my email, shut off all my notifications, and sat down to do some “deep work” (as Cal Newport calls it). It was a productive couple of hours, and at the end of the session, I decided I would check my email and see if anything had come in. I was surprised to see no less than a dozen urgent, unrelated, actionable requests. None of the requests were unreasonable, all of them were related to commitments that I had made or ordinary responsibilities of my job. And yet, an immediate wave of exhaustion and despair washed over me.

Un-looked-for emotions (sudden anger, unexpected tears, etc.) are often a clue to something we’ve left unattended. If we press in and look beneath the surface, we will often find God putting his hand on an area of our life and saying, “Do you notice this? What do you think this means?” For myself, I knew what it meant. It meant that I had come to the end of my own resources; the illusion of my omni-competence had been unmasked. What I needed was not just “deep work,” but “deep rest.” The question that rose in my mind went something like this: “when will it ever be enough?”

This question was reinforced to me recently, after NFL quarterback Tom Brady won his record seventh Super Bowl. The consensus among sports commentators was that Brady is indeed the greatest NFL winner of all time. But the conversation continued, jumping the gaps between sports leagues: “But is he greater than Michael Jordan? Is he

greater than Wayne Gretzky? Is he the greatest leader of all time?" Even at 43 years old (ancient by the standards of professional sports), Brady can't seem to

stop competing. And commentators can't seem to stop comparing.

There is something admirable about a professional athlete's will to win. And there is something endearing about the arguments we have over their accolades. But underneath both is a haunting question: when will it ever be enough? Because if we are not careful, we believe that our professional accomplishments are the measure, not just of our competence at our work, but of our identity and significance as human beings.

I will never forget an interview I saw after Brady won his third Super Bowl. The interviewer asked which championship was his favorite. Brady responded: "It's the next one." The questioner was surprised: "So you're never satisfied?" And Brady replied: "Yeah, what is it with that? What is it with this need that I have to do this thing over and over? Why do I keep wanting this thing, when it isn't working? Why do I have three Super Bowl rings and I think: there's got to be more than this?" "What do you think it is?" the interviewer asked. Brady: "I wish I knew. I wish I knew."

I wish I knew what it was I was looking for. I wish I knew what it was that I'm trying to prove. Brady's relentless drive for achievement makes sense in a flattened world. If this world is all that we have, the only immortality to be had is in leaving our mark. Survival is not enough; like the tower-builders of Babel we have to make a name for ourselves. But fame is a fickle thing, which means that even the most successful among us still struggle to find significance amid the abundance of their accomplishments. Even Rocky has to keep boxing, to prove he's not just "another bum from the neighborhood."

But if there is indeed, "more than this," if our significance is not determined by the jury of our peers, or even from the deliberations of history, then there are other judgments to consider. And the judgment that matters the most has already been rendered in Christ. This is meant to set us free, to help us rest, to help us say, "It is enough." This is the word we are taught to say every Sunday, when we are meant to cease from our labors and find that we are still loved, and that the world goes on quite fine without our efforts. It teaches us that as creatures with limits, we can learn to say, "enough." For despite our best efforts to build platforms and manage our personal "brands," God is the one who gives ultimate meaning to our lives—and nothing could be better news.

Indeed, the practices of Christian spirituality, which we often treat as mini accomplishments, are meant to undo our fixation on accomplishment. They are meant

to remind us how to live by grace rather than performance. There is, of course, so much good work that we are set free to do. Ephesians tells us that *“we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God has prepared in advance for us to do.”* But our work is always preceded by a participation in God’s grace. It is always grounded in the recognition that everything we have is God’s gift: *“For it is by grace you have been saved, through faith – and [none of this] is from yourselves, it is the gift of God – not by works, so that no one can boast.”* (Eph. 2:8-1). As Dallas Willard used to say, grace is not opposed to effort; grace is opposed to earning.

There is a world of difference between a life that seeks ever to respond to the love of Christ and a life that seeks to earn our significance through achievement. There is a world of difference between a life that seeks to fill our inner emptiness through professional accomplishments and a life that proceeds as if the benediction has already been given. There is a world of difference between a life of exhausted busyness and a life within limits, where our work flows from a place of rest.

I will finish with a word from C.S. Lewis, which has helped situate my own search for “deep rest”: “the real problem of the Christian life comes where people do not usually look for it. It comes the very moment you wake up each morning. All your wishes and hopes for the day rush at you like wild animals. And the first job each morning consists simply in shoving them all back; in listening to that other voice, taking that other point of view, letting that other larger, stronger, quieter life come flowing in. And so on, all day. Standing back from all your natural fussings and frettings; coming in out of the wind.”

Sometimes our “wild animals” take the form of important emails, legitimate requests, and ordinary expectations. But first, there is another voice to hear. And that voice invites us first, not to work, but to rest.