
THE AMBITIOUS MAN

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I. AMBITION CONCEIVED

¹³Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the meekness of wisdom. ¹⁴But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.

James 3:13-18

“What worries me most is the danger that, amid all the constant trivial preoccupations of private life, ambition may lose both its force and its greatness, that human passions may grow gentler and at the same time base, with the result that the progress of the body social may become daily quieter and less aspiring.”¹

-- Tocqueville

A. What comes to your mind when you hear the word ‘ambition’?

“We’re all dreamers..... We all conjure up visions of our own personal earth-bound heaven, and we all are committed to realizing what we have dreamed.....Some of our dreams are unrealistic and irrational. Some of us dream about what is in our reach. Some of us are afraid to dream, but we do it anyway. It is inescapable; there is always some grand vision that has your heart. There is always something that motivates you, that magnetizes your energy, and that gives you reason to press on.”²

-- Paul Tripp

“I charge thee, fling away ambition: By that sin, fell the angels.”³

-- William Shakespeare

¹ Tocqueville, quoted in David Brooks, *Bobos in Paradise: The New Upper Class and How They Got There* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 271.

² Paul Tripp, *Lost in the Middle: Midlife and the Grace of God* (Wapwallopen, PA: Shepherd Press, 2004), 135.

³ William Shakespeare, *Henry VIII*, III:2.

B. The desperate need for ambition.**C. The rise of the masculine helpmate.**

- The present-day confusion over orientation
- The domesticating of men
- The ability of men to impact the church or culture is related to their wife's vision to release them to do so.

- *"If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."*

1 Timothy 3:1b

- *"...and thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else's foundation, but as it is written, 'those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand'."*

Romans 15:20–21

D. A return to ambition's mandate – Genesis 1&2.

"[John Adams] wrote...of a natural "*passion for distinction*" in all men and women ..."⁴

-- David McCullough

E. Godly ambition: *The desire to use our gifts for God's glory.*

"If we have discovered what our ambition is, let us submit that ambition to the apostolic test. Love must lie at the heart of it, or it is a perilous and evil thing. If the ambition stand that test, if the reason why I desire this or that thing as an honor, is the love within me, then let me cherish my ambition, cling to it; let me be jealous and zealous in the prosecution of that which will issue in the realization thereof."⁵

-- G. Campbell Morgan

⁴ David McCullough, *John Adams* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2001), 421.

⁵ G. Campbell Morgan, *The Westminster Pulpit*, Books 9&10 (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), 34.

II. AMBITION CORRUPTED

A. The effect of the Fall: ambition becomes selfish.

¹⁴“But if you have bitter jealousy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast and be false to the truth. ¹⁵This is not the wisdom that comes down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, demonic. ¹⁶For where jealousy and selfish ambition exist, there will be disorder and every vile practice. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”

James 3:13-18

B. Selfish ambition: *moving ourselves to the center of our drives and dreams.*

C. Rather than living for God’s glory, motivations are more weighted for self-glory.

D. Edwards defines selfishness as “confined self-love”⁶ with the idea being that the sin is not in the self-love but in the confinement.

“We grow small trying to be great.”⁷

-- Eli Stanley Jones

E. Selfish ambition spins a host of others sins into our orbit: jealousy; discontent; vain conceit.

- *Thought:* Where you see a jealous person, you see a person with selfish ambition. Jealousy is just selfish/frustrated ambition applied towards others. (Selfish ambition is what it is called before God, jealousy is how it manifests towards one another.)

⁶ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 166.

⁷ Eli Stanley Jones.

F. Wisdom creates peace. The ambition cluster (jealousy + selfishness + vain conceit = selfish ambition) creates disorder. Who am I???

G. The dangers of a passion for personal distinction that displaces the glory of God.

- *God is trivialized.*
- *Men are envied* – The word for selfish ambition is often translated as rivalry (Philippians 1:17, Philippians 2, 2 Corinthians 12, Galatians 5:20)
- *The soul becomes discontent (factious).*

“A humble saint likes that condition which God sees best for him. A proud man complains that he has no more; a humble man wonders that he has so much.”⁸

-- Thomas Watson

H. Our souls shrink!!

“The ruin that the Fall brought upon the soul of man consists very much in his losing the nobler and more benevolent principles of his nature, and falling wholly under the power and government of self-love. Before, and as God created him, he was exalted, noble, and generous; but now he is debased, and ignoble, and selfish. Immediately upon the Fall, the mind of man shrank from its primitive greatness and expandedness, to an exceeding smallness and contractedness.”⁹

-- Jonathan Edwards

I. A Personal Testimony

“The world’s smallest package is a man wrapped up in himself.”¹⁰

-- Stuart Scott

⁸ Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man’s Picture*, 81.

⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 157.

¹⁰ Stuart Scott, “Pursue the Servant’s Mindset,” *The Journal of Biblical Counseling* 17, no. 3 (spring 1999): 10.

