

Grace to You :: *Unleashing God's Truth One Verse at a Time*

Understanding Your Ambition (Special Message)

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

Code: MC224M

NOTE* This message is a duplicate of TMC224, but includes a 1 minute greeting and introduction by John MacArthur. This message will only be available as part of the TMC audio album, A Course for Life.

Hello, this is John MacArthur, pastor, Grace To You Bible teacher and president of the Master's College and Seminary. What you are about to hear is a collection of messages I taught to nearly a thousand college students during chapel services at The Master's College. The lessons were handpicked to give you what I call A Course for Life.

School years certainly are a time for book learning, but it's also a critical period for setting the spiritual tone for the rest of your life. The decisions you make when you're young will many years later be the prologue to your life—an explanation of why your life went the way it did. The course you set and the patterns and priorities you adopt now will affect your relationships, your career, your leadership, your family, most importantly your usefulness to the church and your witness for Christ.

This series is a blueprint for your life—the life of every student of every age. So listen carefully, commit yourself to obeying the biblical principles and I believe you'll see blessing beyond what you can imagine. Run the race, stay the course, finish strong.

I have been given the wonderful privilege of opening the Word of God with you for a little bit. And if you have your Bible handy, 2 Corinthians 5, just want to comment a little bit on a couple of verses in Scripture...Second Corinthians chapter 5.

When you think about college education, when you think about young people, when you think about people who have graduated from college and gone on to pursue different careers, of course it embraces all of us here today. But all of us have one thing in common and that is we're goal oriented. We're not just flotsam and jetsam floating downstream. There's some drive and some desire and some passion in our lives, there's some objectives that we have set. And it brings up the issue of a word that I think is used a lot in this kind of environment and perhaps needs to be defined a little bit for us. It's the word "ambition," 2 Corinthians chapter 5 gives us a biblical understanding of ambition. Verse 9, 2 Corinthians 5:9 and Paul speaks here regarding himself. He likes to use the plural pronoun "we," it sort of takes the sting out of the "I" pronoun which if you had written as many epistles as he did could get a little overbearing, and so he likes to use the editorial "we" and he says this, "Therefore

also we have as our ambition...”

Paul had ambition. But ambition in our world today has overtones that are negative. When somebody talks about the word ambition, you sort of assume that maybe somewhere along the line in parenthesis the word unscrupulous ought to appear. Or maybe the word conniving ought to appear. There’s just something about the idea of ambition that pushes us a little beyond what we might consider to be virtue and character. Thomas Brooks wrote, “Ambition is a gilded mystery, a secret poison, a hidden plague. Ambition...he said...is the engineer of deceit, the mother of hypocrisy, the parent of envy. Ambition...he said...is the original vice. It was ambition that got Satan and his agreeable angels thrown out of heaven. It was ambition that got Adam and Eve thrown out of the Garden. It was ambition that got Judas thrown into hell. Ambition is the destroyer of virtue, the blinder of hearts, turning medicine into malady and remedy into disease,” says Brooks.

“And certainly blind ambition has caused many people to sell their souls, compromise their convictions, if they ever had any, violate their beliefs, sacrifice their character and use everybody in their way. And it is true. Ambition is often associated with pride, with sort of evil aggression, with self-centeredness. Ambition is often associated with people that we call driven people, who are utterly insensitive to the people around them, or anything but selfless servant leaders. Ambition could even be associated with the idea of being careless. Ambition can leave carnage in its wake and family among friends. And it very often leaves principles lying in the dust.”

But what about that word ambition? What really is it? It’s from a Latin word, *amberae*(??). Interestingly enough *amberae* means both...both. It seems like a rather innocuous word, how did it ever get to this point? But it referred to going both ways at the same time, being duplicitous, being double-minded, saying one thing and believing something else, pretending to have one objective and actually having another one. It’s Mr. Facing Both Ways of *Pilgrim’s Progress*. And it was applied to the person who had absolutely no convictions, would do anything, say anything to gain a selfish goal, never really revealing the truth, attempting or trying to convince you he was going one way when in fact he was really going another.

The word, its Latin form, was a common word used to describe Roman politicians. And it would certainly be the right word in its Latin form to describe one of the presidential candidates well-known to us who was also Mr. Facing Both Ways.

In order to gain power, in order to gain prestige, in order to achieve your objectives, you take whatever side you need to take on any and every issue. You show people whatever face it is necessary to show them to gain the power whether or not it has anything to do with what you really believe. And it was a word that belonged to Roman politics because they would do anything to get votes.

