

AMBITION, GLORY AND GIVING YOUR ALL

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Muddy
Pearl

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PREFACE

You may think this book is my autobiography. It is, in a sense.

Nearly all of my books are conceived in my mind years before the actual writing. Approximately twenty years ago one of my deacons at Westminster Chapel began saying to me that he hoped I would write a book on the subject of ambition. I cannot say that any bells rang but I kept his suggestion in mind. Some two or three years ago another deacon from Westminster Chapel said virtually the same thing to me: would I please consider writing a book on ambition? I find it interesting that two laymen – one a businessman, the other a lawyer – would suggest this. I thought of the verse about ‘two or three witnesses’ establishing a matter (Deuteronomy 19:15). From that day this subject began to grow in my mind to the extent that I became gripped. It has been my practice never to proceed with a sermon or a book until I am *gripped*. I have learned – certainly in my case – that the anointing of the Holy Spirit is invariably connected to this phenomenon – being gripped.

It happened that the 2012 Olympics in London were in progress when I began the actual writing of this book. I watched all I could of these thrilling sporting events, including many interviews by Piers Morgan on CNN with people like Sebastian Coe, Mark Spitz, Michael Phelps and Gabby Douglas. I was enthralled with those occasions and have no doubt been somewhat influenced by them in the writing of this book.

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I used to say to David Jermyn, one of the aforementioned deacons, that one day I would dedicate a book to him. I don't think he believed me. But here it is – this one being dedicated to David and also Paul Gardiner, the other deacon who suggested that I write a book on ambition. Both of these unusual and godly men became deacons during the time of my ministry at Westminster Chapel. They both have also been a blessing to Louise and me personally, and I take pleasure in dedicating this book to David and Paul.

My thanks to Jane Campbell, editorial director of Chosen Books, and also to my editor. My friend Lyndon Bowring reads all my manuscripts before they become books, and yet he – and also his wife Celia – have given me more helpful suggestions this time than almost any other book I have written. Most of all I thank Louise – my wife of 54 years, my best friend and critic.

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INTRODUCTION

And I saw that all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour. This too is meaningless, a chasing after the wind.

Ecclesiastes 4:4

God uses sex to drive a man to marriage, ambition to drive a man to service, fear to drive a man to faith.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

When John F. Kennedy was asked why he wanted to be President of the United States he replied, 'That's where the power is.' Dale Carnegie, the author of *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, says that the greatest need in people is the desire to feel important. Psychologist Abraham Maslow says that the peak experience of a human being is 'self-actualisation' – when he or she comes into his or her highest level of self-awareness, or significance.

What is it that gives a person significance? Is it the feeling of being admired? Is there a significance that goes beyond being admired or feeling important? If so, how does ambition figure in this need?

It used to make some people smile a little nervously when I quoted the words, 'God uses sex to drive a man to marriage, ambition to drive a man to service, fear to drive a man to faith' – especially at weddings. But I almost always quoted it in my

wedding sermons (exactly ninety-one in my twenty-five years at Westminster Chapel). The congregation usually went quiet for a moment. It helped that I gave Martin Luther the credit for it. I am quite sure it came from Luther. My friend Dr Michael Eaton says he could not find where Luther said it, although admitting it sounds a lot like Luther. If Martin Luther did not actually say this, someone should have! And if you prove to me that Luther did not coin this phrase, then do forgive me if from now on I should take credit for it myself! In any case, these words lay behind this book in a very significant way.

Definition

Ambition is the *desire to achieve* – often in the eyes of others. Motivation is the driving force that would make it happen. It is the thesis of this book that God often uses ambition to motivate us to do what we need to do – and what He calls us to do. As we shall see in some detail later, ambition is not a virtue; it can be a good thing and also a bad thing. But ambition as a potential for good is one of the main aspects of the human personality that God often taps to motivate us to do His will.

