

HOLY AMBITIONS

"We make it our ambition to please Him." II Cor. 5:9.

"Make a quiet life your ambition." I Thess. 4:11.

"I made it my ambition not to preach the gospel where Christ's name was already known. Romans 15:20 (Weymouth).

There is a well-known saying that if you give a dog a bad name it sticks to it. There are individuals who unfortunately get a bad name, and it is very difficult for them to throw it off. It is just the same with words. Some words get an unfortunate definition, and it is not easy to cast off their sinister association. "Ambition" is a word of this sort. It is often set forth in literature in a bad sense.

It is, of course, an unhappy fact that ambition has often wrecked men and threatened to wreck the world. When it takes the tigerish form of a lust for power, or the hyena-like shape of a craving for wealth, or the snakelike movements of a passion for revenge, there is no telling what dark and dire consequences will follow.

It is ambition viewed in this ugly way that has led to so many fierce denunciations of it. Walter Savage Landor said that "Ambition is but avarice on stilts and masked." Sir William D'avenant calls it "the mind's immodesty." Robert Burton cried indignantly, "Ambition, a proud covetousness, or a dry thirst of honor, a great torture of the mind, composed of envy and covetousness, a gallant madness, one defines it a pleasant poison."

Yet in all fairness one has to say that there is another side of the matter. What is ambition but desire mingled with resolution? If the desire can be directed toward evil ends, it can be directed also toward good ends. If there can be depraved ambition, there can be holy ambition also. And this, obviously, is Paul's contention. According to the gospel which Paul preached, God does not save men by destroying them--that would not be salvation at all -- but He saves them by redeeming them. He takes their desires, their volitions, their hopes, their fears, and cleanses them, reshapes and redirects them, sanctifies them. He does that very thing with a man's ambitions. And when He does, behold the happy result!

Let us see what it is, as exemplified by the Apostle Paul, for he certainly had holy ambitions.

I. A Holy Ambition Has An Upward Look Which Concerns Itself With The Motive Of Life.

"We make it our ambition, whether being at home or being from home, to please Him." II Cor. 5:9. By "home" Paul means one's life in this present mortal body. The Christian, says Paul, sometimes feels a kind of dilemma: is it better for him to be a Christian on earth where his testimony is needed, or a Christian in heaven where his vision of the risen form of Christ will be perfected? Paul's conclusion is that, while each possibility has its advantage over the other, there is one thing that is of supreme importance, and that is to have and to hold the approval of Jesus Christ.

Thomas Yates said, "When a man lets you into the secret of his ambitions he is giving you the master-key to his mind." Well, the master-key to Paul's mind, during all those years that he was burning like a torch for the Christian cause, was just the one simple, splendid, consuming ambition to please Christ Jesus the Lord.

Once he had tried to please the Pharisees. Once he had sought to please himself. Once he had endeavored to please his teachers. That day was gone -- and gone forever. A new set of gears had been put into the machinery of his soul, and a new governor attached. Just one thing mattered now: was he pleasing the Redeemer who had died for Him? That was the master-motive of Paul's life. His chief desire was to please Christ. Whether here in the body or at home yonder in the Father's house, he could conceive of no motive so lofty. He was ambitious to please Christ perfectly. Why was Paul so ambitious to please Christ?

1. Because he had come to know Christ as his Saviour.
He was willing to do whatever Christ wanted him to , and to believe what He wanted him to believe, because his Lord had taken away his blindness and had enabled him to behold greater glories than he had ever beheld.
2. Because he was assured of victory over death.
What a glorious thing it is to be assured of victory over death through Jesus Christ! The more assured of triumph over death a believer becomes, the more the desire to please Christ wells up within him.
3. Because he knew that he had to appear before the judgment seat of Christ.
He says, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that everyone may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done whether it be good or bad." In that day all our motives will be made known, all our faithful service in the name of Christ be rewarded, all our sacrifice repaid, all of our honors determined.
4. Because the love of Christ constrained him.
Christ's love for Paul impelled or urged him on. Christ's love for us, which He demonstrated on the cross, urges all true believers to endeavor to please Him in all things.

A critical present-day need is to rescue religion from the cold hands of duty and ritual and organization, and lay it in the warm arms of a personal experience of Jesus Christ and His compelling love. Most men do not need just to be taught better morals, but they need to be shaken and shaped by better motives. As a rule they do not curse the good; they simply by-pass it. They do not shout a defense of wrong; they merely shuffle into it. Robert Browning put it this way:

"The real God function
Is to furnish a motive and injunction
For practising what we know already."

That "real God function" is what we see in Christ. In Him we find more than life's design; we find life's dynamic. When we surrender to Him, and allow the flame of His love to purify our motives and aims to the point where our superlative joy in life is to have His pleasure and approval, then we find that these principles and precepts take care of themselves.

