

THE ANATOMY OF AMBITION

(Various thoughts on the subject of ambition—good and bad)

Ambition; a strong desire for advancement or success or to achieve a particular favorable end.

Most preachers tend to be ambivalent toward being called ambitious, indeed, most would not want their peers to describe them as ambitious, but neither would they want to be called NON-ambitious. *At its core ambition is related to the pursuit and expression of power.* Discerning between good and bad ambition forces a person to discover *why* he desires power and *how* he will go about attaining it and once he obtains the power, *how will he use it?*

Jesus never undermined ambition. He viewed it as a normal part of human nature. What Jesus did was to direct or focus the ambition of His disciples into godly channels. In Matthew 6 He tells them to stop focusing on the things this world is ambitious for: recognition and material goods. Instead, a Christian is to have a strong desire, *“to seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness and all these things will be added to us.”* In other words, Christians are strongly motivated for the glory of God and the good of others. It is *self-giving* not *self-serving*.

Ungodly ambition revolves around self. The power attained is used to the detriment of others. Relationships are a means to an end. People are used rather than loved.

The Greek word for selfish ambition is *eritheia*, and the ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle defined selfishly ambitious people as those who want to achieve political office by making themselves appear bigger and better before others through cunning. In other words, selfishly-ambitious people are those who will electioneer for office and court popular applause by deceit. They are always putting themselves forward without reference to truth. They are full of such slogans as, “Make way for me! I am more important than all of you. Vote for me, and I will be your savior.” The Antichrist is an example of such a politician. When he comes, he will be characterized by *eritheia*, selfish ambition, and he will use deceit and trickery to promote himself.

A man characterized by this vice of *eritheia* is full of himself. Such a person lives to glorify himself, but there is a problem in doing that. In the process of seeking his own interests first and seeking to glorify himself rather than others, a selfishly-ambitious person will destroy himself. Selfish ambition yields bitter fruit, in other words.

This type of ungodly self-serving ambition has been the root cause of the downfall of more than one organization, church, relationship or home—has it not?

Absalom was a born politician. He was tall, handsome, and possessed the gift of gab. He was a hardworking person who would rise early each day and go with his fifty men, chariots, and horses to the main road leading into Jerusalem. There Absalom would intercept Israelites who were coming to Jerusalem to bring their cases before King David for adjudication. Absalom would listen to these people and without examination would tell them, “You know, your case is just, but the problem is this father of mine. He is uncaring, and he has no representative to listen to your just case. If only I were the king of Israel!”

Absalom knew this behavior would ingratiate himself with the people of Israel, and it did. Not only that, whenever anyone would bow before him, Absalom would grasp the person’s hands, lift him up and hug and kiss him. Such actions further endeared him to his father’s subjects.

This selfishly ambitious Absalom had no regard for truth. He was always using trickery and deceit to push himself forward. He was so ruthless that he would even destroy his own father and mother—yea, his whole family—for the sake of realizing his own political ambitions.

So, Absalom spoke evil of his father David to all who came to Jerusalem for justice. He used every trick in the book—innuendo, insinuation, ingratiating, kissing, handshaking, backslapping, flattery, and commiseration—to promote himself and to put his father, King David, down.

Why do you think Absalom did all these things? Because Absalom wanted to be king. There was only one problem: it was *not* God’s will for Absalom to be king. A selfishly ambitious person wants very much to achieve that which God denies.

MOTIVE must be discerned to know the difference.

The Bible tells us that at the end of four years all of Israel had turned against David. Absalom stole the hearts of the men of Israel from their legitimate king, David, who was the true man after God’s own heart and the one whom God had chosen to lead his people. Even Ahithophel, David’s trusted counselor, defected. So, in 2 Samuel 15 we read how Absalom went to Hebron and made himself king. He knew God did not want him to become king, but he ignored God. “I won! See, I have become king!” Absalom declared. And as he did this, his father David fled, barefoot and weeping, from Jerusalem.

