

THERFIELD CHAPEL MORNING SERVICE

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Ambition

There was once a man whose motto stated “I am going to enjoy life”. He joined the family firm at 15, worked his way up from the bottom, and within a few years was running the whole show. His ambition for his company was to expand it into new areas, and during the Great War he profited by providing essential services to the Army. Afterwards he was able to expand the company nation-wide and eventually internationally. With the profits he was able to build a large home with spectacular views, and, true to his motto, he spent his free time doing the things he loved, including walking in the Lake District and spending large sums of his money on things which gave him pleasure.

During the second world war, he again profited from many government contracts, and a few years after the war he floated the company on the stock market for another massive gain. By the time he died well into his nineties, he had earned many millions of pounds – a vast sum of money for those days – and had spent most of this fortune in fulfilling his motto.

There was also a man, born around the same time towards the end of the 19th Century, whose motto was “The centre of my life is to be God”. He worked hard to earn what he could, but always gave most generously to good causes, particularly his local church. He devoted his time to sharing his faith amongst his work colleagues, to working in his church, and to running children’s camps – which he continued to do till he was 70. When he died, his entire life savings totalled £371! But he also had lived his life true to his motto, and would be remembered for generations for his warm heart, generosity and wisdom.

Now which would you say was the more ambitious man?

And whose ambition was the best? Specifically from a Christian viewpoint, how would you rate their lives and their ambitions?

These two stories serve to illustrate the two views of ambition which we come across in the New Testament. Firstly, there is that selfish, self-serving, self-centred sort of ambition which drives people to achieve as much as they can in the eyes of the world, and often in so doing to make as much money as they can for themselves. And secondly, there is the spiritual Christ-centred ambition to serve God humbly, as our treasure is in heaven not on earth.

The New Testament is pretty clear that “selfish ambition” is a bad thing. It is listed alongside foul practices like idolatry and witchcraft, and corrupting character traits like bitterness and envy. The word translated selfish ambition apparently stems from Aristotle, who used it to describe those who had a “self-seeking pursuit of political office by unfair means”. That same description could apply equally well to many people today; including perhaps the first man in the opening story.

It is not surprising that such “ambition” is inappropriate for people who follow Christ, whose kingdom values humility above self-seeking, help for the poor above exploitation of anyone, and seeking God’s glory rather than our own.

If that were all the Bible had to say on ambition, then the rather negative view which many have of Christianity would have some foundation – that it discourages people from have any “go” or “spark” in them, that it is for the weak and feeble and listless and not the strong and virile and... well, ambitious people.

But there is another side, of course, such as we read in Romans 15:20 where Paul has a great ambition to preach the gospel in new places. That was clearly a driving force in his life, for which he travelled thousands of miles, put up with many hardships, and eventually was arrested and executed. Paul was an ambitious man, but his ambition was not self-centred but God-centred, like the second man in our story.

There is a different word used in the Greek for ambition in Romans 15 – **filotimevomai** [φιλοτιμωμαι / φιλοτιμωμαι] his time it has a more neutral connotation than the selfish ambition of Galatians 5. It means to “strive earnestly” or “make it one’s aim”; but like our modern word Ambition, it also has a connotation of being fond of honour. I expect in both cases this is because, in our fallen world, the things which motivate most people and which they will strive earnestly to achieve, are things which bring them personal honour. But we have to be careful that we do not taint all ambition with this idea, for it is clear that Paul’s ambition was good and self-less.

For although Christianity does discourage selfish ambition, it does not encourage us to be limp wet lettuces! We of all people ought to have a great driving force in our lives, since we know the Good News of the Gospel, we know that other people are in desperate need of salvation, and we have our minds set on our heaven destiny rather than any short-term earthly gain. That same word crops up in 2 Corinthians 5:9, in a passage where Paul is speaking about our heavenly destiny:

*⁹ So we **make it our goal** to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it. ¹⁰ For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, that each one may receive what is due to him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.*

This is surely the highest goal that anyone can have!

Does this mean that we are to have no other ambitions besides that? Should our desire to serve Christ be so all consuming for all of us that we want to achieve nothing else in life but to spread his Good News?

Well, there are those who would take this view, and who would agree with the “pecking order” that Andrew referred to a few weeks ago with Missionaries at the top and Christian politicians and business men at the bottom.

But not everyone is able to be a missionary as such. Few people have come close to emulating the apostle Paul's achievements in taking the Gospel to new areas. While we all have a responsibility to share our faith when and where we can, we are not all going to make a full-time career of it. So are we allowed any other driving force in our lives? Is it possible, for example, to follow a career and still keep true to our main ambition of serving God?

