

Ambition

A sermon preached by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on September 22, 1991, the 18th Sunday after Pentecost at Oxford High School. Scripture Lessons: Job 28:20-28; Psalm 27:1-6; James 3:13-18, Mark 9:30-37.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Is it wrong to strive for excellence? Is ambition, for ourselves or our children, a sin? Without ambition we don't reach our full potential. Robert Browning wrote, "A man's reach should exceed his grasp or what's a heaven for." When I was a boy I read the story of Robert F. Scott whose great ambition was to be the first human being to reach the South Pole. He failed to achieve his ambition and died in the attempt. But there was something heroic and inspiring in his attempt that motivated me to establish high goals and to work for them.

Last Thursday I heard Dr. Leon Sullivan speak at Lincoln University. He is a tremendous motivational speaker. He exhorted the students to be ambitious. "You can be anything you want to be"-- he appealed to the student body to dream great dreams and to have great ambitions. "You can be great. You don't have to be average or below average. You can be great."

But if there's a good kind of ambition, there's also selfish ambition. William Barclay, the biblical scholar, use to say, ambition can mean one of two things. It can mean, "How can I shine?" or "How can I serve?" Ambition can be good or it can be bad.

Which kind do most Americans have? In Paterson and Kim's book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, they asked people, "What are your dreams?"

What are your ambitions? How might you fulfill your potential as a human being?" And this is what Americans said: They'd be thin and they'd be rich. Those are the two primary ambitions that Americans in the 1990s have, according to Paterson and Kim. "Greed is okay, most Americans are saying, so long as it's not fattening."

After the ambition to be rich and thin, "smarter" ran a very distant second. The ambition to be a better person didn't even finish in the rankings. People across the country showed much less interest in changing their inner selves, including their intelligence or personality, than they did in changing their outward appearances of weight, body, hair, face, and age.

James, in his first century letter to Christians, warns us against selfish ambition:

"Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind."

The word James uses for *selfish ambition* originally had a good meaning. It referred to a laborer who worked for a daily wage. Later, the word came to refer to someone who would do anything, no matter how unethical or unscrupulous, in order to advance themselves in society. Finally it came to refer to someone who seeks friendships only for their usefulness and then drops them when they're no longer useful.

Few people have described selfish ambition better than John Dean,

President Nixon's legal counsel during the Watergate scandal. In his book, *Blind Ambition*, he wrote, "I learned that to make my way upward, into a position of confidence and influence, I had to travel downward through factional power plays, corruption and finally outright crimes. Slowly, steadily, I would climb toward the moral abyss of the President's inner circle until I finally fell into it, thinking I had made it to the top just as I began to realize I had actually touched bottom."

And Charles Colson, writing in, *Earn Again*, his best seller of about 15 years ago, says, "I knew that if I was as valuable to the President as he said I was, it was because I was willing at times to blink at certain ethical standards, to be ruthless in getting things done. It was earning me status and power."

Selfish ambition. How many of us are familiar with it? Do we know anything of selfish ambition in our work? In our homes? In the nation? In the Church?

But there's a good ambition[^], the ambition to be wise and understanding. Years ago *Time* magazine nominating the late Dr. Albert Schweitzer as one of the greatest people of the 20th century. He wasn't a military leader, not an athlete, not a diplomat but a wise and understanding man.

When he was twenty-one years old he became aware of the tremendous advantages he'd been given. He also began to be aware of his

obligation to share those advantages. In his heart he knew that if he really wanted to follow Jesus he must serve his fellow brothers and sisters. He set goals for himself. He was an ambitious young man. His ambition was to advance himself as much as possible in the area of intellectual achievement and music until he was thirty years old. By the time he was thirty he had distinguished himself as a great biblical scholar and a great organist. After that he gave himself utterly to serving people where they needed him most.

When he was thirty he returned to the university and became a doctor of medicine. His friends tried to discourage him from going to Africa as a missionary, but he said, "For me the whole essence of religion is at stake. The meaning of my life doesn't consist in knowledge or art but simply in being human and doing some little thing in the spirit of Jesus."

For fifty years this brilliant man showed by his good life that his works were done with gentleness born of wisdom. He lived and worked in the most incredibly primitive conditions healing people in the name of Christ. Albert Schweitzer showed the world that the path to greatness lies in the ambition to be wise and understanding. His life demonstrated that the "wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy."

If we took another poll and asked, Who is the greatest living person in the world today? many people would nominate a Roman Catholic missionary

nun named Mother Theresa who lives and works in India. She was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979. After teaching for twenty years at a Convent School in Calcutta, Mother Theresa realized, kind of suddenly, that outside the pleasant, cloistered convent was a world of misery.

She began to have an ambition to leave the convent and to minister to the most wretched part of the city. She found an apartment and began to gather abandoned children and minister to them in the name and spirit of Christ. In 1949 she founded, The Missionaries of Charity.

The order grew at a fantastic rate. Today there are houses in twenty-five Indian cities and in several other countries. The sisters take a special vow to give wholehearted service to the poorest of the poor, whose life they totally share.

They have ambition, but it's not selfish ambition. Their ambition is to provide homes for little children unwanted by their parents and for infants who might otherwise be thrown away or killed. They minister to nearly 10,000 lepers. They've picked up 23,000 dying people from the streets of Calcutta and taken them to their Homes for the Dying. There they show them that they're wanted and loved even for the few hours that they have to live.

Dietrich Bonhoeffer once wrote, "Once a man or woman has experienced the mercy of God in their life they will henceforth aspire only to serve." What are your aspirations and ambitions? To get good grades?

To excel as an athlete, a teacher or musician? To retire and travel? To be the President of the United States? All that's good. There's nothing necessarily wrong with those ambitions. But as you examine your life can you identify, as well, the ambition to be wise and understanding and to show that wisdom and understanding through a life whose goal it is to serve others?

There's a conventional wisdom which says get all you can. But there's also a wisdom from above that says give all that you can give. Which wisdom will we seek? Which kind of wisdom will it be our ambition to attain?

Let us pray: Almighty and eternal God, so draw our hearts to you, so guide our minds, so fill our imaginations, so control our wills, that we may be wholly yours, utterly dedicated to you; and then use us, we pray, as you will, and always to your glory and the welfare of your people; through our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.