

Lacking Ambition: What's Holding Us Back?

A Diagnostic Survey:

- Do you have a habit of taking short-cuts, not for the purpose of efficiency, but in order to just be done with it - to gain some rest and some leisure?
- Are you slow to contribute to conversations or group discussions that might be too revealing about your own difficulties and struggles?
- Have difficult or painful events in your life worn down your resolve? Have they subtly (or not so subtly) left you in a state of indifference and disillusion...possibly left you depressed or filled with doubt?
- Do you have a difficult time committing to things that don't show sure promise of furthering your own hopes or plans?
- Do personal failures and disappointments tend to derail you?
- Are you a loner? Are you consciously or unconsciously fearful of being known by others for who you really are?
- Do you use your education, or your work, or your family as a shield to keep you from connecting and investing in the lives of others in meaningful ways?
- Do you intentionally posture or present yourself in such a way that those around you are unlikely to ask for your help?
- Do you ever feel hopeless? Like you want to give up or walk out on your own life?
- Are you Mr. Fix-it? Do you live by the slogan "Never give up and never give in"? Would others refer to you as being "stubbornly self-reliant"?
- Would you say that you're generally content, that you're more or less coasting along, that you're basically taking things as they come, with little thought of what's next?
- Or would you say that you're often enduring your life? That you're in a perpetual state of survival, just trying to get through the day, and longing for the weekend so that you can just get away from it all and be left alone?
- What inspires you? What intrigues you? Where do your thoughts tend to gravitate in the idol moments of the day? What are you hoping will happen?
- When additional or unexpected work, time or commitment is asked or required of you (and I'm not just talking about your workplace here, this could be within your home - something that your wife asks of you. Or it could be church - that last minute, in a pinch request). When additional or unexpected work, time or commitment is asked of you, do you get irritated? Do you feel put out or resentful maybe?
- Would you consider yourself to be cynical, or has anyone ever commented to that effect?
- Do you tend to procrastinate, often, and do you always manage to have a perfectly justifiable reason for your procrastination? (ouch)
- Is there anyone in your life (and I don't mean your mom here)...Is there anyone in your life who you would say of them, that they truly know you...nothing held back, nothing concealed, through and through they know you...they've got your number?

I. The Lonely Road of Self Ambition (Phil. 2:1-4)

Phil. 2:1-4 >>>

"So if there is any encouragement in Christ, any comfort from love, any participation in the Spirit, any affection and sympathy, 2 complete my joy by being of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. 3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. 4 Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Q: What does self ambition have to do with a lack of ambition? What's the connection?"

A: Paul is encouraging them to continue in a shared and singular ambition for Jesus Christ. He sees self ambition as a clear hinderance or threat to the pursuit of that ambition. Self ambition is at odds with human relationships. Self ambition is at odds with the development of meaningful communities.

Selfish ambition: one who is motivated by self interest, an opportunist, one who furthers their own cause.

Conceit: one who is desirous of the praises of others, to be seen as being glorious and acknowledged for it.

The thriving ambition of our culture is *self ambition*, because self ambition is seen as the road to freedom, happiness and the good life. Within this good life, relationships and shared community are seen as a potential detour to that end. Relationships are viewed as possible constraints that might hold you back.

Pointed Questions Related to Self Ambition:

- Men, have your ambitions for happiness and personal fulfillment, for the good life, for your job, for your security, for ease and comfort and leisure, for your man time, your cave time....has your ambition for these things brought about a lack of ambition for the people in your life?
- Do you lack ambition for your family - for your friends?
- Do you lack ambition for your wife?
- Do you pursue her with the same kind of vigor and gusto as you do your own legacy and leisure?
- Are you ambitious for your children? Are you intentional with them? Are you intentional with your children? How much of your time do you give them and what does that look like? How much of your private thoughts are spent on them as opposed to your work and personal leisure? And really, you can implant any relationship here: son, brother, neighbor, etc...
- If you're a part of the church, are you invested in the lives of the people there? Or do you see the people in your life as a constraint? Are they just making you crazy? Do you

resent them? Or are you ambitious to see them thriving in the wonder and liberation of the gospel of Christ?

- Are you pursuing people in your small groups and your men's groups?
- Men, are you investing in the lives of other men?
- Are you passionate about the shared life and community of the church?
- Or are you just chasing your own tail?

When we're ambitious for ourselves, when we're driven by self fulfillment, self-actualization, self-made glory, it is inevitably an inward facing journey and so it drives us away from one another. It isolates us. And therefore it's a lonely road to travel. Why are we as men typically so prone to isolation? I'm talking about our lone rangerly ways here. Why are we so prone to being distant and aloof and inaccessible? Surely self ambition plays a role.

