

Ambition

2 Corinthians 5:6-15

This is the first Sunday of 2020, and the first Sunday of a new decade. So I want us to talk about *Ambition* - about your dreams and goals for your life ahead, and why you have them.

Now next week, we're starting a new series on Paul's letter to the Galatians, but every month or so, we're going to be coming back to this theme of Upside Down World - and how the gospel has this power to turn the world upside down. In the book of Acts, Paul and his team arrived in Thessalonica, and as he preached about Jesus, uproar ensued, and the ring leaders of the mob said, "These men who have turned the world upside down have come here also... saying that there is another king, Jesus" (Acts 17:6-7).

Because Paul understood that when you understand, in your heart, not just in your head, but your heart, that Jesus is the authority, the power, greater than any other cultural authority that can shape you, it totally upends your life.

And that is true for Ambition, and what you want out of life, and why you want it. So to look at this I want us to look at a passage where Paul talks about his own work, and what motivates it.

2 Corinthians 5:6-15.

Look at that last verse again, because that's where we're going to spend most time: '[Christ] died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.'

And we're going to start the year as we mean to go on, so three points: Firstly, the Roots of Ambition; Secondly, the Rotten fruit of Ambition; and then thirdly, Redeeming Ambition.

The Roots of Ambition

If you had to define *Ambition*, what would you say? Probably something like, it's a desire, maybe even strong desire, to achieve something. It's a determination, a drive to succeed in some field, or obtain some end or some position that you want, or maybe even to be or become a certain kind of person. As one writer puts it, ambition is about 'more stuff, bigger goals, better results.'

But what you *want* can vary hugely can't it? It could be to reach the top and make a name, leave a mark in your field; it could be to be successful enough to retire early. Or simply to earn enough so you can enjoy doing the kind of things you really enjoy, the stuff you're really ambitious for, outside of work. It could be to find that person who will complete you, to marry and have a family. Or maybe it's to have the perfect family and see your kids succeed.

So whatever you most want from life, ambition is this desire for that end that results in life falling into place for you. It's that goal that when you have it, everything is in its right orbit around you. And you'll happily sacrifice other stuff to achieve that end, because *that's* the goal.

And you probably won't get through a single day this coming year without hearing, in one form or another, the message, 'follow your ambitions, pursue your dreams, scale that mountain. Because life is about saying, 'I've done it!'' It's what Paul describes in v15 as living 'for themselves.' For

ourselves. That the centre of your life should be you, and the drive of your life should be achieving that end you want for you.

But think for a minute what's underlying that. Think about the roots of our ambition.

In 1 John 2:15-16, John writes, 'Do not love the world or the things in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For all that is in the world - the desires of the flesh and the desires of the eyes and pride of life - is not from the Father but is from the world.' And in the Latin translation of the Bible, that phrase, *the pride of life* was translated, *secular ambition*. It's the thing that when you have it you feel good about yourself, you feel like you can hold your head up.

But look where John roots that, because it's not that you've rationally thought through what you want from life. He roots it in what you love, what you desire: *Love not the world*.

Su and I were once talking about someone who'd come to us for advice, and they were on the verge of making a decision that if they carried it through had the potential to wreck both their and others' lives. And I said to Su, 'What are they thinking' to which Su replied, 'they're not thinking, they're feeling.' And John would say, 'exactly! Our hearts are a mix of competing loves. Loves, desires, ambitions for things that we're looking to to give us what only the love of the Father can give us.'

James KA Smith, professor of philosophy at Calvin College says that what we're really aspiring for in our aspirations, what we're really dreaming of in our dreams, is 'to win and to be noticed... to win the crown [whatever that crown is] and be seen doing it.' In other words, underneath our ambitions are the desire for *the power and the glory*. That if you achieve this end, it'll save you from mediocrity, it'll save you from not mattering in life.

If you've seen it, you probably remember the film *Chariots of Fire* as the story of Eric Liddell, the runner in the 1924 Paris Olympics, who gave up the chance of winning gold because he wouldn't run on a Sunday. But it's not just about him. It's also about the sprinter, Harold Abrahams, and his drive and ambition in contrast to Liddell's. And at one point in the film Abrahams says, 'I've got ten seconds to justify my existence.' And that's what ambition and achieving your goals offers you, doesn't it - the chance to justify yourself, to show yourself and others that you matter, that you're ok, that you're good enough.

But there's another potential root for our ambitions, Ambitions that are imposed on us by others. Like our parents. And you want this thing because they want it. We want to achieve to please them, or maybe to escape them. To be like them, or not like them. Or, we can see others who have this thing and as we watch them discontent grows inside us. And we want to be admired like they're admired, we want to achieve like they've achieved, or have what they have. We want to be like them, or better, better than them.