Over a century ago David Livingstone was out there in darkest Africa, an explorer and missionary whose gallant career has thrilled the world for these many years. What sent him there, leaving family and friends so far behind in his beloved Britain? What kept him there amid hungers, thirsts, fevers, hostile savages and stalking beasts? Say what you will, it was ambition. No Hannibal or Napoleon was ever more certainly driven by ambition than was David Livingstone. But what an ambition! It was the sort of ambition that would have sent up a shout of praise from Paul. Yet get a fine glimpse of it in a letter which Livingstone wrote from a lonely spot in Africa in September of

1843: "That hymn of St. Bernard's on the Name of Christ rings in my ears as I wander over the wide, wide wilderness. Jesu dulcis memoria.

"Jesus, the very thought of Thee
With sweetness fills the breast,
But sweeter far Thy face to see,
And in Thy presence rest."

There you have it! Ambition, cleansed and hallowed, giving to life its one utterly worthy motive -- the deathless desire for the approval of Christ Jesus!

II. A Holy Ambition Has An Inward Look Which Concerns Itself With The Manner Of Life.

In writing to the Thessalonians Paul said, "We exhort you, brethren to make a quiet life your ambition, and to mind your own business, and work with your hands."

The abnormal excitement and impractical dreaminess, against which Paul found it necessary more than once to warn these early Christians, grew out of a false view of the second coming of Christ. Christ's return from heaven in "power and great glory" is at hand, they said. So why carry on the ordinary hum-drum activities of life? They began, instead, to plume themselves for their flight through the blue. That is wrong, wrote the Apostle. You are ever to be ready for the Lord's return, but meanwhile you are to conduct yourselves as those who do not know -- and cannot know-- when He will return. Hold this hope steadily before you, exhorts the great teacher, and while you are doing so, indeed under the hallowed inspiration of doing so, mind your duties, even the smallest of them, and maintain a calm, unwavering trust in God.

"Make a quiet life your ambition." Whoever heard of ambition that was associated with quietness and serenity of spirit? Ambition as the world knows it is a thing of flame and furor. It marches with bannered battalions across the fields of battle and blood. It shouts its oratory where senators are seated in pompous array or crowds are assembled in cheering gaiety. That brand of desire and striving the world knows full well.

But this other kind, this taking of ambition and purging it of its selfish heat so that it seeks the secret of inner peace, is far too little known among the sons and daughters of men. We are a noisy crew. We have pitifully little peace within our hearts because we set so little store by it.

Now Christ's way of peace is simple but expensive. It costs us nothing, yet it costs us everything. It is the way of surrender and receptivity. Its first stage is peace with God through the forgiveness of sins. And that comes, always, as a gift. You don't tear your hair to get it. This pardon, with its attendant peace, Christ has provided for you through His atoning love and death for you.

But our ambition for quietness and tranquillity must go beyond the peace of sins forgiven. It must include the peace of a purified and unified personality. A holy ambition includes the crucifixion of the self-mind and the full enthronement of the Christ-mind. Therein lies the deeper peace. It is the quietness of the Master that we are to claim and to cultivate.

III. A Holy Ambition Has An Outward Look Which Concerns Itself With The Ministry Of Life.

In Romans 15:20 Paul says, "I made it my ambition not to preach the gospel where Christ's name was already known." Since that sounds rather negative, let me give you the containing passage in the King James Version: "From Jerusalem and round about unto Illyricum I have fully preached the gospel of Christ. Yea, so have I

strived to preach the gospel, not where Christ was named, lest I should build upon another man's foundation; but as it is written, To whom he was not spoken of, they shall see; and they that have not heard shall understand."

Here, you see, if Paul's ambition to make of his whole life a ministry laid down upon the altar of Jesus Christ for the sake of the world that so terribly needs a Saviour. It is his passion to share and to serve.

This again, I beg you to note, is the reversal of the world's notion of ambition. The glory of Christless minds is the cheap glory of lording it over others; the splendor of Christly souls is the celestial splendor of lowly service in behalf of others.

Today we need far more people with an ambition to lay down their lives in redemptive ministry for the neighborhood, the community, the state, the nation, and the world. We talk about difficulties in service as though they were frustrations; Paul talked about them as though they were challenges. We talk about our little deeds of mercy as services that are unnoticed and unappreciated; Paul talked about his heroic deeds as deserving no higher reward than the smile of the crucified Saviour.

Paul had a triple ambition. It was as if he had said, "I was ambitious to make the motive of my life what it ought to be: to please Christ; and to make the manner of my life what it ought to be: to live with inner calm and steadfastness amid all of the world's confusions; and to make the ministry of my life what it ought to be: to share the love and joy of God with others who have never known them." Won't you make that triple ambition yours now? God grant that you shall.