

Ambition: Vice Or Virtue?

It's What We're Striving For That Makes The Difference

By Jerry Harvill

I teach a course in interpersonal communication at a local university. The first thing I have each student do is put together a collage from magazine cuttings that portrays his or her self-concept to the class.

Almost without exception, students' posters are filled with images of material success and glamorous lifestyles. I'm guessing that what I see in my classroom is a reflection of what my students see and hear at home.

This isn't surprising. The thrust of our consumer culture is toward having and consuming more and more things. People in our society want more for their children. They want more for themselves. They are ambitious.

The landscape of the eighties was peppered with news stories of those—within and without the Christian community—who toppled from the heights to which their ambition drove them. But is ambition “wrong” just because some go astray? Is it wrong for Christians to want to succeed, to want their children to “get ahead” in life? Is there a place for ambition in the Christian life?

AMBITION: GOOD OR BAD?

Perhaps some of the negative connotations of the word ambition come from its Latin root, which means “both”—suggesting the compromise and deceit of those who stop at nothing on their climb to the top. But ambition at its worst is not the same as ambition at its best.

What does the Bible have to say about ambition that can help us answer this question of its appropriateness for the Christian?

Scripture certainly does not gloss over examples of ambition gone astray. Images come to mind of James and John lobbying Jesus for the best positions in the Kingdom (Mark 10:35–45). Then the corruption spread to the other ten disciples, who reacted just the way we probably would have: they were incensed (Mark 10:41). A supreme example of ambition's corrupting effects might be Satan, who, some commentators suggest, got himself kicked out of heaven for this unholy drive (cf. 1 Tim. 3:6; Rev. 12:9ff).

But it would be a mistake for us to generalize from these examples that the Bible says all ambition is wrong and destructive. Let's look carefully at the biblical use of the term.

The New Testament term for *ambitious*, which occurs three times in Paul's letters, literally means “to love honor.” It is the urge to live up to the words, “Well done, good and faithful servant” (Matthew 25:21). This is the driving force of the Christian life. Ambition goes wrong when the concept of the honorable is debased, so that what we strive for reflects misplaced loyalties.

Two factors, therefore, are crucial in assessing ambition:

(1) *Goals*. What are we ambitious *for*? What have we set our hearts on? The Christian's priorities cannot be the same as those of the world—“But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness” (Matthew 6:33). “Set your minds on things above, not on earthly things” (Col. 3:2).

(2) *Methods*. How are we planning to reach our goals? What means do we use to realize our dreams? Christian standards for acceptable methods are different: “You must no longer live as the Gentiles do . . . put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires . . . put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness” (Ephes. 4:17; Ephes. 4:22–24).

The crucial issue regarding ambition is not whether we've set our heart on something, but *what* we have set it on, and *how* we are pursuing it. Ambition can be good *or* bad, depending upon whether our

goals and methods are in harmony with God's will.

Three key passages in Paul's letters give us a clear picture of healthy ambition: Romans 15:20; 2 Cor. 5:9; and 1 Thes. 4:11–12. In the first two passages we'll look at goals, or the *what* of ambition; in the third we'll look at methods, or the *how* of ambition.

AMBITIOUS FOR WHAT?

Paul was ambitious to pioneer new territory for the gospel. “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation” (Romans 15:20). Paul had the earnest desire to break new ground, to go where others hadn't gone, to do what others hadn't done. He didn't want easy success; he didn't want to take credit for others' work. He was a pioneer.

Like all aspects of ambition, this impulse to pioneer can be perverted into something low and self-serving. We can race to be first and claim credit over others, instead of acting out of a genuine desire to spread the gospel. The motive determines the virtue of the act. Paul's goal was to blaze new trails for Christ, not for himself.