And it's this desire to win and be seen to win that formed the basis of the second temptation Jesus faced in the wilderness. Luke tells us, 'the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory." (Luke 4:5-6) Jesus, all this power can be yours. You can win. You can be the one in control. *And* you can have the glory, you can not only be the top dog, you can be acknowledged as the top

dog. You can climb that ladder of recognition, you can be seen, you can be noticed, you can have the attention. Think of the likes you'll get, think of the photos of *you* that you'll be able to post on Instagram, think of the followers.

And Jesus replies: "It is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve." You see, Jesus understands that our ambitions are inevitably about what we worship, about what we most love, about what you feel will do it for you, and that you inevitably end up serving what you most desire. And so when Paul says in our passage that we live life for ourselves - he's describing a life where our loves, what we most want, revolve around ourselves.

And despite that fact that you're going to be encouraged to live like that every day, that kind of life comes at a cost.

The Rotten Fruit of Ambition.

In Genesis, the serpent comes to Eve in the Garden and tempts her to take the fruit of the tree of knowledge. But listen to how he frames the temptation: Genesis 3:5, 'Your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.' In other words, he tempts her with ambition: Aim higher Eve, be more than you are. And they do eat, but the result wasn't exactly what they hoped for. And they began to blame one another and God for their circumstances. And so in the place of their idyllic existence came relational breakdown.

But that's often the way with ambition, isn't it. You want to win, to achieve this goal, but when it begins to dominate your life, you find yourself becoming *more* envious of those who already have what you want, and you find yourself becoming more ungrateful, or critical, of those who aren't helping you achieve your goal the way you want them to. Or you find yourself willing to walk over others, or at least not notice them, as you pursue your dream. But hey, you and your dreams are the point of life, not others. And so far from your ambition making *you* a better *you*, ambition has this power to hollow you out. You think you'll thrive if you win, and be seen winning, but in reality it eats you up.

But if you don't achieve your goal, it also has the power to disappoint you, doesn't it. And that doesn't just leave you resentful against others, or even God, it can leave you with that crushing feeling that you're a failure. That you haven't made it.

But what if you *do* make it? What if you live for yourself, and go for that goal and you achieve your ambition, you make it to the top? Jonny Wilkinson, the England rugby player, who won the 2003 Rugby World Cup with a last minute drop goal - the kick he'd been training for all his life, described how afterwards he sank into a profound darkness - the euphoria lasted only a few hours, before he realised, I'm only as good as my last kick. So even achieving can leave you feeling let down. Because you're only as good as your last kick. You're only as good as the last paper you published, the last deal you secured, the last success your child enjoyed.

Over Christmas, my stepfather was telling me about an obituary he'd read of a climber who had died aged 56. And the obituary describes how this man had been the pin-up of the climbing world - he had, literally, climbed to the top. But it also described the day he retired. It had been his long ambition to climb this inaccessible rock face in Australia, and he did it. And he lowered himself to the ground, and never climbed again. And you might think, there's a guy who achieved his goal,

who can look back on life and say, I made it to the top and everyone saw me do it. Except, the obituary describes how he sank into alcoholism and died much earlier than he should have.

Now if you've scaled the mountain of ambition, and won, why hit the bottle? Because it's not just that you're only as good as your last climb, it's that it leaves you with the haunting question, is that it? Is this really as good as it gets? The last kick? The last climb? The last paper? And you get what you've been longing for, and for a moment you're euphoric, but then you realise - nothing's changed, I'm still me. Think of your work, your life, your goals as a means of self-fulfilment or self-realisation, and it'll crush you.

You see, having your deepest wish granted may not be a blessing, it may be a disaster. You think that having this thing will save you from mediocrity, it'll save you from not mattering in life. And if you don't get it you feel unhappy and empty. But if you do get it, it also leaves you feeling unhappy and empty, because it fails to fulfil you the way you thought it would.

Think about it: if underlying our ambition is a desire to win and to be seen to win, how many wins is enough? How many people telling you you're great or look great will do it? How many likes, how many pats on the back, how many positive reviews will make you feel secure or good enough? And how, in Harold Abrahams' words, will you justify your existence when someone younger, faster, more able, more pretty, or with a greater output comes and takes your place, and you become a has-been?

You see, underneath our ambitions, this desire to win and be noticed, is hiding a deeper desire. A desire for something that won't disappoint, a desire for someone's approval who won't dump us when someone better comes on the scene.

And that's why the answer to wrong ambition is not the absence of ambition or dying to desire. The opposite of ambition is complacency, and settling for the comfort of the status quo, it's being passive, or timid. But aiming low and hitting it has never been a Christian virtue, has it? And playing it safe in 2020 is not a Christian virtue. And to be given talents and gifts and not pursue them with excellence is not a Christian virtue.

So sure, ambition can be all about 'me' and leave you empty and unhappy, but never risking, never aspiring, never desiring, failing to use to the full the gifts and skills God has given you, is not humility, is it? And there's nothing Christ-like about pursuing comfort that never aspires beyond comfort.

