

Is Personal Ambition a Sign of Self Righteousness and Therefore Sinful?

Sooner or later, if we are to make spiritual progress, we must, as it were, attend our own funeral!!

God is a God of Glory.

Glory is the nearest we get to describe the “essence” of God.

Glory is the sum total of all God’s attributes.

God desires glory, the purpose of our existence is to bring glory to God.

But what about our glory?

Hebrews 2:10 [NIV] *“In bringing many sons to glory, it was fitting that God, for whom and through whom everything exists, should make the author of their salvation perfect through suffering.”*

God’s desire is to glorify us.

We all have a natural desire to be appreciated, wanted, admired and to be well thought of and well known, glorified.

Is this personal desire for glory legitimate or is it a wicked desire we need to eradicate?

If we seek glory for ourselves then we become the rivals of God and He does not like such an attitude.

1 Peter 5:6, 4 [NIV] *“Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.” ... “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.”*

Consider the example of Joseph who was not only sold into slavery but ended up in a dungeon. What a bleak outlook. But overnight he was elevated to the Prime Minister of Egypt.

How do we explain this?

God did it! God put Joseph there because he could be trusted.

What is the glory of man, this natural built-in ambition for office or honour?

The word “ambition” comes from the Latin “ambitio” which described a candidate for an official office in the Roman Government soliciting votes.

Hence the word means a desire for some ruling position or honour.

Ambition can also mean the desire we have for some object.

Shakespeare warns us against ambition. Is he right in doing this? *“I charge thee, fling away ambition, by that sin fell the angels.”*

There are two Greek words used in scripture referring to an ambitious nature:

a) Kěňödōxōs [ken-od-ox-os] **Vain or empty glory, self-conceited.**

Galatians 5:26 [King James] *“Let us not be desirous of **vain glory**, provoking one another, envying one another.”*

Philippians 2:3 [King James] *“Let nothing be done through strife or **vainglory**; but in lowliness of mind let each esteem other better than themselves.”*

b) Ěrithěia [er-ith-i-ah] Factions, contention, strife, **self-interest**, thinking only of immediate gain.

Philippians 1:17 [NIV] *“The former preach Christ out of **selfish ambition**, not sincerely, supposing that they can stir up trouble for me while I am in chains.”*

James 3:14, 16 [NIV] *“But if you harbour bitter envy and **selfish ambition** in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” ... “For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.”*

Why deal with this subject?

a) **It will help us to come to terms with our personalities and perhaps our feelings.**

b) **Jeremiah 17:9** [Amplified Bible] *“**The heart is deceitful above all things**, and it is exceedingly perverse, corrupt and severely, mortally sick! Who can know it, perceive, understand, be acquainted with his own heart and mind?”*

This study will help some of us at least to understand our hearts.

Matthew 13:14-17 [NIV] *“In them is fulfilled the prophecy of Isaiah: “You will be ever hearing but never understanding; you will be ever seeing but never perceiving. For this people’s heart has become calloused; they hardly hear with their ears, and they have closed their eyes. Otherwise they might see with their eyes, hear with their ears, understand with their hearts and turn, and I would heal them.’ But blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For I tell you the truth, many prophets and righteous men longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.”*

The opportunity to understand our ambitions is available to us. Jesus shows the way, as He continues to teach us with the parable of the sower that follows the above quotation from Isaiah.

Ephesians 4:20-24 [NIV] *“You, however, did not come to know Christ that way. Surely you heard of him and were taught in him in accordance with the truth that is in Jesus. You were taught, with regard to your former way of life, to put off your old self, which is being corrupted by its deceitful desires; to be made new in the attitude of your minds; and to put on the new self, created to be like God in true righteousness and holiness.”*

Paul in this letter expands on what Jesus taught.

c) **This study will bring us face to face with our motivation, what really motivates us to do what we do.**

d) This study will make us ask the question, ‘Is there really such a thing as a pure unmixed motive?’

Ambition is a natural tendency

Quote from writing of Martin Luther:-

“God uses sex to drive a person to marriage, ambition to drive a person to service, and fear to drive a person to faith.”

