

LIFE'S SUPREME AMBITION

"Wherefore we labour, that, whether present or absent, we may be accepted of him."
II Corinthians 5:9.

"Wherefore also we are ambitious, that whether being at home or being from home, to be well-pleasing to him."

"So whether we are at home or away, we make it our aim to please him." (Revised Standard Version).

"Therefore, whether we are at home (on earth away from him), or away from home (and with him), we are constantly ambitious and strive earnestly to be well-pleasing to him." (Amplified Bible).

"We make it our ambition, whether at home or in exile, to please him perfectly."
(Weymouth).

There is a well-known saying that, if you give a dog a bad name, it sticks to it. There are individuals who get a bad name also, and they find it very difficult to throw it off. It is the same with words. Some words get an unfortunate connotation, and it is not easy to cast off their sinister association. "Ambition" is a word of this sort. Many times it is used 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 ambition takes the tigerish form of a lust for power, or the hyene-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 had led to so many fierce denunciations of it. Walter Savage Landor said: "Ambition is but avarice on stilts and masked." Sir William D'zvenant calls it "the mind's immodesty."

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 message which he preached, God does not save men by destroying them, but He saves them by redeeming them. He takes their desires, volitions, hopes and fears and cleanses, reshapes, redirects and sanctifies them. He does that very thing with a man's ambitions. And when He does, behold the happy result!

Paul frequently laid hold of that which was questionable, baptized it with a new spirit, gave it a new meaning, and charged it with a new idea. When General Booth of the Salvation Army heard a rollicking tune which was wedded to questionable words, he would say, "Let us take that tune from the devil's service and use it in the Lord's service." Then he would have new words written to which the tune could be sung. What had been tap-room song would become a revival song. In the same way Paul took hold of this word, and he said: "Let us be ambitious for the right thing."

It is a good thing to have a wholesome and worthy ambition, a dominating desire to reach the place in which we can expend our energies to the fullest advantage possible. In athletics, art, business and scientific investigation, it is the enthusiast who surpasses others. The vast multitudes are ambitious about earthly things primarily, and have little appreciation for Paul who said: "We make it our aim to be well-pleasing to him." This ambition will certainly make for the highest possible type of character and conduct, and will bring wonderful spiritual success in its train.

One can have a commendable and worthy ambition even though he may not attain it. David had a worthy ambition when he wanted to build a temple in which men could worship God.

Although he was not permitted to erect the temple, he was commended for having the desire in his soul and for making preparation for its construction. John Milton had a worthy ambition when he said that it was his desire "to write something which after-times would not willingly let die." He had an ambition to put on record great ideas which the world would cherish, and which would immortalize his name. David Livingstone had a worthy ambition when, after he had traversed Central Africa, he said, "I am determined to go and to do all I can for the poor degraded people of the North."

Ambition is an eager desire or steadfast purpose to achieve something, and has primary reference to the approval of others. It is described as "the eager desire for power, fame, or something deemed great or eminent, and viewed as a worthy prize." It is clear that, if one's ambition is to be realized, other things must give way or be brushed aside. For example, if one's goal is the obtaining of an education, many things must be sacrificed. The same thing is true in the spiritual realm. Whatever stood in the way of attaining his spiritual ambition, Paul counted as refuse.

In the text Paul expressed an ambition that is highly praiseworthy, namely, to be well-pleasing to God. It was as much better to be ambitious to please and glorify God rather than to be ambitious for himself and his own glory.

Paul was a man with a transforming religious experience; and experience which completely shattered all his original plans, and turned his manifold and masterly activities into newer and nobler channels. One midday, you recall, while he was journeying, suddenly a great light from heaven, above the brightness of the sun, wrapped him in sheets of blinding splendor. Amid that outstreaming glory he saw the Lord, and every other ambition of his life went down before that vision. He was no longer Saul the Pharisee, whose punctilious aim was to obey the law, but Paul the Christian, whose chief desire was to please Christ. His discriminating faculty was so illuminated and sensitized that he could recognize the true, the beautiful and the good. Through the eyes of such clarified intelligence he saw that for the priceless privilege of knowing and pleasing Christ he could afford to suffer the loss of everything, and to reckon it all as mere refuse. Paul was anxious to please Christ perfectly, whether he remained on earth in the body or was at home in the Father's house.

The Christian sometimes considers himself as being in a dilemma. He wonders, 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 retain the approval of 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 and consuming ambition to please Jesus Christ the Lord. Formerly, 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 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?

Pleasing Christ is the supreme ambition. It towers above all other ambitions — social position, literary fame, political preferment, amassed fortune — as Jesus Christ rises immeasurably above all the brightest and best of the sons of the morning. It is the ambition which in its spirit, aim, and duration, is the same as that which Christ cherished. He is the perfect pattern. If we can learn what His ambition was, we shall know what ours ought to be. And we can learn, for we have His own words: "I do always those things that please the Father." As Christ went about doing good, He was the beloved Son in Whome the Father was well pleased.

Christians must have right aims in life and must keep them right. As the needle of the compass must be right, so must the ambitions of the Christian be right.

1. Right toward ourselves.

With reference to our practising as Christians Paul said: "That ye should study to be quiet, and to do your own business, and to work with your own hands." To Paul the greatest truths had a bearing on the smallest duties, and the vision of future glory was meant to shape the homely details of present work.