The third and final use of the Greek word □□□□□□□□□□□□□□□□ in the New Testament is in 1 Thessalonians 4:11:

11 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,¹² so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody.

At first sight, this seems to be saying that if we can't be missionaries then we ought to keep our heads down and not bother anyone. Again you can see how this could be used to encourage people to be docile in their behaviour, and how Karl Marx could view religion in general – and Christianity in particular – as the opiate of the masses!

As is so often the case with verses like this, it is important to look at the context they appear in – what is the point that Paul was trying to make, and where does this verse fit in his argument?

Well, the Thessalonians in particular had a few hang-ups about the Second Coming of Christ. It was not that they did not believe he was coming again, but quite the reverse. They were worried that their brothers and sisters who had already died would miss out on this glorious event, which Paul re-assures them of in this letter. And some of them were so taken with the idea that Christ was going to come again any day that they gave up work and sat around waiting – and in so doing became a burden on the rest of the church, not to mention becoming a source of ridicule for the outside world – a point more fully addressed in 2 Thessalonians.

So Paul encourages these heavenly-minded people to have more of an earthly vision! Although they are not to give up their hope of Christ's return, they are to strive to live a respectable life on earth. Paul's encouragement for them to "work with their hands" does not mean that Christians must only engage in manual labour – it simply reflected the sort of work that was available at the time. His purpose here is clear in verse 12 – that they should not be dependent on anybody. They were not to sponge off their brothers!

His purpose was also that their lives, both individually and as a church, should win respect from those outside – for evangelism becomes very difficult when the Church is in disrepute. Sadly we see this all too often when a story of a Vicar having an affair or worse provides ammunition for those who do not want to listen to the message of the Gospel.

It would seem then that some sort of ambition for what we want to achieve in this world is legitimate for Christians – though the overriding concern has to be the spreading of the Gospel, it is clear that we can be so focussed on eternity that we lose sight of what we are supposed to be doing here and now.

Just how far can such ambition go?

The principle of not being dependent on anyone is interesting. It is obvious from the rest of Scripture that this does not mean a Thatcherite society where it is every man or woman for him or herself. There will always be those who, through no fault of their own, need help with the daily things of life. Indeed, from time to time most if not all of us will need some help and support, either financial or emotional – and most definitely spiritual – as we go through life. But the general case is that we should all be paying our own way through life.

So does this make it a legitimate aim to pay off your mortgage as early as possible? Or to ensure that your children do not complete their education with massive debts? If that is the case, is it legitimate to seek promotions which will pay more money so that we can achieve this more easily?

And what of the injunction to be respected? If it is the case that people respect those who have climbed the career ladder more than those who stick at the bottom, then is it legitimate to want to become a Director or even Chief Executive of a company?

In the cut-and-thrust world of business, there are many who are quite ruthless in their pursuit of career, and will deliberately stab people in the back, take credit for work other people have done, and generally trample on anyone who gets in their way. Such behaviour is of course incompatible with a Christian witness, and even in the outside world earns the respect only of those who are similarly ruthless.

But there is another way to pursue a career, a way which, in my opinion and experience, wins the respect of most people with whom you work. If you do your own job diligently, help others in theirs wherever and however you can, and always treat others with respect whether or not they have anything to offer you, then you may well find that opportunities open up for promotion and “advancement”. Such integrity, fairness and impartiality are actually valuable assets for any business, because they help to establish sound relationships both within and outside the company which are vital to achieving anything of significance.

You might not get so far or so fast up the greasy pole as others who are more machiavellian in their tactics, but by not trampling on those beneath you, your slide back down again will be more comfortable!

An example from the Old Testament might help here. David was a rather ambitious young man. He was not content to look after the sheep while his brothers went off to war. And he was not content to stand by and listen to the Philistines taunting his countrymen. Significantly, it was a desire for God’s glory which motivated him to fight Goliath, and we all know the result.

He was anointed King of Israel by Samuel many years before he actually took over the throne from Saul. He of anyone had a legitimate ambition to reach the top – he had been promised this by God himself. What is significant is the way in which he sought to achieve that. He had several opportunities to take the throne by force, and could even justify such an act as God having given him the opportunity. But instead he bided his time, until God worked events out so that the throne did indeed pass to him.

He was ambitious, but he did not let his ambition become his God. It was more important for him to be close to his God than to achieve his goals.

There is another aspect to ambition, and in fact to life in general, which is relevant here – the so-called Creation Mandate in Genesis 1:28:

²⁸ God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. Rule over the fish of the sea and the birds of the air and over every living creature that moves on the ground.”

