

Series: Embracing a Radical Faith

VBC

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Matthew 20:20-28

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“When Ambition Moves Us Off Course”

Joel Gregory was at one time a spell bounding orator

- a Southern Baptist “golden boy” who was chosen to pastor the most prestigious church-Dallas First Baptist
- but like many who are driven by ambition—his world eventually collapsed—he ended up selling funeral plots
- and eventually he wrote a book *Too Great a Temptation*, to tell about his descent
- exposing the ugly side of ambition

But is there a good side to the word?

- can ambition be something holy-even honoring to God?
- or should we always be suspicious of the word?
- Dave Harvey, who wrote the book, *Rescuing Ambition*, notes that there is a “quirky awkwardness”
- when someone is described as ambitious, we’re not sure if that is meant as a compliment or a warning

- here are some probing questions—
- are you ambitious?
- what are your ambitions?
- to write a book?
- start a new company?
- raise a champion?
- survive another day?

In Matt. 20—we come face to face with naked ambition (read Matt 20:20-21)

- the desire for recognition is a story found in lots of places in Scripture
- one thinks of Haman who desperately wanted a “seat” above all the officials (Esther 3:1)
- or the Pharisees who, Jesus noted, loved the “front seats” in the synagogue-23:6
- or the disciples who—for all of their faithfulness—struggled with similar ambitions-Matt. 18

- James and John were ambitious—but they hid them behind the skirt of their mother

- who came to Jesus with all the appearance of humility and adoration
- she thinks highly of Jesus (but then—she obviously also has a high opinion of herself and her family)
- hearing that her disciples will one day reign with Jesus--she wants certainty that her sons will have the highest posts
- the place on the left or right is traditionally for those of the highest honor
- there's a certain ugliness in the language
- for this was less a request—more of an insistence—
- “Say that my two sons may sit on your left and right”
- these are Your lead apostles who have followed You as long as anyone—they deserve significant cabinet posts—secretary of state vs. secretary of the interior
- what follows tells us at least four things about ambition-read vss. 22-28

1-AMBITION CAN BE A BLINDING FORCE

- “you don’t know” tells us they were missing something
- something was escaping their notice

A-That ambition—the pursuit to be set apart--has a COST

- if you want to have prominence—greatness—can you drink from the same cup—walk the same journey?
- pay the same price
- Jesus had just described the cost (vss. 17-19)
- *when you drink this cup you will feel the full weight of God’s wrath against sin*
- can you drink from it?
- without hesitation, without understanding, without serious reflection, without asking for any clarity—without any prayer—only hearts full of ambition
- they replied—we are willing, able!-vs. 22b
- eventually their ambition would get them killed—they would drink the same drink
- James would be the first disciple to be killed for his faith-Acts 12
- John would be exiled to Patmos for the rest of his life
- be careful with your ambitions—Jesus seems to be saying-make sure you have considered the cost

B-Ambition can also blind us as to WHO'S IN CHARGE

- driven by ambition-they assumed they called the shots
- say to my sons!

- but vs. 23 tells us that ultimately all of life's pursuits are under the Father's authority
- we may inform God of our dreams and aspirations
- but wisdom recognizes that all of our ambitions must submit to Him
- our future is His prerogative—it is God who prepares the seats—determines our roles-chooses our path--not us

2-AMBITION CAN BE A DIVISIVE FORCE

- ambitious people can be threatening
- they can splash cold water on our complacency
- upset the status quo—sometimes run over us

- the uninhibited ambition of James and John was threatening-vs. 24
- they were aroused, indignant, angry—not because these two sons and their mother were chasing after the future
- we know from other texts all of them harbored similar ambitions
- they were all at times consumed with status
- it's just that James and John got there first

3-AMBITION CAN BE A CORRUPTING FORCE

- Jesus exposed naked ambition for what it is—it curves in on itself-vs. 25
- *when ambition is corrupted by sin—it's plutonium—“positively glowing with depravity”*
- ambition turns men into empire builders, launching wars, lording it over, imposing one's authority-this is how it works here

- In all of this—Jesus is giving a warning
- if you are not careful with your ambition for distinction
- your desire to have the more significant rule
- you might end up being no better than a bunch of position grabbing pagans
- growing small by trying to become great
- *exalting yourselves and shrinking your souls*
- just like the world--but you are supposed to be different-26a

But for all the negatives—there is something very right about ambition

4-AMBITION CAN BE A NOBLE FORCE

A-what stands out here is that Jesus did not rebuke their aspiration for greatness—did not treat ambition as one of the deadly sins

- “whoever wants to be great” is an invitation to its pursuit
- after all-without ambition-nothing happens
- people become lazy
- a person without some ambition is mentally and emotionally in neutral
- Willimon asks-would Michelangelo have suffered upon his back atop the scaffolding of the Sistine Chapel if he were not an insufferable, relentlessly ambitious pain in the neck?

- would churches be planted, outrageous global dreams ever see the light of day—businesses begin, social problems be addressed—if it weren’t for some aspiration, some drive?
- would there have been a Genghis Kahn without ambition?—no
- but would there have been a Billy Graham, a Jim Elliott, a Bill Bright, a Henrietta Mears?

- as I noted in an earlier sermon-all of us should have a certain ambition—be it to be a great dad, a great spouse, one who prays great prayers
- it doesn’t impress God to settle for patchiness—live cowardly and without aim—without ambition--and chalk it up as just wanting to be humble
- to reject ambition might be choosing to live a minimal, unimpressive life

- ambition gets us dreaming about what life might look like--
- illus-Jeremy-3rd floor-a community co-op

- when we undermine ambition—
- we rob people of their desire to do something great with their lives
- we might even push people away from church

- in his book, Why Men Hate Going to Church, David Murrow notes that one of the reasons men hate going to church is the assumption church downplays ambition—opposes the idea of achieving greatness

- boys do not dream of sitting in a cubicle
- men dream of slaying dragons, catching the winning pass, being part of an achieving community

B-It’s not that Jesus condemned ambition—He redirected ambition
-redefined true ambition—noble ambition

- here are five marks:

1-noble ambition is not about being served—but serving others

- it's not about the best seat in the house
- not about positioning yourselves to be waited upon—but arranging your life goals to wait on others
- embracing the ministry of the mundane

2-noble ambition is not about living for approval but living from approval

- not about doing something great to be recognized
- but doing something great because we have been recognized, approved—the cross accomplished this

3-noble ambition is not about what I accomplish—but what God accomplishes through me

- the apostle Paul was incredibly ambitious before he became a Christian-see Phil 3
- and he was also ambitious after his conversion-Phil 3:12
- he had to be--to accomplish what he did

4-noble ambition is not about gaining power—it's about releasing it

5-noble ambition is not about becoming more and more you—but becoming more and more like Jesus

- whose life was not about grandiosity
- His life was a waiting on others—He washed the disciples' feet
- becoming a ransom—giving one's full self for another

CONCLUSION

So what are your ambitions?

- are they lofty? Imaginative? Audacious?
- they should be—must be
- we must be an ambitious church

- but are they noble?