

OCTOBER 2004—*Ambition: Vice or Virtue?*

One of the pervasive problems of American culture is the relentless pursuit of success, which is spawned by selfish ambition. Interestingly, one seldom hears anything about ambition in the church today. Indeed, it is regarded as an American virtue, along with motherhood and apple pie. However, the Bible addresses it differently. In Philippians 1:17 and James 3:14,16, such ambition is described by the same Greek word that Aristotle employed to describe one who sought political office by unfair means.

Of course, not all ambition is bad. C. S. Lewis helps us distinguish good ambition from bad:

Ambition! We must be careful what we mean by it. If it means the desire to get ahead of other people – which is what I think it does mean – then it is bad. If it means simply wanting to do a thing well, then it is good. It isn't wrong for an actor to want to act his part as well as it can possibly be acted, but the wish to have his name in bigger type than the other actors is a bad one.¹

All of us struggle with selfish ambition at some point in life, and Lewis was no exception. He writes insightfully on this problem in a letter to his long-time friend Arthur Greeves who was struggling with being rejected by a publisher.

From the age of sixteen onwards I had one single ambition [to succeed as a writer], from which I never wavered, in the prosecution of which I spent every ounce I could, on which I really and deliberately staked my whole contentment: and I recognise myself as having unmistakably failed in it.

...The side of me which longs, not to write, for no one can stop us doing that, but to be approved as a writer, is not the side of us that is really worth much. And depend upon it, unless God has abandoned us, he will find means to cauterise that side somehow or other.

...Think how difficult that would be if one *succeeded* as a writer: how bitter this necessary purgation at the age of sixty, when literary success had made your whole life and you had *then* got to begin to go through the stage of seeing it all as dust and ashes. Perhaps God has been specially kind to us in forcing us to get over it at the beginning. At all events, whether we like it or not, we have got to take the shock. As you know so well, we have got to *die*. Cry, kick, swear, we may: only like Lilith to come in the end and die far more painfully and later.

...I would have given almost anything—I shudder to think what I would have given if I had been allowed—to be a successful writer...I am writing as I do simply and solely because I think the only thing for you to do is absolutely to *kill* the part of you that wants success.²

The ambition that grows out of a desire to exalt ourselves and gain success at the cost of our character or at the expense of our neighbor arises from our own flesh and the values of the values of the present world. However, the ambition to do well those things that God has gifted us to do and to do them for his glory is an ambition that God approves. Paul uses a different Greek word when he speaks of this good type of ambition in II Corinthians 5:9, Romans 15:20, and I Thessalonians 4:11. This kind of ambition does no harm to our souls or to our neighbors; rather, it glorifies God and leaves us with no regrets in the end.

*Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves.
Each of you should look not only to your own interests,
but also to the interests of others.
Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus...*

Philippians 2:3-5 NIV

¹ C. S. Lewis, *God in the Dock* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing, 1996), pp. 55-56.

² *The Collected Letters of C. S. Lewis*, Volume 1, Ed. Walter Hooper (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2004), pp. 925-927.