III. AMBITION'S CROSSHAIRS (Common Times of Temptation...)

A. When Dreams Are Deferred or Declined

"A humble saint likes that condition which God sees best for him. A proud man complains that he has no more; a humble man wonders that he has so much."¹¹

-- Thomas Watson

B. When Dreams Come True

"It is dangerous to be the world's favourite."¹²

-- Thomas Watson

- "A man is tested by his praise."

Proverbs 27:21

- The test of encouragement

"I do not know whether anyone has even succeeded in not enjoying praise. And if he enjoys it, he naturally wants to receive it. And if he wants to receive it, he cannot help being pained and distraught at losing it ... Men who are in love with applause have their spirits starved not only when they are blamed offhand, but even when they fail to be constantly praised."¹³

-- John Chrysostom

C. When The Journey is More About Faithfulness Than Fruit

- The call to 'sustained' Christianity.
- "Selfish ambition is the mother of all schisms ..."¹⁴

¹¹ Thomas Watson, *The Godly Man's Picture*, 81.

¹² Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (reprint, London: Religious Tract Society, 1835), 81.

¹³ John Chrysostom, "On the Priesthood", quoted in Joost Nixon, "Pastor Traps: Glory, Part 2", *Credenda Agenda* 13, no. 6: 15.

¹⁴ John Calvin.

IV. AMBITION CORRECTED AND CONQUERED (What Does the Cross Say to My Selfish Ambition?)

A. The Cross Reminds Me that God Controls All Those In Power

- *“The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will.”*
Proverbs 21:1
- When selfish ambitions are frustrated, sovereignty comes under attack.
- Our place is His choice—through each day and each transition.
- God is not anxious about whether our life will have impact.

“In short, he prepares and fits us to enter on our course, and by his power leads us on to the end of the race.”¹⁵

-- John Calvin

B. The Cross Reminds me That Before Christ Died for Me, He Emptied Himself for Me

- Making ourselves nothing.
- God’s encouragement: *“Consider others better than yourselves.”*
- This means we celebrate, rather than denigrate, when more gifted people come along who might serve more effectively.

¹⁵ John Calvin, *Commentaries on The Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Hebrews*, Calvin’s Commentaries vol. XXII (reprint, Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999), 312.

“Few sights are more depressing than that of a professed Christian defending his supposed rights and bitterly resisting any attempt to violate them. Such a Christian has never accepted the way of the cross. The sweet graces of meekness and humility are unknown to him. He grows every day harder and more acrimonious as he defends his reputation, his rights, his ministry, against his imagined foes.”¹⁶

-- A. W. Tozer

“If we have not what we desire, we have more than we deserve.”¹⁷

-- Thomas Watson

- The gospel reminds us that our ambition should be for self-emptying.

“The way for a man to be contented, is not by raising his estate higher, but by bringing his heart lower.”¹⁸

-- Thomas Watson

C. The Cross Reminds Me that I Can Be Content with God’s Approval

The power of God’s approval.

(Humility) tends, in the first place, to prevent an *aspiring and ambitious behavior* amongst men. The man that is under the influence of a humble spirit, is content with such a situation amongst men as God is pleased to allot him, and is not greedy of honor, and does not affect to appear uppermost and exalted above his neighbors. He acts on the principle of that saying of the prophet (Jeremiah 14:5) “Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not;” and also the injunction of the apostle (Rom. 12:16), “Mind not high things.”¹⁹

-- Jonathan Edwards

¹⁶ A. W. Tozer, *Of God and Men*, 105-106.

¹⁷ Thomas Watson, *The Art of Divine Contentment* (reprint, London: Religious Tract Society, 1835), 223.

¹⁸ *Ibid*, 163.

¹⁹ Jonathan Edwards, *Charity and Its Fruits* (reprint, Carlisle, PA: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1998), 138-139.

VII. CONCLUSION

Later that day Spurgeon was walking through the fields on his way to a village service. As he thought of the strange event of the afternoon there came an overwhelming impression on his mind, almost as though he actually heard a voice that said, very distinctly, "Seekest thou great things for thyself? Seek them not!" He immediately rejoiced in this counsel, and then and there he determined not to enter the college. He knew God had already made him a minister, and he purposed to continue the manner of life that had been his for the past two years. *The decision allowed no room for earthly ambition* [emphasis mine].²⁰

-- Arnold Dallimore

A. No room for earthly ambition!!

B. What lies at the end of your ambition as a man?

"If you happen to have lived in obscurity, and have never entered the lists for honors among your fellow-men, be content to run well your own course and fulfill truly your own vocation. To lack fame is not the most grievous of ills; it is worse to have it like the snow, that whitens the ground in the morning, and disappears in the heat of the day. What does it matter to a dead man that men are talking of him?"²¹

-- Charles Spurgeon

²⁰ Arnold Dallimore, *Spurgeon: A New Biography*, (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 1995), 38.

²¹ CH Spurgeon, "The Prayer of Jabez," sermon no. 994, delivered at the Metropolitan Tabernacle, Newington.

BOOK RECOMMENDATIONS

1. *The Art of Divine Contentment* by Thomas Watson.
2. *Lost in the Middle* by Paul Tripp.
3. *Charity and Its Fruits* by Jonathan Edwards.