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An Honorable Ambition

To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition.

1 TIMOTHY 3:1 NEB

Should you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.

JEREMIAH 45:5

Most Christians have reservations about aspiring to leadership. They are unsure about whether it is truly right for a person to want to be a leader. After all, is it not better for the position to seek out the person rather than the person to seek out the position? Has not ambition caused the downfall of numerous otherwise great leaders in the church, people who fell victim to “the last infirmity of noble minds”? Shakespeare expressed a profound truth when his character Wolsey said to the great English general:

*Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambitions,
By that sin fell the angels; how can a man then,
The image of his Maker, hope to profit by't?*

No doubt, Christians must resist a certain kind of ambition and rid it from their lives. But we must also acknowledge other ambitions as noble, worthy, and honorable. The two verses at the beginning of this chapter provide a warning—and an encouragement—for sorting out the difference. When our ambition carries out a burning desire to be effective in the service of God—to realize God’s highest potential for our lives—we can keep both of these verses in mind and hold them in healthy tension.

Part of that tension is the difference between Paul’s situation and ours. We may understand his statement (1 Timothy 3:1, above) in terms of the prestige and respect given to Christian leaders today. But such was far from Paul’s mind. In his day, a bishop faced great danger and worrisome responsibility. Rewards for the work of leading the church were hardship, contempt, rejection, and even death. The leader was first to draw fire in persecution, first in line to suffer.

Seen in this light, Paul’s encouragement does not seem so open to misuse by people merely seeking status in the church. Phonies would have little heart for such a difficult assignment. Under the dangerous circumstances that prevailed in the first century, even stouthearted Christians needed encouragement and incentive to lead. And so Paul called leadership an “honorable ambition.”

We ought never to forget that the same situation faces Christians today in certain parts of the world. Leaders of the church in China suffered most at the hands of Communists. The leader of the Little Flock in Nepal suffered years in prison after church members had been released. In many troubled areas today, spiritual leadership is no task for those who seek stable benefits and upscale working conditions. It remains true that any form of spiritual warfare will inevitably single out leaders who by their role present obvious targets.

Paul urges us to the work of leading within the church, the most important work in the world. When our motives are right, this work pays eternal dividends. In Paul's day, only a deep love for Christ and genuine concern for the church could motivate people to lead. But in many cultures today where Christian leadership carries prestige and privilege, people aspire to leadership for reasons quite unworthy and self-seeking. Holy ambition has always been surrounded by distortions.

And so we find the ancient prophet Jeremiah giving his servant Baruch some very wise and simple counsel: "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Don't do it!" (Jeremiah 45:5 NLT). Jeremiah was not condemning all ambition as sinful, but he was pointing to selfish motivation that makes ambition wrong—"great things for yourself." Desiring to excel is not a sin. It is motivation that determines ambition's character. Our Lord never taught against the urge to high achievement, but He did expose and condemn unworthy motivation.

All Christians are called to develop God-given talents, to make the most of their lives, and to develop to the fullest their God-given gifts and capabilities. But Jesus taught that ambition that centers on the self is wrong. Speaking to young ministers about to be ordained, the great missionary leader Bishop Stephen Neill said: "I am inclined to think that ambition in any ordinary sense of the term is nearly always sinful in ordinary men. I am certain that in the Christian it is always sinful, and that it is most inexcusable of all in the ordained minister."¹

Ambition which centers on the glory of God and welfare of the church is a mighty force for good.

The word *ambition* comes from a Latin word meaning "campaigning for promotion." The phrase suggests a variety of elements: social visibility and approval, popularity, peer

recognition, the exercise of authority over others. Ambitious people, in this sense, enjoy the power that comes with money, prestige, and authority. Jesus had no time for such ego-driven ambitions. The true spiritual leader will never “campaign for promotion.”

To His “ambitious” disciples Jesus announced a new standard of greatness: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all” (Mark 10:42–44). We will consider this amazing statement at length in a later chapter. Here at the outset of this study of spiritual leadership, we will simply highlight Jesus’ master principle: True greatness, true leadership, is found in giving yourself in service to others, not in coaxing or inducing others to serve you. True service is never without cost. Often it comes with a bitter cup of challenges and a painful baptism of suffering. For genuine godly leadership weighs carefully Jesus’ question: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38b). The real spiritual leader is focused on the service he and she can render to God and other people, not on the residuals and perks of high office or holy title. We must aim to put more into life than we take out.

“One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass on each other,” said Samuel Brengle, the great Salvation Army revival preacher. “The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.”²

“Let it once be fixed that a man’s ambition is to fit into God’s plan for him, and he has a North Star ever in sight to guide him steadily over any sea, however shoreless it seems,” wrote S. D. Gordon in one of his well-known devotional books. “He has a compass that points true in the thickest fog and fiercest storm, and regardless of magnetic rocks.”

