

feeding . . . gathering . . . carrying . . . leading . (Isaiah 40:11)

April 12, 2011

Dear Family,

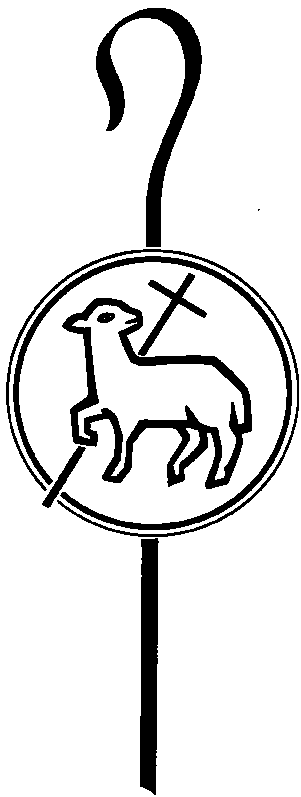
What is your instinctive response to the word “ambition”? Does it have a positive or a negative ring to you? Bo continued his *Theology of Work* series on Sunday, focusing on this issue of ambition, asserting that Christians are called to display this quality in our lives, given a little biblical redefining!

In the New Testament, we find two words relating to ambition, one with a negative sense and one with a positive sense. *Eritheia* is a desire to put oneself forward, often at the expense of or in competition with others. We see this in Philippians 1:17, where Paul describes those who “preach Christ out of selfish ambition, not sincerely...” because they consider themselves in a sort of ministry competition with Paul. In Philippians 2:3-4, Paul exhorts his readers to “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of others.” So we see that ambition, whenever it occurs in the context of comparison and competition with others, has no place in the Christian life.

But there is another word for ambition: *Philotimeoni*, literally translated, refers to being fond of honor. In Romans 15:20, Paul says, “It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known...” In his first letter to the Thessalonians, in which Paul addresses those who are “idle and disruptive”, Paul exhorts them “to make it your ambition to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you” (4:11). Finally, 2 Corinthians 5:9: “So we make it our goal...” (*can also be translated “make it our ambition”*), “...to please him, whether we are at home in the body or away from it.” This sort of ambition is motivated by a desire to see God pleased, the gospel preached, and work done well (enabling the worker to have a positive witness to the world).

As John Stott put it, “ambition concerns our goals in life and our incentives for pursuing them.” Ambition, he says, has to do with our “secret, inner motivation.” So the question should not be whether or not ambition has a place in the Christian’s life, but what the goal, or motivation of our ambition should be. There is, to be sure, a right answer: God’s glory.

But what is the source of our selfish ambition? In order to do right, it so often important to understand why we do wrong in the first place. Bo’s answer: We seek glory and honor for ourselves because our original source of glory and honor was stripped from us at the fall. When Adam and Eve discovered their nakedness, they not only found themselves to be vulnerable but found themselves unadorned as well. They no longer had the relationship with God from which they derived all of their meaning and dignity. Stripped of this, we have resorted to selfish ambition, seeking honor and dignity in our work, or to put it more specifically, in the quality of our work compared to others’. The story of Cain and Able, right after the fall, gives us a perfect picture of how selfish ambition operates. Abel brought an acceptable offering to God, while Cain’s offering was rejected. Cain killed his brother because of his competitive, selfish ambition. Do you wonder what would have happened if *both* offerings had been rejected? Would Cain have been as dejected if he hadn’t failed *in comparison* with his brother. The story is clear enough that he wouldn’t have, because Cain takes his anger out, not on God, but on his



completion, Abel. The story would have been quite different if Cain had truly desired to please God (seeking to know why his offering was rejected), rather than desiring to perform better than his brother. The solution to our selfish ambition is first and foremost a restoration of our relationship with God, which he accomplished for us in his Son, Jesus. Apart from this relationship we remain naked, but in Christ we are adorned as richly as the Prodigal son was upon his return home.

Now that we've seen that there is a place for godly ambition, this begs the question: what about godly contentment? Some have seen ambition as the enemy of contentment, and have therefore resigned themselves to "resting in the Lord." Others see this contentment as a form of laziness that keeps some from "going all out for God." How can we both "rest in the Lord" and "go all out for God"?

Paul is a good model for us of how one can know both godly contentment and holy ambition. In his letter to the Philippians he says, "I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." (4:12); but in the previous chapter he describes his holy ambition: "Forgetting what is behind and straining toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus." (3:13-14). Paul helps us to see that the ability for contentment and ambition to exist side by side dependant on what motivates each. In regards to *our needs*, we may be content, knowing that God is good and that despite our myriad circumstances, God keeps us in His care. But in regards to *God's glory*, we must never cease to be ambitious! Where we are lacking, we can be content, but where God's glory is lacking, we must never be content. Wherever we see injustice and idolatry in the world, wherever His name is not hallowed and his Kingdom rule has not taken full control, we are to strive and strain to see Him glorified, until the day when his glory covers the earth as the water covers the seas.

Even in our ambition for God's glory, however, we must trust that God is in control, and that the full extent of what we can accomplish lies within the confines of our obedience to Him. And so we rest in the Lord, knowing that the weight of the mission is on his shoulders, and we persevere in our obedience to Him.

May you be blessed this week as you seek to rest in the Lord ambitiously!
Ben

<http://www.christshepherd.org/pastlet.htm> (and follow links to download MP3 audio of sermon)