

Good and Bad Ambition (Matthew 20:17-28)

Today as we continue in the gospel of Matthew I want to talk about good and bad ambition. Good ambition is the desire to accomplish something great; bad ambition is the desire to accomplish something in order to be great. Good ambition is selfless, bad ambition is selfish; something I am very familiar with. For much of my adult life, the desire for attention, approval and acclaim and the need to not just to be the best but to be recognized as the best has often blinded me to the way God was using me because of envy and resentment about the way He was using others and the attention they were getting that I wasn't. Jesus' disciples also struggled with bad ambition. Read through the gospels and look at how many times they argue about which one of them is the greatest. In the passage from Matthew we'll be looking at today, Jesus explains to His disciples what true greatness is and the difference between good and bad ambition. I want to look at three truths we learn from Jesus which if we will believe them will enable us to conquer this persistent temptation.

1. Greatness is Not Determined by Us (Matt. 20:23)
2. The Desire to be Great is not wrong (Matt. 20:26)
3. The Path to Greatness is not up (Matthew 20:27-28)

The single most important truth about greatness we absolutely must understand if we're to get free of our need for attention, approval and acclaim is that true greatness is never determined by us. Honor and greatness are bestowed on us by God's grace and not something that we can seize or win. Let's begin reading at Matthew 20:20. ¹⁷ "And as Jesus was going up to Jerusalem, he took the twelve disciples aside, and on the way he said to them, ¹⁸ "See, we are going up to Jerusalem. And the Son of Man will be delivered over to the chief priests and scribes, and they will condemn him to death ¹⁹ and deliver him over to the Gentiles to be mocked and flogged and crucified, and he will be raised on the third day." The closer Jesus gets to the cross, the more often He reminds His disciples of what is about to happen when they arrive in Jerusalem so that their faith will not be shaken when it does. But His disciples don't get it. They refuse to believe that could ever happen to Jesus. I mean, He's the Messiah. He's supposed to reign over Israel forever. He's just wrong about rejection and dying on a cross. Do you ever believe some things Jesus says but ignore others? I like the verse about delighting in the Lord and receiving the desires of my heart but I'll skip the verse about suffering shame for His name. The disciples are just like us, filtering Jesus but Jesus keeps telling them that He is about to be rejected, suffer and die – that's the main thing on His mind right now - and that is why the next verse is so ironic. ²⁰ "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came up to him with her sons, and kneeling before him she asked him for something." We don't know whose idea this was; whether James and John put their mother up to this or if this was her idea but the whole family is in on this. Mom probably told her boys, "Well, if you won't ask Him, I will," and so right after Jesus tells the disciples about what He's about to suffer, Mrs. Zebedee comes to Him with a request. Talk about bad timing. Jesus told them what He must suffer and she wants to talk about what she wants for her boys. ²¹ "And he said to her, "What do you want?" She said to him, "Say that these two sons of mine are to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." Sitting next to the king was the place of greatest honor and that's what James and John are asking for; the top spots in the kingdom. After all, aren't they part of Jesus' inner circle? Who else deserves the place of greatest honor more than they? ²² "Jesus answered, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup that I am to drink?" Jesus doesn't rebuke James and John for their request. As we'll see in a moment, their desire to be great isn't wrong. But there is a price for greatness and Jesus asks if they are ready to pay it. Are they ready to follow Him into death? "They said to him, "We are able." ²³ "He said to them, "You will drink my cup, but to sit at my right hand and at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared by my Father." All 11 of the disciples drank the cup Jesus drank. James was the first apostle to follow Jesus in death and was executed by Herod in Acts 12; and John was the last. The Bible doesn't tell us how John died. The early Christian writer, Tertullian, wrote that John was arrested in Ephesus where he led the church later in his life and was thrown into a huge basin of boiling oil in the arena for the entertainment of the Ephesian citizens. Miraculously John was unharmed by the burning oil and everyone in the arena was converted. John was then

