

"That endless, exhausting crusade for approval? Ends here."

ANN VOSKAMP

LOVE IDOL

*Letting go of
your need for approval
—and seeing yourself
through God's eyes*

JENNIFER DUKES LEE

Foreword by Lisa-Jo Baker

That endless, exhausting crusade for approval? Ends here. A brilliant writer, Jennifer Dukes Lee takes you to the foot of the Cross—and takes one stunning hammer to the foot of the Love Idol. Read this book—and walk free.

ANN VOSKAMP, Author of the *New York Times* bestseller *One Thousand Gifts*

Love Idol is a book that is going to set a lot of women free. It's a journey of grace, truth, and beautiful freedom. Jennifer Dukes Lee takes her readers by the hand and leads us to the home our hearts all long for deep inside—a place of true acceptance.

HOLLEY GERTH, Bestselling author of *You're Already Amazing*

Has Jennifer Dukes Lee been reading my journals? In all seriousness, *Love Idol* taps into something countless women struggle with. As I read Jennifer's tale of pursuing accolades and accomplishments instead of resting in God's absolute love for her, I was reminded of my own futile attempts to impress people—and God—with my achievements. I've been a fan of Jennifer for a long time, and I'm an even bigger one now. *Love Idol's* gorgeously crafted, warm writing style and deeply honest stories invite readers into Jennifer's world, while simultaneously pointing them toward their heavenly Father. This is a book I'll keep close at hand and recommend to many, many women.

DENA DYER, Contributing editor, *The High Calling*; professional speaker; author of *Wounded Women of the Bible: Finding Hope When Life Hurts*

I am so excited about the book you hold in your hands! You are about to embark on a journey of soul healing and emotional freedom. I love how Jennifer poetically crafts each sentence; I love her transparent heart for us, her readers; and best of all, I love the way she communicates the love of our Savior. *Love Idol* invites you on a journey that will change you from the inside out. Jesus has set His heart on you, and you're worth everything to Him. Today is a brand-new day to believe it, receive it, and walk in that treasured freedom.

SUSIE LARSON, National radio host, speaker, and author of *Your Beautiful Purpose*

Jennifer Dukes Lee has written a book that every woman needs to read, a book that speaks counterculturally, a book that whispers to the heart of every mother, daughter, wife, and sister who longs

to find approval. Through simple prose and personal anecdotes, Jennifer reassures us that we were born preapproved. We don't have to keep striving for love because we were designed and created by Love itself. It is with great joy and conviction that I endorse this timely and poignant work.

EMILY T. WIERENGA, Author of *Chasing Silhouettes* and *Mom in the Mirror*

I read *Love Idol* slowly because I didn't want it to end. When I turned the final page, I closed the book and hugged it to my heart. I don't think I've ever read a book quite like this one. It is elegantly written, beautifully spoken, bravely crafted, and tenderly shared. *Love Idol* is a sparkling love letter from the God who rejoices over each one of us—exactly as we are.

DEIDRA RIGGS, Managing editor, The High Calling

Jennifer Dukes Lee's book is beautiful and honest. As I read her stories, mesmerized, I realize that all too often I can spot my own heart in the stories and on the pages of *Love Idol*, recognizing how I've caved to the world's expectations and craved approval and significance, turning away from my first Love: Jesus, the only One whose approval truly matters. *Love Idol* reminds us to turn back to Him, where we find we're already approved.

