

“Career Progression for Christians, surely an oxymoron?” Christian Ambition with Bill James

Is it possible to be both a Christian and ambitious? In what ways should Christians be ambitious? How does Christian ambition differ from non-Christian ambition?

When you check out the dictionary definition of ambition it says this: “a strong desire to gain a particular objective, spec. the drive to succeed or to gain fame, power, wealth, etc..” Immediately there is the picture of ambition as a rather unspiritual thing. And when you come to the NT you find a similar sort of picture. Do a word search on ambition in your English Bible and you come up with the following sorts of verses: Ga.5:20, Php.1:17,2:3, Jas.3:14,16. It is to do with greedy and aggressive characters who are out to line their own pockets and assert their own power. The rich young graduates of the city perhaps in the 80's, the yuppies, the high climbers of the rat race. All they are really interested in is themselves, and they will tread on anyone's neck to get to the top. That is what ambition is all about, isn't it?

If you went into work and someone said: “You are an ambitious person,” would you take it as a compliment, or as an insult? Worse still if someone in church accused you of being ambitious! Isn't it rather like being told that you are covetous or greedy? Well, there is another and more positive view of ambition. The NT uses ambition in a more spiritual sense Ro.15:20, 2Co.5:9, or interestingly 1Th.4:11 (actually uses a different Greek word to the passages which talk about selfish ambition). Here the sense is much more of aspiration, or desire, and clearly the goals in view are very good.

So we are driven to the conclusion that ambition is not wrong in and of itself. It is not wrong to have desires, to be passionate, to want to move forward. But the question the Bible asks us is first of all, what are you ambitious for? What do you want out of life? What are you chasing in life that you don't already have? Are they good things, or bad things? And why do you want them? What makes you so ambitious? Where do these desires come from? In a sense all of these questions are questions about the heart. It is the very root of the sort of people we are. This is the sort of question Jesus would ask: Do you love Money, or do you love God? The ambitions we cherish say a lot about the sort of people we are. They say a lot about what we really want out of life. And they say a lot about what or whom we really love.

Our Greatest Ambition

When you ask someone what is their main ambition in life, you have a pretty good indicator as to where their heart is. Some people will talk about marriage, or family, or money, or career, or a comfortable retirement. But for the Christian the fundamental ambition beyond all else is to serve God and glorify Him.

What the Bible constantly condemns is selfish ambition. In fact selfish ambition is the essence of sin. It is putting ourselves and our desires in the place of God. It is idolatry. It is a desire to put ourselves at the centre of the universe, and I want more money, more status, more recognition, more comforts, more desires to be satisfied, and that becomes the be-all and end-all of my life. But the Christian has a different attitude. Because the centre of our universe is not ourselves, but God. And our desire, our passion, our great ambition in life is not to serve ourselves, but to serve God. 2Co.5:9. That is the very purpose for which we were created. And that is the noblest and the highest and the greatest and the most joyful calling that any human being can enjoy.

Whereas some in the world may want to be as rich as Croesus, or as famous as a pop star, yet the role model for the Christian is not the yuppie, or the rich executive, or the family on the TV adverts, or the beautiful model, or the millionaire. No, our role model is the Lord Jesus Christ. Our sights are to be clearly set upon Him, and our ambitions are to be sharply focussed on His priorities. To live is Christ.

That is the first challenge to us this morning. Where are our hearts? Think of Php.3:10-11. That is to be our overarching ambition. Not money. Not status, or power. Not popularity. Not even marriage, or family. But to know Christ. And if God wants us to learn of Christ by calling us to a rather humble job and a humble salary, then we will be content with that.

And that is the framework within which we are to understand our working life. It may be helpful to suggest a Christian definition of work to explain what we mean: Work is serving God in those duties and responsibilities which He has called us to for His glory and the benefit of others.

Our Financial Ambition

This great Christian ambition means that our attitude to our career is different to that of our non-Christian colleagues. First of all our attitude to money is different. We scarcely need to search for texts to warn us against the dangers of greed and avarice and covetousness. Simply to state that the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil. And if we are working simply for money, and we desire certain sorts of jobs because they are well paid jobs, and we are looking into the future over the next few years and even decades of our career and wondering just how wealthy we will become, then we are falling into the devil's trap. Like the rich fool we will be called to account. What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world but loses his soul?

There is nothing wrong with money in and of itself. In fact, the Bible makes a very clear link between hard work and earning money. And the Bible also makes a very clear priority that we need to provide for our own families wherever we can by earning money. So if we work hard we may hope for good rewards - a labourer is worthy of his hire. And if we want to provide well for our families, then we may want to earn a good salary. And there is nothing wrong with that. In fact if anybody tells you that they are not bothered about receiving money at the end of the month, and that money is totally irrelevant to their life plans, then either they are deceiving themselves or they are more spiritual than the Bible! If someone is not concerned about providing for their family then that is not Biblical Christianity. Money has its place.

But the point is that money is not our great ambition. It is not top of the agenda, in fact it is not even high on the agenda. As Christians we may deliberately choose vocations which are not paid so well, because our first priority is not money, but the glory of God. And those areas where we might serve God best may not be paid most highly. Because it is the Lord who is our goal, and not financial gain.