The word actually in Latin came to mean “campaigning for a promotion...campaigning for a promotion.” So if you want a sort of historic definition of ambition, it was campaigning for a promotion and that is so vivid to us in the world in which we live today, particularly with the election coming and all that we’ve been overexposed to. Ambitious people want power, they want position, they want social visibility, they want popularity, they want approval, they want money, they want recognition, they want authority.

There was a missionary leader years ago named Stephen Neal(?) who wrote this, “I am inclined to think that ambition in any ordinary sense of the term is nearly always sinful. I am certain that in the Christian it is always sinful and that it is most inexcusable and sinful in the ordained minister.”

Is it a sin to be ambitious? Well by virtue of the Latin definition, it would be. If it’s hypocrisy, if it’s doing whatever you need to do to get whatever you want at the price of anybody and anything along the path. It was really, you know, because of sinful ambition that Jesus came into the world because we sinners want to be great, Christ became small, because we will not stoop, He stooped. Because we want to rule, He came to serve. There’s a sense in which Christ came into the world to rescue us from our damning ambition.

The prophet Jeremiah sort of spoke to the issue in very straightforward terms, Jeremiah 45:5, Jeremiah said this, “But you, are you seeking great things for yourself? Do not seek them.” That may go against the grain, you know, of why you’re here and what you’re trying to do now as an alum out there, you know, trying to climb the ladder, whatever ladder you’re on. What was Jeremiah talking about when he said, “If you’re seeking great things for yourself, don’t seek them?”

Is ambition really always sinful? Well, if it is then what in the world is it doing in the Bible here, the Apostle Paul, back to verse 9, “We have as our ambition.” Here I want you to meet a man who is as ambitious as anybody I think whoever lived. I mean, it was basically Paul’s nature to be extreme. He was extreme before he was converted, right? That’s why it took an extreme act of God to redirect him. I mean, he didn’t just do things half way. If he was going to persecute Christians, it was all the way...to the extreme. That’s the way he lived his life after Christ as well. There’s no question that this is a driven man.

What is it then that Jeremiah was forbidding that Paul is allowing and even honoring and even confessing to? It is simply this. The issue of Jeremiah is if you’re seeking great things for yourself, don’t seek them. And I think it’s pretty obvious that Jeremiah was not condemning all ambition as sinful, but showing that selfishness is always sinful and corrupting.

The Greeks did what I think the sinful world always does, even today. They make noble things out of sin and the Greeks actually sort of overcame the meaning of the word and turned ambition into

something kind of noble. The Greek word here, *philotimeomai*, means to love honor. And the Greeks really did. And they elevated the idea of loving honor and seeking honor, pursuing noble goals. Paul spoke of honor. He talked about, "If anybody seeks the office of an overseer, he seeks a noble work." One translation of 1 Timothy 3:1 says, "To aspire to leadership is an honorable ambition." And here we find that Paul had a noble ambition. But his ambition was uncorrupted and I'll show you why.

It was a kind of three-dimensional ambition. It went high and it went wide and it went deep. Let's just look at those three things briefly.

He had ambition, first of all, that went high, verse 9. "We have as our ambition whether at home or absent to be pleasing to Him." Just look at the phrase "to be pleasing to Him." That separates spiritual ambition from sinful ambition. Paul never sought great things for himself, he always sought great things for God. The Apostle is like a violinist who cares not for the audience applause but for the smile of the master who taught him. He lived to please the Lord. Everything he did he did to the glory of the Lord.

In 1 Corinthians chapter 4 he really makes some very, very powerful statements about this. Verse 3, he says, "To me it's a very small thing that I should be examined by you or by any human court." It is a minor detail in my life to be examined by people. I really have little regard for what you think or what any human tribunal things. Any evaluation by people has very limited value to me.

Now he's not saying that in an unhealthy attitude. "I don't care what you think" attitude which betrays some kind of open display of indifference. But he is simply saying, "At the end of the day I don't do what I do for your approval. My accountability really is not to you, it's way beyond that. There is a higher court than any human court." He even goes on to say, "I don't even examine myself, I'm conscious of nothing against myself, yet I'm not by this acquitted."