Blazing trails for Christ is a noble ambition. It can take many forms. For example, it might lead you to befriend someone at work or school whom others ignore. It might lead you to volunteer to teach an illiterate adult to read. Being ambitious to pioneer for Christ might even take on global proportions—such as studying linguistics and anthropology in order to translate Scripture into native dialects for tribes who have been without the written Word.

But to be a pioneer for Christ does not mean setting a grand or exotic goal. It means being ambitious to go where you've never gone before in your own personal commitment; to tackle in faith a challenge you've shirked in the past; to reach new levels of fellowship and surrender. These are all frontiers of the Kingdom that will expand as you pioneer new territory in your discipleship.

Paul was ambitious to please God. “So we make it our goal to please him” (2 Cor. 5:9). Two elements of ambition are noteworthy here. The first is *the principle of one master*. Paul was not strung out by divided loyalties or competing priorities. His life was focused because the center was clear. “This is how one should regard us,” he earlier told the Corinthians, “as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor. 4:1).

I find that this same focus works in my life, too. Things get easier and much less brittle when I stop trying to please everyone and concentrate on pleasing the only One. And the paradox is, the more I keep my spirit and attitudes pleasing to Him, the more pleasing I am to others.

The second element of ambition here in 2 Cor. 5:9 is *the desire to please Jesus*. Paul's ambition here is to do not just some generic good, but good that is tailored especially to please Christ. There is something wonderfully personal about this. It brings to mind a careful gift made with the receiver in mind, in the context of an intimate relationship.

I have a new appreciation for tailored gifts because of an old rocking chair. Years ago when I was a graduate student in Scotland and our first child was due, my wife wanted more than anything else a rocking chair in which to feed and cuddle our new baby. We were poorer than poor, but I was determined to surprise her with one.

I found an old upholstered platform rocker which I bought for a few shillings—a grand chair in its day. But its day was long past. The upholstery was torn and faded, and the woodwork showed every one of its many years.

With the help of a Jewish shop owner who was gracious enough to give me pointers on upholstering, and a neighbor who knew something about woodworking, I—the klutz of my seventh-grade shop class—transformed that old chair over the next two months. It became a thing of beauty. My wife loved it, and both of my children got their start in life in that chair that love rebuilt.

After seven years in Scotland we moved back to the States. To raise money for the return trip we sold most of our furniture to an American antique dealer and friend. We bade a sad farewell to the rocking chair so full of memories, and didn't look back.

A few years later in Jackson, Mississippi, the church where I was preaching held a celebration, and they surprised us with a very special gift. To our great astonishment, there stood our old rocker! Our friends had tracked down the antique buyer in another state, found the chair, and brought it to Mississippi for a reunion none of us will ever forget. Talk about well-pleasing gifts! There wasn't a dry eye in the house. Twice over, that chair has been a love gift in our lives.

I can't tell you what you can give to God that will be that kind of special, tailored gift. But I know that sacrifice has something to do with it; the most precious gifts are those we pour ourselves into. Make it your goal to please God and you'll discover ways to feed a healthy ambition.

THE AMBITIOUS LIFE

“Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody” (1 Thes. 4:11–12). In this passage (see also 1 Thes. 4:9–10) Paul is exhorting his readers to holy living. This passage is especially helpful in teaching us *how* we are to be ambitious.

Let's look at three key elements of this holy living—*quiet, solitude, and labor*. Just to list these ambitions is to be struck by how quaint they sound, by how far our modern notions of ambition have moved away from biblical priorities.

Ambitious for the quiet life. The word Paul uses here means “to be still, to be at rest.” This term became famous in the Middle Ages as a label for the monastic, contemplative life. It is the same spirit Peter commends in Christian wives of unbelievers, when he urges them to demonstrate “the unfading beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which is of great worth in God's sight” (1 Peter 3:4).

The “quiet” life implied in this word does not mean passivity or inactivity, however. In fact, Paul explicitly links “quiet” and “work” together in 2 Thes. 3:12, where he forbids what we would call “freeloading.” The quiet life is full of channeled energy and work. What is absent is the stress, agitation, and restlessness associated with the mark of the heathen (see Psalm 2:1; 1 Peter 4:3–5).