An important question we must ask ourselves: Does ATTAINMENT (success) always equal the favor and the blessings of God—is this the proof of God's will?

And of course, we cannot leave out Uzziah:

2 Chronicles 26:16 tells us, *"After Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall."* God had exalted Uzziah and made him a great king—powerful, famous, rich, skillful, and a great military strategist. But Uzziah was not satisfied by his power, wealth, and fame as king of Judah. He also wanted to be the chief priest.

Uzziah was afflicted with the same disease that afflicted Saul—the desire to be like the pagan rulers and consolidate all political and religious power in himself. He wanted to get rid of all the priests and be the sole authority. He was selfishly ambitious, in other words, desiring that which God did not intend for him to have.

What did Uzziah do to achieve his goal? He entered the temple *"to burn incense on the altar of incense."* Uzziah knew this was not the job of the king of Israel, but in his desire to be high priest, he went beyond what God had called him to do. Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the Lord followed him in. They confronted him and said, *"It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the Lord. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the Lord God"* (2 Chron. 26:16-18).

Did Uzziah listen to the priests? No. He resisted them and so in God's sovereignty, judgment came upon him. While [Uzziah] was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the Lord's temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the Lord had afflicted him. And then we read a final, sad statement: King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprous and excluded from the temple of the Lord. Uzziah tasted the bitter fruit of selfish ambition.

We also must not forget Korah. The selfish ambition of Korah was dashed to pieces upon the solid rock of God's sovereignty. He was full of envy and jealousy and was constantly grumbling about God's gifts and calling for his life. Why? In his selfish ambition Korah wanted something else. What was it? Moses' job.

What do you suppose Korah was thinking? No doubt it was something like this: "Who does this Moses think he is? I'm just as good as he is. I could do the job

Moses is doing. In fact, I think I would do a better job than Moses.” And the Bible tells us that Korah stirred up many leaders in Israel and caused them to join him in his opposition to Moses.

As soon as he finished saying all this, the ground under them split apart and the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, with their households and all Korah's men and all their possessions. They went down alive into the grave, with everything they owned; the earth closed over them, and they perished and were gone from the community. Korah and his followers tasted the bitter fruit of selfish ambition.

Uninhibited, naked ambition seems ready at any moment to expose itself to our shame.

It does so in a number of ways, first; *Jealousy and competition*. If "burying the competition" (the other oneness churches in town so that we appear the host with the most—the more effluent of the pack) becomes our quest, ungodly ambition has streaked our souls. And then; *Self-promotion and divine displacement*. Ambition is out of bounds when we think we can become brighter lights than God.

Holy ambition, on the other hand, is Joshua conquering the land, Nehemiah restoring the people, Paul going on to Derbe after being stoned in Lystra. It appears as a desire to do all for the glory of God, to elevate him, to deny self and enjoy the freedom and fulfillment of doing God's will. Holy ambition is willing even to fail if it will further God's purposes.

Questions about our drive and efforts:

Motives that are not analyzed soon lead to destruction. Should our abilities be used in as large an arena as possible? Or is that just raw ambition wanting to make a bigger splash? Any decision to launch something significant in ministry carries with it questions of personal ambition. Many struggle with expectations placed on us by ourselves, our parents, our congregations. Has ministry become a frightening sprint toward acceptability through accomplishment—to prove OUR worth to others?

Good, holy ambition drives the mills of a yielded ministry, helping accomplish tasks the unambitious might deem impossible, transforms churches, and maximizes the power of the gospel.

Raw ambition, on the other hand—the desire to claw our way to the top—pours sand in the ministry gears and forces the machinery to produce an unholy product: human pride which soon grinds to a dismal end.

The following seems to powerfully express the heart of the matter:

“(Selfish) Ambition is a gilded misery, a secret poison, a hidden plague, the engineer of deceit, the mother of hypocrisy, the parent of envy, the original of vices, the moth of holiness, the blinder of hearts, turning medicines into maladies, and remedies into diseases.” —Thomas Brooks