

Christ's Ambition over the World's
(James 3:13-18)
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Introduction: What is behind a particular ambition is what really matters! James uses a word *eritheia* two times in our text (vv 14 & 16) that is translated as “selfish ambition,” and one might assume that what is meant is that *all* ambition is selfish. Not true. Let’s clarify and make sure we don’t slip into an unnecessary mental or spiritual quandary. Some ambitions are good and holy; and absolutely from God. For example:

A. Jesus’ ambition:

John 4:34: “Jesus said to them, ‘My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to accomplish his work.’”

And shouldn’t this be our ambition as well? Of course, the Christian should be ambitious to do the will of God and to accomplish the work that God gives us to do! And don’t fall into the trap that the will of God should be some deep, mysterious thing. The Scriptures are very clear and our *Small Catechism* helps in that clarity! We should be ambitious to be good husbands, wives, fathers, mothers, sons, and daughters! We should be ambitious to be good and Godly workers! We should be ambitious to do the will and work of God in all of our God-given vocations! Yes, be ambitious about these things!

B. Paul’s ambition:

Philippians 3:8-11: “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith – ¹⁰that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, ¹¹that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.”

And shouldn’t this be our ambition as well? Of course, the Christian should be ambitious to gain Christ, to be found in Christ, to possess Christ’s righteousness through faith in Him, to know Christ and the power of Christ’s resurrection, to share in His sufferings and thus becoming like Christ so that we may attain the resurrection from the dead! This is a great ambition indeed!

C. The Christian’s ambition (to all disciples):

John 8:31-32: “If you abide in my word, you are truly my disciples, and you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free.”

Of course this should be our ambition: to be true disciples of Christ, to know the truth, and to be set free from the bondage of sin, death, and the power of the devil!

Part I: Thus it is abundantly clear that the LORD is not warning us against *any and all forms of ambition*, but against a specific kind: namely, *selfish ambition* (vv 14 & 16):

- A. In the case of selfish ambition, a boastful attitude is prevalent.
- B. This selfish ambition is contrary to “the meekness of wisdom” commended in vs. 13 = Christ who is wisdom demonstrated self-effacing humility and made Himself a servant. Meekness is not weakness, but the wisdom to know how to live in purposeful humility that does not need the lime-light; does not need the attention.
- C. This selfish ambition is associated with jealousy (v 14). Then, ambition is no longer focused on pleasing God, but now focused on outdoing your neighbor.
- D. This selfish ambition as I’ve already mentioned is given a very specific New Testament word that is *eritheia* (vv 14 & 16) = and is properly translated as selfishness, selfish ambition, or selfish rivalry (some would translate “envy,” but in my humble opinion, this does not seem strong enough in today’s vernacular).
- E. But what is most helpful in understanding this concept of selfish ambition so that it is truly clear in our minds is the in-depth elaboration here in James 3 through a triad description that corresponds to Luther’s famous “the world, the flesh, and the devil.”
 - 1. This selfish ambition is “earthly” [v 15] (like Luther’s “world[ly]”) = living in such a way so as to have no awareness of God so that thoughts are controlled by what you see in this world. Let this soak in: the Christian by God’s grace approaches the world with the lens of God; God is everywhere and applies to everything, but this is not so with the “earthly” or the “worldly.” In those who are earthly God is absent and all situations are responded to as if God were not there.
 - 2. This selfish ambition is “unspiritual” [v 15] = takes the situation a step further, not only is the world all one sees, but they are also totally preoccupied with it. All of one’s concerns are directed to his or her existence in this world. This is the “flesh” for Luther which is completely self-serving.

3. This selfish ambition is “demonic” [v 15] = under the control of Satan. Point blank: other terrible problems arise from such a condition, see v 16: “there will be disorder and every vile practice.”

Part II: But how often we succumb to this selfish ambition?!

