

Gospel Ambition
What Makes Ambition Unhealthy
Philippians 3:1-21
Sermon Outline

Introduction: Many come to New York because they are ambitious, drawn by the Kander/Ebb lyric, “If I can make it there, I’ll make it anywhere.” Is ambition always bad? If not, what makes it unhealthy and what makes it healthy?

I) Ambition is not inherently evil

A) Genesis 1 commands us to “subdue the earth”

B) Paul is full of ambition in Phil. 3:12-13

...I press on...One thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal....

Language of extreme ambition borrowed from athletic competition

The problem with ambition is not ambition per se but other things—motivation and goals.

II) Unhealthy ambition

A) Its motives

Aims at self-justification

1) Self-justification defined

v. 2: Look out for the dogs, look out for the evildoers...

v. 3: We are the true circumcision who worship by the Spirit and glory in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in the flesh

v. 8bff: For Christ’s sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own....

2) The currency of self-justification varies:

--For Paul—religious currency

--For us—any number of things

3) What matters is what we use the currency for

B) Its symptoms

1) Joylessness

2) The inability to enjoy and worship God

3) Isolation from people

Conclusion: a picture of the joy and satisfaction arising from healthy ambition

Questions for Reflection this Week

- 1) John Kander and Fred Ebbs wrote this famous lyric: “Start spreading the news/ I’m leaving today/ I want to be part of it/ New York, New York...If I can make it there/ I’ll make it anywhere/ It’s up to you/ New York, New York.” Did you come to New York to ‘make it’? If so, in what? Have you succeeded? Have you failed? How are you coping with success/failure?
- 2) In Genesis 1 God commands us to “subdue the earth”—which means that seeking to have an impact on this world is not a bad thing. It is, in fact a good thing. How do you reconcile this with the sense we often have that it is not spiritual to be ambitious?
- 3) Read Philippians 3:12-13. What metaphor is Paul using to describe his aim in life? Notice how intensely he is striving. What is he striving for and what clues does this give us as to what makes ambition healthy and what makes it unhealthy?
- 4) Unhealthy ambition aims at self-justification—drawing one’s identity, or hopes, or sense of value from oneself. It is a life lived in isolation from God and can take multiple forms, including (a) indifference to God’s commands (disobedience) and (b) indifference to God’s grace (obedience without joyful dependence). Which form did it take in Paul’s former life? Which form has it tended to take in your life?
- 5) The “currency” of self-justification varies tremendously. We may “buy” our identity and self-worth with the currency of “doing the right thing” or “career success” or “fierce independence from all tradition” or “education” or “background” or any number of other things. Which currency have you tended to use?
- 6) Some of the symptoms of unhealthy (self-justifying) ambition are (a) joylessness, (b) the inability to draw near to God or enjoy him, and (c) isolation from people. Why these symptoms? Have you experienced them?
- 7) According to Paul the alternative to the unhappiness and isolation that arise from self-justification is the joy and satisfaction that arise from “being found in Christ not having a righteousness of my own.” Why does “Christ justification” have such a happy effect? How in practical terms do we strive not build our identity upon our own efforts and background? It sounds like striving not to strive!