- a) We know that sex is natural, it is a God-given urge, it is biological, it is the way God made us.
- b) **Luther's statement assumes that ambition is as natural as the sexual urge.**

I believe this is true.

Dale Carnegie, the author of *'How to Win Friends and Influence People'* says that **the two strongest urges in the world are the sex urge and the desire to feel important, self-worth.**

Both of these urges can become unbalanced, even perverted.

The Christian faith teaches us that the sexual urge must wait until marriage for gratification.

Sex outside of marriage is wrong. The person who cannot control his or her sexual appetite will eventually be sorry.

Ambition can also lead to a person's downfall if it becomes uncontrolled.

What about fear?

Natural fear may not necessarily lead to faith.

The fear Luther was referring to was a supernatural fear which is brought on by the influence of the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit does this as He reveals the awesomeness and Holiness of our Creator God, and the reality of our sinful nature.

Quote John Newton:-

"Twas grace that taught my heart to fear and grace my fears relieved. How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed."

In society today there is little or no fear of God. Much of this lack of fear must be laid at the feet of the Church.

The gospel message preached today does not in general promote a fear of God.

The theme is more on the level of *"What is in it for you if you become a Christian?"*

Is your marriage *"on the rocks?"* Then become a Christian to resolve the problem!

Do you fear the future? Then become a Christian to have peace of mind!

Do you have financial difficulties? Then become a Christian and let God solve the problem!

There is none of the "fear of God" today that pervaded the message of the great evangelists such as John Wesley and George Whitefield.

Such a message that they preached caused thousands to seek God's Grace and Mercy in that time of national revival.

Accepting that ambition is a natural tendency, some people have a higher level of ambition than others.

1 All leaders are highly motivated people, but not all highly motivated people are leaders.

Many writers, scientists or musicians are highly motivated but shun the public eye, and have no leadership gifts.

2 Ambition has its origin partly in the influence of our past life, on a natural level.

- a) Our relationship with our parents.
- b) The influence of our peers.
- c) Authority figures in our life.
- d) Deprivations in our life such as poverty or social class.
- e) Any traumas we may have been through.

Ambition also has its origin also on a spiritual level.

- a) God may choose to use any of the physical influences, as already mentioned.
- b) God may infuse motivation either at the level of common grace or special grace.

Common grace:-

Matthew 5:45(B) [NIV] *“...He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.”*

God’s goodness to all people whether or not they are called by Him at this time.

Special grace:-

1 Corinthians 12:1, 7-11 [NIV] *“Now about spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be ignorant.” ... “Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good. To one there is given through the Spirit the message of wisdom, to another the message of knowledge by means of the same Spirit, to another faith by the same Spirit, to another gifts of healing by that one Spirit, to another miraculous powers, to another prophecy, to another distinguishing between spirits, to another speaking in different kinds of tongues, and to still another the interpretation of tongues. All these are the work of one and the same Spirit, and he gives them to each one, just as he determines.”*

When a person is called by God they are given by God something special to live for, some special spiritual gift.

3 There are degrees of ambition – some have a large measure, others far less.

- a) Those with a large measure of ambition tend to look on it as a good thing.

They tend to look down on those who are not so ambitious.

- b) Those who are not so ambitious tend to be suspicious of those full of ambition, they are not sure it is a good thing.

They tend to look down on those who are filled with ambition.

- c) **Most of us just like the way we are!**

The truth is that generally speaking it is the ambitious people who are the achievers in this world, they are the “movers and shakers”. Ambitious people are those who tend to make a difference in others’ lives and in history. They do this through their inventions, research, discoveries, oratory, leadership or composition.

Whether the results of ambition are good or bad, the fact is such people are the ones who make a difference in society and also in the Church.

What largely motivates ambitious people?

Ecclesiastes 4:4 [NIV] *“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.”*

Envy and jealousy are the major motivators of ambition. We may have difficulty in accepting this statement in God’s Word, but after honest, unbiased thought we will have to end up agreeing with God!