To be ambitious for the quiet life is to swim against the modern current. Modern ambitions as reflected in my students' self-concept posters move toward the fast lane, toward precisely the stress and frenetic restlessness that is the opposite of Paul's exhortation. Here is a completely inverted order of priorities. Here is that lifestyle of a quiet heart in which the ancients heard the voice of God. “The Lord is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Habakkuk 2:20). “Be still, and know that I am God; I will be exalted among the nations, I will be exalted in the earth” (Psalm 46:10).

Ambitious for the self-examined life. Paul tells the Thessalonians to “mind their own business” (2 Thes. 3:11). Literally the phrase means to practice one's own things. Evidently there was a serious problem at Thessalonica with gossip and busybodies (cf. 1 Thes. 5:14; 2 Thes. 3:10–13). Apparently, for some at Thessalonica fellowship had become license to scrutinize everyone else's life. These people were so busy monitoring everybody else's work and progress that they neglected their own.

One could take this exhortation to extremes by twisting it into justification for a self-centered life. But nobody believed more strongly in the unity of the Body of Christ than Paul. The independence he urges means developing our own gifts and skills rather than focusing on the giftedness of others. He wants us to make it our ambition to sharpen our own “swords” to their keenest edge, rather than inspecting the sharpness of others.'

Ambitious for the industrious life. Paul exhorted the Thessalonians to a productive and self-sufficient work life. There is a sanctity in hard labor, in a job well-done.

Near my home close to Harrodsburg, Kentucky, is the old restored Shaker Village of Pleasant Hill. It's a favorite retreat of mine. Walking along its picketed paths under spreading maple trees, I can almost hear the Shakers singing and share their celebration of God in the craftsmanship of their labor. Their motto was, “Give your hands to work, and your hearts to God.” They knew the meaning of working with their hands—and their simple yet creative genius continues to inspire admiration even from a gadget-jaded generation such as ours.

Here is an ambition every Christian can claim. To strive to be an industrious worker does not

require a high-paying job or specialized training. This ambition fits you wherever you are, whatever you're doing. Like all other aspects of the Christian life, what's important is the spirit in which you do it: "Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as working for the Lord, not for men . . ." (Col. 3:23). To be like God, the Creator, is to find joy in our creative labor.

My great-uncle, who lived to be eighty-eight, loved to hoe his garden in the midday Kansas sun right up till he died. "There's something honest about sweat!" he used to say. I believe he was right. And remembering him and his sweat-soaked shirt and hat as he celebrated his honest labor, I can't resist the contrast of a popular deodorant commercial that seems to celebrate the pretensions of our generation as it instructs us, "Never let them see you sweat!"

Today on our assembly lines, in our offices, our restaurants, and our hospitals we desperately need as role models those who have a deep sense of the sanctity of work. Because our national work ethic has eroded there is opportunity today for ambitious Christians to break new ground for a generation of workers who never knew laborers like my great-uncle. For the Christian, ambition in the workplace goes far beyond wage and benefit negotiations. Indeed, it goes far beyond modern definitions of a successful standard of living, precisely because its values are located in a higher standard of life.

A POSITIVE FORCE

Ambition is our "want to" in life. The decisive issue is what we *want* and *how* we go get it. Ambition can be a positive force in our discipleship, motivating us to pioneer advances in the Kingdom, to live a manner pleasing to the Lord, and to lead quiet, reflective, and productive lives in our communities.

Are you ambitious? If you are, is it for those things God wants? If you aren't, should you become so? Don't let society set your standards and priorities. Don't let our American culture define success for you in a bombardment of messages that will piece your values together like so many images on a collage poster. "Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God's will is—his good, pleasing and perfect will" (Romans 12:2).

Be ambitious—in your world, for His Kingdom.

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