The great leader Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) was tempted by rank and riches; indeed, he is most widely known by the title of honor noted here. But his attitude toward ambition was summed up in one simple statement: “I have one passion: it is He, He alone.” Zinzendorf turned from self-seeking to become the founder and leader of the Moravian Church, Methodist Church. His followers learned from their leader and circled the world with his passion. Before missionary work was popular or well-organized, the Moravians established overseas churches that had three times as many members as did their churches back home—a most unusual accomplishment. Indeed, one of every ninety-two Moravians left home to serve as a missionary.

Because we children of Adam want to become great,

He became small.

Because we will not stoop,

He humbled Himself.

Because we want to rule,

He came to serve.

FOR REFLECTION

How would you illustrate the differences between self-centered and God-centered ambition from your own life?

Who has been your most influential example of godly leadership?

What are some areas of honorable/holy ambition in your life?

The Search for Leaders

No one from the east or the west
 or from the desert can exalt a man.
 But it is God who judges:
 He brings one down, he exalts another.

PSALM 75:6-7

Give me a man of God—one man,
 One mighty prophet of the Lord,
 And I will give you peace on earth,
 Bought with a prayer and not a sword.

GEORGE LIDDELL¹

Real leaders are in short supply. Constantly people and groups search for them. A question echoes in every corner of the church—“Who will lead?” Throughout the Bible, God searches for leaders too.

“The LORD has sought out a man after his own heart and appointed him leader of his people” (1 Samuel 13:14).

“Go up and down the streets of Jerusalem, look around and consider, search through her squares. If you can find one person

who deals honestly and seeks the truth, I will forgive this city” (Jeremiah 5:1).

“I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall” (Ezekiel 22:30).

The Bible shows us that when God does find a person who is ready to lead, to commit to full discipleship, and take on responsibility for others, that person is used to the limit. Such leaders still have shortcomings and flaws, but despite those limitations, they serve God as spiritual leaders. Such were Moses, Gideon, and David. And in the history of the church, Martin Luther, John Wesley, Adoniram Judson, William Carey, and many others.

To be a leader in the church has always required strength and faith beyond the merely average. Why is our need for leaders so great, and candidates for leadership so few? Every generation faces the stringent demands of spiritual leadership, and most unfortunately turn away. But God welcomes the few who come forward to serve.

“The church is painfully in need of leaders,” lamented the English Methodist preacher William Sangster. “I wait to hear a voice and no voice comes. I would rather listen than speak—but there is no clarion voice to listen to.”²

If the world is to hear the church’s voice today, leaders are needed who are authoritative, spiritual, and sacrificial. Authoritative, because people desire reliable leaders who know where they are going and are confident of getting there. Spiritual, because without a strong relationship to God, even the most attractive and competent person cannot lead people to God. Sacrificial, because this trait follows the model of Jesus, who gave Himself for the whole world and who calls us to follow in His steps.

Churches grow in every way when they are guided by strong, spiritual leaders with the touch of the supernatural radiating in their service. The church sinks into confusion and malaise

without such leadership. Today those who preach with majesty and spiritual power are few, and the booming voice of the church has become a pathetic whisper. Leaders today—those who are truly spiritual—must take to heart their responsibility to pass on the torch to younger people as a first-line duty.

Many people regard leaders as naturally gifted with intellect, personal forcefulness, and enthusiasm. Such qualities certainly enhance leadership potential, but they do not define the spiritual leader. True leaders must be willing to suffer for the sake of objectives great enough to demand their wholehearted obedience.

Spiritual leaders are not elected, appointed, or created by synods or churchly assemblies. God alone makes them. One does not become a spiritual leader by merely filling an office, taking course work in the subject, or resolving in one's own will to do this task. A person must qualify to be a spiritual leader.

Often truly authoritative leadership falls on someone who years earlier dedicated themselves to practice the discipline of seeking first the kingdom of God. Then, as that person matures, God confers a leadership role, and the Spirit of God goes to work through him. When God's searching eye finds a person qualified to lead, God anoints that person with the Holy Spirit and calls him or her to a special ministry (Acts 9:17; 22:21).