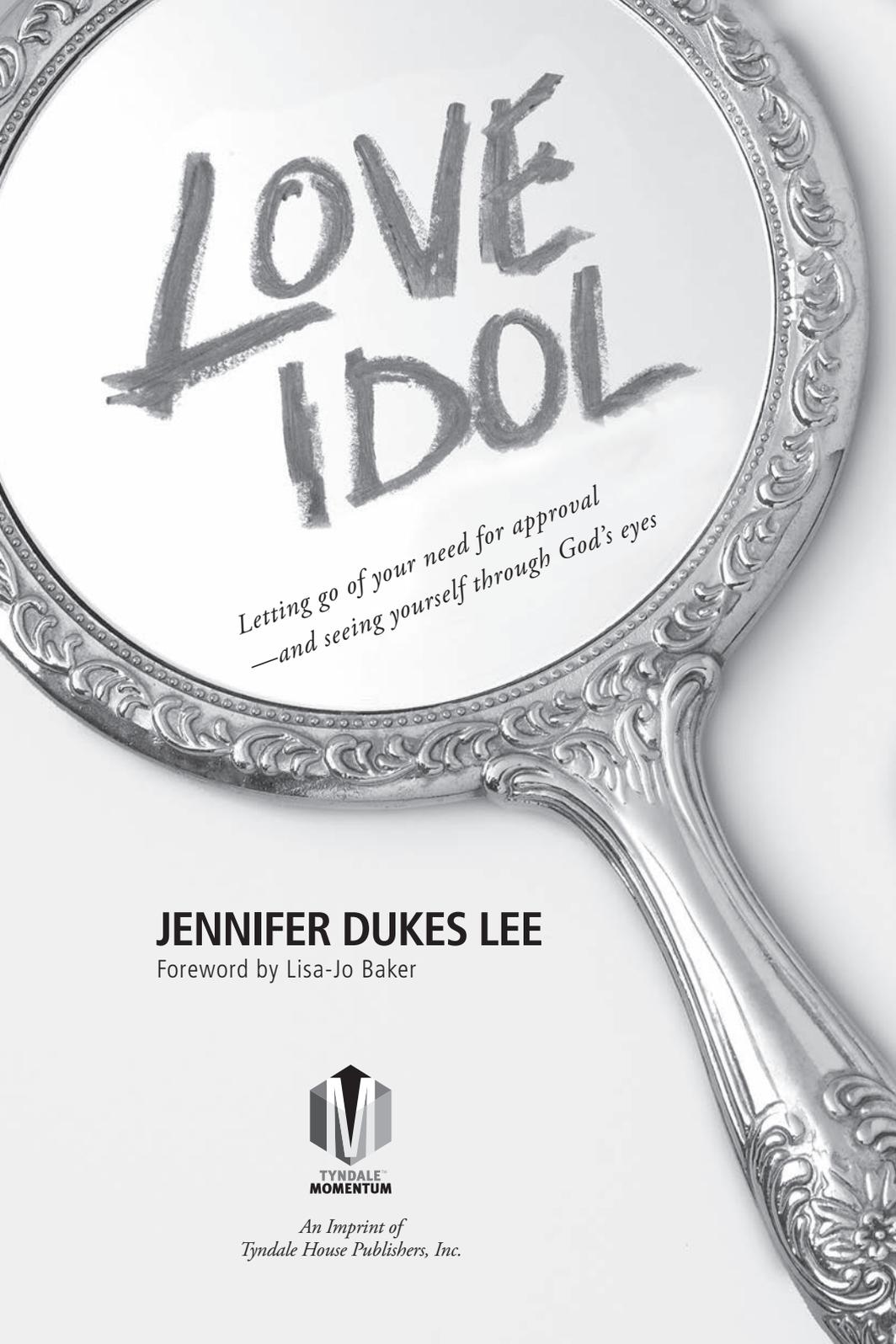
ANN KROEKER, Author of *Not So Fast: Slow-Down Solutions for Frenzied Families*

There is no fluff in this book. It is solid, biblically based, and very readable. Within the pages of Jennifer's words flows a gentle persuasion that whispers to our souls: you *are* loved, you *are* approved, you *are* my beloved. It is a message of hope that, if taken to heart, could free you from the tiring job of trying to be perfect. This book will encourage you and help you exchange your love idols for performance-free living.

MARILYN HONTZ, Author of *Shame Lifter* and *Listening for God*

Jennifer's writing is so real, so honest, so vulnerable, so powerful. As Jennifer bares her heart, she challenges each one of us to examine our own, teaching us how to dethrone the Love Idol and experience the life-transforming love of Jesus for ourselves.

CHRISTIN DITCHFIELD, Internationally syndicated radio host; author of *What Women Should Know about Facing Fear*



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Love Idol: Letting Go of Your Need for Approval—and Seeing Yourself through God's Eyes

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Some of the names and identifying details of the women whose stories appear in this book have been changed to protect their privacy.

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Contents

Foreword by Lisa-Jo Baker *ix*

Introduction: The *What* Idol? *xv*

CHAPTER 1	Picture Perfect	<i>1</i>
CHAPTER 2	Clout	<i>19</i>
CHAPTER 3	Conviction	<i>31</i>
CHAPTER 4	Mud Pies	<i>47</i>
CHAPTER 5	Bee Sting	<i>59</i>
CHAPTER 6	“God’s Got It”	<i>73</i>
CHAPTER 7	“Do You Want to Get Well?”	<i>93</i>
CHAPTER 8	Preapproved	<i>111</i>
CHAPTER 9	Very Little	<i>135</i>
CHAPTER 10	Cupped Hands	<i>157</i>
CHAPTER 11	Bleachers	<i>175</i>
CHAPTER 12	Haitian Hallelujah	<i>193</i>
CHAPTER 13	Apelles	<i>213</i>
	Epilogue	<i>231</i>
	The Love Idol Movement	<i>237</i>
	Endnotes	<i>239</i>
	Discussion Guide	<i>243</i>
	Acknowledgments	<i>255</i>
	About the Author	<i>259</i>

Foreword

IT'S FUNNY HOW you can grow up on the outside and still feel a little like thirteen on the inside. Or maybe a lot like thirteen on the inside. How you can have kids, a house, and a business card with your title right there at the top and still feel like a bit of a fraud.

If other people could only see how you couldn't fit comfortably into your jeans this morning or didn't know what to say as you sat at the lunch table across from two women far more accomplished and fashionably put together. Or how your five-year-old actually recited—in front of his entire class, the teacher, and God—an entire list of what you'd done to turn his Monday into a terrible, horrible, no-good, very bad day.

Then they'd know you couldn't possibly live up to the neatly lettered expectations printed loudly alongside your name, whether it's on a business card, the back of your journal, or the parent-teacher conference sign-up sheet.

So in the interest of full disclosure, I'll let you know that

Jennifer's e-mail asking me to write this foreword arrived on a day when I felt at perhaps my most scattered and ungreat. I typed these actual words back to her: "I'm sitting here such a mess this morning. Wet hair pulled back in a hair band and no makeup. It's that awful time of the month, and my house is a wreck. I feel dizzy and that there isn't enough sleep in the world to make up for the last seven years. I feel so empty and not enough."

