

INTRODUCTION

In the last message we examined the powerful admonition to maintain sexual purity even though we live in an X-rated culture. The next message from 1 Thessalonians will be from the familiar section predicting the second coming of Christ. But nestled between those two tall mountains of truth is a pleasant valley passage. Sometimes when we're reading the Bible, we jump from peak to peak and skip over these scriptural valleys. But since I'm committed to teaching God's Word verse by verse, we can't ignore this important passage that speaks about having the right kind of ambition.

When we were kids we were asked, "What do you want to be when you grow up?" My generation often answered, "A cowboy, a policeman, or a fireman." I think the first answer I gave to that question was that I wanted to be a football player.

Kids today still have ambitions. A second-grade class was given an assignment of drawing a picture of what they wanted to be when they grew up. One girl drew a picture of what appeared to be her mother dancing beside a pole with people holding out money toward her. She wrote: "When I grow up ... I want to be just like mommy!" You can only imagine what the teacher thought. The next day, this student's mother sent this note to the teacher: "Dear Ms. Jones, I wish to clarify that I am not now, nor have I ever been an exotic dancer. I work at Home Depot and I told my daughter how hectic it was last week before the blizzard hit. I told her we sold out of every single snow shovel we had, and then I found one more in the back room, and that several people were fighting over who could get it. Her picture isn't me dancing around a pole. It's me selling the last snow shovel we had. From now on I will remember to check her homework more."

There are many kinds of ambition. In this message we want to focus on what it means to have a holy ambition.

1 Thessalonians 4:9-12. "Now about brotherly love we do not need to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love each other. And in fact, you do love all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Yet we urge you, brothers, to do so more and more. Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands, just as we told you, so that your daily life may win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody."

Paul wrote to the believers in Thessalonica about having a holy ambition. But there is a dark side to ambition. Webster's dictionary defines ambition as "an ardent desire for rank, fame, or power." There are plenty of self-help books written about ambition in the business world. Here are a few of the titles I found: *Looking Out for Number One*, *Every Man is a King*, *Pushing to the Front*, *Climbing to the Top*, *How to be King of Your Hill*, *Fly to the Top of your Career Ladder*.

That is ambition as the world sees it. But the Bible teaches that selfish ambition can be unfulfilling. There are many hard charging, dog-eat-dog, businessmen and women who spend all their adult lives scratching and clawing their way to the top of the ladder of success. Then they discover that it's leaning against the wrong wall.

Here's what Paul wrote about the wrong kind of ambition: "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interest of the others." (Philippians 2:3-4)

But there is a wonderful kind of ambition that we can call holy ambition. What's the difference? A selfish ambition is striving to do what YOU want to do. A holy ambition is striving to do what GOD wants you to do. But when you place your life under the Lordship of Jesus, you find that whatever God wants you to do, you want to do it too!

So, what do you want to be when you grow up...spiritually? Here are four good answers.

1. I want to expand my love for others

Paul wrote, "You do love all of God's family...Yet we urge you... to do so more and more." Paul loved these believers and they loved him. They had a reputation for loving other believers as well. Paul commended them for this, but he warned them not to be satisfied. He encouraged them to let their love grow deeper and wider.

The word Paul used here for love means "brotherly love." Even if you can't read Greek, you know this word, it's Philadelphia. *Phileo* means tenderness and affection and *adelphos* literally means, "those born into the same family." It's a family word. So Philadelphia doesn't just mean "brotherly love" it means "family love." We love other believers because we have all been born into the same family.

How's your love life? I'm not talking about your romantic love life. How's your brotherly and sisterly love life? What the world calls love isn't always genuine love. I was perusing the card section of a drug store recently and read a card that said: "I love you. "If I had an ice-cream cone, I'd give you half. If I had six pieces of candy, I'd give you three. If I had two apples, one would be yours. If I won the lottery...I'd send you a post card from Tahiti."

The Bible gives us the definition of real love. Last night at a beautiful wedding, I read the words from scripture that I use at most ceremonies where I officiate. It's the description of love Paul gives in 1 Corinthians. Listen to these words and give yourself a personal grade on your love life: "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast...It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends." (1 Corinthians 13:4-8 ESV)

C.S. Lewis: "We may talk so much about loving people in general that we love no one in particular."

So what does it mean to love more? I don't think it means you love me more. Paul is writing to the church here. I think it means you look around in your fellowship for people who need your love. May the Holy Spirit show you someone who needs your love, and when you love them, then you're expanding your love!

What do I want to be when I grow up?

2. I want to live free from worry

Paul said, "make it your ambition to lead a quiet life." We live in a hectic age. Someone said, "This is the age of the half-read page; the quick hash; the mad dash; the bright lights; the nerves tight; the plane hop for short hop; the lamp tan in a short span; the big shot in a soft spot; the brain strain and the heart pain; the cat naps 'till the spring snaps, then the fun's done."

Our fast-paced world creates tension and anxiety. This produces worry. Jesus said many times, "Do not worry." I've said the most common sin among Christians isn't lying, stealing, or gossiping. The most popular sin among Christians is worry.