This command has never been revoked. Now we could discuss the environmental implications of ruling over the world, and how we balance our responsibility as stewards of the planet with our God-given desire to subdue and exploit its resources. But the relevance for ambition is that a legitimate part of our earthy life concerns the improvement of our earthly lives.

Given what we have seen about “selfish ambition”, what we are talking about here is not improving our own individual standard of living as such, particularly if that is at the expense of others. But rather, if there is something we can contribute to the greater good of humanity, then that is a laudable ambition. That might be helping the third world to catch up in terms of water, food, education. It might be contributing to medical research to find a cure for cancer. It might be developing energy-efficient transport to save the planet that way. It might be writing or performing beautiful music.

The point is that there are a multitude of ways in which our lives can make a difference, and it is in line with God’s will for us to have ambition to do something good in the here and now.

So where does that leave us? Have we really resolved the question of whether Christians can be Ambitious? Well, before I try to sum up in general, it is worth returning to the two men we started with. Can we now make a Christian assessment of their lives and ambitions?

Well, surprisingly enough, these two men are in fact one and the same! Both portraits are historically accurate depictions of the same man – Sir John Laing! Of course I have carefully selected which facts to include in each portrait; and only by putting it all together do you see the real man.

He has been held up before as an example of a man who was successful in the business world but who was always true to his faith. His family business was in construction, starting in Carlisle building houses, and through his ambition ending up as an international firm undertaking major civil projects like reservoirs and power stations. But in the early days after the turn of the Century, they were in deep financial trouble after a contract to build sewers in Barrow went badly wrong. Concerned not just for himself but for his parents, his workers and their livelihood, he did what came naturally to Christians - and took it to God in prayer. As he did so, he drew up a sort of partnership with God which he coined his “Programme for life”, the motto which he was to live by for the rest of his days.

His full motto was:

*"First, the centre of my life is to be God, as seen in Jesus Christ
Second, I am going to enjoy life and help others to enjoy it."*

I was struck by the two-sided nature of it. He would get plenty of piety points for the first part, but the second does sound very hedonistic. Yet in fact he had found the secret to true enjoyment in life – focussing first on God, and also on helping others. Without that, as Andrew reminds us in Culture Explored, the search for enjoyment is ultimately not enjoyable!

He also resolved to give away as much of his wealth as he could. He and his family did not live like paupers – indeed, he did build a large house with spectacular views. But he also allowed the public to enjoy his grounds, and the amount he spent on this was small compared to what he spent building churches and donating to Christian charities.

His ambition to build the company was far from all-consuming. He was concerned for the welfare of his workers, and wanted them to be able to share in the success of the firm – in keeping with his motto of helping others to enjoy life.

Two men were having lunch in a canteen on a Laing site. "Do you really expect us to eat this stuff?" they jeered as they queued for their food. Dodging the rain which came in through holes in the roof, they found a table and started to eat.

"The old man is visiting the site today. I bet he won't be sitting in this rotten canteen eating this rubbish," said one.

They took no notice of a man in an old raincoat who was sitting nearby, but he listened carefully to what they said. The next day, a new roof was put on the canteen and better food was provided! The man in the raincoat was John Laing, finding out how his men lived, and doing his best to improve their lives.

(<http://www.request.org.uk/main/history/laing/laing03.htm>)

He was one of the first employers to provide paid-for annual leave, bonuses, and share ownership – so when the company did float in 1952, a quarter of the shares were owned by employees.

At the end of his career, he built a nuclear power station and a Cathedral, the so called Power and Glory of his achievements! But more importantly, his wise advice and charitable giving helped many evangelical Christian organisations – including, Tyndale House, London Bible College, and Missionary Aviation Fellowship.

Without ambition, Laing would not have achieved any of this.

So drawing this all together, what we see is that our ambition has to be centred first and foremost on God. If we fail to do this, then it will be a selfish ambition which runs counter to Christianity.

All of us ought to have spiritual ambitions, perhaps not as grand as the Apostle Paul's, but never the less if our faith in Christ doesn't affect the way we want to spend our lives, then we have missed the point and are maybe kidding ourselves about our faith in the first place.

But we are not to be so heavenly minded we are no earthly use. As a minimum, we should all want to be self-sufficient and to win respect, whilst also recognising the need to share with those who can't provide everything they need. If we choose to pursue a career, that must always be done in a way which honours God and is consistent with Christ's teachings. In particular, we should avoid pursuing our own gain at the expense of others. No ambition is worth that sort of compromise to pursue.

And we must never let the attractions of this world dim our view of the glory of the next. After all, it is our ambition to be with Christ in heaven, to enjoy eternal life with our Creator. Nothing we can achieve here can compare with that!