

Podcast: The Epicenter of Godly Ambition

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Preacher: Chris Oswald

[0 : 00] Hello, hello, hello. Welcome to the Providence podcast.

My name is Chris Oswald, senior pastor at Providence Community Church. I'm recording this Tuesday morning, October 3rd. It's about to strike 8 a.m.

And I'm preparing this podcast mainly for additional reflection on the text we examined on Sunday, which at the end of the day wound up mostly being 1 Timothy 3.1.

We have the whole passage to work through. I got through the first verse. And I'm not going to move much beyond the first verse again today. I do this podcast on particular weeks when we have community groups with the particular intention that this recording serve as a sort of a setup for your interactions in community group as you meet twice a month to stir one another up to faith and good deeds.

And doing that requires really a reflection back on the passage that we examined the week before and in particular kind of what was said during the sermon and so on and so forth.

[1 : 20] And so I want to do that today. I want to get back into the main topic we addressed on Sunday, which would be ambition. Ambition.

We want to make sure that we understand that ambition, along with all the other qualifications in this passage, apply to all of us.

They apply in different ways. They're going to express themselves in different contexts. But there's really nothing per se on the list of qualifications in 1 Timothy 3.1-7 that are sort of above any Christian.

They're all just things we should all aspire to. And so today I want to talk in particular about the idea of ambition and how it fits into the average Christian life.

The first idea is that we should indeed all aspire to do as much as we can for the kingdom of God. I mentioned that the Greek for the word aspire, at the beginning of 1 Timothy 3, it says, if anyone aspires to the office of overseer.

[2 : 29] The Greek word for aspire there is to stretch oneself out to get. Like it's a reaching for. This fits with something I'd read years ago from the great William Carey, the great missionary to India, when he wrote, expect great things from God, attempt great things for God.

And elsewhere he said, surely it is worthwhile to lay ourselves out with all our might in promoting the cause and kingdom of Christ.

Lay ourselves out, this stretching out, this grasping for a godly ambition. Regarding ambition and differentiating between selfish ambition and godly ambition, the great John Stott wrote, ambitions for self may be quite modest.

Ambitions for God, however, if they are to be worthy, can never be modest. There is something inherently inappropriate about cherishing small ambitions for God.

How can we ever be content that he should acquire just a little more honor in the world? No, once we are clear that God is king, then we long to see him crowned with glory and honor.

[3 : 46] Accorded his true place, which is the supreme place, we become ambitious for the spread of his kingdom and righteousness everywhere. Sometimes godly ambitions will have us aspiring toward a new task.

But very often, this is the key thing I want you to see, very often godly ambition simply involves taking our current lives more seriously and seeing what we do now as *quorum deo*, which means service before the face of God.

For instance, two weeks ago, I talked about mothering. And there's a way to mother without any godly ambition. And there's a way to mother with godly ambition. And the net result down the road will be significantly different according to one's ambition, according to how seriously one takes the

task.

But the actual activity itself of mothering, or the title I suppose you could say, hasn't changed one bit. I think that what I'm trying to push us toward is this idea that Jesus deals with in the parable of the servants and the talents.

I think that has a lot to teach us about how to apply godly ambition in our lives. In this case, the idea is that we want to make the most out of what God has already given us.

[5 : 11] There are a lot of nuances in that parable. But one of the things I think is so remarkable about that parable is that in addition to focusing on the nature of the master, the first two servants had some sense of understanding of the nature of money.

And they had some sense of understanding that the nature of money is by its very nature, a multiplying force when applied correctly. And this is reflected at the end when the master condemns the third servant.

He says that money has a fundamental ability, even if it's put in a bank, to multiply. And I think that's the way we have to look at our lives and the way that we look at our current situations.

We want to often change our circumstances as if our circumstances are the thing that really are the limiter. It's like, well, that's not usually the case.

Our circumstances usually contain enough multiplying potential that if we were simply to take those circumstances seriously, we would see growth. We would have plenty of ambition.

[6 : 23] There's plenty of potential ambition usually in our current life situations. Very often in my life, I have felt a restlessness.

And that restlessness in my mind, maybe particularly because of my personality, that restlessness often will initially be interpreted as a call to change circumstances or even locations.

But if you look back at my life, and this surprises me more than anybody, you know, I really haven't done that in ministry. I've kind of stayed in the same place for pretty extensive periods of time.

And the reason for that is because initially that restlessness begins to sort of be interpreted initially kind of by my foolishness as, oh, I should change my address. I should change my location.

I should go to a different church or so on and so forth. But then as I sit with the Lord, I begin to realize that the restlessness is really about having a newfound respect for the potential of my particular circumstances in this moment.