Because the thing is, I often buy into the lie that there's something I can do, that I can manufacture, that I can claw my nails and my self-image into so I can drown out the panic and fear that plays the "you're not good enough" track on repeat in my head.

It's flat-out exhausting.

I know from firsthand experience. And I know from the hundreds of stories I've read at the blog I manage, www.incourage.me, a place where women the world over have bled their insecurities into the comment box during the last four years. Wonderful, accomplished, seemingly successful women have written the same words over and over again about feeling small and overlooked, about craving recognition and being afraid of failure.

Women I admire, women I love have crumbled when comparing themselves to their sisters and declared self-confidence bankruptcy. They've been tempted to check out of showing up again tomorrow.

Those women are not the exception.

So this book? This book has helped me get my bearings.

This book has logged many airline miles with me over the last month, jammed into my computer bag between my laptop and all those lists I'm behind on. This book has been a profound relief and a desperately needed, security-blanket reminder of who I am in Christ in a month that almost ate me alive with travel and insecurity.

And I've already given away the advance manuscript I was sent, because this book is like a life preserver I could pass along to a drowning friend.

Because we all so desperately want to know that who we are matters.

Like you and like Jennifer and like your friend who lives around the block or like the mom you met in the preschool pickup line, I want to know that the work I do and the kids I'm raising justify all this tiredness and make sense of my confused days. I want to believe that the laundry I just sorted or those pages of writing I just dredged out of my gut are going somewhere—that they're going to live larger than me in the lives of others.

I want to squeeze just one more round of affirmation out of my best friend, my editor, my mentor so that I can stew in the delicious assurance that I. Am. Worthy. I want to soak in that validation until my fingers turn pruny and my tired soul feels refreshed.

But tomorrow is waiting. And I know I'm going to wake up back at square one with the hair I've never figured out how to properly blow-dry and the boys who are being belligerent about breakfast as the school bus barrels toward our

house. Then I'll be back to waiting for someone to come and tell me that I am something special.

We can waste a lot of days waiting.

We can waste a lot of time, beggars for praise.

We can waste away the DNA that makes our stories unique and necessary if we're constantly begging for praise handouts to prop them up.

But it's what we're used to. It's familiar. Comfortable. A pretty and reassuring reflection that we don't want to smash.

It's hard to get up and take up all that we are, all that we pretend to be, and all that Christ actually sees us as and walk forward in Him alone. It's hard and might require brand-new muscles, but I'm going for it.

So is Jennifer.

So can you.

All us daughters of the King can put one brave foot in front of the other. Because in the pages that follow, Jennifer offers a glimpse into how He truly sees us. Us with the messy hair and muffin tops that we try to hide behind stylish blouses, artfully draped just so. Us with the worry and insecurity, who work hard at fitting into groups and conferences and our own skin. Us who are all just wondering if we might find a new friend and tell her the story of our son who yelled and refused to get on the school bus and made us so embarrassed and so mad and so confused about being a grown-up.

Yes, all us sisters who need each other and a Savior who always sees the beauty within.

The beauty, affirmation, and love that is always there because it is always and only ever reflected in Him.

These pages are the reminder that you were already fully and deeply beloved before you were born and not because of anything you've done or haven't done. That there is a God who calls you by name right there in the midst of your deepest insecurity and holds out His hand, waiting for you to get up, pick up your story, and follow Him.

Lisa-Jo Baker

Mom to three very loud kids, social media manager to DaySpring, community manager for the millions of women who gather each year at www.incourage.me, and author of *Surprised by Motherhood: Everything I Never Expected about Being a Mom*.

INTRODUCTION

The *What* Idol?

Hi, I'M JENNIFER. I know, we've just met, but already a familiar anxiety is rising up inside my heart: I want you to like me.

For much of my life, I have lived like that. I have wanted people's approval. I have wanted to be a real somebody but have felt like a nobody. I'm not proud to say that I've been a people pleaser and a perfectionist and a prisoner to popular opinion. I hoped that others might *think* I had it all together, which was more important to me than actually having it all together.

Look at that, would you? See how I'm using the past tense, as if that woman were history? But here's the truth: Often, I still *am* that person.

Maybe you're like me, and you want to unchain yourself from your approval rating. You want to find deep contentment in who you are in Christ, not in what you do. You crave authentic joy in your life, based not on your gold-star performances, people's opinions of you, or the American

dream with its temporary trappings, but on an identity secured for you through a loving Savior.

In short, you want to stop bowing down at the feet of the Love Idol.

I can almost hear your question. The . . . *what* idol? Love Idol? How can love be an idol? Love was God's idea. We were created in God's image, and God *is* love!

Paul wrote to the Corinthians: "These three remain: faith, hope and love. And the greatest of these is love."¹ Yet we take God's "greatest" and contort it into an idol. We twist our desire for approval into a false god.

Instead of resting in the love and approval of an unseen God, we chase after the temporary pleasures of human validation.

Whatever rules our hearts becomes our lord. The person who seeks approval and acceptance can become controlled by it. The person who is motivated primarily by a need for human affirmation is, in the end, ruled by it.

If we don't get the love and acceptance we crave, we're deflated. But if we do get the approval we want, we might not be any better off, for we are tricked into thinking our idols offer fulfillment.

And we keep going back for more.

This book is for any of us who want to live content in God's perfect love, freed up from the wearying demands of the Love Idol.

