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Is Ambition Sinful?



IT WAS A LOADED QUESTION. I KNEW IT. THE WOMAN asking knew it. Her husband, sitting next to her knew it. In fact, I'm pretty sure, judging from the chuckles rippling through the room, that everyone knew it.

"Is ambition sinful?" she asked, pretending to smile innocently while she elbowed her husband, a hard-driving and successful business owner and an elder in a local church.

I gave her a lengthy answer with enough twists and turns to please a politician, smiled back at her and moved on.

Or so I thought. As I pointed to somebody else whose hand was raised, I heard her calling out. "Was that a yes or a no?"

Now the whole room was laughing. Even her

husband, who wasn't enjoying the question, seemed to be enjoying my discomfort.

I laughed too. "You're right. That really was a non-answer. So here's the one I should have given."

"Yes, ambition is sinful. It depends..."

I swear I saw eighty arms shoot up on the heels of that answer, even if there weren't that many people in the room. I folded up the rest of my notes and put them away. This was one rabbit trail I wasn't going to get to dodge. I saw her husband grimace and raise his hand, too. Fair is fair, I thought. I pointed to him for a follow-up. We were off and running...

Do you agree with my answer? Why or why not?

Scripture Passages

Galatians 5:20

James 3:14

Romans 15:20

I Thessalonians 4:11

Philippians 1:17

James 3:16

Philippians 2:3

Introduction

The room that night wasn't having any caveats in my answer to the question "Is ambition sinful?" They wanted a yes or a no without qualifications. Forced to come down on one

side or the other, then, it was easy to answer: Yes, ambition is sinful. But when I say that, reactions quickly settle into two camps. Those people who are not particularly ambitious, or who can't be because circumstances limit their options, are generally pleased with the answer. People who are successful, competitive or ambitious don't like it. In fact, some like it so little they tune me out.

Scripture makes use of the term "ambition" six times, and it's useful for us to look at them as we tackle this question. Write out what you think each passage has to say about ambition.

- Galatians 5:20

- Philippians 1:17

- James 3:14

- James 3:16

- Romans 15:20

- Philippians 2:3

- I Thessalonians 4:11

Purely on the basis of these passages, how would you answer the question "Is ambition sinful?"

You've seen me put the word "but" after my answer each time. What do you think I'm going to say after that word?

Christians often see salvation as a business transaction with God. They see it as a tit for tat, a quid pro quo. They accept His Son as their Savior and then He does stuff for them. It's here that ambition becomes either sinful or not.

Salvation is not really a transaction—it's a gift. Nothing we do merits salvation; and nothing we do after we receive the gift of salvation makes us more or less worthy of it. Our opportunity to be back in fellowship with God is based on the righteousness of Christ. God owes us nothing after that either, though as we've seen in our earlier studies He does offer rewards in heaven.

God owes us nothing, but the same isn't true for us. As Paul tells us in I Corinthians 6:19-20, we "are bought with a price." We owe Him everything, and it's a debt we start paying the moment we meet Christ. Consider these other passages:

- Romans 12:1-2
- Galatians 2:20
- Philippians 1:21

At the moment of salvation all we are is surrendered to the kingdom of God, and that includes our jobs, careers, wants and desires. No longer are we able to pursue selfish goals or possessions; now we must pursue what brings God glory and accomplishes His will.

Think of it as replacing one fire with another.

Now we ask ourselves these questions: How will that promotion help me serve others or glorify God? Will changing jobs make it harder or easier for me to do the things God is teaching me are necessary? The idea of being ambitious for the kingdom drives us back to God in earnest conversations about how He's gifted us and how He wants to use us.

But (there's that word again)—But God is never satisfied with lackadaisical effort. Avoiding selfish ambition doesn't mean being lazy. It doesn't mean doing things without energy. It doesn't mean not doing our best.

To the contrary, Paul stresses that whatever we're doing—on the ball field, in the board room, on the docks, wherever we're working—we're to work as if doing it for God (Colossians 3:23-24).

That is our righteous ambition. As the Shorter Catechism of the Westminster Confession of Faith teaches, "The chief end of man is to glorify God and enjoy Him forever." We glorify Him most, we enjoy Him most, or, as Eric Liddel's character in the movie *Chariots of Fire* put it, "we feel His pleasure most" when we compete with fervor and excellence. But for *His* pleasure and glory, not ours. For *His* kingdom, not our palaces. For *His* service, and the service of others, not for our accumulation.

Is ambition sinful? As this world defines it, yes. But when we apply zest to our efforts because we offer them to Him as a testimony and offering, then ambition is eminently praiseworthy.

Common Sense and Eternal Principles

- Ambition as defined by what it brings us is sinful.
- When Christ purchased our salvation, He bought us, too, and our lives this side of heaven are to be spent serving God and others.
- Our service does not make us more or less worthy of our salvation. That salvation comes as a free gift from God and is the result of Christ's righteousness being imputed to us.
- We can be ambitious to bring God glory with our work, or ambitious for His kingdom to be proclaimed, or ambitious for more souls to know His Son, or ambitious to please Him.
- God expects us to be excellent in our labors. He also expects us not to be selfish while we're being excellent.