condemned slave labor in the mines of the island of Patmos, where he had a vision of Jesus and wrote the book of Revelation. He was later freed, possibly due to old age, and he died peacefully in Turkey, the only apostle to do so; but he certainly did drink the cup of suffering which his Savior had drunk. Jesus says that true greatness is never free; there is a cost to greatness and the brothers will pay it. However – and this is what I want you to see – regarding their specific request to sit in the highest place of honor, that is not something Jesus can promise. God alone determines who sits in those seats because true greatness comes from God alone and not something we compete with each other for. I struggled with wanting to be noticed and admired from the very beginning of my ministry and one of the first verses God impressed me with was Psalm 75:5-6. *“For not from the east or from the west and not from the wilderness comes lifting up, (true honor does not come from people) but it is God who executes judgment, putting down one and lifting up another.”* Real, permanent honor only comes from God. He humbles and He exalts. He lifts up and He puts down because He is the only righteous judge. He knows what we don’t. It doesn’t matter what people think about me because they don’t know what God knows or what I think about myself. What matters is what God thinks about me. Plus any honor people may give is temporary because people are temporary. Plus we have very short memories. If you are under 30, raise your hand if you know who any of these people are (just having heard their name doesn’t qualify: you have to know who they are.) Cyndi Lauper, Steffi Graf, Boris Becker, George Michael, Carl Lewis, Boy George. How many of you who are over 30 know who they are? So many people who used to be household names wouldn’t even be recognized on the street today. Andy Warhol (how many of you remember him?) was right. “In the future, everyone will have their 15 minutes of fame.” Fame is so short-lived. Think of all the people who were famous yesterday and infamous today. What matters is who God honors. That’s why Jesus said, “I do not receive glory from men. I do not seek glory from men, but seek only the glory that come from God.” That’s why Paul writes in 1 Cor. 4:3-5, *“But with me it is a very small thing that I should be judged by you or by any human court.* (In Greek and Roman culture the pursuit of personal honor and glory was considered the highest good. Plato writes about how humans seek honor and fame and are ready to brave any danger or sacrifice to attain it; and so the Corinthian Christians were competed for the top place in the church and constantly compared one leader against another. “I’m a follower of Paul; he’s the chief apostle.” “You’re wrong there. Peter’s my guy. He’s the rock.” “Neither of those guys can compete with Apollos. He’s the best speaker I’ve ever heard.” Paul addresses the fan boys in the first 4 chapters of 1 Corinthians and he says, “Your evaluation or any person’s evaluation of me for that matter means nothing to me.) *In fact, I do not even judge myself.* (Paul is talking about judging his own fame and greatness. He won’t compare himself with others.) ⁴ *For I am not aware of anything against myself, but I am not thereby acquitted. It is the Lord who judges me.* (That’s the point. God is my judge, not you. He will determine any honor I receive.) ⁵ *Therefore do not pronounce judgment before the time, before the Lord comes, who will bring to light the things now hidden in darkness and will disclose the purposes of the heart. Then each one will receive his commendation from God.”* I’m not great because I think I’m great or because anybody thinks I’m great. Only God can say who is truly great and He’s not saying until Christ returns. Then God will give each person the honor we deserve; and I think there are going to be some big surprises about who receives the highest honors; because it’s only then that God will bring to light the things now hidden and disclose the motives of our heart. Only God knows all the facts and only God is qualified to judge. So Paul tells the Corinthians to stop comparing yourselves with others and worrying about whether you’re getting the attention and credit you think you deserve; and wait until the grades are given out. God alone knows what you did with what He entrusted to you and why you did it. God alone knows how faithful you were in running the unique race He gave you to run. The greatest people in the kingdom of God will very likely be invisible and unknown now. Just think about how often now the wrong people get all the attention and credit. The high school valedictorian is usually the student who got the highest GPA – not necessarily the person who worked the hardest with the abilities they were given. The most famous people are often famous because they were lucky and were at the right place at the right time. God alone knows who deserves what and from the parable Jesus tells right before this conversation, we know that He will not only be perfectly just but incredibly generous in the honors He bestows. Whatever we get, we’ll feel like it is far more than we deserve.

That’s the first truth that will free us from bad ambition and the need for people’s attention, approval and acclaim if we’ll believe it; greatness comes from God and the grades don’t come out until the end of the class. That’s why Jesus can’t give James and John what they ask for; that decision belongs to God and to His unique plan for each one of us. Next to Jesus, God’s greatest gift to us is ourselves. You are unique and He created you for a unique purpose; and everything we go through is molding us into that unique person and preparing for that purpose. And

we won't really see the beauty of what God had made us to be until the end when we hear Jesus say, "Well done, good and faithful servant. Enter into the kingdom which My Father has prepared for you before the foundation of the world." So stop comparing. Stop envying and concentrate upon becoming the best version of you that you can. The question is not, what did I accomplish in comparison to others? It's, was I faithful? Did I do what Christ gave me to do? Did I become the person He created and saved me to be? Leave the evaluation of your greatness to God.