Samuel Brengle, a gifted leader who served for many years in the Salvation Army, outlined the road to spiritual authority and leadership:

It is not won by promotion, but my many prayers and tears. It is attained by confession of sin, and much heart-searching and humbling before God; by self-surrender, a courageous sacrifice of every idol, a bold uncomplaining embrace of the cross, and by eternally looking unto Jesus crucified. It is not gained by seeking great things for ourselves, but like Paul, by

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counting those things that are gain to us as loss for Christ. This is a great price, but it must be paid by the leader whose power is recognized and felt in heaven, on earth, and in hell.³

God wants to show such people how strong He really is (2 Chronicles 16:9). But not all who aspire to leadership are willing to pay such a high personal price. Yet there is no compromise here: in the secret reaches of the heart, this price is paid, before any public office or honor. Our Lord made clear to James and John that high position in the kingdom of God is reserved for those whose hearts—even the secret places where no one else probes—are qualified. God's sovereign searching of our hearts, and then His call to leadership, are awesome to behold. And they make a person very humble.

One last thing must be said, a kind of warning. If those who hold influence over others fail to lead toward the spiritual uplands, then surely the path to the lowlands will be well worn. People travel together; no one lives detached and alone. We dare not take lightly God's call to leadership in our lives.

FOR REFLECTION

God took eighty years to prepare Moses for his leadership task. In what ways has God been preparing you?

As you begin this study, what do you understand as the primary qualifying traits of godly leadership?

How are you affected by the closing warning in this chapter?

The Master's Master Principle

Whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,
and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

MARK 10:43-44

Given the importance of competent leaders in the church—and in business and government too—we might expect that the Bible would use the term more often. In fact, the King James Bible (on which many of my generation have been nurtured) uses *leader* only six times. Much more frequently, the role is called *servant*. We do not read about “Moses, my leader,” but “Moses, my servant.” And this is exactly what Christ taught.¹

Jesus was a revolutionary, not in the guerrilla warfare sense but in His teaching on leadership. He overturned an existing order. In the world's ears, the term *servant* spoke everywhere of low prestige, low respect, low honor. Most people were not attracted to such a low-value role. When Jesus used the term, however, it was a synonym for greatness. And that was a revolutionary idea. It still is!

Christ taught that the kingdom of God was a community where each member served the others. He defined His ultimate purpose using that term:

“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Paul wrote in the same vein: “Serve one another in love” (Galatians 5:13). Our loving service should spread also to the needy world around us. But in most churches, a few people carry the load.

Jesus knew that the idea of leader as “loving servant of all” would not appeal to most people. Securing our own creature comforts is a much more common mission. But “servant” is His requirement for those who want to lead in His kingdom.

The sharp contrast between our common ideas about leadership and the revolution Jesus announced is nowhere clearer than in the Gospel of Mark 10:42–44: “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be the first must be slave of all.”

This was such a revolutionary idea that even those closest to Jesus, the disciples James and John, used their ambitious mother in a scheme to secure top positions in the coming kingdom before the other ten received their due. These two disciples took very seriously Jesus’ promise about sitting on glorious thrones and judging the tribes of Israel (Matthew 19:28), but they misunderstood how to get there.

Despite their friendship, Jesus did not give an inch to their campaign for office. “You don’t know what you are asking,” was His reply (Matthew 20:22). James and John wanted the glory, but not the cup of shame; the crown, but not the cross; the role of master, but not servant. Jesus used this occasion to teach two principles of leadership that the church must never forget.

- *The sovereignty principle of spiritual leadership.*

“To sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared” (Mark 10:40).

A more common response might have been: Honor and rank are for those who have prepared themselves for them, and worked very hard to get them. But here we see the fundamental difference in Jesus’ teaching and our human ideas. God assigns places of spiritual ministry and leadership in His sovereign will. The New Living Translation makes the point of verse 40 very clear: “God has prepared those places for the one he has chosen.”

Effective spiritual leadership does not come as a result of theological training or seminary degree, as important as education is. Jesus told His disciples, “You did not choose me, but I chose you and appointed you” (John 15:16). The sovereign selection of God gives great confidence to Christian workers. We can truly say, “I am here neither by selection of an individual nor election of a group but by the almighty appointment of God.”

- *The suffering principle of spiritual leadership.* “Can you drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38).

No hedging here. No dodging the hard realities. Jesus simply and honestly set forth the cost of serving in His kingdom. The task was magnificent and difficult; men and women leading in that task must have eyes wide open, and hearts willing to follow the Master all the way.

To the Lord’s probing question, the disciples responded glibly, “We are able.” What tragic lack of perspective! But Jesus knew what lay ahead. They would indeed drink the cup and know the baptism. They would fail miserably and be restored gloriously.

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Eventually, James would be executed, and John would finish his days in isolated confinement.

If the disciples figured to learn about leadership on the fast track and with appropriate perks and bonuses, Jesus soon disillusioned them. What a shock it was to discover that greatness comes through servanthood, and leadership through becoming a slave of all.