There are three kinds of ambition

a) **Authentic ambition:-**

This is natural, part of our being human and we should wish for this and not be ashamed of it. **We grow up wanting to please our parents, our peers and our friends.**

After conversion we child-like have the ambition to please our Heavenly Father.

b) **Ambiguous ambition:-**

Some desire to be great by doing great things in God’s Name.

Such people go into the ministry as a career, God’s Name is used to justify their desire for greatness.

Preaching the gospel message and laying down their lives in serving God’s People is not the main goal in their lives after a while. They continue to tell themselves and the world *“it’s all for God”*. But is it really?

James 1:8 [NIV] *“...he is a double-minded man, unstable in all he does.”*

The Greek word means *“two spirited”*. **This describes a person with ambiguous ambition. We cannot have the spirit of self-advancement and sacrificial service at the same time.**

Romans 12:1 [NIV] *“Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God, this is your spiritual act of worship.”*

God desires total sacrifice, our whole life, not just a part of it.

c) **Arrogant ambition:-**

Such people shamefully bend the rules to achieve a goal. They may extend to fraud, certainly they will use *“name-dropping”* and seek to be seen with *“the right people”*.

Such people desire others to stand in awe of them.

Is Ecclesiastes 4:4 the only kind of motivation that gets things done?

In other words, could we turn down some honour and keep quiet about it, telling no-one?

Or if we say that receiving some honour for our labours or sacrifice is not important to us, is it important to us that others know that it isn’t important!!

If we feel we have no desire to be honoured, why do we want others to know this if it is not to be admired by them?

Sadly the truth is that very little is accomplished in this world if there is not some sort of recognition.

This also happens in our church work.

Without someone saying “thank you” we are not going to be highly motivated.

Nothing we do that appears to be for God is done with totally pure and unmixed motives.

Even consider the motives of the twelve apostles. Was it completely pure for God-only motivation?

I don't think so!

I'm sure they felt very good and honoured to be associated with a man who could walk on water and perform the many other healing miracles, or to following the new Messiah.

They had a “what is in it for me?” type of mentality.

Are we then to believe that the desire to make others envy is the only motivation for the Christian in this life?

I don't believe so.

Let us examine Luther's statement again.

a) **The fear that leads to faith.**

Does this fear remain the same?

No!

The fear that gives rise to faith becomes the relationship that says “*Abba Father*”.

Quote John Wesley:-

“The faith of a slave becomes the faith of a son.”

b) **The sex drive that drives a person to marriage.**

Does this remain the same?

No!

The sexual love that makes people desire to become married is not the love that will sustain that marriage.

The “*eros*” love [physical sexual love] must become the “*agape*” love [love that remains whatever the response of the object of that love].

1 Corinthians 13:4-7 [NIV] *“Love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It is not rude, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs. Love does not delight in evil but rejoices with the truth. It always protects, always trusts, always hopes, always perseveres.”*

1 John 4:18 [NIV] *“There is no fear in love. But perfect love drives out fear, because fear has to do with punishment. The one who fears is not made perfect in love.”*

“Agape” love is the love that casts out fear and keeps no record of wrongs.

“Eros” love was used by God but sooner or later there must be a parallel unselfish love or the relationship will fall apart.

c) **Ambition that drives a person to service.**

Does this remain the same?

No!

The natural ambition that God uses to drive us to service must also change.

John 21:18-19 [NIV] *“I tell you the truth, when you were younger you dressed yourself and went where you wanted; but when you are old you will stretch out your hands, and someone else will dress you and lead you where you do not want to go.” Jesus said this to indicate the kind of death by which Peter would glorify God. Then he said to him, “Follow me!”*

Peter’s headstrong ambitious nature had to experience change of direction in his life. His natural ambition’s direction had to be changed, his own desires had to die.

Matthew 20:20-28 [NIV] *“Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favour of him. “What is it you want?” he asked. She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.” “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?” “We can,” they answered. Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.” When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the 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 your slave, just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

The natural ambition of James, John and their mother had to change direction. Different unnatural goals for their natural ambition.