- A. Madonna describes the seduction of success (in the sense of selfish ambition) in her own words:

“I have an iron will, and all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy....I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I’m mediocre and uninteresting....Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that’s always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I’ve become Somebody, I will have to prove that I’m *Somebody*. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will.” (Keller, *Counterfeit Gods*, 72)

- B. Let’s analyze this from a biblical perspective and as I do so please don’t get on a pedestal so that you’re looking down on Madonna. I’m sure we can relate since our sin is no better than anyone else’s:
 1. “I have an iron will”: that’s the problem, because we have the propensity to put ours above God’s! Our call is to crucify our will not play with it and the last thing we want to do is to try to make it stronger!
 2. We can relate to the “horrible feeling of inadequacy,” but what is the next step? Is it to obsess and take matters into our own hands? No! And yet, how often do we do exactly that? God calls us, however, to *confess* our inadequacy to Him.
 3. The “horrible fear of being mediocre”...this is something else that God frees us from and He does so by leading us to know:
 - i. We are *far worse* than mediocre.
 - ii. And we are *far better* than mediocre.
 - iii. And one result of this is that mediocre is no longer a concern! God frees us.
 4. On the need to be “somebody” ...
 - i. Again, this is no longer our project. Thank God!
 - ii. We are children of the Living God...and this terrible anxiety is dealt with in our death and resurrection in Christ. Consider St. Paul’s words in Galatians 2:20 and pardon my bracketed applications: “I have been crucified with Christ [our selfish “somebody” has been crucified]. It is no longer I who live [ambitious “somebody” is gotten rid of], but Christ who lives in me [Christ is the true Somebody/He is LORD!]. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me [indeed, now I am united to the only “Somebody” who matters!].”

Part III: And where selfish ambition once reigned, now wisdom reigns supreme!

- A. There are many uses of “wisdom” in Holy Scripture.
- B. I am struck by verse 15 of James 3:

“This is not the wisdom that comes down from above...”

- C. Also verse 17:

“But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, open to reason, full of mercy and good fruits, impartial and sincere.”

- D. Recall who the One is who is “from above”...note the language for example in John 3:31, the words are about Jesus your Savior:

“He who comes from above is above all...[and it is repeated]...He who comes from heaven is above all.”

- E. Jesus is *the Wisdom from above*.
- F. It is essential that we maintain this, because Scripture is not leading you to try to fix yourself by mustering up some sort of super inherent wisdom so that we can start the selfish ambition cycle all over again!
- G. There is only One answer to your selfish ambition: it is the “wisdom from above.”
- H. Jesus comes to those caught up in selfish ambition...Jesus comes to you and supplies what is described in v 17 of James 3:
 - 1. He gives to you His wisdom, the knowledge of the saving Gospel and His atoning blood that covers your terrible thirst for success and selfish ambition.
 - 2. He gives you His peace as He has won for you peace with God, so that now you may live in His peace toward the entire world and life...the world is no longer for you to try to manipulate for selfish ambition, but for you to serve with the peace of Christ.
 - 3. He gives you His gentleness that did not insist on His own rights when He went to die for you, but gave up His rights and in Him you are no longer need insist on your rights.
 - 4. He gives you His openness to reason in that He is always willing to hear you; to hear your soul’s complaint and even your desperate prayers...so that now in Him you are open to listening to others and respecting their opinions.
 - 5. He gives you His mercy and good fruits...the very qualities that led Him to take pity on you poor sinner so that you would be included in the fruits, the harvest of righteousness that came through His saving work; and now in Him you share mercy with others and offer your good works to your neighbor.
 - 6. He gives you His impartiality and sincerity...as we proclaimed recently in another sermon; there is no doubt that you are included dear Christian...you are included; His impartiality and sincerity would have it no other way. This is your great confidence!
- I. And note the conclusion of these verses we’ve examined at verse 18: ***“And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace.”***

1. *You are in the harvest of righteousness...among those redeemed by the blood of the Lamb through Jesus who has given you peace with God!*
2. *Now live in this righteousness Christian...celebrate it! This new clothing in Christ; this new identity in Jesus has liberated you from selfish ambition and freed you to holy ambitions...make peace by sharing His peace, the most vital message in the universe: the Gospel for sinners to save them and to release them from the maddening thirst for success; and frees them to know that in Christ you already shine as the redeemed, you are already cloaked in wisdom (Christ): glorifying the Lord and blessing your neighbors wherever you go!*