There are exceptions to this, of course. There are people who are motivated to do needed service for other reasons than to be seen of people. There is also a variety of reasons why some people choose to marry. And there are people who may become Christians without first consciously tasting of the fear of God. But, generally speaking, it is my view that God often motivates us by appealing to our self-interest. The Holy Spirit is the ultimate and final explanation for our conversion and the good we do, yes; but it is nonetheless true that God often motivates us by what sometimes appears as a human explanation.

As for the alleged quote from Luther about sex, ambition and fear, I hasten to point out that these three components in our fallen nature invariably need to be refined. They are transitional: entry points through which God often chooses to get our attention. For example, the *eros* love that lies behind a couple wanting to get

married must eventually be upgraded to *agape* love (while not abandoning *eros*) if that marriage is to survive. When husbands are told by the apostle Paul to love their wives as Christ loved the church (see Ephesians 5:25), he did not use *eros* but *agape*.

This is the principle we must grasp when it comes to ambition. The desire to achieve must be upgraded to the degree we get our motivation from wanting to please God alone.

There were at least three Greek words in the ancient Hellenistic world that translate into English as love: (1) *Eros*, physical love, often the only kind of love the world seems to think about, is nonetheless a God-given desire but so often abused; (2) *Philia*, brotherly love, from which we get the name of the great city of Philadelphia, is family love – parent for a child, brother for a sister or a child for a pet; (3) *Agape*, unselfish love, is what motivated God to send His Son into the world. It is the word used by Paul regarding marriage and is the word used throughout 1 Corinthians 13, the famous ‘love’ chapter of the Bible. If, therefore, *eros* love is not soon paralleled by *agape* love in a marriage, that marriage is doomed to fail sooner or later. The folly of the present generation is that too many people marry for *eros* love then wonder why after a few months they are so unhappy. Seven marriages for Elizabeth Taylor did not bring her happiness.

If, therefore, God uses ambition to drive a man or woman to service, such a motivation must develop so that it becomes God-oriented. This means that a love for the glory of God must eclipse that natural ambition, which originally set a person on a path to achieve. Sadly the ancient Pharisees’ desire to do good works only to be seen of men (see Matthew 6:1ff) never matured. You could say that the Pharisees never grew up. Their lack of maturity also became their downfall, this being the very reason they missed their Messiah.

Fear as a motivation

When the hymn writer John Newton injected that second verse into his great hymn *Amazing Grace* – ‘Twas grace that taught

my heart to fear,' he was no doubt partly referring to his own experience. And yet this kind of thinking was axiomatic in his tradition. Martin Luther taught that we must know God as an enemy before we can know Him as a friend. It was an assumption in the theology of the reformers (as in Luther and John Calvin – and later by Jonathan Edwards) that the preaching of the wrath and justice of God would lead people to repentance. After all, the earliest message of the New Testament was that of John the Baptist warning people to 'flee from the wrath to come' (Matthew 3:7, KJV).

There is no doubt that I myself was convicted of my sins by the awareness of God's wrath; therefore, fear initially motivated me to be saved. But I suspect that so little preaching is done nowadays along that line that, if fear must necessarily set in before one has faith, few would be saved! This is partly why I said there are exceptions. There are many ways God may use to bring His people to salvation. That said, for those who do come to Christ out of a fear of God's wrath, such anxiety and trepidation must – without ever losing a sense of a healthy fear of God – grow into a sweet intimacy with the Holy Spirit. This comes through an ever-increasing knowledge of Jesus Christ through prayer, reading the Bible, good teaching and walking in the light. The result will be to experience the loving fellowship of the Father (see 1 John 1:7).

Funnily enough, the quote from Ecclesiastes 4:4, presumably written by Solomon, is more controversial than the alleged Luther quote: 'all labour and all achievement spring from man's envy of his neighbour.' Really? *All* labour? *All* achievement? Luther may have his opinion, but Ecclesiastes 4:4 is from Holy Scripture – the infallible Word of God. Or is that verse there merely to show Solomon's personal opinion based upon his own observations?

There are at least two interpretations of Ecclesiastes 4:4, both of which are valid. First, that it is saying how people would not be motivated to get things done or to achieve any measure of success were it not for the good feeling we get from *making other people jealous!* If people will not discover or admire what I achieve, then what's the point?