This is not a book of how-tos or tacked-on requirements for the Christian life. It will not tell you what you

must do to earn or gain more love and approval from others. Most of us have already tried that approach, and it hasn't worked. Rather, this is a book that woos you to open your hands to receive a love that is already yours. Together, we can wave the white flag, surrendering our need for human approval in exchange for a godly approval that is already bought and paid for. These words are for you and also for me, co-pilgrims on this journey of discovery. Wrapped in these pages are my heart's cry and my personal fight for freedom, offered to you. I pray that, together, we can give up on

- ◆ the inner critic who bruises, the mirror that accuses, and the mental playback that oozes with bad history;
- ◆ our knee-jerk response to try to please people;
- ◆ the idea that it's somehow all up to you and me, or that our reputations hinge on our own spotless performance;
- ◆ our penchant for self-criticism;
- ◆ our fear of trying because we're afraid we'll fail when people are watching;
- ◆ our inability to fully experience the love of God because we're waiting for proof from a spouse or a friend that we are worthy of his or her love;
- ◆ our longing to feel important;
- ◆ our appetite for being "known";
- ◆ our un-gospel notions about pleasing God.

Are you with me?

I hope so, because I need a friend on this journey.

Perhaps you're like me—in need of a fresh reminder that we're *already* loved by the One who made us. These words are for those of us who know what the Bible says—that our identity is found in Jesus—but who continue to find ourselves snared in a sprint for significance among inhabitants of planet Earth.

Some of you hold these words in your hands because you grew up believing that love and approval are earned assets—but that no one ever cared to invest in you. You grew up being told you were unlovable. You were neglected or abused by someone who disregarded the treasure that you are. Perhaps you struggle to know what love really is, because someone you should have been able to trust perverted it.

Your problem, perhaps, is this: you feel you've had to work your way toward love. You had an overbearing father or a mother who demonstrated her approval only when you performed according to her standards. Or maybe your church left you with the impression that you had to earn grace and thus love.

On the other hand, perhaps you grew up in a home like mine—where you experienced love and security. When you went to bed, your dad pulled the sheet tight under your chin and kissed you on the cheek before he turned out the light. All these years later, if you were to stretch out on the psychiatrist's couch, he'd be hard-pressed to find something deep in your past that triggered your need for approval.

I don't have a good excuse for how messed up I've been, as you'll see in the pages ahead, other than the fact that I am part of the human race, which has a history of turning God's greatest gifts into idols.

That's right—not all idols are made of gold. Some of the most dangerous idols are cleverly disguised in the clothing of God's gifts—food, sex, pleasure, and even love.

And they leave us lovesick.



Friend, where have you twisted love into a false god? Where have you gone looking for love, approval, and respect?

Our culture bombards us with the message that if we meet certain standards, life will be better. We are told that the answers to our deepest aches can be discovered if we work harder, climb faster, get prettier—all of it apart from God.

Maybe you looked for validation in the backseat of a car, at the table with the important people, or on the last empty barstool of the tavern. Maybe you've looked for approval from a distant spouse, a son who won't come home, a coworker who dismisses your innovative ideas, or a father who still thinks you'll never be good enough. Your quest for approval has left you completely empty. You want to be seen, to be known. But you feel like an invisible “nobody.”

Or maybe it's all looked rather harmless. In fact, on paper, your quest for love and approval might look like it actually *worked*. After all, you might have landed at the top

of the honor roll, on the Homecoming Court, on the Chamber of Commerce board, on everybody's Christmas card list, or in the glass office with upholstered chairs.

The big star in the spotlight has felt it; the "nobody" with her back against the wall has craved it: the sweet taste of validation and approval.

Satan loves to whisper this one question into every human ear: "What will people think of you?" In a cold sweat, we respond to that question by throwing our money, energy, and time into what we think will give us joy, applause, acceptance, and a little bit more respect.

But no matter how much we get—or how good we are—there's always someone doing life better, writing her story more poetically, speaking her words more eloquently, living her days more gracefully, raising her children more patiently, being promoted more regularly. (And she probably has better hair.)

I know, because I've found myself in the cultural rat race. I've scurried up corporate ladders, only to find the rungs never reach high enough to satisfy. For years, I worked sixty-hour weeks at newspapers, hoping to garner the respect of editors and peers with front-page stories and scoops. I've been a social chameleon, shifting to fit in with the crowd. I've tried to do everything perfectly and make others happy—all because I wanted more love. And I've employed various techniques—fake smiles and witty Facebook statuses among them—to make you *think* I'm okay when on the inside I'm breaking.

So what is the chief end of all my striving? Has it brought me lasting joy?

In some ways, I've been a raging success, at least according to cultural barometers. But you cannot measure the health of a woman's soul by yardsticks, scales, or approval ratings. Hear me now. I'm evidence that a person can get her fill and never feel more empty.

But I've also felt like the nobody. Maybe you can relate. Maybe you've never been asked to the cool kids' table. You look at your Facebook news feed and realize suddenly: you're the only one who didn't get invited.

Or maybe you're a pastor with a half-empty church, a writer who can't get a publisher to take one look at your manuscript, a volunteer whose contributions are overlooked every single time.

You think you wow no one in your life.

In the midst of it, you can feel like a complete loser.

But take heart: There is greatest hope for the biggest losers. People who lose their lives for the sake of Christ end up winning, living the life for which they were created (see Matthew 10:39).

