

Mark 10:35-45 (1984 NIV)
Like Christ in Our Ambition

Introduction

The Oxford Dictionary defines “ambition” as “a strong desire to be or do something”. We all have some strong desire to be or to do something in life. So in this sense, we are all ambitious people.

My Chinese name is Zhi Wei, meaning “great ambition”. It seems that my parents gave me this name because they had wanted me to carry some great ambition in life; to achieve something great and become a great person. And you know, with a name like this, it is very heavy on the shoulders and very hard to be humble.

My struggle as a Christian from time to time is how ambitious should I be in this life given all the opportunities that have come my way. I believe this is a typical struggle for many people from time to time whether in mid-life or not. When it comes to disturb us, I also believe that we need to rest in the reassuring promises of God’s Word as we move on in life. And there is one important question that you and I need to ask ourselves from time to time if we are not to live through life aimlessly—“How should I respond to all the great opportunities that come my way in this life as a God-obedient Christian?”

In Mark 10:35-45, we can find some answers to this question. In fact, Jesus never condemns ambition in this passage, even the ambition to be great. Rather, Jesus redefines the meaning of “greatness” so that His disciples will have God’s perspective of what it means to have ambition, even the ambition to be great.

In Mark 10:32-34, we are told that Jesus was going up to Jerusalem with His disciples.

- There was a certain resolute determination on Jesus’ part to go though He knew that danger was ahead of Him.
- Such a determined resolve astonished even His disciples.
- He told them that He would be delivered into the hands of the priests and the scribes; that He would end up in the hands of the Roman authorities; that He would eventually be sentenced to death.
- He also told them that in the process, He would be mocked, spat on, and flogged before He’s finally killed.
- His disciples realized that something big was going to happen in Jerusalem that would culminate in all that Jesus had been teaching about the Kingdom of God.
- However, it is likely that they did not quite understand all that Jesus had taught them, and this led them to misunderstand that Jesus was about to assume earthly power and human glory in Jerusalem as the Messiah.

- It is also likely that they recalled what Jesus had said to them on an earlier occasion recorded for us in Matt. 19:28—"I tell you the truth, at the renewal of all things, when the Son of Man sits on His glorious throne, you who have followed me will also sit on twelve thrones, judging the twelve tribes of Israel."
- The disciples had these thrones on their minds as they walked up to Jerusalem with Jesus, anticipating Him to do something big there.
- Yes, the disciples were anticipating these thrones in an earthly sense, and what they were asking and fighting for in Mark 10:35-45 (our passage today) was actually a misunderstanding of what Jesus had promised them earlier in Matt. 19:28.
- However, Jesus did not rebuke them for being ambitious here—i.e. to be seated on these thrones, and to be as near to Him as possible.

Indeed, Jesus never condemns ambition per se, even the ambition to be great. But He does warn that we can end up least before Him in our pursuit of ambition if we blindly follow the way of the world.

To help us keep God's perspective as we pursue of our ambition, Jesus sounds out two calls to us today. The first call is to ...

I. Commit ourselves to achieve in God's way, not in the way of least adversity (vv. 35-40).

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask." 36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked. 37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory." 38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?" 39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 40 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."

James and John made known their ambition to Jesus when they told Him in v. 37—"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

- These were prime positions of honour and power. They both wanted to be Jesus' left and right-hand men; they wanted to be Jesus' no. 1 and no. 2 men.
- In response to their request, Jesus asked them in v. 38—"Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?"
- When Jesus spoke of drinking the cup and baptising with the baptism He was baptised with, He was referring to His suffering and death on the Cross—an adverse experience that He was willing to accept and endure to its fullest in His earthly life and ministry.
- In other words, Jesus was telling His disciples in v. 38 this—"I have a great ambition to achieve on earth because God has a mission for me

here. And I am going to achieve this great ambition by following the way of suffering and death because that's God's way for me."