II. The Shackles of Fear (Proverbs 29:25)

Figuratively speaking, fear can bind us - it puts us in shackles. It can be painfully larger than life. And as men, we don't want to talk about that. And why is that? Why is this a struggle that we feel so compelled to conceal? It's shame. Isn't it? Fear and anxiety is seen generally as a weakness, and as men, we don't want to be looked upon as being weak. What are we afraid of? What are you afraid of?

- Are you afraid of failure?
- Are you afraid of letting people down - the people you love most?
- Or maybe your boss...those that you don't love the most?
- Do you fear exposure? Are you afraid that the people around you might find out who you really are? Might see your weaknesses?
- Might learn of your secret sins? That you're a hypocrite?
- That you're not so strong after all?
- That you wear masks and put on fronts?
- Why do we work so hard to conceal these things men? What's it about?

Proverbs 29:25 >>>

"The fear of man brings a snare, But he who trusts in the LORD will be exalted."

The great Puritan pastor and author John Bunyan referred to the fear of man as "*an idol of approval*" and defined it as "*the fear of losing man's favor, love, goodwill, help, and friendship.*"

Do you think you're not capable of this? That you're above this? Turn to Galatians 2:11-14:

Galatians 2: 11-14 >>>

"But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. 12 For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. 13 The rest of the Jews joined him in hypocrisy, with the result that even Barnabas was carried away by their hypocrisy. 14 But when I saw that they were not straightforward about the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas in the presence of all, "If you, being a Jew, live like the Gentiles and not like the Jews, how is it that you compel the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

In the gospel, Peter believed that he was free and released to dine with the Gentile believers and not separate from them, and so he did. But once a certain group of Jews showed up, he anticipated their judgement and their critique and so he made a b-line for the segregated table of Jews and avoided eating with the Gentiles in their presence. He was desperate for their approval **and it left him lacking**. Rather than fearing God he feared men and it momentarily robbed him of ambition for Christ.

If a chosen Apostle of Christ could fall to this, do you really think that you're not susceptible to it? If that innate desire for acceptance and approval is not perpetually met in us through the acceptance and approval of God in Christ, we will inevitably fall to this just like Peter did. It will hold us back again and again and again.

III. The Wilderness of Disappointment (Psalms 77; Psalms 119:116)

What about disappointment and despair? This may come as a result of loss. It could be hopes that have been continually delayed and put off or altogether dashed? Maybe your life, your career, your relationships, are not playing out in the ways that you thought they would? What is this? What does this have to do with ambition?

The expectations and experiences of our lives can have a huge impact on us and can totally derail our ambitions. In no small part they can derail our ambition for Christ and for the shared life of the church. We can tend to look at the outcomes of our expectations and our actual experiences as an interpretive grid to inform us - to tell us or not life is really good and if God is really good. And we've got to realize that that's really shaky ground to build upon.

Closing:

What's your instinct? What's your next move? Pay close attention to that. When you see these fault lines and stress fractures in your life, what's your instinctive response? What's the plan?

When we notice our fault lines, we don't want others to catch on and so we run from the problem, we try to bury it, conceal it, cover it over and hope it will go away. Or...we attempt to cowboy up and lasso and hog tie it to the ground. We attempt to do this alone, and in our own strength and wisdom. This is usually motivated by shame or pride. When we become terribly discouraged and exhausting by our own inability to bring about lasting change in ourselves we

crawl into the caves of our historic sin struggles and then we eventually crawl back out, and the cycle continues. Is this sounding familiar to you?

What do we need? What we need is the only thing that will ever truly realign our suffocating ambition for ourselves...we need the transforming grace of God to break in and change the atmosphere. Not some trite, ethereal, cheap, greasy grace, but what Dietrich Bonhoeffer referred to as the Costly Grace of Christ.

"Cheap grace is the preaching of forgiveness without requiring repentance, baptism without church discipline, Communion without confession, absolution without personal confession. Cheap grace is grace without discipleship, grace without the cross, grace without Jesus Christ, living and incarnate.

Costly grace is the treasure hidden in the field; for the sake of it a man will go and sell all that he has. It is the pearl of great price to buy which the merchant will sell all his goods. It is the kingly rule of Christ, for whose sake a man will pluck out the eye which causes him to stumble; it is the call of Jesus Christ at which the disciple leaves his nets and follows him.

Costly grace is the gospel which must be sought again and again, the gift which must be asked for, the door at which a man must knock." (end quote)

~ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*

Does this touch a nerve? Is this ringing your bell? Do you have ambition for this? This is the grace that we need! Desperately. More desperately than we know.