When I began the process of writing this book, I enlisted a prayer team of friends that included a pastor. He agreed to pray, even before he knew the content of the book.

He texted me later with a question: "What is the book about?"

I texted a response, with these words exactly: "It is a book about making peace with yourself and with whom God

made you to be. It is for people who crave approval . . . and who fear that at any moment the world will see what a mess they really are. Funny, because you might think a person should be cured before they write such a book, but even as I write, I find myself in the midst of this battle daily.”

One minute later, my phone beeped with the pastor’s texted response: “That is the thing—the cure is the process.”

The cure *is* the process.

So begins the journey. You and I step onto the path together, arm in arm, daring one another to find our truest selves along this winding road, homeward bound. My own life is a case study of the way that the human need for love manifests itself in a variety of ways: from approval seeking to chasing the good life. First I pull back the curtain on my own past—a narrative rife with mistakes. Then I invite you to journey with me into a present-day discovery, exploring the immeasurable ways that you and I are already loved scandalously by God, who gave us His only begotten Son.

I do not write this as the master. I write instead as a fellow traveler, stumbling her way along, awed over the most stunning love story ever told. And trust me, you have a starring role.

One of His beloved,

Jennifer



Love Idol includes a four-week
discussion guide that begins on page 243.

CHAPTER I

PICTURE PERFECT

*Define yourself radically as one beloved by God. This is
the true self. Every other identity is illusion.*

BRENNAN MANNING

THE STORY OF this approval-craving people pleaser begins in the front row of a sixth-grade classroom.

I'm the scrawny girl holding her breath, overinflated with air and anxiety. I clench a No. 2 pencil in my sweaty little fist, as if I might muster up superhuman strength to squeeze the lead straight out of it. The language arts teacher click-clacks her high heels on the linoleum floor, delivering graded papers to a room full of children who—with the exception of me—slump with carefree ease at their desks. I wonder if they have been lulled into some kind of post-lunch trance, induced by the cafeteria's chipped beef and potatoes. Do they not realize that Mrs. Huseman is

distributing grades for *the biggest project of our entire lives* . . . or at least of the sixth grade?

With glacial speed, the teacher slides graded papers face-down onto the wood-veneer tops of our desks. Vaughan's paper airplane zooms past Shane's head, bounces off the chalkboard, and then crash-lands on the teacher's desk. The boys snicker, Mrs. Huseman scolds, and I retreat into a private tsunami of worry. Who has time for child's play at a moment like this? My arms stiffen with fear, paralyzed by the overachiever's coup de grâce: the prospect of getting a B on my project.

At last, the teacher pauses beside me. She presses my grade onto the desk and pats my back, an attempt to offer reassurance for an overwrought child who does not want to disappoint her teacher or her parents. I flip the paper over and hold my breath until my darting eyes find what I crave.

And I do. I find an A+ inked in a corner. Only then do I exhale, in one long, warm stream of air. The thin, red lines of a single vowel coax my fears into remission. This fulfills my daily requirement of approval, and now I can breathe. At least until tomorrow.

I don't know what I would have done if I had gotten a B. I was never brave enough to try such a daring thing as *that*.



My whole life, I have lived this way, in a breathless scamper for significance and the approval that comes with it. I have performed, climbed, raced, jockeyed, and postured for it.

I've feared rejection. I've wanted to be a lot of things: prettier, skinnier, smarter, better. In all the striving, the graffiti of human praise defaced real love.

I have wanted the A—not just on my sixth-grade paper but in life.

You can call it perfectionism if you want. But that's just a symptom of the bigger problem. I've wanted to be approved. I've wanted to be loved.

I've forgotten that I already am.

The Love Idol has enslaved me, chaining me to my approval rating. I have been addicted to being liked.

And the world is a buffet, dishing out heaping portions of flimsy praise: crowns for the homecoming queens, trophies for the first-place finishers, glossy covers for the world's most beautiful. We fill our plates, feeding on lies about love. We nibble crumbs of approval and always leave the table hungry for more. We measure love and respect by numbers: Facebook friends, checkbook balances, monthly sales quotas, and dress sizes.

It never fills.

We start young, looking for love somewhere outside Eden before we're even able to tie our shoes or count to ten. We enter the world wrinkled and flailing as if we already fear abandonment. Someone cuts the cord and puts a striped beanie on us, as we cry out to be held. And so begins a lifelong quest for love.

Enter Satan.

The world's oldest liar gets us to forget that we were

God's idea in the first place. We don't always remember that there is a very real God on a very real throne who calls us His beloved. The slithering enemy convinces us that our Maker's love is never enough, never was. And Satan continually asks us to consider what others are thinking of us. He tries to make us forget about God. Martin Luther calls it sin: "The sin underneath all our sins is to trust the lie of the serpent that we cannot trust the love and grace of Christ and must take matters into our own hands."

With our distrusting eyes off our Maker, we really do take matters into our own hands, like modern-day Eves grabbing for the polished fruit of cultural standards and expectations.

We cannot rationally explain the enormity of God's love or why Christ would die for us "while we were still sinners" (Romans 5:8). So we live like we don't believe it at all.

I have lived like I don't believe it at all.

I've doubted His love. I've distrusted His covenant.

