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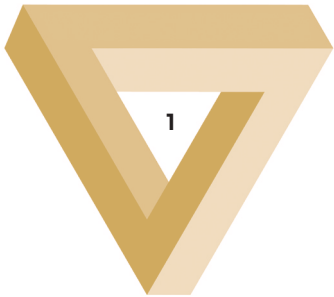


AMBITION

WHEN I ENTERED SEMINARY, I was humbled by many of my classmates. While we all suffered through "suicide Greek" (an intense six-week summer course that only a gifted linguist with a penchant for self-flagellation would enjoy), I learned that some students sacrificed far more than others to pursue a call into pastoral ministry.

Scott left his position as a Navy pilot with a stable salary and excellent benefits. David left his management job with an automaker and relocated his family. He attended classes all day and studied while working as a night security guard. I have no idea when he slept.

Gregory, an engineer from China, brought his wife and two young girls from Hong Kong to Chicago—he'd never seen snow before, let alone twelve inches of it covering his car. In six months Gregory taught himself enough English to successfully translate the New Testament from Greek

into English, and then into Cantonese for his congregation in Chicago's Chinatown.

These pastors represent the power of godly ambition. Their desire to serve God and people was the engine that drove them to make enormous sacrifices.

But seminary revealed the dark side of ambition as well. On my first day in a small class, when asked to introduce ourselves and say why we had entered seminary, the first student said, "I'm here because I'm going to be the next Bill Hybels." (Hybels is a popular megachurch pastor.) Really, I thought. Someone should tell him that Bill Hybels isn't dead. I don't think we need another one yet.

The next said, "My grandfather was a pastor, my father was a pastor, and I'm supposed to be a pastor, too." Someone call a counselor. This one has daddy issues.

The third student revealed his three-year plan to become senior pastor and then transform his congregation into a megachurch. "My denomination wants me to have an MDiv degree," he said, "but once they see I can grow a big church, I don't think they'll make me finish the program." An ego the size of Donald Trump's. Good grief, I thought.

As the introductions continued around the room, a frightening realization entered my mind: What if my motivations for being here are just as questionable? Seminary had introduced me to remarkable women and men with godly devotion and drive, but it also showed me the shadow side of pastoral ambition. It can drive us to make great sacrifices in service to God and others, or it can be a veneer that hides far less noble motivations. What appears to be love

or devotion externally may actually be fueled by profound insecurity or even, in rare cases, pathological mental illness.

Even those with a healthy motivation sometimes need our ambition engines tuned up, a realignment toward Christ and away from self-centered desires. Discerning when we require an overhaul is the dilemma. There is no "check engine" light on the dashboard of our soul. But Scripture does offer wisdom in recognizing when our ambitions are misfiring.

Old Testament figures like Moses and Jeremiah were reluctant leaders. They did not want power or influence and at times actively resisted God's call into leadership. There is something noble about a reluctant leader, a sense that we can trust them with power because they don't want it. Perhaps that is why we create so many fictional heroes with this quality. Batman, Harry Potter, Katniss Everdeen—they all become leaders out of circumstance and necessity rather than desire for acclaim. It is the opposite of what we so often see in others and suspect about ourselves.

Moses and Jeremiah were this way. God put a "fire in their bones" that they could not extinguish. They were compelled to lead and speak, seemingly against their will. They remind us that the call to leadership is a result of God's grace; it doesn't come from our desire for acclaim. But is humble reluctance what we should expect in every godly leader?

Not according to the New Testament. Peter says that elders ought to lead willingly and not under compulsion (1 Peter 5:2), and Paul affirms those who aspire to leadership

(1 Tim. 3:1). We should remember, however, that while being a church leader in the first century may have offered a person more honor within the Christian community, it also often carried the likelihood of greater persecution by those outside of it. In other words, leadership carried a cost.

Still, the affirmation of willing leaders with a desire to teach and guide God's people is evidence that ambition is not inherently bad. When it is sparked by our communion with Christ, it can be a righteous energy that drives us toward the work of God. It can inspire us to take risks, try new approaches, or venture to new lands. The challenge, therefore, is to recognize the volatile and combustible nature of ambition. When paired with godliness and humility, and guided by a love for others, it can ignite life-giving change in the world. Where would we be without the ambitions of William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Jr., or Dorothy Day?

Ambition, when combined with the accelerants of ego and insecurity, can become a source of great destruction.

But any fuel that can accomplish so much good carries inherent dangers as well. Ambition, when combined with the accelerants of ego and insecurity, can become a source of great destruction. The drive to achieve can backfire on a leader, causing terrible harm to families, congregations, and the work of God in the world.

You know the pattern. A young Christian with strong communication abilities discovers that others are drawn to

him. Conflating the affirmation of an audience with a calling from God, the young man decides to start a church. He genuinely wants to see others engage with God, but there is another motive lurking beneath the surface. The church grows quickly. He soon finds himself in the company of other high-octane church leaders with even larger, more influential ministries. Comparing himself to them makes his ambition burn even hotter. Next come books, conferences, and media appearances. The inner apparatus of the church shifts subtly from growing disciples to growing the pastor's platform. Just as he reaches the pinnacle of influence—everything implodes.

