

Winning an empty game

by [Peter W. Marty](#) in the [August 3, 2016](#) issue



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Vince Lombardi remains etched in the American psyche for one comment: “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” He later regretted the way his remark seemed to spin out of control, much like a viral tweet in today’s virtual world. “I wish I’d never said the damned thing,” he said shortly before his death. “I meant the effort . . . I meant having a goal . . . I sure as hell didn’t mean to crush human values.”

Even if Lombardi had never made that comment, the idea that winning is the only worthy outcome of effort would still run deep in the human soul. We adore success. Accomplishments determine much of our sense of worth. “Climbing ladders” is a phrase we assign to other people—never ourselves, thank God!—who don’t like to admit that ambition has gotten the best of them.

In an old *New Yorker* magazine cartoon, a wealthy husband and wife with self-satisfied grins sit down to dine, and the waiter introduces them to the menu. “For your convenience, the items starred are dishes associated with success, riches, power, and the like.”

It would be one thing if only unbelievers were enthralled with success. But [as Mark Yaconelli points out in this issue](#), Christians frequently fuel their lives with the pursuit of worldly success. “Some voice inside of us tells us that faithful people are successful.” In other words, keep a pious spirit central and God will grant you a successful life.

But failure and disappointment are at the heart of Christianity, just as they are basic to Christian experience. Reinhold Niebuhr condemned those who tried to make a success story out of the cross. The tree on which a man of love was despised, abandoned, and left to die is anything but a success story. The influence of that cross on the apostle Paul’s life caused him to speak of “finishing the race,” rather than winning the race. In the church, we sing: “Crown him the Lord of life, who triumphed o’er the grave.” No one has yet been bold enough to suggest a rewrite: “Crown him the big success . . .”

In Susan Howatch’s novel *Ultimate Prizes*, the sister of Archdeacon Neville Aysgarth scolds him for his empty chase of worldly success. “You and your prizes! The only prize worth winning is love—and just you remember *that* when you’re a lonely old man trying to comfort yourself with your bank balance and your fading memories!” Aysgarth later reflects on the sadness of sitting alone in his grand house. “I look around at all the mementos of my past, all my prizes, and I think: What a success I

was! . . . But after a while I begin to hear that silence, that long, long silence . . . and I know with a terrible certainty that the only prize worth chasing is the prize I've managed to lose."

Chasing worldly success is an empty game. It leaves the best of us devoid of the one prize worth knowing. But in contemplating that long silence created by our empty pursuits, we become more available to living the life of love God intends. What else is the Christian life but practicing how to live that life of love, or what Yaconelli calls "God's hidden, humble work"?