

The Glory Drive

Godly ambitions lead to life, if we don't settle for the counterfeit, self-glory.

An interview with Dave Harvey

Christians, even pastors, don't know how to talk about ambition. As Dave Harvey puts it, "Check your local bookstore. In contrast to sex, which drives more publishing than any topic in the galaxy, there's practically nothing on ambition. Seriously, nada. I tried to find it, but it isn't there. You rarely even find the subject mentioned in business books anymore. Sex sells; ambition apologizes for even showing up."

His new book, *Rescuing Ambition* (Crossway, 2010) aims to change that. He doesn't just warn about the dangers of selfish ambition, he elevates the importance of godly ambitions.

Harvey, a criminology major in college, was working as a security manager in Philadelphia when he got involved in a church plant. Soon he was asked to join the staff of that church, Covenant Fellowship in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, as "the youth guy/evangelism guy/administrator/whatever was needed around the office." Within a few years, he became senior pastor and served in that capacity for 19 years. He now serves Sovereign Grace Ministries, where he is responsible for church planting, church care, and international expansion. Leadership's Marshall Shelley talked with him about personal ambition and the glory of God.

Why is ambition important?

Without ambition, nothing happens. Churches don't get planted, the lost aren't reached, the church has no impact. And beyond the church, businesses don't start, social problems go unaddressed and exploration doesn't happen. Without ambition people become lazy. If you undermine ambition, you rob people of their desire and will to do something great with their lives.

So lack of ambition is not a virtue—it's destructive.

The wrong kind of ambition is destructive. God's agenda is to shape us by engaging our ambition. We have dreams and desires for impact and aspirations to do things, and often we can assume that God's responsibility is to come alongside of us and make them a reality. But God may delay the fulfillment of those, or even deny the satisfaction of certain ambitions, because he's got a more important plan that requires the reorientation of our ambitions toward his glory.

Ambition about what I do and how I'm positioned is not as important as what Christ has done for me.

Did that happen to you?

Many times. For example, in my 20s my dream was to be a policeman. I trained for that. Yet no jobs opened up at that time. Every time a job would be posted in some borough or municipality, hundreds of people would turn out. But all I wanted was to be a cop somewhere in that area. Suddenly, a campus police position opened up at the Indiana University of Pennsylvania. And because I was an alumnus and had done my police certification through IUP, I was able to get

on the interview list. I did well and was one of the four final candidates. It just seemed as if everything was happening the way I'd been praying for it to happen.

But one of the other candidates got the position. This ambition I had, in a sense, was unsatisfied. Nothing went the way I expected. But a month later, a business in the Philadelphia area was interviewing, and the church in this area was being planted, and that call came together to deliver me to the Philadelphia area. And a year later I was in full-time ministry.

So God frustrated one ambition in order to birth another.

Yeah. God denied my original ambition in order to satisfy me, redirect my focus, and to help me to delight in him even more.

So it's not immediately clear if an ambition a person has is the one that God intends to bless?

I believe that much of what God is doing in our lives is to sift out and rework our ambitions. Sometimes our ambitions are too grand for our gifts and we need them realistically downsized. But I'm also concerned we can settle on ambitions that are too small because we can fear failure, ultimately fear failing God. So we squelch those dreams. Godly ambitions are good because they have been honed by God for his purposes.

So is the godly ambition about attaining a position, or about accomplishing something for God, or something else?

What impresses me about people with godly ambition is that it's not rooted in a position; it's rooted in the gospel. In other words, these people recognize that in the gospel they have received all of the approval they will ever need. They stand in the righteousness of Christ, they've been adopted as sons and daughters of God, have received spiritual blessings, on and on—all of it coming through the gospel.

So the ambition about what I do and how I'm positioned is not as important as what Christ has done for me, and how I live in light of that.

In ministry, godly ambition and personal ambition are often melded. For instance, when you hear a young person say something like "I want to preach like C.J. Mahaney" or "I want to preach like John Piper," how do you respond?

I start by celebrating the first part of their sentence, "I want to preach." And I express my enthusiasm that God has put in their heart a desire to proclaim the Word of God, to articulate sound doctrine clearly, so that people would be helped. I want them to feel the enthusiasm I have over the fact that God may be raising up someone for gospel ministry.

It's the "like C.J. Mahaney" or "like John Piper" thing that I would then move to. I'd try to help them understand that however they develop, whatever they do in ministry is going to be distinctively "them." They have their own gifts and capabilities, and God will be most glorified in and through them if they seek to develop according to who they are and not just try to pattern themselves after someone else.

God is very good to the body of Christ by allowing there to be men of exceptional gifting like John Piper and C.J. Mahaney. And as Piper himself has said in *A God-ward Life*, "Mountains are not meant to envy." He talks about how we should approach Charles Spurgeon and other preaching greats similar to the way one approaches the Grand Canyon. You don't say, "Wow,

this is amazing. I wish I could dig a hole like this." No, you just stand there in awe, and you thank God that something like this exists.

Likewise when you observe a great preacher, don't envy the mountain. You just thank God that there are those with exceptional gifts. And desire to use the gifts you've been given for God's glory.

So appreciation and wonder give glory to God, but comparison usually leads to ... Comparison is a doorway into selfish ambition. It leads you to a place of competition and contrast, and then competing becomes a part of your ministry paradigm, so that you're ultimately and unintentionally walking down a road where selfish ambition begins to drive what you do in life.