It's April 2, 1972—the day after April Fools' Day—and the Rev. Vickery holds me in the crook of his arm. He sprinkles water on my forehead at the front of the United Methodist Church, then hoists my curled body higher, an infant queen, shrieking. The congregants in the creaky wooden pews applaud.

At age three, I toddle toward the altar in patent leather shoes, standing on that same square foot of red carpet where I was baptized. And now, I've come to sing "Jesus Loves Me" with the cherub choir.

Years later, I kneel there to receive my first Communion.

At age thirteen, I wear a white robe and confirm my baptismal vows. And then, one Christmas Eve, I sit in a folding chair on that very spot, playing the part of Mary, mother of God, cradling her Fisher-Price Savior.

But I remain the April fool, believing lies about what love really means. I confess now that I have not fully believed the promise of my baptism. If I'm gut-level honest, I've lived like an agnostic. Me, a woman girded by Christ's teachings from age three. Me, a woman who serves Communion, volunteers at vacation Bible school, selects worship music for her congregation. In the sanctuary, I sing of His great love with tears rolling down my cheeks. Yet in my everyday life, I have at times treated those songs like mouthed abstractions.

Although it has not been intentional, the old nature rises up against my new self. It pains me to write these words, but it's true: At times, my divided heart has looked for significance everywhere else but the altar. The world is a cacophony of distraction and man-made applause, drowning out the sound of Christ calling.

I cannot pinpoint a trigger in my personal history to explain why I have sought human approval like I have over these years. Yes, my parents valued and rewarded hard work. They expected me to give my best effort in school. But I never felt that I had to earn their love and approval. I knew I was loved because I was theirs. Period.

It is, perhaps, the way I am wired, no different from being born with hazel eyes. And it is, in a sense, the way we're *all* wired. God created within us this need to love

and to be loved, a beautiful inner longing that is designed to drive us toward Him. But our old nature can twist our hunger for love, so we begin to crave the approval of people over the approval of God.

God's Word suggests that this is part of the human condition. Scripture addresses it repeatedly, warning us against the temptation to choose the temporal. In fact, the warning became a theme for Paul throughout his letters. He wrote, "Our purpose is to please God, not people" (1 Thessalonians 2:4).

But the truth is, we don't always want to please God. We actually *like* pleasing people, because it feels good. The sound of applause reminds us not only that we're doing a good job but, equally important, that we're not messing up in front of a live audience. Since we can't hear God's "attagirl" in our human ears, the crowd's applause lets us know that we matter in the world.

Soon, even the applause isn't enough. We secretly hope the audience will give us a standing ovation, so we keep singing and dancing. We live for the perpetual encore.

What an exhausting life.



My friend Shari knows how exhausting that life can be. She says her need for approval has caused her to question her worth in almost every area of life: as a wife, a mom, a friend, an employee, a Christian. But the question she has struggled with the longest is this: Am I a good daughter?

“I love my parents deeply. I have had a good relationship with them most of my life,” Shari says. “Yet there was one thing that I really wanted to hear from them, one thing that I sought hard after for many, many years. I wanted to hear them say, ‘I am so proud of you.’”

For years, Shari heard her parents boast about the accomplishments of one of her siblings. “Each time I did something, I waited for the approval that I hoped would come . . . it never did. And I was left disappointed and sad,” she recalls.

Shari says her need for approval became an addiction, like she was a drug addict craving another hit. When she couldn’t get it from her parents, she looked for it in other relationships. “Eventually that next ‘hit’ can’t come soon enough, and it isn’t enough. You need more and more to satisfy,” she says.

Like Shari, I grew to desire “the next hit.” As a child, I loved compliments because they let me know I mattered. Criticism could downright deflate my whole spirit.

Early in life, my two older sisters and younger brother dubbed me the Golden Child. The name was, perhaps, a well-meaning joke for the straight-A sister with the smoothed-down bangs and color-coordinated closet. I wore the nickname like a badge. It felt like real praise.

And just behind the praise, I could hear the mocking, high-pitched giggles of my neuroses. These were the voices in my head, and they looked like two snobbish Valley Girls, making themselves at home in my teenage brain. *Golden*

Child? Like, whatever! That's what they would say, with an eye roll. In my mind, those two girls wore stirrup pants and neon hair scrunchies. They sashayed around the middle of my cerebrum like they owned the place.

My parents went out of their way to make sure that I knew I would still be loved, even if I failed miserably. One morning comes back now with startling clarity: the morning of a junior high track meet in 1985. I told Dad I was weary of the embarrassment of last-place finishes. I wanted to quit. I folded my arms on the kitchen table and dropped my head down, sobbing. Dad put a hand on my shoulder and urged me to simply try my hardest, focusing on something he called my "personal best." That rainy afternoon, I ran twice around an asphalt oval in northwest Iowa. I came across the finish line dead last in the 800-meter race. I didn't know it yet, but I had improved my personal best by several seconds. Lungs burning and chest heaving, I put my hands on my hips and looked up into the bleachers. Through the drizzle, I saw Mom and Dad, both of them on their feet, with their hands high in the air, applauding.

They loved and approved of me, in spite of my lack-luster finish.

Yet I much preferred bringing home As on my projects and high ratings from musical contests. Sure, my parents cheered when I lost, but somewhere on the inside of me, I would rather have had them be proud of a winner, not a last-place finisher.