2. Right toward others.

Pioneering for Christ should be our aim toward others. Paul preached to those who had never heard the gospel of Christ. Pioneering for Christ meant striving, laboring and studying. This called for effort, sacrifice and zeal. It was Paul's desire to tell the Good News to those who had not heard it. His aim was to make Christ known at heavy cost and in hard places.

3. Right toward Christ.

Paul had an ambition to please Christ. The praise of the commanding officer is the reward to the soldier, the smile of the master is the reward of the servant, and the approval of Christ is the reward of the Christian. Our loved ones get joy when we do well. Our Lord gets more joy when we do well --- the well of His will.

One night the gateman at a railroad station was demanding that the passengers show their tickets before boarding the train. Because the night was bitterly cold, this regulation occasioned much grumbling and faultfinding on the part of some of the passengers. In the group was a Christian who, having noticed the attitude of the others, said to the gateman, "You don't seem to be very popular around here tonight! The gateman replied, "Well, if I can be popular with the man who put me here, that's all I want."

How greatly that aim and ambition simplified the man's life and work. He was trying to please one man. Whether or not others were pleased was a secondary matter. So it should be with us in our relationship to Christ. To be ambitious to please Him will greatly simplify our life and service. Our chief aim should be to please Him. To please people is a difficult thing. To please most people is an utter impossibility. Human nature is so changeable that what pleases a person at one time will not please at another. But that is not the case with our blessed Lord, for He is "the same yesterday, and today, and for ever."

More than a century ago David Livingstone was out there in darkest Africa, an explorer and missionary whose gallant career has thrilled the world through the intervening years. What sent him there, leaving his family and friends so far behind in his beloved Britain? What kept him there, amid hungers, thirsts, fevers, hostile savages and stalking beats? Say what you will, it was ambition. No Hannibal or Napoleon was ever more certainly driven by ambition than was David Livingstone. But it was the sort of ambition that would have sent up a shout of praise from the heart of Paul. You 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 Jesus Christ!

I. Why Should We Be Ambitious To Please The Lord?

1. We are saved.

There are those who try to please the Lord by observing the church ordinances and by giving their time, talent or treasure to works of charity and philanthropy. These things are splendid if they are done by those who are saved by grace through faith, but they are positively injurious if they are done to try to appease God and His righteous claims against a broken Law. We cannot do any acceptable work for the Lord until we have been saved and are at peace with Him. Those of us who are saved should be willing and anxious to believe what the Lord wants us to believe and to do what He wants us to do.

2. We are assured of victory over death.

Paul said: "Knowing that he which raised up the Lord Jesus shall raise up us also by Jesus, and shall present us with you" (II Corinthians 4:14). What a glorious thing it is to be assured of victory over death through Christ! This very assurance should cause us to be extremely ambitious to please the Lord.

3. We shall appear before the judgment seat of Christ.

Paul said: "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ; that every one may receive the things done in his body, according to that he hath done, whether it be good or bad" (II Corinthians 5:10).

The believer in Christ will never come into any kind of a penal judgment that will endanger his salvation, for the Bible says emphatically: "There is therefore now no condemnation to them which are in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:1). But the believer in Christ will have to stand before the judgment seat of Christ to have his works judged with a view to rewards.

4. We are constrained to do so by the love of Christ.

Christ's love for us, which He demonstrated on the cross, urges all true believers to strive to please Christ in all things.

I. What Are The Results Of Our Pleasing The Lord?

1. We shall be protected from our enemies.

God compels our enemies to be at peace with us, for He says: "When a man's ways please the Lord he maketh even his enemies to be at peace with him" (Proverbs 16:7). No matter how much our enemies may hate us they can do us no injury so long as we are doing what is well pleasing to God.

2. We shall have our prayers answered.

John said: "And whatsoever we ask, we receive of him, because we keep his commandments, and do those things that are pleasing in his sight" (I John 3:22). If we do what pleases Him, the Lord will be glad to give us what we ask of Him. That is the way it works with earthly parents. A child who seeks to please you gets from you pretty much what he desires, so long as those are not

calculated to be injurious to him. The Psalmist said: "If I regard iniquity in my heart, the Lord will not hear me" (Psalm 66:18).

3. We shall receive glorious rewards.

It is encouraging to read in Hebrews 6:10 that "For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister." It certainly pays to please the Lord. That we can do by believing Him, being devoted to Him and His Word, doing what He commands us, praising Him and giving ourselves and our substance to His work.

Let us be ambitious to make the motive of life what it ought to be: to please Christ; and to make the manner of 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 life what it ought to be: to share the love and joy of the Lord with others who have not known them.

Dr. Theodore L. Cuyler's young son George, who was a good Christian, was nearing the end of his short pilgrimage, and Mrs. Cuyler, the devoted mother of the boy, was seated by the bedside with tear-bedewed cheeks wondering why the Lord was taking the treasure from her keeping. George had been seeking to comfort his mother when, tired by his efforts, he closed his eyes and dozed for a while, the mother watching for any change which might come over the features of her darling boy. Suddenly his face was aglow with a radiant smile and, opening his eyes as he turned toward his beloved mother, he said, "Mother, I have had a peep through the gate and it was very beautiful -- it was ever so lovely, but Mother, what do you think Jesus will say when He sees me?"

Again and again that question comes back -- "What will Jesus say when He sees me?" What will Jesus say when He sees you? So live and serve as a Christian that when He sees you He will be able to say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant: thou hast been faithful over a few things, I will make thee ruler over many things; enter thou into the joy of thy Lord" (Matthew 25:21).