

**Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People**  
**Chapter 7: Ambition – Putting Off Selfish Ambition**  
**Pastor's Notes/Review**

Have you ever noticed a strange transformation that occurs each year at the beginning of hockey season? The transformation is this: the same kids who would never dream of getting up before 11 am on a Saturday will get up at 6 am in order to go to hockey practice. Amazing, isn't it? How does that happen? Where did they all of a sudden get such great ambition? It's because they want to become great hockey players. Go to a practice and find a kid and ask him what kind of hockey player he wants to become. He will inevitably tell you he wants to become the best. No kid goes to practice wishing to be mediocre.

Ambition is a good thing. It is something that God created within us. But like all good things, it can be misused. A good example is Paul. Paul knew a lot about ambition. In the book of Philippians Paul describes himself as being circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for legalistic righteousness, faultless. (Philip. 3:5-6). You didn't get all those credentials by staying in bed all morning. Paul had a lot of drive. He knew what he wanted and he knew how to get at it – even if it meant pursuing Christians from one town to the next. But eventually Paul learned he had it backwards. "Whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ" (3:7).

To the same Philippian church Paul wrote: "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." (Phil 2:3-4)

- There's the problem. The problem isn't ambition; God created us with ambition. The problem is selfish ambition; in other words. The problem is the motivation behind the ambition.
- With that in mind, let's take a look at the different types of ambition we can have.

### **1. Holy Ambition**

Holy ambition is ambition that is based upon a mandate from God, when God calls someone to accomplish something for His purposes. It is knowing that God is calling you to do something.

- You almost can't help it. You got to answer that call. You got to do what needs to be done.
- This is the kind of ambition that takes risks; the kind of ambition that does what is uncomfortable.
- Holy ambition is the conviction that God has called you personally to do something specific, and nothing must stop you because you need to do it. You are certain it is God's will for your life.
- The motivation is not success. The motivation is obedience.

It is holy ambition that enabled Moses to stand before Pharaoh and demand that the pharaoh let the people go.

- You don't do that because you are selfish; you don't do that because you want to impress somebody.
- You only do that because you have a deep sense of compulsion that you must do it.
- Holy ambition is not very common.

Difficulty is that sometimes we are afraid to do something unless we have holy ambition.

- We don't want to mess up, so unless we have this holy compulsion to do something, we are reluctant to do anything at all.
- But holy ambition is just one kind of ambition. Not everything we do must be done out of a deep sense of compulsion. God has also given us human aspiration.

### **2. Human Aspiration**

Human aspiration is a God-given drive to achieve something, whether it is something simple or more likely something great.

- Sometimes well meaning Christians are hesitant to strive for the best because they feel that there is something unholy about doing something great.
- They take out of context Jesus words that he who wants to be great must be the least; so they don't want to do anything great. They feel that there is something almost evil about success.
- But we need to know that the desire for excellence, success, or accomplishment comes from God.

- All of us have this yearning, Christian or not. It is stamped on our nature by the Creator.

Jesus clearly taught that the man who buries his potential in the ground will receive strict rejection from his Master (Matthew 25:26).

God expects you to invest and multiply the talents and opportunities He has given you. For He is the one who has given you the desires of human aspiration.

- These are neither good nor bad but they can certainly be used for good or bad.

### 3. Selfish Ambition

Selfish ambition is human aspiration that has turned into selfishness. Instead of striving for excellence in order to do our best, we strive for excellence or advancement or achievement for the primary purpose of serving *ourselves*.

- Selfish ambition is human aspiration that is self-serving.
- It is not just wanting to *do* my best but it is wanting to *be* the best.
- Selfish ambition is stepping on others in order to get ahead.

While I doubt that any of us would say that we are driven by selfish ambition, the real danger we all face is that our human aspiration can easily turn into selfish ambition.

- In other words, we often start off well, with all the right intentions, but we don't always end well.
- We may have the right intentions but over time we can easily get selfish.

Keith Drury, writer of the book, "Spiritual Disciplines for Ordinary People" put it well. He said, "*Satan does not attempt to turn wholesome ambition evil in a day or even a year. Rather, he injects the poison of selfish ambition...one drop at a time. Each tiny additional drop seems minute compared with the whole. We may not even recognize this poisoning process at first. Even when we recognize it, we dismiss this part of our motivation as inconsequential. We then comfort ourselves with the thought that our motivation is "mostly" pure.*"

God is not satisfied with "mostly pure" ambition. In fact, the scripture is rather clear: "Do *nothing* out of selfish ambition or vain conceit".

- Notice, Paul did not say to do nothing. He's not talking about having no ambition at all.
- He says "Do nothing *out of selfish* ambition". The issue isn't ambition... but the type.

God does not want to *quench* our ambition [and here is the good part] God wants to *transform* it. Look at what Paul writes. Instead of selfish ambition what are we to do? "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."

God does not want to quench our ambition but to transform it... to change the very center of our drive from self to servant and He has shown us the way through the example of Jesus Christ.

- [See Philippians 2:5-11]
- Jesus, who was and is God humbled himself, became a man, born of a common carpenter.
- Instead of pursuing selfish ambition, Jesus pursued the interests of others. He became obedient, even obedient to the point of death on a cross.

Jesus said, that if we are to go after Him, we too need to take up our cross and follow him. One way we do that is allowing God to transform our selfish ambition into servanthood – and that's really the answer or the "key" to dealing with selfish ambition – focus on servanthood.