The second truth that will help you to defeat bad ambition follows the first. Since true greatness comes from God, the desire to be great is not wrong. The other disciples have been listening to James, John and their mom's conversation with Jesus and the more they hear, the madder they get. ²⁴ "And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers." "Who do you think you are, bros? We're just as important as you." ²⁵ "But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,^[a] ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,^[b] ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." In this world, greatness is measured by how many people you're over and by how many people serve you. In God's kingdom, greatness is measured by how many people you serve. We'll come back to that in a moment. But first, notice that Jesus also says that our desire for greatness isn't wrong. "But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,^[a] ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave." Jesus doesn't say, "Whoever wants to be great or first should be ashamed of herself." Apparently there is nothing wrong with wishing to be great or wishing to be first or to be the best. The issue is the path we take to get there. When I worked at Cal with Cru, my friend Eric and I were invited to spend a few days with the Cal football team at their preseason camp in Santa Barbara where we conducted Bible studies for players who were interested; and we got to know a number of the guys fairly well. A number became Christians that season, including the starting tight end a couple of weeks after the season began. I was excited for him because he had received eternal life and now had a relationship with Jesus; and I was excited that a prominent athlete on campus was now a believer; and hoped his example might motivate more people to come to know Christ; but just the opposite happened. From the time Jesus came into his life, Steve's game began to deteriorate. He began routinely dropping passes and missing assignments. In fact, the more excited he became about Christ, the less excited he became about football and as he moved from first string to second to third and saw less and less playing time, I began to fear that I was going to be the last person the coach wanted to be around the team. I dreaded running into him and hearing, "What are you doing to my players?" Steve had no idea why his play had dropped off but as we talked about it, he realized that when Christ came into his life, he lost his motivation to play. His game had always been fueled by his desire for fame and attention. Football was his identity. Football made him somebody. But now that he knew Jesus, he no longer needed football and his motivation to excel was gone. He left the team by the end of season. The fire just wasn't there any longer. Steve's story is not unusual. When we become Christians, God gives us a new heart with new motivations and ambitions. And often, as in Steve's case, there is a time when the old ambitions aren't working for us any longer but they haven't been replaced by new ambitions; and we can come across as kind of passionless and passive. However, the desire for greatness and to excel is built into us by our Creator. Ambition doesn't need to be killed. It just needs to be redirected. Paul writes in Galatians 1:10, "For am I now seeking the approval of men or of God? Or am I trying to please men? If I was still trying to please men, I would not be a servant of God." Paul's ambition to please people was replaced by his ambition to please God. That's why he writes in 2 Cor. 5:9, "So then, whether we are at home (in our physical bodies) or away (having departed from this world through death), we have as our ambition to be pleasing to God." Paul was not an ambitionless man. He was zealous about pleasing God and that ambition was just as fierce as anybody else's ambition to make a name for themselves. That's why Paul writes in 1 Cor. 9:24-27, "Do you not know that those who run in a race all run, but {only} one receives the prize? Run in such a way that you may win. Everyone who competes in the games exercises self-control in all things. They then {do it} to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable. Therefore I run in such a way, as not without aim; I box in such a way, as not beating the air; but I discipline my body and make it my slave, so that, after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified." Paul says that we need to exert the same discipline and desire to complete the race God has given us to run as the Olympic athlete must exert to win a gold medal. The desire to win is not wrong. The desire to excel is not evil. The desire to be the best is not inherently selfish – it is the way God made us. We just need to harness that ambition for God's purposes rather than for our own. Run to win – but run to win the prize God has