In other words, he said, "It's a small thing to me what you think, it's a small thing to me to what I think. You don't know the truth of my heart and I may know me better than you, but I don't even know the truth of my own heart because the heart of man is deceitful. And even though...as he said to the Corinthians in chapter 1 of 2 Corinthians verse 12...my conscience is clear, still he said, even when I know nothing against myself, even when my conscience is clear, herein am I not justified? Sin is so profound in my flesh, it is so deceptive to me that even I in my best moments of spirituality am in no position to evaluate the truth about me. So no way do I go through life trying to satisfy you, and try to satisfy me. It's not about what you think. It's not about what I think. It's not about you feeling good about me. It's not about me feeling good about me."

He says in verse 4 of 1 Corinthians 4, "The one who examines me is the Lord. So don't go on passing judgment before the time, wait till the Lord comes who will bring to light the things hidden in the darkness disclose the motives of men's hearts and then each man's praise will come to him from

God.” And this is what drove Paul. He told the Galatians he was no men pleaser, they had accused him of being that and he denies that in Galatians chapter 1. You see, he had the highest goal with regard to his ambition and that was to be pleasing to the Lord. This is the pervasive reality of Christian living. This is the basic principle of all that we are and all that we do and it is to please the Lord. Not just on the outside, but on the inside as well. The basic bottom line of Christian living is to be driven to do what pleases the Lord, to offer your body, as it were, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable unto God which is your reasonable kind of worship, to have your mind renewed.

In Ephesians 5 Paul talks about trying to learn what it is to please the Lord. He speaks of that over and over and over in his letters. So his ambition, first of all, went up in the sense that his highest goal was to please the Lord. And whatever it is that you do in life, whatever career you choose, whatever ministry you choose, whatever path you go, what drives that ambition has to be the pleasure of God.

But not only did his ambition have an upward sense, it had an outward sense. Look again at verse 9. He says, “Whether at home or absent.” The Apostle’s devotion to this noble ambition knew no limits is indicated in that phrase. Whether at home or absent...what does he mean by that? Back up in to verses 1 through 8, go back to verse 8, “I prefer...he says...to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord.” He’s talking about whether he lives or dies.

Now this is really an important note here to remember. He has been talking about the fact that life is tough on him. Back in verse 1, his earthly tent is weakening. He says that elsewhere, of course, just backing up a couple of verses in to verse 17 of chapter 4, he’s experiencing light affliction. Verse 16, the outer man is decaying. So he understands as he gets older and as persecution continues and as he battles with his unredeemed flesh and struggles with sin, his house is breaking down.

But he says we have a building from God, a house not made with hands, eternal in the heavens. He looks forward to that eternal body, that new body, that resurrection body.

In the meantime, in verse 4, he says, “We grown, being burdened in this body, burdened with sin and weakness and all of that.” And then he comes down to verse 8, and said, “If I had my choice, I’d go to heaven.” That’s a very mature statement and I would assume that most of you sitting here today couldn’t say that. There’s just too much of life out there. There’s too much of all the good things that God has put into life that you haven’t yet experienced. But it is an indicator of how consumed we’ve become with the world around us, when heaven doesn’t seem as good as life here on this earth. And we could talk about that but that’s not really the point I want to make.

Go back down to verse 9. He says, “Whether at home or absent, my ambition is to be pleasing to Him.” And what he means by that is I have right now on this earth the very same ambition that I will have when I’m in heaven and it is to please the Lord. And that’s the breadth of it. It covers time and eternity.

Paul understood that you live your life here the same way you're going to live it in heaven...no different. And you're certainly not going to be pleasing men in heaven and you're certainly not going to be pleasing yourself in heaven. In perfect righteousness with perfect joy and perfect peace you will live to the pleasure of God forever who Himself will ever live for your pleasure. He's not necessarily wishing to go to heaven, although he has said on other occasions I'd rather depart and be with Christ, but it's more needful to be here. And he's also said, "If I live, I live to the Lord. If I die, I die to the Lord. So whether I live or die I'm the Lord's." It's just the sweeping continuity of his perception. I am here on Earth committed to live my life the same way I will live it in heaven. So I'm not going to go down those paths that certainly have no place in heaven. There will be no liars in heaven. There will be no adulterers in heaven. There will be no immorality in heaven. There will be nothing unclean in heaven. It will be a pure environment of worship to Christ and abandonment to service to Him forever. I live my life now the way I will live it there. There are no borders in my life. This is full continuity of life. The height of his ambition is to please God and the breadth of his ambition is there's absolute continuity between time and eternity in the way he lives his life.