Even if my parents didn't criticize me, those snobbish

Valley Girls did. They were belligerent opportunists, reminding me where I failed. That's the job of inner critics: to stick a foot in the door of your brain and remind you what a loser you are, never mind what your God says about you.

In my teenage journal—a spiral-bound Mead notebook—I often wrote about the pain those two inner critics inflicted on my tender soul. Last year, I found that yellow notebook hidden underneath the mattress of my childhood bed. I remember experiencing a sinking sense of disappointment when, as an adult, I flipped through pages to find that not a whole lot had changed since childhood. I could practically hear the Valley Girls—now grown-up women wearing Prada—snickering while I reread old words:

“Why do I feel this way?” I wrote at age sixteen. “If there were 100 people I knew and 99 of them liked me, I'd very likely concentrate on the one that disliked me because I want *everyone* to like me.” Even then, my downcast soul tried to remind myself of the truth. I wrote at the bottom of the page these words: “God is love! I am loved.”

True enough, I had written it on college-ruled paper, that I was loved by a Savior. Yet I lived another way, and it would be years before I would recognize this as a spiritual problem that needed fixing.

Approval intoxicated me. By the time I was a teenager, I was learning how to fill my addiction: with bylines. I was only sixteen years old when I felt the thrill of seeing my name in print. I had begun writing stories for our local weekly paper as part of our school's career-exploration

program. They were small stories about Easter egg hunts and town baseball matchups. But I was *writing*. Publicly. For a real-life audience. People would tell me they liked the way I could tell a story.

As a senior in high school, I made a campus visit to Iowa State University. A journalism-school recruiter gave me a tour of the college's newspaper office. I noticed right away the glass office in the corner and made a vow to myself that I would run that place someday.

Three years later, at age twenty-one, the *Iowa State Daily's* masthead listed my name as editor. I loved chasing the story, experiencing the thrill of front-page bylines. It made me feel powerful, approved, and respected. Every summer, instead of going home to relax for a couple of months, I worked at newspapers. In the summer of 1994, I drove my Geo Storm halfway across the country after landing a highly regarded internship at the *Sacramento Bee*.

I think it's important for you to know that I value hard work and excellence, the kind that will have a college student aiming high in his or her career. Eagerness and ambition, rightly channeled in our workplaces and homes, make the world a better place for all of us. My trouble, of course, came because I worshiped what my work could give me, instead of what God already had waiting for me.

But my accomplishments never once satisfied me long-term, no matter how many "attagirls" I got.

I suppose a part of me knew that the answer rested in Jesus. I would pay Him an occasional visit by darkening the

doorway of a church now and then. But mostly I saw God as a disinterested third party—or worse, the fairy-tale hero of nicely packaged Sunday school stories. “God’s love” was an assurance that I left in my yellow notebook, a holy promise that I slipped in a box under the bed of my childhood home. It was a promise that I had forgotten. I was becoming fluent, not in God’s love but in status and achievement.

The world is full of rankings and résumé lines that make you forget about God, report cards that let you know whether you made the grade in this great big world.

Any of us can look back on our childhood lives and remember the lists that shaped us: honor rolls published in the local paper, school-play casting calls, homecoming courts, birthday party invitations, and more. When we grow up, the lists grow up with us: the Fortune 500, the 50 Most Beautiful People in the World, the Top 100 Bloggers, the richest, the sexiest, the most relevant. Even Christian leaders have come up with online lists to tell us which authors are the most influential.

In a world of list makers, how can we begin to live only for the Maker’s list? In a world that says, “Climb higher to be noticed,” how can we bow lower?

One of my dearest friends, Trish—a self-described approval addict—knows about the lists, the ones that let you know you’re valued. She likes how it feels to be picked.

Trish says her approval addiction can manifest itself in

the ugliest ways right in our own church. She likes knowing that people can count on her—to sing a solo, sew Christmas-pageant costumes, decorate the altar, and lead a mission project.

“I can channel my inner Sally Fields at church,” she says. “You know, ‘They like me; they really like me!’”

At times, she says, her need for an “attagirl” from the pews can morph into an ugly monster called pride.

“There are no acronyms like AA to help us,” she says. “There are no well-known support groups, no twelve-step programs for our problem. Most people wouldn’t classify it as a problem, let alone an addiction. I mean, everyone likes to be appreciated. If only that were the extent of it.”

Trish and I half-joke that we ought to start up a flagship AAA—Approval Addicts Anonymous.

She and I confess to each other about times when we have preferred the approval of people over the approval of God, even in our church. Our old nature hovers, threatening to bring us down daily, to make us want to be noticed.

Shari, Trish, and I have to fight this war again and again, because the enemy hasn’t surrendered. He knows he can’t have us for eternity, so he wants as much of us as he can have while the earth spins under our feet. He’ll follow us straight through the glass doors of our churches if he has to.

But we have decided that it’s a battle worth fighting. We really do want liberation from the Love Idol.

We ache to live our Christ identity more fully, instead of living a life yielded to our approval ratings. Life in Christ is

not a popularity contest. It is not a materialistic chase for medals, money, or Twitter @mentions.

But how can we really begin to uproot the Love Idol? How do we begin to understand that God's love is the only love that slakes our thirst for approval? How can we shed the self-obsessed culture in which we live?

I want to live the right answers to those questions.

I want to live like I'm loved.

Because I am.