- But was there an easier way for Jesus to achieve this same great ambition—i.e. to win the people of the world and bring them to Himself without going through all the adversities?
- Yes! There was such a way, and Jesus knew it even in the early days of His earthly ministry. This means He actually had all the time to decide and choose this easy way to achieve this great ambition if He had wanted to.
- But this easy way was not God's way. In fact, it was Satan's way. In Matt. 4, we read how Satan tempted Jesus three times, and in Satan's third temptation there in vv. 8-9, the devil showed Jesus "all the kingdoms of the world and their splendour" and said to Him—"All this I will give you if you will bow down and worship me."
- Jesus refused and rebuked the devil instead in Matt. 4:10—"Away from me, Satan! For it is written, 'Worship the Lord your God, and serve Him only.'"
- As He pursued His great ambition, Jesus was bent on achieving it by following the hard way of God, not the easy way of the devil or the world. Jesus knew that it would amount to nothing if He had achieved His great ambition, but at the same time, ended up not worshipping and serving God.
- In the Garden of Gethsemane, He decided to go all the way to His suffering and death on the Cross by saying to God in Mark 14:36—"Yet not what I will, but what you (i.e. God the Father) will."
- Jesus was not here going against His own will when He said these words; that would mean He was somehow forced to do what He was actually unwilling to do. Yes, Jesus did not follow God's will by going against His own will. Rather, Jesus followed God's will by harmonising His own will with that of God—that's His commitment to achieve His great ambition in God's way rather than the way of convenience, ease, or least adversity.

Hence, when Jesus asked James and John, "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptised with the baptism I am baptised with?" He was not merely asking a question. Jesus was actually calling for a commitment from them—a commitment to achieve one's ambition in God's way rather than the way of convenience, ease, or least adversity.

And Jesus is sounding out the same call to you and me today. He says to us today—"You can be ambitious, yet you must keep God's perspective in your ambition. You must commit yourselves to achieve in God's way rather than the devious way of Satan in this world. No achieved ambition is ever pleasing to God if it is attained at the price of losing your worship and service to God."

Indeed, I am not too sure how much James and John understood the full implication of Jesus' question when they answered in v. 39—"We can." Jesus seemed to take them at their word, but He went on to say in v. 40—"To sit on my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

We have to look at the parallel account in Matt. 20:20-28 in order to understand fully the implication of Jesus' words here.

- In Matthew's account, we find that James and John actually had their mother with them when they made their ambition known to Jesus. Now, why two grown-up men like James and John could not speak for themselves, but needed the support of their mother?
- If you do a little comparing of the gospel accounts in Matt. 27:56; Mark 15:40; John 19:25, you will realise that the mother of James and John was Salome, and her husband was Zebedee. Salome was also a sister of Mary, the earthly mother of Jesus. That would mean James and John were actually cousins of Jesus, and their mother was an aunt of Jesus.
- Perhaps, that's why James and John would pull their mother along—they wanted to use family connections to manipulate Jesus to give what they wanted.
- If this is indeed so, we can then understand the full implication of what Jesus meant when He said—"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 God the Father, and not based on close family connections."
- Put in another way, Jesus was saying this to James and John—"You want to achieve this great ambition when my kingdom comes? Good for you! But don't do it by resorting to shady human favouritism. Trust in the impartial way of God—trust God to give the deserving ones their rightful places in accordance to what He has already prepared for them."

Isn't it true that human favouritism often denies the most deserving of their rightful places?

- We use different labels for it—corruption, collusion, nepotism, etc. But they all basically mean the same thing—doing something deviously and less than honest.
- And because it is often an attempt to undermine God's way, many lives, many nations, many businesses, and many organisations have "gone down the drain" as a result of leaders and people using it to achieve their ambition.

The Lord is reminding us to achieve our ambition in God's way—the way of doing our honest best rather than the way of shady human favouritism, even though it may be the easiest and fastest way to the top.

Today, we live in a meritocratic culture where we stress much on competition in order to attain excellence. Our country has benefitted much as we compete with others (both inside and outside the country) to excel; we compete to be the top. At the same time, our news media have often reported on brilliant, promising, and established individuals who have made the mistake of destroying their lives by resorting to criminal and dishonest ways just because they want to be or to stay at the top.

My prayer is that we will be people of great ambition, yet at the same time, we will know how to handle life well if we do not end up as no. 1, or no. 2, or even no. 3 after having put in our honest best in God's sight.

Jesus calls us to keep God's perspective as we pursue our ambition in life. He calls us to commit ourselves to achieve in God's way rather than the way of least adversity. And we can respond in two ways.

- One, beware of the easy promises in life. These may promise quick fixes, but are actually short-cut ways to crime and dishonesty, leading us away from God.
- Two, strive to do OUR best, never mind if we do not end up as THE best. We strive do the best we can, yet submit to what God will eventually work out for us, even if it means not being at the top. Remember, God has prepared His best for us even if we are not no. 1.

Jesus sounds out a second call to us as we pursue our ambition in life. It is to ...