Even if we do get a substantial pay cheque, we will want to use it in a different way to many of our non-Christian colleagues. Because our agenda is to use our money to the glory of God and in the service of Christ. So the stubs of our cheque book are going to look different to someone who is not a Christian. We are going to use our God-given resources in a way which will help others Eph.4:28.

So, that is the purpose of earning lots of money. And that means making lifestyle choices. Talking just last week to someone in my church who runs his own business.

He realised that he had a choice in which car to lease, and the difference in price was £200 a month. What could that do for a Zambian church when the pastor earns £50 a month? But sadly we often make lifestyle choices on the basis of what we can afford without thinking of how our money could be better used. If we have the money we spend it on ourselves. Like the adverts for L'Oreal hair products "Because I'm worth it." But if we buy that then we are just buying in to the materialistic outlook of the world.

The Christian attitude to money is stewardship. And the more money we have, the more responsibility we carry to use it well. We have to spend on housing, and clothing, and all manner of things to be acceptable citizens and employees. But our ambition is to use our money for the glory of God.

Our Ambition for Advancement

And the other area where a Christian's attitude is different is the whole issue of status. There is in all of us a desire to be recognised and to be appreciated. Wouldn't it be nice to be the big shot in the sharp suit, driving the fast car? Wouldn't it be great to have the jet set life style, to be the top executive making the crucial decisions? To have everyone hanging on our words and waiting for our wisdom?

Of course there is a proper place for hard work being rewarded with recognition and a certain status. It is right and proper that our gifts and abilities and hard work be acknowledged, and that we get the promotion and honour that we deserve. We want the good pay rise at the end of the year because it is the boss' recognition that we are indispensable. We want the promotion, and to be afforded more responsibility. There is nothing wrong with that. There is a natural disappointment when we are slighted. It can happen in church life, when we work behind the scenes and are rarely noticed or appreciated. It can happen in the family when a mother with 3 pre-school children has just prepared dinner for her husband and he comes in from work and asks what she's been doing all day. At work, the sign that we are noticed is a pay rise or promotion. We want that sense of recognition, and appreciation. To be honoured - getting that promotion, that move, that pay rise that we have wanted for so long.

But the attitude of the Christian is somewhat different to the attitude of others in this matter of status. Because when we turn to the Scriptures we are reminded that the Lord gives honour and status not according to the job we do or the position we hold or the amount of money that we earn. No, the Lord honours us according to our character and our faithfulness and our integrity. Think again of our role model the Lord Jesus Christ - we find someone who was despised and rejected of men. And yet He was the beloved Son in whom the Father was well pleased. Or think of another great NT character the apostle Paul. He was a man of greater gifts and abilities and energies than any of us, yet what reputation did he gain in the society of his day? He spent much of his time in prison, not in the limelight.

David Wells, in his fine book "No Place for Truth" points out that modern obituaries are often a list of the great achievements, fame and significance of an individual. But in an earlier age the obituary would want to reflect much more of a person's character. It is character which is much more important to the Lord. The Lord values first of all not what we have done, but what sort of people we are. You can see that in his obituaries of the Kings of Israel - e.g. Omri who accomplished much politically but is dismissed briefly in the Bible account as a king who did evil in the eyes of the Lord.

The Lord affords honour or status not according to position but according to character. And sometimes the Bible turns our expectations upside down. Doesn't

Jesus say that those who are first will be last? Those who are honoured most in this life - it may be said - have already received their reward in full. They have already been in the spotlight and received the adulation and the praise and the financial rewards.

But it is the quiet and humble believer who faithfully and diligently works away, sometimes not recognised as we ought to be who on that last great day will be welcomed with the words "Well done, my good and faithful servant." It is that divine approbation which is more important to us than any human recognition. And the Christian has less need for human recognition, because our self-worth is determined by the love of God.

God's programme of career development often looks very different to a modern company's plans for personal advancement. Think of Moses who was trained at the best university and management school in the world, but then spent 40 years as a shepherd in the backside of the desert. Think of Paul the great theologian, missionary church planter who spent so much time in prison. Now that is not perhaps our idea of advancement. And there may be situations in our lives where we are boiling over with frustration because we are not getting where we want to be fast enough, and there is injustice because we have been overlooked for promotion. But actually this is God's academy of spiritual training. And He is much more interested in changing our hearts than swelling our bank balances or fulfilling our idle dreams. If we are Christians, after all, we should not be surprised that we are called to follow in the footsteps of the Lord Jesus Christ who walked a very humble path in this life on His way to glory. And the path to the mountain tops of glory was precisely through the valley of humiliation (Php.2).

Our Daily Ambition

But is there then any place for Christian ambition? We have seen that our ambitions are to be different to those of the world. But does that mean that ambition in daily life is to be totally absent from the Christian life?

Think again of one of the giants of the NT - the apostle Paul. Surely we would regard him as a man full of drive and zeal and commitment, and yes, ambition. Ro.15:20. We are commanded to be full of zeal. Now you may try to escape from that, and say that we can be ambitious and zealous for God, but only in church or when we are doing specifically Christian work. No, if we are zealous for God, serving the Lord, then that should pervade every area of our lives. After all, the creation mandate to subdue the earth is a divine command! Think of Cl.3:23.

