

Clarify Your Ambition

“He’s very ambitious.”

Is that a compliment or a criticism?

Do you want to be known as ambitious?

Would you prefer to be known as someone who has no ambition?

We know that it’s not like Christ to climb over people, to politick for influence, or be driven blindly for wealth, position, or fame. But it’s also unChristian to be slothful, dispassionate about the quality of your work, or without motivation.

Hmmm. Ambitious: to be or not to be?

Your answer to this question will influence the contours of your spirituality. So one way to simplify your spirituality is to clarify your ambition. A biblical starting place is to recognize that two very different kinds of ambition are described in the New Testament.

The first is often presented as “selfish ambition” or “self-seeking.” This kind of ambition strains for personal gain and at almost any cost. It’s the sort of ambition that characterizes the ungodly (Galatians 5:20) and those under the wrath of God (Romans 2:8). Self-seeking ambition has a partner: “bitter envy.” Together they often push a person to “boast and lie” (James 3:14) in order to get ahead or to hold others back. And in any heart, home, or workplace “where envy and self-seeking exist, confusion and every evil thing will be there” (James 3:16). Is there a more succinct description of a complicated life than one where “confusion and every evil thing” abound?

But there’s another kind of ambition described in the New Testament. We’re ambitious in a holy sense when we eagerly aspire for something that is right and good in God’s sight. Such ambition may be for things great or small, as long as the goal, method, and motivation are God-centered.

The apostle Paul exuded this good ambition when he determined to preach where no one had heard of Jesus: “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known” (Romans 15:20, NIV). Like Paul, and in obedience to the Lord’s Great Commission (see Matthew 28:19-20), part of our own holy ambition should relate to the spread of the good news of Jesus Christ.

The Lord reveals another aspect of the right kind of ambition in the command of 1 Thessalonians 4:11—“make it your ambition to lead a quiet life” (NASB). That doesn’t mean we shouldn’t, in the famous words of pioneer missionary William Carey, “Attempt great things for God.” Instead it speaks to the object of our ambition. Ourselves or God? The unrelenting drive of selfish ambition never leads to a quiet life. Only when our ambition is to have no *selfish* ambition can we hope for a quieter life.

God may choose to give us a not-so-quiet life. But there’s a world of difference between a busy life where everything is ordered around the Lord and one filled with “confusion and every evil thing.”

Regardless of the size, scope, or pace of our pursuits, we should always “have as our ambition . . . to be pleasing to Him” (2 Corinthians 5:9). Whenever this ambition falls second to selfish ambition the spiritual life will decline. The demands of the higher affection will steal time from the spiritual disciplines. And eventually this leads to a more complicated and frustrating life.

For what—or rather for *whom*—are you living? Clarify your ambition and you’ll significantly simplify your spiritual life.

Excerpted from Donald S. Whitney, *Simplify Your Spiritual Life*
(Colorado Springs, Colo.: NavPress, 2003).

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