II. Have an attitude of servanthood, even when we are successful (vv. 41-45).

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John. 42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. 43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, 44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. 45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

When the quest to succeed is to boost one's ego, it will often cause tension and animosity. We see this happening even among the 12 disciples.

- When the other 10 heard what James and John had asked from Jesus, "they became indignant" (v. 41).
- In fact, it was an old problem brought to a boil—they had earlier been arguing among themselves about who was the greatest in Mark 9:33-34.
- So, the 10 were indignant not because they had a nobler attitude, but because James and John had beaten them to the race—the two came to Jesus first and asked what they too wanted.
- Also, by asking Jesus to give them the two prime positions of honour and power, James and John were implying that they were better than the other 10; of course, these other 10 didn't like it at all.

That's what often happens—fighting for status often results in tension and animosity. For one to be placed up higher, someone else has to be placed down lower. As a result, jealousy, envy, and resentment often come about.

It is against this backdrop of fighting for status, tension, and animosity that Jesus called His 12 disciples together in v. 42. It is as if Jesus was stressing to them this point by His timely action of gathering them together—i.e. “My desire for you all as you aspire to great ambition is that you will still remain together, and not split into factions.”

And Jesus went on to tell them how this could be done in vv. 43-44.

- Basically, Jesus was teaching them this—“As each of you aspire to greatness, don’t try to lord or rule over one another. Instead, work at being a servant, and even a slave, to one another—look beyond status to servanthood.”
- A servant’s job is to give of himself in serving others; a slave’s role is to work for the benefit of his master, not his own.
- Thus, as far as Jesus is concerned, true greatness is found in the one who gives of himself for the benefit of others. Jesus wanted His disciples to use the right standard in their pursuit of ambition and greatness as exemplified by His own words in v. 45—“For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
- Jesus exemplified servanthood further in John 13:1-17 with His action when He was observing the Last Supper with His disciples in the upper room just before He was arrested by His enemies—He washed and dried the feet of all His disciples.
 - In the Jewish household, the lowliest of servant would be tasked to wash and dry the feet of others after their long journey.
 - The feet are supposed to be most exposed to dirt and dust as one travels through a long journey.
 - Thus, to wash and dry the feet of others after their long journey is not merely doing manual work, but also doing the most dirty work.
 - None of the 12 disciples were willing to wash and dry one another’s feet, not even the feet of Jesus—they viewed themselves as too self-important and self-respecting to do such a demeaning and dirty task.
 - Jesus then took the initiative to wash and dry the feet of all His disciples—the Master bending down to serve His disciples, fleshing out in real life what He had earlier told them in Mark 10:45: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”
 - Jesus concluded His demonstration of servanthood with these words in John 13:14-17—“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you. Very truly I tell you, no servant is greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. Now that you know these things, you will be blessed if you do them.”

Of course, this is very much revolutionary as far as the world’s standard of greatness is concerned. The world understands greatness to be the ability to rule and control others, but Jesus redefines it to be the humility and big-

heartedness to serve others. It is not how many people serve you, but how many people you serve in the name of the Lord.

Also, a great person is not one who always makes others dependent on him. Jesus called His disciples whose feet He had washed and dried to do likewise to one another in John 10:14-15—“Now that I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also should wash one another’s feet. I have set you an example that you should do as I have done for you.” Jesus as the great Teacher and Master was empowering His disciples by exhorting them to imitate what they saw Him did to them. Indeed, a great person empowers by strengthening, encouraging, forgiving, helping, caring, nurturing, and even correcting and rebuking in love.

I believe we can do such empowering in at least three contexts.

- In church, we can empower those who are working unseen and quietly in the “backroom” by giving them appropriate appreciation, so that greatness is not only in terms of some high-profile or prominent role.
- At work, we can empower those we work with by helping them to improve and succeed, without them looking incompetent when compared with us.
- At home, we can empower our family members by leading and nurturing them to grow in faith and faithfulness, without screaming and shouting to show who is in charge.

Conclusion

Jesus never condemns ambition, even the ambition to be great. But He does warn that we can end up least before Him, even if we have achieved our great ambition, if we blindly follow the way of the world.

To help keep God’s perspective in the pursuit of our ambition, Jesus calls us today to:

- One, commit ourselves to achieve in God’s way.
- Two, have an attitude of servanthood even if we have already achieved much success in life. The greatest achiever in the Lord’s sight is the one who is never too successful to serve others. Even when we are successful, Jesus still wants us to be like His servant, and continuing to serve others in His name.

Pray that the Lord Himself will so help us as we learn to be like Christ in our ambition. Amen!