And there really is no other way to maintain sanctified ambition. If you have one set of objectives here and you're going to have to abandon all of them when you go to heaven, you've missed something. "Well while I'm here I'm trying to make as much money as I can." "Well, while I'm here I'm trying to get up the corporate ladder as fast as I can." "Well while I'm here I'm trying to get as much power and influence as I possibly can." God may give you power, give you influence, give you money, give you promotion but the goal is to please Him. What He chooses to do with the way you please Him is up to Him. By the way, you will be inexplicably, incomprehensibly wealthy in heaven, so God is certainly not against that. But His desire for you now is the very same thing that is His desire for you in eternity. That's why Paul in Philippians 3 makes a really interesting statement, he says, "I press toward the mark, goal, for the prize." Okay, you're going toward a mark, "For the prize of the high calling of Christ Jesus."

This is a very interesting statement. Paul is telling us that the goal of my life here, I press toward this mark, is the prize of the upward call. Well what is he talking about? Well ask yourself this. When we're called up, what's the prize? What are you going to get when you get to heaven? What is the most glorious feature of heaven to you? Gold streets? Nah. Pearl gates? No. Flashing jewels? No. Being able to play the harp and sing with the angels? No. Transmigration across the infinite new heaven and new...? No.

What is the glorious reality that's going to take place when you enter into heaven? First John 3, "We shall see Him, we shall be like Him." Christ's likeness. So Paul says, "My goal in life is to reach the mark which will be my prize when I'm called up." So Paul doesn't have any different objective in life than is the reality of eternity, the goal in eternity is to make him like Christ, Romans 8, to conform him to the image of God's Son, that's why he was chosen and saved. And His objective, God's objective

for him in eternity becomes his objective in time. So there's continuity in his life. There's no discontinuity at all. He lives his whole life to become like Jesus Christ. That's the eternal prize and that becomes his goal in life. That's the breadth of this ambition.

And then there's a third element. When you look at these three dimensions of a sanctified ambition, its upward focus is to please the Lord, its outward focus is to maintain continuity between that which is eternal and that which is temporal. And then I want you to look at a third dimension, its depth...its depth. And when I'm talking about depth, I'm talking about what drives this ambition, what motivates this ambition. Verse 10, "For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ that each one may be recompensed for his deeds in the body according to what he's done whether good or bad."

What motivates you? No earthly reward, no earthly honor, no earthly threat, no earthly possibility, no earthly circumstance, no earthly opportunity motivated Paul. He could take it all. Over in chapter 6 he says, "As far as living life here...verse 4...I've lived it in much endurance, afflictions, hardship, distress, beatings, imprisonments, tumults, labors, sleeplessness, hunger," not exactly your first choice for life. "And sometimes good things come...verse 7...the word of truth, the power of God, the weapons of righteousness on the right hand and on the left." But he said most of the time it just kind of flip-flops back and forth, sometimes glory, sometimes dishonor, sometimes evil reports, sometimes good report, sometimes I'm regarded as a deceiver, some people think I'm true. I'm unknown to some, well known to others. I'm dying and yet I'm alive. I'm punished and yet never put to death. I'm sorrowful at rejoicing, I'm poor yet rich. That's how life goes, right? None of those things really move me. I'm not motivated by circumstances. I'm not motivated by earthly issues.

There's this one underlying deep-seeded reality that drives Paul and it is that he has to stand before the judgment seat of Christ. There will be an accounting some day. To appear is *phaneroo*, to be made manifest, to be made clear. The judgment seat of Christ, interesting term, and, of course, the thing you understand that when you go before Christ to have Him render the verdict on what in your life really mattered as a Christian, you understand that all the hypocrisies are over and all the concealments are over and all the secrets are over and all the fronts and the facades are over, everything gets stripped away because God, 1 Samuel 16:7 says, always looks where? On the heart. And that's why, back in 1 Corinthians 4:5 Paul says, "God who searches the hearts will know the secrets of men's hearts and then every man will have praise from God." There is according to Hebrews 4:13, no creature hidden from His sight. All things are open and laid bare to His eyes with whom we have to do. Stripped then of all pretense. Stripped of all disguise. Stripped of all deception. Stripped of all hypocrisy. Stripped of all the external trappings. You're there and your naked soul, as it were, is unveiled at the judgment seat, *bema* is the word. Familiar word, by the way, to the Corinthians because there was one and there still is one on the main street, any of you who have been to Corinth, when you kind of go around the circle of the old city of Corinth, they take you to a place known as the *Bema*. *Bema* in itself doesn't convey a lot, it's used in the Septuagint back in Nehemiah chapter 8 to refer to a place with steps. Just an elevated place.

