

## **Christianity and Ambition**

**James 3:13-18**

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A few weeks ago I referenced J. C. Penny as an example of a person who tried to apply his Christian beliefs to his business practices. The owner of one of the nation's largest department store chains was a firm believer in ambition. One of his more famous quotes reflects this belief. Penny said, "Give me a stock clerk with a goal, and I will give you a man who will make history. Give me a president without a goal, and I will give you a stock clerk."

Ambition, in the way J. C. Penny used it, is a desire to accomplish more than we are presently achieving. It represents a dissatisfaction with the status quo. A true desire to reach for something beyond our current grasp. A boy who works as a stock clerk but intends to one day own his own store, is a man with a plan, a go getter, a guy with ambition. A young girl who waits tables at IHOP but plans to one day operate her own restaurant is a woman who, in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson, has hitched her wagon to a star, she's moving on up, she's ambitious.

Motivational guru Tony Robbins endorses ambition as one of the necessary components of success. The man who's made millions helping others make hundreds writes, "The truth of the matter is that there's nothing you can't accomplish if: (1) You clearly decide what it is that you're absolutely committed to achieving, (2) You're willing to take massive action, (3) You notice what's working or not, and (4) You continue to change your approach until you achieve what you want, using whatever life gives you along the way.

Ambition is extolled by many men and women who try to help us grow and achieve and prosper. The question for us this morning, however, is whether or not ambition is Christian. We are in the middle of a sermon series on "Christianity and . . ." We've looked at Christianity and Citizenship, Christianity and Sabbath, Christianity and Leisure, and now we are examining the relationship between Christianity and ambition. Unfortunately, Jesus never used the word ambition. He warned us about striving for things in this world and about being anxious about food and drink, but he never used the word ambition. His brother James, however, did. In the middle of a letter that he wrote to first century Christians, we find the word. To our surprise, however, the trait is not lauded by our Lord's brother. In fact, he appraises it as having a negative effect on the church. In James 3:16 he writes, "where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."

James isn't the only inspired writer to condemn ambition. In his letter to the church at Phillipi, the apostle Paul wrote, "Do nothing from selfish ambition." I'm not sure what Tony Robbins would say about that. Of course there is the adjective before the word. In both passages, the Greek word *erithaea* is translated as not just ambition, but selfish ambition. The word is rare in the New Testament and virtually unheard of before the first century AD. In fact, only Aristotle used the word before it found its way into the Bible. The Greek philosopher used the word to refer to the process of seeking political office by unfair means.

Two weeks ago we discovered that back in 1972, Major General John Lavelle had been made a scapegoat for the unpopular bombings of North Vietnam. Because the public outcry against the bombings was so intense, Defense Secretary Melvin Laird, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger and President Nixon all declared publicly that the bombings were the unauthorized work of General Lavelle. Consequently, General Lavelle was stripped of his rank and relieved of his command. Recently released tapes however revealed that Nixon and Kissinger authorized the bombings. Both men confessed that they felt guilty about letting Lavelle take the wrap, but not guilty enough to come

clean with the American public. Because of their political ambitions, they let an innocent man bear the punishment.

That's the kind of ambition James is criticizing. The drive that says, my goals are so important, I am willing to sacrifice truth, justice and other people's lives in order to reach my goal. When our ambitions take precedence over every other value, relationship and aspect of our lives, they become sinful and destructive.

James says selfish ambition operates according to a worldly and demonic wisdom or cleverness. Unfortunately, Christians compete in a world that is driven by this kind of ruthless brilliance. In the corporate world, this stop at nothing, sacrifice everything for career advancement is often rewarded. Christians, who operate by a different value system often find themselves left behind when promotions are given out.

In the political realm, the most ambitious politician in the race usually wins. A person with good ideas and integrity but no political killer instinct rarely wins higher office. Last week the Washington Post reported that Harry Reid seems to be willing to say almost anything about his opponent, true, half true or outright lie. The most ruthless politician will probably win that senatorial campaign.

In academia, the professor who is willing to exploit every relationship, trumpet every achievement and betray every colleague often rises to the top. In the arts, the critical praise and career opportunity is not always awarded simply on merit or talent but in response to the artist's willingness to do whatever is necessary to get the contract. The most skillful athletes are not always given playing time or prominent positions. Those who know how to "play ball" with coaches, administration and alumni are often the ones who take center stage. We all love those stories in which Cinderella gets the prince, but the truth is, more times than we wish were true, the royal heir is snagged by the ruthless and often ugly stepsister.

That's why the way of Christian wisdom and understanding is so difficult to follow. We see the unscrupulous folks around us making headway in life while we get commended for being such nice people and then left to languish in relative obscurity. What was it that the old baseball manager Leo the Lip Derocher said about nice guys? I think he said they'd finish last. Not always, but a good bit of the time.