[7 : 30] And I guess you could say doubling down on optimization. I was speaking with another guy at church the other day, and we were talking about advice we would give young men and so on and so forth.

And he talked about like, try to take everything you're doing now and just do it like 20% better over a year, something like that.

Well, you know, we'd fall into the question of better and so on and so forth. But the idea is to take what you have now and invest it in a way that reflects its true potential and its true importance before God.

So here's a good question. This is something you might ask during community groups. How can the life I have right now be further maximized to do the most good for the kingdom of God?

I mentioned this in part to some extent in Sunday's sermon when I spoke about David and Goliath in 1 Samuel 17. A key to that story that gets overlooked is that David was more or less a rather ordinary guy in so far as his giant killing capacities went.

[8 : 44] King Saul says to him, you're not able to go against this Philistine to fight with him, for you are but a youth and you have been a man and he, Goliath, has been a man of war from his youth.

And David's response was, your servant used to keep sheep for his father. And when there came a lion or a bear and took a lamb from the flock, I went after him and struck him and delivered it out of his mouth.

And if he arose against me, I caught him by his beard and struck him and killed him. Now, I hinted at this on Sunday. I'm convinced that if supposing there were 50 men there who overheard that conversation with Saul, there would have been, even in a group of 50, at least a few who would have thought, well, you know, I've done that too.

You know, there were many shepherds in the army of Israel. It was one of the most common professions. And it's highly unlikely that David's shepherding experience was wildly unusual in the sense that he was the only one to encounter predators trying to kill his sheep.

So when David is using, hey, I've killed bears and lions to protect my sheep, as his justification for why he is able to go against Goliath, there are people that if they'd overheard that would have thought, well, you know, I have that too.

[10:07] I have that story too. And see, it's really not about having unique equipment. It's about understanding the equipment that you do have, the stories that you do have, the experiences you do have.

It's understanding them correctly. It's understanding what was going on in those stories, and it's understanding how they can be extrapolated out into the future. What is exceptional about David is not the fact that he was a shepherd who took care of his sheep, or took care of his sheep from, protected his sheep from predators.

What's exceptional about David is his ability to see God's faithfulness to him in relatively small things, and his ability to leverage what he knows to be true about God in these small things toward bigger things.

In verse 36 of 1 Samuel 17, he responds to Saul's objection by saying, Your servant has struck down both lions and bears, and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them.

You see how he's extrapolating God's faithfulness in the past outward into the next thing, into the next challenge. And this uncircumcised Philistine shall be one of them, for he has defied the armies of the living God.

[11:28] David's not adding any new skills. He's not adding really any new activities. He simply sees Israel as sheep in the mouth of Goliath.

Goliath is just one more predator trying to kill the thing he loves and values and respects. And so David says in verse 37, The Lord who delivered me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear will deliver me from the hand of this Philistine.

And Saul said to David, Go, and the Lord be with you. Now what we must understand when we're talking about average Christian ambition is we must understand that gratitude and humility are the catalysts for courageous ambition.

Gratitude and humility are the catalysts for courageous ambition. David did not look on his experiences with the bear and the lion as something he had done on his own.

He sees that God was doing that through him. He doesn't look back at those things and say that he had accomplished something on his own. He sees God's faithfulness through these past victories.

[12:45] And what I think is often happening, I think we are in a confidence gap, a period of demoralization where people should have more confidence than they do toward the Lord.

And I think what's going on there is that there's a whole backlog of things you need to file in the appropriate categories. Have you ever had like a several days mail stack up?

Or have you ever had your inbox filled up? And the work is there. You don't have any question about what you need to do. It's just a matter of sitting down and doing it.

And to some extent, it is, for me, the mundaneness of that task of, like, I already know what I have to do. It's not going to be that hard and so forth that can kind of encourage procrastination.

It's like, oh, this won't be difficult to do, so I don't need to do it now. Which is exactly, of course, like defiance of one of my favorite productivity books, which is Getting Things Done or How to Get Things Done by David Allen, I believe.

[13:50] His adage is, if it takes less than five minutes to do, do it right now. Anyway, the point is that I think that many of us have a very cluttered file of past experiences that we've never clearly named as God was faithful to me there.

God was faithful to me there. I think we're keeping long accounts of gratitude. We've got to reconcile the checkbook of our past experiences and see, He took care of me there. He took care of me there. He took care of me there.

He took care of me there. And so on and so forth. Because that is, as it turns out, the catalyst of godly ambition. Gratitude. The capacity to see God's past faithfulness.