Mrs. Huseman, my sixth-grade teacher, knew the problem, at least in part. She named it for me, but I didn't know that day what she meant. And at first, I took it as a compliment.

Mrs. Huseman wrote the word in loopy cursive: "perfectionist."

Naturally, I saw the A+ before I saw the P-word. But when I discovered that word—*perfectionist*—I locked my gaze upon it as if it possessed a certain magic. I read her note while twirling strands of hair around my index finger.

"You have a perfectionist quality in you that I so often see as a great asset," Mrs. Huseman wrote.

I blushed.

There was more. She filled two sides of that pink notepaper: "Beware of it, however, and try to always view things with an open mind. After all, there always will be tomorrow."

Her words were a well-intentioned warning for a girl who yearned to be the best at something. *Anything*. I wanted to

know that I was loved and valued not just by my parents—which I was—but by the masses in Marathon, Iowa (population 352). I wanted the pat on the back, the neon-light validation from my teachers and peers, and perhaps a one-paragraph announcement in the community-church bulletin informing the public. I wanted to feel significant. I realize all of that now.

If I could, I would sit knee-to-knee with my twelve-year-old self on the school playground, take her by the hand, and persuade her to cut herself some slack. I'd tell her she ought to heed the words of her wise and discerning language arts teacher. I'd show her how to make a paper airplane. I'd tell her to go ahead and wear her favorite fuchsia-colored leg warmers, even if the other girls made fun of her. I'd mess up her hair.

I'd dare her to get a B.

But back then, I didn't hear the teacher's warning. I doubt I would have listened to my older, wiser self either. I heard only that one single word, and I let it roll around in my mouth: *perfectionist*. I rather liked how it sounded. Because if you took off the last six letters, you were left with something . . . perfect.

I knew what perfect meant. Perfect meant approval. Perfect meant significant. Perfect meant contentment.

But, fat chance of *perfect*. On the ball field and in the mirror, I was the antonym of perfection. I figured that if I was God's idea, He must have been taking a vacation when His helpers pieced me together on the assembly line.

When I looked at my reflection, I saw an odd-looking little creature staring back with crooked teeth. I wore a bra, not because I needed one, but because I wanted to fit in with the crowd—which held considerable sway over almost every decision I made. I wanted good grades to please my parents, who valued hard work and straight As. I made up silly lyrics to songs, hoping to win my friends' approval. And I stole a necklace from the jewelry store to impress the popular girl who dared me to do it.

I knew what the Bible said about me, but I measured my worth by other barometers—the mirror, report cards, and my performance among peers—even if it broke well-established moral rules.

On the playground, I was voted as the kid most likely to trip over her shoelaces. When team captains chose sides for kickball, I was the last one picked. My top dresser drawer held a collection of green and yellow ribbons—the consolation prizes for runners who slogged across the finish line last. I did score two points in basketball in the seventh grade. Trouble was, I scored for the rival team.

No, I wasn't perfect at all. But I wouldn't mind if Mrs. Huseman *thought* I was.

Mrs. Huseman had instructed us to write our autobiographies for a class project.

Mine included the high points, naturally: crisp certificates from piano contests, photographs of me posing for the local newspaper with a shiny French horn propped on my lap. I strategically left out the green and yellow ribbons,

or the fact that I lost the district spelling bee the year before on a three-letter word.

My autobiography also included a detailed, handwritten plan for the next ninety-three years of life. I set high expectations and mapped out a future that would, I hoped, give me the sense of validation that I deeply craved. At age twelve, I was an early adopter of the now-popular school of thought that if one wants to achieve her dreams, she should write them down. I was my own life coach. While most girls my age planned slumber parties, I mapped life strategies. I wrote that I would marry a handsome man and birth twins—one girl and one boy—all while managing dual careers as a highly acclaimed psychiatrist and a famous book author. Death would not come knocking until age 105.

What I didn't know then is that life has a way of making its own plans, no matter what you write down.

But in that single moment, my planning paid off handsomely. I got an A+ on my autobiography. Along with the grade, Mrs. Huseman wrote me that two-sided note. "You really are a busy girl," she wrote. "And your future—well—you certainly have it all spec'd out! If you do live to be 105, you'll have many tomorrows!"

I read and reread her letter that day in the classroom.

Perfect? Isn't that what Mrs. Huseman said I was?

If I couldn't be the fastest runner or the prettiest girl, maybe I could be perfect at *trying* to be perfect. That had to be good, right?

I squeezed my eyes tight and could almost hear the

crowd's applause—the roar of validation ringing in my ears. I envisioned my name tacked to the bulletin board in the school lobby. The announcer's voice crackled over the gymnasium's loudspeaker—*Here she is, Miss Jennifer D-U-UUUUKES!* And not a single soul in those bleachers would remember that I was the goofy-looking klutz who once scored a layup for the wrong team.

I filed Mrs. Huseman's letter away at the bottom of a dresser drawer, back in a decade when banana combs were still *en vogue*. I didn't read it again for another quarter of a century. I was too busy making all those dreams come true, gathering up a couple of decades worth of "attagirls." It would be years before I learned that a woman can scoop up almost everything her little heart desires, while missing out entirely on what her emaciated soul really needs.

I was firmly in the grip of the Love Idol.



Whose "attagirl" do you value most? (Find additional questions for reflection in the discussion guide at the back of the book.)