Sooner or later, if we are to make spiritual progress, we must, as it were, attend our own funeral!!

We all must die to:-

- a) The things that had been so important to us.
- b) The things that motivated us.
- c) The desires we had for success and honour.

How will this change come about?

2 Corinthians 3:18 [NIV] *“And we, who with unveiled faces all reflect the Lord’s glory, are being transformed into his likeness with ever-increasing glory, which comes from the Lord, who is the Spirit.”*

We are all in the process of being transformed by the work of the un-grieved Holy Spirit in us.

1 John 1:7 [NIV] *“But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus, his Son, purifies us from all sin.”*

We first come to the light [Jesus Christ].

1 John 2:7-11 [NIV] *“Dear friends, I am not writing you a new command but an old one, which you have had since the beginning. This old command is the message you have heard. Yet I am writing you a new command; its truth is seen in him and you, because the darkness is passing and the true light is already shining. Anyone who claims to be in the light but hates his brother is still in the darkness. Whoever loves his brother lives in the light, and there is nothing in him to make him stumble. But whoever hates his brother is in the darkness and walks around in the darkness; he does not know where he is going, because the darkness has blinded him.”*

We continue to walk in the light of God’s Word.

Psalm 119:105 [NIV] *“Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light for my path.”*

God’s Word, a light to our path of life.

1 John 2:15-17 [NIV] *“Do not love the world or anything in the world. If anyone loves the world, the love of the Father is not in him. For everything in the world, the cravings of sinful man, the lust of his eyes and the boasting of what he has and does, comes not from the Father but from the world. The world and its desires pass away, but the man who does the will of God lives forever.”*

The natural desires of this society, which were once ours, must change to a desire to do the will of our Creator God.

This process of change will involve pain and suffering but the additional grace of God we receive will be more than worth it.

What then is the new motivation that transcends our old ambition to serve and receive honour from men?

A love for God’s Glory.

John 5:44 [NIV] *“How can you believe if you accept praise from one another, yet make no effort to obtain the praise that comes from the only God?”*

We seek to glorify God’s Name by being a witness for Him, pointing people to Jesus Christ, the Father who sent Him and the Holy Spirit who the Father sent to be our guide and teacher.

When we give this witness we also in due time will receive glory from God.

What then is the love for the glory of God?

a) **A desire that only God will get all the credit for anything He may choose to do through us His servants.**

b) **Our joy and contentment is in the fact that only He knows of the part we played in what has caused others to honour Him.**

c) **We abandon our own plans and await on God to use us in His Plans in a way that He chooses and at a time that He decides.**

d) **Luke 14:12-14** [NIV] *“Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”*

We receive our joy in life by serving those who are unable to reward us or return the favour.

e) **We refuse to vindicate ourselves.**

If we try to “*clear our name*” we receive honour from others.

If we refuse to “*clear our name*” but leave it to God to do it in His way and at His time we receive honour from God and honour Him at same time.

f) We refuse to point the finger.

Pointing the finger is keeping a record of all people’s wrongs and then judging them by their past that I may be exalted over them.

1 Corinthians 4:5 [NIV] “*Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God.*”

We give God the glory by allowing Him to be the judge. If we judge others we are in competition with God and do not give Him the honour and glory that is due to Him.

g) **Romans 12:10** [NIV] “*Be devoted to one another in brotherly love. Honour one another above yourselves.*”

Philippians 2:1-5 [NIV] “*If you have any encouragement from being united with Christ, if any comfort from his love, if any fellowship with the Spirit, if any tenderness and compassion, then make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others. Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:*”

We have the same loving spirit that is God’s when we give honour to others. When we have this deep desire for their success and welfare.

Such an attitude of mind brings honour and glory to God as we reflect His goodness as one of His children.

1 Peter 5:6 [NIV] “*Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time.*”

Sadly many Christians will miss out on receiving honour and glory from God as they have already sought it from other people.

Humble ourselves and give God the honour and glory for all He does through us.

The root of our problems is often we have un-sanctified ambitions that brings honour to us and not to God.

Who knows what God will do through us if a love for His Glory is our main motivation?