It really isn't inherent in the word necessarily a place of judgment. In ancient Greek culture it was a platform and it could be a platform where and was a platform where athletes were rewarded for their endeavors, for their victories, such as today. In the Olympics when the winners are all brought together, they get on platforms and they are elevated and given their awards..

But the word also is used in the New Testament a couple of times for Pilate's judgment seat. And that was more than a place of rewards, that was a place of criminal judgment. But for us as Christians, since Jesus already paid the price for all our sins, for us it's going to be a place of reward. So we come to the judgment seat of Christ, according to 1 Corinthians chapter 3, all the wood, hay and stubble of our lives fades away. That's not sin. Wood, hay and stubble aren't evil, you know. I mean, wood is useful, hay is useful and even stubble you can feed to an animal. It's not that it's evil, it's just all the junk, all the stuff, the stuff that didn't matter, all the non-spiritual stuff burns and the gold, silver and precious stones is that which had eternal value and on the basis of that we receive an eternal reward.

So Paul knew he lived in the light of that. I mean, that is really a mature Christian perspective. It didn't matter to him whether we received honors in this world at all. Honor or dishonor, either way, it didn't matter to him. He just wanted to please the Lord. That was his ambition. He wanted to have the same objective in time that he would have in eternity, the glory of Christ and the pursuing His likeness. And he was motivated by nothing in this world but only by the fact that one day he would stand before Christ and all the worthless stuff in his life would disappear in a moment and he would then spend eternity enjoying the reward for what he did in the power of the Spirit that mattered.

That's how we have to live our life. At that judgment, look at the end of verse 10, it says we will be rewarded. That's recompense. We will be rewarded. It's only a judgment of rewards. It's not going to be a condemnation. You're not going to be punished cause Christ was punished for all your sins. It's only a reward and a reward for what you've done, whether good or *phaulos*...*phaulos*. It's not really bad, it's worthless. It's a word that means worthless. It's not *kakos* which means bad. It's not *poneros* which means evil. It's *phaulos*, all that's worthless disappears. Now this is living in the light of heaven. This is a sanctified ambition.

Many years ago when I was a kid, I found a poem my grandfather used to quote and I got a hold of it. I heard him quote it...I guess I heard him quote it when he was preaching or in one of the sermons that he wrote many years ago. And it really struck me hard and so as just a kid I memorized that poem. You know how some of the things you memorize as a kid stick? You have a lot of junk that sticks as you're growing up but every once in a while something good sticks. And I've often gone back to this poem, my grandfather had it written in the front of his Bible and I think if I can remember it, we'll see how good my memory is at this point. It went like this.

“When I stand at the judgment seat of Christ and He sees how I blocked Him here and checked Him there and would not yield my will, will there be grief in my Savior’s eyes? Grief though He loves me still? He would have me rich but I stand there poor, stripped of all but His grace while memory runs like a haunted thing down a path I can’t retrace. Then my desolate heart may well nigh break with tears I cannot shed. I will cover my face with my empty hands and bow my uncrowned head. O Lord of the years that are left to me, I give them to Your hand. Take me, break me, and move me to the pattern that You have planned.”

I don’t want to stand there empty handed, and neither did Paul. The highest goal...to please Christ. The widest devotion in this world and the next, the deepest motive...to face my Lord one day in His presence.

Father, we ask that You would help us to be faithful, to be spiritually ambitious, to have what could be called a noble ambition like the Apostle Paul, that isn’t built on anything this world has to offer and knows how to be abased and how to abound and be content if Christ is honored. And may You help us all and all our students and all our alumni, wherever they are in the world, and wherever the generations to come go to be known as ambitious for Your honor. That would be indeed the noblest ambition of all. Thank You for what You’re doing through our alumni, even now. Continue to bless them and use them and all of us we pray for the glory of Christ. Amen.

Available online at: <http://www.gty.org.uk>

COPYRIGHT (C) 2012 Grace to You

You may reproduce this Grace to You content for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Grace to You's Copyright Policy (<http://www.gty.org/connect/copyright>).