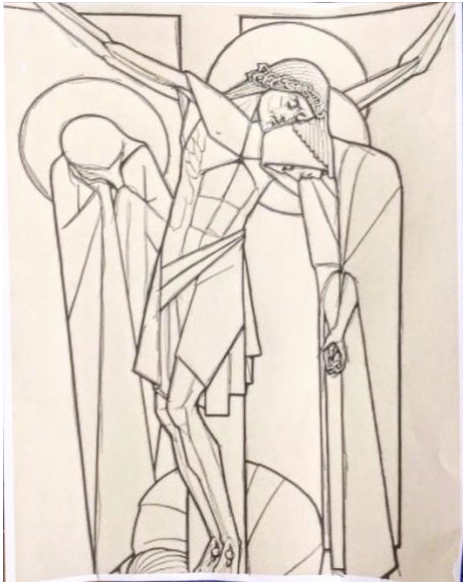


Ambition



Ambition is a peculiar desire; it can be both a virtue and a vice. This is because the determinant, what one strives for, can be good or bad. To make it even trickier, a good desire can become bad if it displaces a greater good. Let me explain, a young boy wants one of his mother's wonderful chocolate cookies. He is too short to walk over to the counter, lift up the lid, and reach in with his hand and grab one. Looking around the room he spies a chair and decides to drag it over to the counter, climb on to the seat, and then on to the counter. He goes to the cookie jar lifts the lid and grabs a cookie. His ambition was to have a cookie. He devised a plan. He implemented that plan and got his cookie. He is a clever and ambitious young boy. His reward was a delicious cookie that his loving mother had made. He is probably thinking of his

success and how good it tasted. His mother comes into the kitchen and has a different response. She scolds him for being a very bad young boy because he did not obey his mother's orders that he could not have a cookie unless she approved it. Since it was near dinner time, the cookie was going to ruin his appetite and deny him the good food that he needed to grow big and strong. Mother always knows best. So, his ambition, which was good at face value, was named evil because he disobeyed his mother and because he ruined his appetite for good food that would truly nourish him.

His ambition is much like Adam and Eve's, "*So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit and ate; and she gave some to her husband, and he ate.*" (Gen. 3:6) The ambition for food is not bad, neither is pursuit of wisdom, nor the pursuit of beauty. What is destructive is selfish ambition that ignores the boundaries of God's loving providence and seeks the approval of men. Eve pursues the approval of Adam when she hands him the apple and he eats, thus affirming her aspiration.

We are full of such ambitions. They can be both good and bad. What makes them either good or bad is the underlying conditions and motivations. It is good to be successful. It is good to aspire to provide for yourself and your family. But who did you hurt to do this? What virtues did you violate. Did you cheat, lie, and steal? I know we say it is survival of the fittest, that it is the law of the jungle out there, and that the one with the most toys in the end wins. It is good to be approved by people for a job well done. But if this is your ambition, as a Christian, be sure it does not replace the approval of God. "*How can you believe, who receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?*" Jesus asks in John 5:44. Seeking the approval of men and not God leads to disbelief.

This is the keystone of ambition for Christians. There is both worldly ambition and godly ambition. Godly ambition seeks God's approval. Worldly ambition seeks the approval of men. Worldly ambition can even seep into our faith. Paul reminds us of this in 1 Corinthians 13:1-3. "*If I speak in the tongues of men and of angels, but have not love, I am a noisy gong or a clanging cymbal. And if I have prophetic powers, and understand all mysteries and all knowledge, and if I have all faith, so as to remove mountains, but have not love, I am nothing. If I give away all I have,*

and if I deliver my body to be burned, but I have not love, I gain nothing.” Ambition without love is worthless. What gives ambition meaning arises out of a loving relationship with God who glorifies us when we seek his glory and approval. Our ambitions when they are godly last. Our ambitions perish when they are not of God. Psalm 1:4-6 speaks plainly to this. *“The wicked are not so, but are like chaff which the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgement, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for the Lord knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.”* Ambition that is founded in seeking the approval of God and not men is ambition that is righteous, just, and loving.

Jesus is our example of godly ambition. In Philippians 2:3-11 Paul describes godly ambition. *Do nothing from selfish ambition or empty conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests but to the interests of others.⁵ Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, assuming human likeness. And being found in appearance as a human, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore God exalted him even more highly and gave him the name that is above every other name, so that at the name given to Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*

Here is true ambition! He puts aside selfish ambition, he puts aside vain conceits, he put aside his own interests of self-preservation and put our interests first. He did this by putting his privilege aside. He took our likeness our weakness into himself. He took our sin into himself. He took all of this, the ambition of the Father and made it his ambition. He took this ambition to the cross, he took it to the grave. God then glorified him by resurrecting him. We need this ambition in the world, in the church, and in our own lives. This is ambition that gives life and builds others up. Jesus was able to do this because he trusted the Father. We can do this as we grow in our trust of the Father.