Only once in all the recorded words of Jesus did our Lord announce that He had provided an “example” for the disciples, and that was when He washed their feet (John 13:15). Only once in the rest of the New Testament does a writer offer an “example” (1 Peter 2:21), and that is an example of suffering. Serving and suffering are paired in the teaching and life of our Lord. One does not come without the other. And what servant is greater than the Lord?

THE SPIRIT OF SERVANTHOOD

Jesus’ teaching on servanthood and suffering was not intended merely to inspire good behavior. Jesus wanted to impart the spirit of servanthood, the sense of personal commitment and identity that He expressed when He said, “I am among you as one who serves.” Mere acts of service could be performed with motives far from spiritual.

In Isaiah 42, we read about the attitudes and inner motives that the coming Messiah would demonstrate as the ideal servant of the Lord. Where Israel failed to live up to this ideal, the Messiah would succeed. And the principles of His life would be a pattern for ours.

Dependence. “Here is my servant, whom I uphold” (Isaiah 42:1). This verse speaks of the coming Messiah. Jesus fulfilled

the prophecy by emptying Himself of divine prerogative (“made himself nothing,” Philippians 2:7). He surrendered the privileges of His God-nature and became dependent on His heavenly Father. He became in all ways like a human being. What a staggering paradox. As we become “empty” of self and dependent on God, the Holy Spirit will use us.

Approval. “My chosen one in whom I delight” (Isaiah 42:1). God took great delight in His servant Jesus. On at least two occasions, God declared that delight audibly (Matthew 3:17; 17:5). And that delight was reciprocal. In another Old Testament reference to the coming Messiah, the Son testifies, “I delight to do thy will, O my God” (Psalm 40:8 KJV).

Modesty. “He will not shout or cry out, or raise his voice in the streets” (Isaiah 42:2). Neither strident nor flamboyant, God’s servant conducts a ministry that appears almost self-effacing. What a contrast to the arrogant self-advertising of so many hypesters today, both in and out of the church.

On this very point the devil tempted Jesus, urging Him to attempt a headline-grabbing leap from the rooftop of the temple (Matthew 4:5). But Jesus did not seek headlines and did not fall to the plot.

So quiet and unobtrusive is the great Servant’s work that many today doubt His very existence. Jesus exemplifies the description of God found later in Isaiah: “Truly you are a God who hides himself” (Isaiah 45:15). This quality seems to be shared among all the host of heaven. Even the picture given to us of the cherubim—God’s angel servants—use four of their six wings to conceal their faces and feet. They too are content with hidden service (Isaiah 6:2).

Empathy. “A bruised reed he will not break, and a smoldering wick he will not snuff out” (Isaiah 42:3). The Lord’s servant is

sympathetic with the weak, mercifully understanding toward those who err. How often do people who fail wear the tread-marks of fellow pilgrims? But the ideal Servant does not trample on the weak and failing. He mends bruises and fans the weak spirit into a flame. Those who follow in His steps will never walk over people.

Many of us, even Christian workers, see a person whose life is a wreck and “pass by on the other side.” We seek a ministry more rewarding and worthy of our talents than bearing up the frail side of humanity. But from God’s point of view, it is noble work to reclaim the world’s downtrodden people. When we find some of those the world calls “the least” and seek to meet their needs, Christ tells us we can think of them as Him (Matthew 25:45).

How dimly Peter’s own wick burned in the garden and the judgment hall, but what a blaze on the day of Pentecost! God’s ideal Servant made that miserable man’s life a brilliant flame.

Optimism. “He will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth” (Isaiah 42:4). Pessimism and leadership are at opposite ends of life’s attitudes. Hope and optimism are essential qualities for the servant of God who battles with the powers of darkness over the souls of men and women. God’s ideal Servant is optimistic until every part of God’s work is done.

Anointing. “I will put my Spirit on him” (Isaiah 42:1). None of these leadership qualities—dependence, approval, modesty, empathy, or optimism—are sufficient for the task. Without the touch of the supernatural, these qualities are dry as dust. And so the Holy Spirit comes to rest upon and dwell in the ideal Servant. “You know . . . how God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power, and how he went around doing good” (Acts 10:37–38). Jesus’ ministry began when the Spirit descended

at His baptism, and then how the Servant began to shake the world!

Are we greater than our Lord? Can we do effective ministry without the Spirit of God working through us at every step? God offers us the same anointing. May we follow close to the great Servant, and receive the Spirit who shows us more of the Master.

FOR REFLECTION

How can you tell when you are being a servant?

What examples would you use to explain the sovereignty and suffering principles of spiritual leadership to someone?

Isaiah 42 includes six characteristics of God's special servant, Jesus. Which one do you find the greatest challenge as you exercise leadership?