Worry is like sitting in a rocking chair. It gives you something to do, but you don't get anywhere.

The opposite of worry is faith. There are only two kinds of situations you'll face in life, those you can do something about; don't worry, do something. The other situation is something you can't do anything about so don't worry about it. As my little poem says: "For every evil under the sun; Either there is a cure, or there is none. If there be one, seek 'til you find it. If there be none, never mind it!"

Seriously, we need to learn how to escape from this hectic world and lead a quiet life. Here's a great plan from A.W. Tozer: "As sleep and rest are needed each day for the body, so silence and solitude are needed each day for the soul. The busier you are, the more hectic your world, the more you need to plan daily spaces of silence and solitude. Retire from the world each day to some private spot, even if it be only the bedroom. Stay in the secret place till the surrounding noises begin to fade out of your heart and a sense of God's presence envelopes you. Call home your roving thoughts. Gaze on Christ with the eyes of your soul. This discipline has a way of airing out the mind and ironing out the wrinkles of the soul. Plan to come to the quiet every day to meet God in His Word and through prayer. (*The Best of A.W. Tozer*, p. 151)

Remember, God said, "Be still, and know that I am God." (Psalm 46:10)

What do you want to be when you grow up?

3. I want to mind my own business and be productive

Paul wrote, "Mind your own business and work with your hands." Paul was an apostle, but he also had a real job. He was a tentmaker. He worked with his hands to make tents and sell them so he could have money to live on. He didn't want to be a burden to anyone. That's a holy ambition to work at a job where you are productive.

Today, many people think they're too good or too educated to do hard work. A fresh college graduate was being interviewed for his first job. The interviewer said, "So what kind of salary are you looking to make?" The college grad said, "Oh somewhere around \$150,000 a year." The interviewer said, "And how about six weeks paid vacation, full medical and dental and a new car leased for you every year?" The college grad said, "Are you kidding me?" The interviewer said, "Of course I'm kidding you—but you started it."

It is a holy ambition to want to work hard and make a difference in our culture. This past month there have been all kinds of graduation ceremonies. Through the years I've had the honor of speaking at several college commencement ceremonies, but a few weeks ago I faced my great challenge speaking to a graduating class. I was asked to give the commencement address at All Saints for the students who were graduating from Kindergarten. It's pretty hard for a preacher to prepare to speak for thirty minutes; it's a lot easier to prepare to speak for an hour, because then you just ramble. The toughest task I've faced so far was preparing a three-minute speech for graduating kindergarteners. So I just talked to them about the wonder of reading. I spoke about how cool it was for them to discover that letters together formed words; and when you put words together you had a sentence; and when you put sentences together, you have books. I had them repeat my theme several times. "IF I READ...I WILL SUCCEED." And I believe that is true for people who are six, sixteen, or sixty years old.

Let me give you a real life example. Ben was born into a poverty-stricken inner-city neighborhood in Detroit. He was raised by a single mom and was doing poorly in school. Most assumed he would turn out like the rest of the young men in his crime-filled neighborhood.

However, Ben's mom refused to accept that future for her son. She cleaned houses for some families she considered to be successful and she noticed the parents made their children read books instead of watching television. So she went to the library and checked out four books, two for each of her sons. She sold their television and told them they had to read a book in one week and write a report to her. Of course, Ben and his brother objected loudly about having to read instead of watching TV, but Ben's mom was adamant. She continued this practice for years: Read one book a week and write a report for her. Ben said he was in middle school when he realized his mother couldn't read herself, but she always scanned the book reports like she was reading them.

Ben started to excel academically. He graduated with honors from high school and attended Yale University and earned a degree in Psychology. Then he attended University of Michigan Medical School where he attained his M.D. He went into Pediatric neurosurgery. Today Dr. Ben Carson is the Director of Pediatric Surgery at Johns Hopkins University. His latest book is *America the Beautiful: Rediscovering What Made this Nation Great*.

He has become one of the most respected physicians in America. George W. Bush awarded him the Presidential Medal of Freedom and last February he spoke at the annual prayer breakfast in Washington D.C.

Ben Carson will be the first to tell you reading books changed his life. Because of that, his family has given thousands of dollars away as scholarships to children who show promise. He has set up Carson Reading Rooms in many public schools.

Ben Carson is a Bible-believing follower of Jesus. That means he is now a target. He was scheduled to be the speaker at the graduation commencement at Johns Hopkins, but after he made remarks saying marriage is between one woman and one man, so much pressure was put on the administration, that he voluntarily declined to speak.

Ben Carson is a great example of what it means to mind your own business and be productive. While his friends in Detroit were out getting into trouble, he was minding the business of feeding his mind, and as a result, he has become a very successful member of our society.

What's more important, being or doing? There has been debate about that in philosophical circles for years. Plato said, "To do is to be." The existentialist John Paul Sartre disagreed. He said, "To be is to do." Frank Sinatra cleared it up when he sang, "Do be do be do."

But think about it. The question we often ask young people is "What do you want to DO with your life." But a better question is, "What do you want to BE?" Being comes before doing. We're called human beings not human doings.