‘As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another’ (Proverbs 27:17). Perhaps the greatest rivalry of recent years is that of Bill Gates, associated with Microsoft – one of the world’s wealthiest men – and the late Steve Jobs, associated with Apple. Steve Jobs once said that Bill Gates never had an original thought in his life! Jobs, too, amassed great personal wealth. He said that when he was twenty-three he was worth one million dollars, ten million when he was twenty-four and one hundred million when he was twenty-five. He also said that he is the only person to have lost a quarter of a billion in one year. And yet he eventually did what was unprecedented, rescuing Apple from a major setback and making it the richest company in the world. When I use my MacBook Air to write this book I think of Ecclesiastes 4:4 and the rivalry of Gates and Jobs.

But the second interpretation of Ecclesiastes 4:4 shows how achievement springs from the desire to *do one better* than what has been done. This motivation refers not so much to making others jealous but believing I can do one better – whether or not they know it. In other words: *one-upmanship*. It is the stuff of which Olympic gold medalists are made. But does ‘all’ achievement spring from the desire to outdo what has been done? Either interpretation of Ecclesiastes 4:4, in any case, shows how ambition motivates a person to service or success.

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) was one of the greatest intellects of modern times, arguably the greatest mind in five hundred years. Who would have thought that such a genius would ever need to approach life with the thought of being ambitious? With a brain like that, you might think that ambition would surely not even come into the picture. And yet Einstein said, ‘You have to learn the rules of the game. And then you have to play better than anyone else.’ Imagine Einstein saying that!

There are basically two words for ambition in the New Testament – one showing it can be a good thing, the other an evil thing. The Greek word *philotimeomai* (etymologically ‘love honour’), which shows that ambition can be a good thing, literally translates as ‘aspire to a goal’ or have ambition. Using this word,

Paul revealed something very interesting about himself: 'It has always been my ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known, so that I would not be building on someone else's foundation' (Romans 15:20). He used the word in 2 Corinthians 5:9: 'So we make it our goal to please him' – the noblest ambition a person can have. Hence the New English Bible translates it: 'We therefore make it our ambition, wherever we are, here or there, to be acceptable to him' (NEB). Paul used the same word in urging the Thessalonians: 'Make it your ambition to lead a quiet life, to mind your own business and to work with your hands' (1 Thessalonians 4:11). The other Greek word is *eritheia* meaning a 'base self-seeking,' or simply 'baseness.' Hence it is always used in a negative sense: 'self-seeking' (Romans 2:8) or 'selfish ambition' (Galatians 5:20; Philippians 1:17; 2:3; James 3:14, 16).

Seven purposes of this book

What is the purpose of writing this book? First and foremost, I hope to motivate every reader to experience the joy and praise that comes from God alone – without caring whether people know what you may have achieved or sought to accomplish. That is the highest joy that can come to us this side of our going to heaven.

Second, I hope this book will teach us to become aware of our motives. We all tend to play games with ourselves – and others – never examining why we do this or that.

Third, this book should bring us to the place where we may have a greater measure of objectivity about ourselves. That would mean – at least in part – seeing our motives in a particular way and knowing *why* we do what we do.

Fourth, I hope this book will teach us how to think. Dr Martyn Lloyd-Jones used to say that the Christian faith ought to teach a person how to think.

Fifth, this book is written also to teach us patience with others. 'Every person is worth understanding,' says the influential Christian psychologist Clyde Narramore. This book should provide a caution against judging people too quickly or harshly.

Sixth, I want to encourage you to use whatever motivation or ambition that lies within you to channel it in the direction of pleasing God. Whatever level of motivation you have, seize upon it with the view of obtaining the glory and honour that comes from God and not people.

Finally, I pray that this book will motivate you to come into God's inheritance for your life here below and that you will be among those who receive a reward at the Judgment Seat of Christ. If this book should be the means to make that happen, I would be overjoyed.