And so the answer to wrong ambition in 2020 is not to quit, or withdraw from the race, or run away from your calling like a Jonah. It's not to be enveloped in a mist of passivity. Instead Paul tells us that the answer to wrong ambition is to redirect and re-order your ambition. Because when your ambition is to be noticed, or to get attention, or to dominate the field - to live for yourself - you're aiming *too* low. Your ambition is not too strong, it's too weak.

Redeeming Ambition

Now, by any estimate, Paul was hugely ambitious. When he compares himself to the other apostles he says, 'I worked harder than any of them' (1 Cor 15:10). And in his letters he describes his desire to see his ministry expand into unreached areas. So no one could accuse him of being timid or slothful, or aiming at nothing and hitting it. But this passage tells us what motivated his ambition,

what drove his desires. And it comes at a point in the letter where he is dealing with criticism he faces from people who he describes in v12 as boasting ‘about outward appearance and not about what is in the heart’; about being noticed, about being seen to win, rather than the heart motivations under that desire to win.

And in response Paul describes the two things that are like the fuel that drives the engine of his desires and aspirations. Get the fuel wrong, and the engine will fail you. Get it right and it has the power to revolutionise the way you see your life and work and ambitions.

Firstly, it’s *the fear of God*: v11: ‘Therefore, knowing the fear of the Lord, we persuade others.’ Paul, why do you spend your life preaching the gospel? Why do you want the scope of your ministry to grow? ‘Because I fear God.’ And he tells us what he means by that: v10, ‘For we must all appear before the judgement seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.’

Now, maybe you think that living with an expectation of future judgment is a terribly repressive way to live. But listen, you already live like that. You already live as though you have to give an account, as if you have to justify yourself - it’s just we live to justify ourselves to others or to ourselves. That if we achieve this goal people will look on us and say, ‘you’re ok, you pass.’

But Paul is saying, that’s too low a motive to live for, because ultimately it’s God you must give an account to. And you want your life to matter, you want to know that there’s a point to life, that your life can be weighed up at the end and be judged worth it. Well, the fear of God and giving an account for your life tells you your life does matter, that it does count, far more than you could ever imagine.

But how can you know you’ll pass that test? Well, that’s the second motivation Paul gives: *the Love of Christ*. Verse 14, ‘For the love of Christ controls us.’

You see, if behind our ambitions is this desire to be noticed and approved of, the answer is not to think that doesn’t matter, that what others think of you should mean nothing to you. It’s to understand that you were made to be approved of. You were made to be loved. You were made, not for Facebook likes or Instagram followers, that’s way too low. You were made to be noticed and seen and loved by God and to hear him say over you, ‘it’s very good.’

It’s impossible to know, but how many ambitions are there out there - maybe even some of our own - that, at root, are driven by the need to be noticed by a father, and hear him say, ‘I’m proud of you’? Because you were made to be loved, and feel loved, by your heavenly Father, and no other goals, no other aspirations will ever adequately fill that desire. And to be loved by God is to have the attention of One who will always love you and never drop you, even though they know you as you really are.

And when you know you’re loved by God like that, a love that’s not based on your performance but on his grace, then it brings peace and rest and contentment. But it’ll never make you passive or timid or slothful. In fact, it’ll do the opposite. It’ll leave you knowing, I can risk, I can step out, I can be bold, I can aspire, I can even fail, because I know my heavenly Father loves me regardless of my performance.

But how can you know that God loves you like that? How can you know you are loved in a way that frees you to succeed, or to fail, without either destroying you?

Listen to Paul again, v14-15, 'For the love of Christ controls us, because we have concluded this: that one died for all, therefore all have died, and he died for all, that those who live might no longer live for themselves but for him who for their sake died and was raised.'

You can know God loves you, and that you don't have to win for him to love you, because Christ died for you when you were anything but a winner.

Before he became a Christian, Paul was a man who coveted reputation and success. He was the standout student of his rabbinic class, the one voted most likely to achieve. But in Philippians 2, Paul describes how Jesus, 'emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant' (2:7) - except the King James Version translates that, 'he made himself of no reputation'. And that's what upended Paul's life: that Jesus, the Son of God - the One with a reputation above every reputation, gave it up, and became of no reputation, to save him, Paul, a man consumed by the desire to have a reputation.

And so, the gospel, the death and resurrection of Christ for you, the fact that your life matters, and one day you'll give an account for it, the fact that you are loved unconditionally in Christ, isn't the graveyard of ambition, it rightly orders it. It changes what you aspire for and why you aspire for it. Listen again to how Paul puts it in v15, 'live... for him who for [your] sake died and was raised.'

Because of Christ, God loves you and already accepts and approves of you. You don't need to win, or be seen, for that to be true of you. It's already true. So be ambitious to know him and love him and increasingly find your satisfaction in him. And then, make it your ambition to excel in whatever God has called you to, not for the praise of your glory, but his. Not to win the approval of God or others, but because in Christ you already have his approval. An approval that means that in 2020 you can win or lose and neither will kill you.