



What's Wrong (and Right) With Ambition, by John Throop, *Christianity Today*

“You certainly are ambitious!” the woman told me. Her tone of voice, facial expression, and bearing told me that it is wrong to be an ambitious Christian.

But are ambition and the urge to achieve sinful traits that the godly Christian must abandon? Many Christians, especially those in the marketplace, cannot escape this question.

There appears to be an unwritten—and untested—assumption that ambition is incompatible with Christian faith. One text that pastors and teachers use to back this position is from the Letter of James: “Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth. Such ‘wisdom’ does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice” (James 3:13-16, NIV).

But is all ambition selfish? Is all achievement carnal? If so, the faith is utterly irrelevant to the marketplace. Perhaps that is why so many Christians in business separate their work lives and their spiritual lives. The underlying attitudes and assumptions of the marketplace are alluring to those who are immersed in that system of values day in and day out. One stockbroker, a leader in his church, told me, “When I make my stock trades and deal in millions and millions, when I make money, I sometimes have to wonder, ‘Can Jesus really be Lord of the marketplace?’”

The dissonance between the drive to achieve and the free grace of Jesus Christ can become acute for the sensitive Christian around promotion time. Ted, a 33-year-old banker, was promoted to manage the loan department of a major midwestern bank. It meant a \$15,000 per year raise, a larger office, more support staff, greater responsibility, and direct decision-making authority. It was clear to Ted and his friends that he was on the fast track to the bank presidency.

But Ted felt torn. He said, “I feel guilty for working toward that position. Must it be sinful to want a higher position and work for it?”

Jesus: Lord of the Marketplace

We must test the assumption that faithfulness and ambition are contrary. If Jesus is Lord of all life, then he is Lord of the marketplace. Christian values must infuse and transform secular values such as ambition, achievement, competition, and the desire to excel.

The Christian can begin to discern the nature of unselfish ambition by becoming aware of the goals of that ambition. We may discover that ambition does not always serve to glorify egos.

According to Ted Engstrom, president of World Vision International, “It all comes down to a matter of attitude. God frowns upon the man who is lazy and slothful— he has a lot to say about that in Scripture. The opposite of being lazy and slothful is to be aggressive, ambitious, and to do everything we can to honor the Lord in our living.” As Engstrom says in *The Pursuit of Excellence*, “Striving for excellence in our work, whatever it is, is not only our Christian duty, but a basic form of Christian witness.”

Thus the right use of ambition can reveal a God who made us in his creative and dynamic image. Ambition can be a way of honoring God and celebrating his purpose for life. Inward attitude is a key to ambition that is faithful both to God’s intent for creation and to the call of the gospel.

Second, ambition can be faithful when exercised in concert with the ambition of others towards a common goal. The talents and abilities of others are brought forward along with one’s own, and all benefit from the desire to excel. Teamwork is the key concept, and service to and with others is the norm.

“Ambition is good if a person uses it for the common good of every one with whom they work,” says Frederick F. Broda, a vice-president of Swiss Bank Corporation and a leader in his church. “The way we channel ambition, which I think is a good Christian witness as well, is to foster a team spirit. Everybody gets credit if there’s success.”

In a team effort, each member realizes that his well-being and achievement is tied to that of others. Individual abilities are called out and improved only in relation to others using their gifts for a common goal. Similarly, the apostles and the disciples of the early church worked as a team to promote the gospel of Christ and to build the church in his name. They were not out for their own advancement, but for the good of one another and the kingdom.

Faithful Ambition

Faithful ambition is to be a servant: Engstrom believes that is the key to Christian witness in the marketplace.

“Even for a Christian in business, there has to be a servant heart,” he says. Yet the presence of ego needs make the blend of ambition and servanthood tenuous indeed. Executives admit it is difficult to be a leader and maintain a servant attitude.

Since leaders are often in positions where they can be served, rather than serve, there can be a spiritual conflict between the drive to achieve and the gospel call to serve. The disciples James and John wanted to ascend to positions of power and influence in the kingdom of God, where Jesus would reign. But

Jesus called all of his disciples together to tell them, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42-44, NIV).

The specter of Jesus’ certain death on the cross loomed over this passage. In order for you to understand that position of leadership you want, you must understand the cup that I must drink, said Jesus. If you want to be ambitious and excel as my follower, you must be prepared not only to serve, but also to suffer.

Ambition, if it is to be true to the gospel, must be purified in the fire of suffering. Ambition’s true purpose is not merely to achieve our own ends or to perfect our own gifts. Rather, it is to witness to the power of God to mend broken lives and rekindle the desire to live creatively and fully. Only then can one achieve and excel in a way that does not have self-exaltation as its first priority. Although one ought not seek the painful, ambition may bring suffering as well as success. Service, the principal orientation of the ambitious Christian, is surely not the easy way to climb the ladder.

The Ambitious Christian

Christian ambition seeks not only to maximize one’s God-given potential, but to call out the potential in others. The ambitious Christian realizes that positions of power and influence are not to be sought after for a glamour and glory. Rather, the ambitious Christian will find the awe of responsibility and the pain of decision-suffering that a Christian can accept, relying on the power of God.

Ambition and competition are transformed from marketplace values to supremely Christian values when they are directed to the raising up of others. In that way, the Christian gives God glory. As the apostle Paul says of Christ’s ambition, “Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness. And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross! Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father” (Philippians 2:5-11, NIV).

The ambitious Christian strives after the example of Christ, whose ambition was to serve; who, in serving, suffered; who, in suffering, was exalted. Then, and only then, can our ambition be God’s exaltation—hardly a small, selfish, human goal.

*John Throop is Associate Rector of Christ Episcopal Church, Shaker Heights, Ohio. He has written for several magazines and is the author of *Shape Up from the Inside Out* (Tyndale House, 1986).*

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