The parable of the talents teaches us that the Lord has given us certain resources and a specific calling, and we are to make the best possible use of that. We want to use our gifts and our resources and our time and our energies to do the best we can with the opportunities that God has given us. That is where "drive" comes from: it is the sense that we want to take on more responsibility, we want to stretch ourselves and use our gifts more fully and be involved in a wider sphere of activity. Those with great gifts have a responsibility to use them to the glory of God. A Christian can certainly identify with that sort of ambition.

It would be a sad testimony indeed, if Christians were people who went into work as lethargic and half-hearted, not bothered about the job, or doing well. (Imagine a work colleague saying "You don't have any ambition at all!") Christians are not devoid of ambition. But we have a different ambition, a better ambition. Whereas there might be others who are simply using the job as a means to their own ends of personal advancement, yet we are concerned to work hard and well even if we are not recognised as well as we should be. Our main focus is not on ambitions of greater

salary and position and promotion. But our main focus is doing the job well for the glory of God, and pleasing Him in what we do and the way in which we do it. We are seeking to serve the Lord and to do the job well and take a pride in our work. That may lead on to great advancement and career success, but that is not our main concern.

And our ambition is a better ambition too, because it is a more balanced ambition than that of this world. One of the problems with ambition is that we only apply it to our job, our career, our working life. And we put our heads down and push, and want to do a really good job and achieve much. But then we try to fit every other aspect of life around our career.

But according to the Bible, God has actually given us several callings. Worker, husband or wife, parent, family member, church member. And we are responsible to serve God for His glory in every area of our lives. I think that women are often better able to cope with this sort of multi-tasking in life than men. But men very often see life as a series of projects. Project one: get job. Project 2: get wife. Project 3: get promotion. And our ambitions at work can overshadow, or even exclude our responsibilities in other areas of life. But remember that the Lord values character more than mere achievements. And the Lord wants us to account for all of our responsibilities, not just some of them. Impressed by a seminary professor who told his students: don't work so hard that you get an A grade in all your papers, but a D grade in your marriage and family life. I would much rather you got an A grade in your marriage, and a D grade in your papers. I think that reflects divine priorities too.

EPILOGUE: A case study in Ambition

The book of Ruth is about the ambition of Naomi to find a husband for her widowed daughter-in-law. But the principles of ambition can be applied to any area of life.

Prayer

Naomi has no doubt about what would be best for her daughters in law, and so she asks the Lord. Perhaps we have a sense about a future career path, or marriage or family life. The first step is to pray.

Providence

Ruth goes gleaning in the fields, and just by chance she ends up in the field of a man called Boaz. Just by chance he is an eligible bachelor. Just by chance he is a godly man, and just by chance he is actually a close relative who has responsibility for the family. The Lord does lead us by providence. There are career options we may want to pursue, but the Lord closes the door. And He may open the door to other opportunities. We need to be alert to His leading.

Prompting

This is the really interesting bit. Naomi persuades Ruth to get dressed so that she is really attractive, put on her make up, and go and lie down next to Boaz at night on the threshing floor in the middle of the harvest field.

It would be wrong to interpret this as seduction (still less to take that as an example!) But it does give us a good example of someone taking the initiative. Christians should not be fatalists. "I'll just pray and wait for God's providence." No, if we see the

opportunity to move forward it is right and proper for us to do something about it. That is not unspiritual. If Ruth had remained at home and only prayed she might have been single to her dying day. She positively made an effort to look attractive; and we can take practical steps to move forward - to push the door.

Patience

What does Boaz do then? Well, Boaz by this time is sold on the idea of marrying Ruth. But as he proceeds with his ambition, he recognises that there is someone else who must be consulted before he can marry Ruth. There is a closer relative who has prior claim.

What does he do about that? Ignore it and marry her anyway? No, he faces up to it and he addresses the problem. He shows patience in God's way. He faces up to the fact that his ambitions may not be God's ambitions for him. He is determined to do what is ethical, and act with integrity. If it is God's will, it will be done in God's way.

Priorities

Just close by asking: what are your ambitions?

Whatever you do, our overriding ambition is to serve the Lord. We have to be patient when He calls us to serve Him in rather humble or low-paid jobs. We have to be willing to follow a career path that perhaps we would not have immediately chosen for ourselves. We have to recognise that He is more concerned about developing our character than our career path.

When we get to the end of our lives, we may look back and see that some of our early ambitions are still unfulfilled. But the things of this world never truly satisfy. The only thing that really satisfies is a person - the Lord Jesus Christ. And our greatest ambition should be to know Him better, and love Him more, and serve Him more wholeheartedly. It is good to listen to evangelistic sermons: money does not satisfy; career does not satisfy; family does not satisfy; in all of us there is a God-shaped hole. Only Christ satisfies. But do we believe it?

If we get that right, then we will receive from the Lord a contentment in the situation to which He has called us. Remember the testimony of the apostle Paul Php.4:12-13. We are to be content wherever He would place us