And David is able to do that. He's able to extrapolate the past faithfulness of God into the next challenge. Now, the faithfulness of God is key.

Because the next challenge, very often, will be bigger than the one before. It will be bigger to you than the one before. It won't be bigger to God. That's the key, right?

[15:01] And David could easily see the difference between a bear and a giant, who had been trained for war since his youth. That's a big jump in competition. David's strength of schedule has

just really increased significantly.

He's gone from D2 to D1, you know? So the jump is big for David. But David doesn't see the past accomplishments as something that he did.

He sees them as something God did. And the jump in competition for God between a bear and a giant is negligible. It's nonexistent. There is no jump in competition for him.

And so this is the other piece. Gratitude plus humility. The capacity to say, like, it wasn't me who did that. It was God. And you might say, well, yeah, he took care of me in these small ways.

But now there's this big challenge. Or can I really do this next thing because it's more difficult? Or so on and so forth. It's like, well, difficult for who? Difficult for who?

[16:02] Who are you counting on, right? Right? That's such an interesting thing about godly ambition. It arises out of humility and gratitude. It does not, it cannot rise out of confidence in one's own capacities.

It rises out of confidence in God. And that confidence in God comes by, you know, keeping the inbox of past accomplishments rightly filed.

Of understanding how you got to where you are even today. That is why William Carey's formula is constructed the way it is. William Carey's formula is not attempt great things for God.

And it is not attempt great things for God and then expect great things from God. No, his formula is constructed in a very thoroughly biblical way. Expect great things from God first.

Then attempt great things for God. The root of godly ambition is confidence in God. And confidence in God arises out of counting your blessings and seeing that he has already done great things for us.

[17:07] Even impossible things. The Christian life really is the parable of the talents, friends. It involves taking what he has already given us and investing it in faith.

Extrapolating out into the future how what he has given us even now can be, again, going back to 1 Timothy 3.1, stretched out. Into the future. William Carey launched into a new missions movement that wound up taking hold amongst many churches in the West.

William Carey launched this in a period of time when the church had relatively low ambition. And I want to now take a moment and talk about, I talked about where high ambition comes from.

Let's talk about where low ambition comes from. So, the low ambition of William Carey's time came from the church focusing on what it lacked.

On what God had not yet done for them. So, here's the adage. High ambition flows out of recognizing what God has already done and extrapolating that into the future.

[18:15] Low ambition, on the other hand, is always focusing on what God has not done yet. On what is lacking. One author who was helpful to me in kind of outlining some of the basic ideas of that period of time with Carey, a man named Ryan Griffith wrote an article on Desiring God about this.

And he says that at the time of Carey, the church had become obsessed with something that God had not yet done. This is how he writes. In the late 18th century, Baptist pastors in north central England were grappling with an understanding that had paralyzed the churches in their association. What is that? What is that notion? The notion is that some additional Pentecost-like Acts 2 outpouring of the Holy Spirit would be necessary before the nations could come to Christ.

Until God moved in a clearly supernatural way, some argued, churches had neither the duty to act nor any hope of success.

So, they were focusing on not what God had already done for them and through them, but what had to happen in the future in order for them to move, in order for them to do the next thing.

[19:30] They were a low ambition people because they were focused on what God had not yet done. But there were a few men who saw through this. Andrew Fuller and John Sutcliffe and William Carey, they pushed against this mentality.

Andrew Fuller accused the leaders of being consumed by a procrastinating spirit. Does that sound familiar? A procrastinating spirit. Always focused on what hasn't happened yet, on what needs to happen next before you can do this or that thing.

No, it's like God has already done so much. So, to push back on this, they preached sermons and William Carey eventually published a little booklet called An Inquiry Concerning the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.

The brightness of Isaiah 54 is built on the darkness of Isaiah 53. I'm going to read some scripture to you. I'm going to read a fair amount of scripture to you.

I'm going to read all of chapter 53 and 54. So pay attention. Who has believed what he heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?

For he grew up before him like a young plant and like a root out of dry ground. He had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.

He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and acquainted with grief, and as one from whom men hide their faces. He was despised, and we esteemed him not.

[26 : 21] Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God and afflicted.

But he was pierced for our transgressions. He was crushed for our iniquities. Upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace. And with his wounds we are healed.

All we, like sheep, have gone astray. We have turned everyone to his own way. And the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of his all. He was oppressed, and he was afflicted.

Yet he opened not his mouth. Like a lamb that is led to the slaughter, and like a sheep before its shearers is silent, so he opened not his mouth. By oppression and judgment he was taken away. And as for his generation, who considered that he was cut off out of the land of the living, stricken for the transgression of my people.