One of the things we frequently hear from pastors is this: "My greatest ambition is just to hear those words, "Well done, my good and faithful servant. Enter into your reward." Is that a godly ambition?

Overall that's a legitimate and biblical motivation. What it can at times reflect, though, is a lack of awareness of what the gospel already provides for us. As a result of the cross and the resurrection, we've been accepted. We have all the approval that we need, right now. Christ lived a perfect life, in perfect conformity to God's law in all things, which created a bank account that was credited, "imputed," to us.

So when God looks at us, he no longer sees us in our sinfulness, but he sees a person redeemed by the perfect righteousness of Christ, and that elicits his approval, his blessing. So we then live our life not working for God's approval, hoping someday to finally earn the "well done," but we live obeying and working because we've already gotten God's approval. That's a completely different experience. This means that all the mental energy invested in earthly applause and seeking man's approval can now be redirected to new ambitions for God's glory.

So conversion is essential to godly ambition.

That's an important distinction. At conversion, the regenerating work of the Spirit of God is so powerful, it's so sweeping, it puts a new heart within us. God sets in motion a drive within us to use our life for the glory of God. The glory drive that he created us with that has been corrupted by the sinful nature.

It kindles affections for God. It draws us to want to magnify God. It inspires us to develop ourselves so that we can be spent for God.

The message about ambition doesn't begin with *This is what you must do*, but it begins with *This is what God has done*. It really starts with conversion. So we can now move out consistent with what God is already doing in our life, what God has already set in motion.

I recently read an article where a guy was talking about Paul's example. He was a zealous, ambitious man. He had this drive to distinguish himself by destroying Christianity. But that ambition was corrupted. It was moving him away from God.

He's converted, and in Acts 9, the "why" question seems to be on the mind of God. "Saul, why are you persecuting me?" God seems to be speaking to him on the level of his ambition and motivation.

After his conversion, his ambition is redeemed. He's not a person without ambition. But his ambitions are changed because God is in the middle of them. So now his achievements, his past, his education, he considers but rubbish. His singular ambition now is to see the gospel put forward. "I make it my ambition to proclaim where Christ is not known."

We all chase glory. To seek the glory that comes from God, we move Jesus Christ to the center of our glory drive.

That's a redeemed ambition. He no longer wants to live for his own glory. He wants to live for the glory of God.

You mention in the book that everyone seeks glory, either God's or their own. We all chase glory. It attracts us. We're drawn to it. Selfish ambition happens when believers move self to the center of "the glory drive." But God, in cultivating ambition in us, works from within us and directs that glory drive toward himself. But Scripture actually calls us to seek glory.

"To those who by persistence in doing good seek glory, honor and immortality, he will give eternal life. But for those who are self-seeking and who reject the truth and follow evil, there will be wrath" ([Rom. 2:6-8](#)). Here God's not just sanctioning the pursuit of glory; he says it leads to eternal life.

Then in John 12, Jesus describes those who believed in him but did not confess it for fear of the Pharisees, "For they loved the glory that comes from man more than the glory that comes from God." The issue is not that they're seeking glory. It's where they're finding glory. They love the wrong kind of glory.

Seeking glory, a certain kind of glory, is the reason we exist. That's the foundation for ambition. But in seeking the glory that comes from God, the glory of God is first a Person. It's Jesus Christ.

So when we're seeking the glory that comes from God, we're moving Jesus Christ to the center of our glory drive.

How do you distinguish godly from selfish ambition?

One way is by whether I'm doing something with God in view or with people in view. We can replace our dream to use our life for God's glory by measuring ourselves primarily by other people. That's when selfish ambition enters. Godly ambition pursues God; selfish ambition pursues favorable comparison with other people. In other words, it's not about God; it's about whether I look better than other people.

An athlete, for instance, can seek to excel in respect to God. It doesn't need to be about besting everyone else. "Whatever you do work heartily as unto the Lord, knowing that from the Lord you will receive your inheritance" ([Col. 3:20](#)). He's performing before the audience of One. Now many athletes do great exploits with no ambition for God. And those may count in the record books. But they have no eternal value in the eternal record book of God. And that's the book that seems to matter most.

Can a person be humble and ambitious at the same time?

Certainly. There's a misapplication of humility that makes some people assume you can't pursue both humility and ambition at the same time. We're tempted to think we have to set aside ambition in order to move toward humility. So Christians can become so modest they aspire to very little.

Humility is like the guardrail for our ambitions. It keeps our ambitions moving on the right road toward the glory of God.

G.K. Chesterton put it well: "What we suffer from today is humility in the wrong place... The old humility was a spur that prevented a man from stopping; not a nail in his boot that prevented him from going on. For the old humility made a man doubtful about his efforts, which might make him work harder. But the new humility makes a man doubtful about his aims, which will make him stop working altogether."

I think the ambition that pleases God is focused on God. It isn't the new humble ambition; and it isn't selfish, competitive ambition. It is the desire to do great things for God because he is worthy of great things. And it is confident that even falling short in our goals doesn't thwart his purposes because we stand in his redeeming grace. That's the kind of ambition God can use to make a difference in the world. Our aims, our ambitions, are what keep us going forward.