The brother of Jesus said that selfish ambition rules the world, but it should not be found in the church of Jesus Christ. Yet often it raises its ugly head there as well. Driven people, with clear agendas often dominate the agenda of the church as well as the world. They are the ones willing to intimidate, manipulate and strategize to get their way, while the rest of the flock murmurs, "that just isn't right" and ducks their heads.

James says the Christian antidote to selfish ambition, however, is not grim silence. Whether in the office, the classroom or the church house, the Christian way is not one of muted exasperation or fearful acquiescence. The man who grew up alongside Jesus said Christians are to operate out of a deep spiritual wisdom that can be every bit as powerful as worldly ambition.

Spiritual wisdom is based on the values that Christ taught us. In Matthew 13, Jesus tells two parables back to back. He says the kingdom of Heaven is like a man who unexpectedly uncovers a treasure in a field. With great joy, the man sells everything he has and buys the field. Next Jesus says that the kingdom of Heaven is like a merchant who, while searching for fine pearls, comes across one of great value, sells all that he has and buys that pearl.

Talk about single minded passion. In both stories, the Lord commended people who were willing to sell every thing they owned to obtain the treasure or the pearl. Jesus did not teach us to be apathetic about life. He did not instill laziness in us. The Lord did not say, "Everything in life is meaningless, so take the path of least resistance. Keep your head down, play it safe, why risk anything, be meek and mild and go along with whomever's in charge."

No, Jesus said there are things in this life that are so important, of such high value, that they are worth giving every thing we own to secure. The difference between selfish ambition and Christian wisdom is not one of passion, but of what we are passionate about.

The country embraced a new folk hero this week didn't it? Stephen Slater, a Jet Blue flight attendant had taken all he was going to put up with from unreasonable passengers. When he got hit in the head from an object an obstinate passenger refused to stow properly in the overhead compartment, he announced to a plane load of passengers, "that's it, I quit." Then after adding a few other choice words, he deployed the emergency slide from the side of the plane, grabbed a few beers from the fridge, jumped on the slide and left plane, passengers and job behind. You can applaud or decry his actions, but you have to admit, Mr. Slater decided that some values were more important to him than career advancement.

After telling the two parables, Jesus asked his disciples, "Have you understood all this?" Without waiting for an answer, the Lord said, "Every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like the master of a household who brings out of his treasure what is new and what is old." Then he turned and left. I believe Jesus was saying, spiritual wisdom helps us look through all the aspects of our lives, all our desires, dreams and aspirations and choose those that are true, pure, inspired by God. When we find those sacred dreams, the ones truly inspired by God, Jesus said, sell everything you own and pursue them with every fiber of your being.

What do spirit-given passions look like? James says they are pure, meaning they are not tainted with greed, lust, envy or pride. They are dreams that are in keeping with the higher moral and ethical values taught by Christ. If your dream involves hurting others, lying to others, cheating others, exploiting others, it's a selfish ambition not a spirit given passion. James says the dreams inspired by God reconcile angry people, enhance human life, demonstrate mercy, work for peace and establish right relationships between people and their creator.

Dreams to accomplish the very heart of Christ's mission on earth should fill our hearts with joy, energy and passion. The realization of those kind of dreams are worth everything we own.

Be careful not to think too restrictively about these god-given passions. Jesus is not saying, the only dreams worth pursuing are those of the missionary, pastor and social activist. God inspires powerful music, beautiful art, brilliant science, life-changing education, medical skill and mechanical know how as surely as God invigorates the gifts of preaching and evangelizing. To be passionate about the good work God gives us is the application of spiritual wisdom, not the operation of selfish ambition.

I'm afraid we might confuse passivity with spirituality in this church. We are very tame here, quiet, laid back. We don't want to be seen as too aggressive, too assertive, too ambitious. So we keep to ourselves. We try to respond if someone calls us, but otherwise, we take a low profile. Knowing that a more defined mission is sure to offend somebody, we stay rather ambivalent, even nonchalant about the work we do here. Being careful not to appear proud about who we are, we miss countless opportunities to invite folks to join us in the worship of God and service of Christ.

Julia Duin, in her book *Quitting Church* confesses that although her love for Christ is core to her life, she quit going to church for over six years. Ms Duin, who lives in the Washington metropolitan area, says she quit church because she couldn't find a congregation that demonstrated passion for its mission, beliefs or purpose. She said that although she found some worship that tried to whip people into a frenzy with various kinds of music, the enthusiasm seemed more about the music than it was about Jesus. Duin says it was simply too depressing to go each Sunday and sit with people who manifested so little passion for the work of the one who died for them.

It's time to unleash our passion in this place. This fall we will go through a process together that will help us define what we feel called to do, inspired to do, impassioned to do. We will dream some dreams and speak of sacred aspirations. Together we will seek spiritual wisdom until we recognize our mission, a mission untainted by human greed, envy or selfish ambition, a mission that will be worth singing about, praying about, shouting about and sacrificing for. A mission that will be like a treasure hidden in the field or pear of great price, a mission that will be worth giving everything we own to see come to pass.