[27 : 25] And they made his grave with the wicked, and with a rich man in his death. Although he had done no violence, and there was no deceit in his mouth. Yet it was the will of the Lord to crush him.

He has put him to grief. When his soul makes an offering for guilt, he shall see his offspring. He shall prolong his days.

The will of the Lord shall prosper in his hand. Out of the anguish of his soul he shall see and be satisfied. By his knowledge shall the righteous one, my servant, make many to be accounted righteous.

And he shall bear their iniquities. Therefore I will divide him a portion with the many, and he shall divide the spoil with the strong, because he has poured out his soul to death, and was numbered with the transgressors.

Yet he bore the sin of many, and makes intercession for the transgressors. That's Isaiah 53.

[28 : 33] And now we turn the page from this great thing that God has done into godly ambition. In chapter 54, Sing, O barren one, you who did not bear, break forth into singing and cry aloud, for you have not been in labor.

For the children of the desolate one will be more than the children of her who is married, says the Lord. Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out.

Do not hold back. Lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes, for you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your offspring will possess the nations and will people the desolate cities.

Fear not, for you will not be ashamed. Be not confounded, for you will not be disgraced. For you will forget the shame of your youth, and the reproach of your widowhood you will remember no more.

For your maker is your husband. The Lord of hosts is his name. The Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer. The God of the whole earth he is called. For the Lord has called you like a wife deserted and grieved in spirit, like a wife of youth when she is cast off, says your God.

[29 : 50] For a brief moment I deserted you, but with great compassion I will gather you. In overflowing anger for a moment I hid my face from you, but with everlasting love I will have compassion on you, says the Lord, your Redeemer.

This is like the days of Noah to me, as I swore that the waters of Noah should no more go over the earth. So I have sworn that I will not be angry with you and will not rebuke you, for the mountains may depart and the hills be removed, but my steadfast love shall not depart from you, and my covenant of peace shall not be removed, says the Lord, who has compassion on you.

O afflicted one, storm-tossed and not comforted, behold, I will set your stones in antimony and lay the foundations with sapphires. I will make your pinnacles of agate and your gates of carbuncles and all your wall of precious stones, and all your children shall be taught by the Lord, and great shall be the peace of your children.

In righteousness you shall be established. You shall be far from oppression, for you shall not fear, and from terror, for it shall not come near you. If anyone stirs up strife, it is not from me. Whoever stirs up strife with you shall fall because of you. Behold, I have created the smith who blows the fire of coals and produces a weapon for its purpose. I have also created the ravager to destroy.

[31 : 17] But no weapon that is fashioned against you shall succeed, and you shall refute every tongue that rises against you in judgment. This is the heritage of the servants of the Lord, and their vindication is from me, declares the Lord.

Just a few verses of the next chapter, chapter 55. Come, everyone who thirsts. Come to the waters. He who has no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without price.

So do you understand now how we have every reason to be ambitious? We can look back at Isaiah 53 and see that our sin was satisfied in Jesus Christ.

It was canceled out. It was cleansed. And that we are now in the favor of God in Christ. And we can look back from an Isaiah 53 vantage of humility and gratitude and extrapolate what he has done for us there into confidence.

The confidence we see in Isaiah 54 where we're enlarging our tents and we're stretching out our habitations. Let me close by bringing you back to David. He says, May the Lord be with you.

[33 : 09] Now, did you know, do you realize that that exact same formula, that exact same formula is brought up again in the book of Romans in chapter 8.

It's the exact same thing. Past faithfulness extrapolated out into future confidence. What shall then we say to these things? If God is for us, who can be against us?

He who did not spare his own son, but gave him up for us all, how will he not also with him graciously give us all things? Who shall bring any charge against God's elect?

It is God who justifies. Who is to condemn? Christ Jesus is the one who died. More than that, he was raised. Who is at the right hand of God. Who indeed is interceding for us.

Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? No.

[34 : 04] No. In all these things, we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am sure that neither death nor life nor angels nor rulers, nor things present nor things to come, nor powers nor height nor depth nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

David says, God delivered me from the bear and the lion. Therefore, I can expect great things from God and attempt great things for God. And Paul's like, hold my beer.

God delivered me from sin by giving up his only son. And how can I dare to think that he who did not spare his own son but gave him up for us all, how will he not also graciously give us all things? Extrapolating God's past faithfulness into the future is where godly ambition originates. Well, my friends, have a wonderful, wonderful week.

May God bless you and keep you. I'm praying for you. And be sure to stir one another up to love and good deeds when you gather for community groups.

[35 : 27] God bless. God bless. God bless.