If you strive to BE the person God wants you to be, then you'll be doing the things He wants you to do. A holy ambition doesn't mean you grovel in the ashes of obscurity. It means you are productive for God.

I channel surf a lot on my satellite radio, so I get to hear all kinds of songs. I was listening to one not long ago, and I really liked the lyrics. The song is called "Hall of Fame" and the group that sings it is called The Script. They are an alternate rock trio from Dublin, Ireland. They've had several hit songs, but this one has a message to empower young people to BE a person who will make a difference. The lyrics say: "Yeah, You could be the greatest/ You can be the best / You can be the King Kong banging on your chest / You can beat the world / You can win the war/ You can talk to God /go banging on his door ... Be students / Be teachers Be politicians / Be preachers /Be believers / Be leaders / Be astronauts / Be champions / Be truth seekers."

You may not end up in the world's hall of fame. But if your life is consumed with a holy ambition to please God you'll end up in God's hall of faith.

What do you want to be when you grow up?

4. I want to be respected for being self-supportive

Paul wrote, "Win the respect of outsiders and so that you will not be dependent on anybody." After leaving church one Sunday, a seven-year-old boy announced to his parents that when he grew up he wanted to be a preacher. They said, "Wonderful! What made you want to be a preacher?" He said, "Well, I figure I have to go to church on Sundays anyway, and I think it would be more fun to stand and yell than to just sit and listen.

Paul wrote that we should live in a way that even outsiders, non-Christians, respect us. The way we do that is by working so we don't become a burden to others.

Have you ever wondered: Does what I do matter? I don't have a high-profile job. Nobody respects me. If you are doing what God wants you to do, it matters to God.

During World War II, England faced a problem. They had to increase their coal production in order to keep up with the increased demand. But many of the miners were quitting their jobs to

join the army. They wanted to be a part of something bigger and more glorious than digging coal.

The defection of coal miners was reaching a critical stage when Winston Churchill addressed more than a thousand coal miners. He told them that although their jobs were grimy and dirty, what they were doing was as important to the war effort as anyone else. He told them Britain couldn't win the war without coal. He said: "We shall not fail, and then some day, when children ask, 'What did you do to win this inheritance for us, and to make our name so respected among men?' one will say: 'I was a fighter pilot'; another will say: 'I was in the Submarine Service'; another: 'I marched with the Eighth Army'; a fourth will say: 'None of you could have lived without the convoys and the Merchant Seamen'; and you in your turn will say, with equal pride and with equal right: 'We cut the coal.'"

That's what Paul is showing us in this passage. You may feel insignificant and what you do doesn't matter. But the Bible gives us a holy ambition. And what you do DOES matter and it WILL matter for all eternity!

CONCLUSION

If your ambition is to get rich just for the sake of having riches, that's not a holy ambition. If your ambition is to become famous just so people will know your name, that's not a holy ambition. But when your ambition is to please God, and serve him, He can even use the rich and famous. One of the greatest baseball players in the league today is Albert Pujols. He grew up in the Dominican Republic where he practiced baseball using a lime for a ball and a milk carton for a glove. His parents moved to America when he was in high school. In high school he hit a 450 home run, and after that every opposing pitcher intentionally walked him. In his first game in college he hit a grand slam and turned an unassisted double play. His college coach told him was ready for the Big Leagues.

He's currently plays for the Angels, but he is most famous for his twelve years playing with the St. Louis Cardinals. In 1999 the Cardinals drafted him in the 13th round, which means more than 400 other players were picked before him. But they soon realized what a great athlete they had. In his time with the Cardinals, he led them to win two World Series. The Cardinals easily beat the Detroit Tigers in five games in 2006. Then most of us remember with anguish how the Cardinals beat the Texas Rangers in the seventh game.

Most baseball experts agree Albert Pujols is headed for the Baseball Hall of Fame. He's the only player in Major League history to do this: In his first ten years in the league he batted at least .300, with 30 homeruns, and over 100 RBIs. That's never been done before. He's been named National League Most Valuable Player three times. He signed with the angels in 2012 for \$240 million, not including incentives.

You might look at someone rich and famous like Albert Pujols and assume he has fulfilled his chief ambition in life. But Albert Pujol's chief ambition in life isn't making millions, winning batting titles, MVP titles, or World Series. His chief ambition is to serve Jesus Christ.

Here are his own words: "My life's goal is to bring glory to Jesus. My life is not mostly dedicated to the Lord, it is 100% committed to Jesus Christ and His will. God has given me the ability to succeed in the game of baseball. But baseball is not the end; baseball is the means by which my wife, Dee Dee, and I glorify God. Baseball is simply my platform to elevate Jesus Christ, my Lord and Savior. I would also rather be known as a great husband and father than an All-Star baseball player. Perhaps one day I could be honored with an invitation into Baseball's Hall of Fame. That would certainly be a boyhood dream of mine come true, but it is a far greater honor that one day I will be in heaven with God to enjoy Him forever."

That's why I consider Albert Pujols to be a real champion, a real champion for Christ. Do you have a holy ambition? God will honor you if you will honor him with your life.

OUTLINE

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