for us; and not for the attention and acclaim of people. But the tragedy is that for many Christians like Steve, they are less ambitious for God's glory than they were for their own. Yet Paul says that Christians need to have the same drive and self-discipline we see in athletes and business people and artists and other high achievers in the pursuit of their goals to achieve God's goals. But too often, believers fear ambition and think humility is settling for small goals rather than attempting great things for God. C.S. Lewis writes in *The Weight of Glory*, "We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday by the sea. We are far too easily pleased." Lewis says that often our problem isn't that we want too much. It's that we want too little. Medieval Christians wrote about the sin of pusillanimity: smallness of spirit, shirking back from great acts of virtue because of a lack of confidence; being timid, cowardly and failing to live up to one's full potential. Or as Michelangelo (the artist, not the Ninja Turtle) said, "The greatest danger for most of us is not that our aim is too high and we miss it but that it is too low and we attain it." The problem for many Christians today is not that our ambitions are too great but that they are too small. God created us for a great purpose and put the ambition to achieve something great in our hearts. And that's a good thing because He has given us a great work to do; sharing the good news of the gospel with a needy world. Good ambition is the drive to achieve some great thing; to bring someone to Christ, to solve some great problem so that people will thrive, to discover a better way to do things out of love for our neighbor. Bad ambition is to attain renown and fame for that achievement. Don't fear ambition. It's the way God has wired you. People with small ambitions are seldom happy people. Recognize your natural ambition to accomplish something great for God and then ask Him what that might be? Fame and recognition used to be important to me, but by God's grace, they are no longer so. Accomplishing the great work He has given us to do; training an army of disciple-making disciples who can take the gospel to Bay Area; is far more important to me now than who gets the credit. Where are you settling for smaller ambitions than what you know in your heart God has called you to do? I am convinced that the level of our satisfaction with life is directly proportional to the level of our effort in achieving what God has made us to do.

So Jesus says our desire to be great is not wrong but notice that the path to that greatness does not travel up but down; just the opposite of the path to greatness in this world. Let's look at vs. 25-28 again. ²⁵ "But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,^[a] ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your slave,^[b] ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." Jesus tells His disciples that there is nothing wrong with wanting to be great or the first or the best; what matters is the road they take to get there. In the world, the path to greatness travels up. The greater you are, the more people there are who serve you, follow you and admire you. But in God's kingdom, the road to greatness always leads down. In God's kingdom, the leader is the servant; and the greater a leader you are, the more people you serve. Those who desire to be great in God's kingdom must be concerned more about what they can give rather than with what they can get, as so many have discovered. The great motivational speaker and salesman Zig Ziglar put it this way. "You will get all you want in life, if you help enough other people get what they want." Simon Sinek in his book, *Leaders Eat Last*, writes, "The true price of leadership is the willingness to place the needs of others above your own. Great leaders truly care about those they are privileged to lead and understand that the true cost of the leadership privilege comes at the expense of self-interest." Martin Luther King put it this way. "Not everybody can be famous. But everybody can be great, because greatness is determined by service. You don't have to have a college degree to serve. You don't have to make your subject and verb agree to serve. You don't have to know about Plato or Aristotle to serve. You only need a heart full of grace and a soul generated by love." The best way to influence others isn't to impress them with who we are but to help them to become the person they are meant to be. Why is that the path to greatness? That's the path Jesus took and He is our motivation to put the interests of others over our own. When you don't feel like serving somebody, think about how Jesus served you. Even though He is the King of Kings and the Lord of Lords, He didn't come to earth to be served but to serve and to give His life as our ransom, buying us out of the slave market of sin. He left the glory of heaven to come to earth and made Himself our servant, doing for us what we could not do for ourselves by living the life we failed to live so that God could credit His perfect record to all who put their faith in Him as their Savior; dying the death we deserved to die and bearing the punishment for our crimes so that God can pardon all who believe in Him; and then rising from the dead in our behalf so that all who trust Him might live forever. There is nothing that does not belong to Jesus. We are living on

His earth, breathing His air, eating His food, living in His bodies. We are only tenants and Jesus has the right and the power to evict us whenever He wants. But that is not Jesus' character. He loves us and so He came not to be served and to serve; and to give us the ultimate gift; His own life in our place to release us from our slavery to sin. He is our motivation to serve others. We become a Christian by believing in what He has done for us and a Christian is a servant because we follow the ultimate Servant. That's why Paul says that though I am free from all men, I make myself a slave to all, which means taking the responsibility to reach out to them rather than waiting for them to reach out to me; asking them about themselves instead of wanting to talk about myself; accommodating myself to their culture and tastes rather than demanding they accommodate themselves to mine; looking for ways to serve them and to help them rather than expecting them to help me and working for their salvation rather than only enjoying mine. And Paul does all that because that's the way Jesus treated us and continues to treat us. He is my Lord but He is also my Servant, caring for me, providing for me and protecting me every minute of every day. And because He serves me, I serve you. Do you want to be great? Become the best servant you can be. Find a need and fill it. Albert Schweitzer put it this way. "I don't know what your destiny will be, but one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who have sought and found how to serve."

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