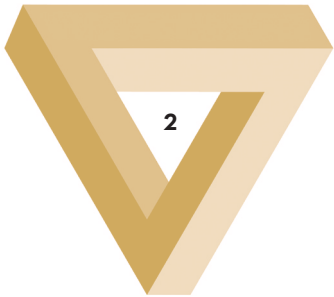
Sadly such stories are all too common. The problem was not a flawed church structure (they are all flawed) or even the ambition of the church leader (we are all ambitious). The problem was what fueled the ambition. Rather than the life-giving fire of communion with Christ, he chose the explosive power of an insecure ego.

As I learned in seminary, we are all a mix of godly and ungodly ambitions. In His power and wisdom, our Lord can use even those driven by selfish motives (Phil. 1:15–18), but we certainly don't want to be counted among them.

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

When did you first sense a draw toward ministry? Looking back, can you identify both healthy and unhealthy motives in your decision?

What are the warning signs—the lights on your soul's dashboard—that your ambition is being fueled by ungodly desires? Who recognizes these warning lights when you do not?



EFFECTIVENESS

COMPARE TWO LEADERS. Leader A lifted an entire nation in a time of despair. He mobilized his people against unimaginable odds with a clear vision and inspiring passion. He launched a movement that has impacted literally everyone alive today. He set in motion an industrial and scientific revolution that produced the first computer, the first jet airplane, began human exploration of space, and unlocked the mystery of nuclear energy. Almost every aspect of the modern world has, in one way or another, been influenced by this man. By the time he died at the age of only fifty-six, everyone on the planet knew his name. Without a doubt, Leader A changed the world.

Leader B lived during the same era. In fact, he died just twenty-one days before Leader A, but his life was very different. At the height of his influence, Leader B ran a school with just a hundred students. He wrote a few books but

was not widely regarded. He was beloved by his friends and family and had a reputation for being both intelligent and faithful, but at the time of his death almost no one knew his name, and most considered his life's work unfulfilled—including Leader B himself.

So, given the choice, which leader's strategies would you rather study? Which man's life would you rather emulate? Which leadership conference would you rather attend—the one featuring a keynote address by Leader A, or the one with a small workshop in a back hall facilitated by Leader B? If you are inspired by the world-changing effectiveness of Leader A, congratulations! You've chosen Adolf Hitler. Leader B was Dietrich Bonhoeffer, the German pastor who was executed by the Nazis for his relentless opposition to Hitler.

My point is simple: effectiveness isn't everything. And yet, we remain enamored with it. A few years ago, a prominent Christian leader speaking to sixty thousand young people said, "The only thing I am afraid of is living an insignificant life." Many of us can relate to that fear. The problem, however, is how we've been shaped by the culture—both inside and outside the church—to define significance. Everywhere we go, we are bombarded with the message that our significance is proportional to how much we change the world. Those few who actually become "world changers" are rewarded with the eternal life of Christian celebrity. The rest of us, however, are condemned to the second death of obscurity.

From where did this idea come that we're all supposed

to change the world? Searching book titles in the Harvard University library database reveals something surprising. In the last fifteen years, five times as many books with phrases like "change the world" in the title have been published than in the entire twentieth century. It seems that Millennials, more than any previous generation, have been shaped by a culture that equates effectiveness with significance.

When this idea is carried into the Christian faith, we come to believe that our value to *God* is rooted in how much we achieve for Christ and His kingdom. We may say we are doing it all for the glory of God and for the mission of the gospel, but often there is a deeper motive, a shadow mission to prove our significance through our effectiveness. I call it the Idol of Effectiveness, and I saw it on display years ago with a group of college students I mentored.

There were about ten of us gathered one night, and the students wanted to talk about their ongoing struggles with sinful habits. I asked each student to answer this question: In the midst of your sin, how do you think God views you?

The first student was a missionary kid. Decades before, she said, her parents had been students at a Christian college when a revival occurred. They committed themselves to overseas missions. The young woman shared about growing up in a wonderful family, with parents committed to God's work, and in a fantastic Christian community. "Now I'm at a Christian college," she said, "and how is God ever going to use me the way He's used my parents if I'm still struggling with sin?"

The next student quoted Scripture. He said, "To whom

much is given much is expected. God has given me so much, and I think He's disappointed with my sin. He expects more from me."

One after another they shared a similar sentiment, sometimes fighting back tears. They spoke of God's disappointment and of their fear that they won't be effective for Him in the world. Finally, after everyone shared, it got back to me, and I asked them a few more questions. "How many of you grew up in Christian homes?" They all raised their hands. "How many of you grew up in churches where the gospel was preached?" Again, they all raised their hands.

"What's so tragic," I said to them, "is that after twenty years in the church and now attending an evangelical college, not one of you gave the right answer. It didn't occur to any of you to say that in the midst of your sin God loves you."

Those young people had absorbed the idolatry of the evangelical movement. It is in the air we breathe. It is the water we swim in. We have replaced the love of the living God with sacrifices to the Idol of Effectiveness. When we bow to this idol, it steals our joy and replaces it with an unbearable burden. We begin to see everything—our value, our identity, even the absence or presence of sin in our lives—through the lens of effectiveness. But the most tragic lie the Idol of Effectiveness tells us is that a life spent in service for God is the same as a life with God.

I believe the most frightening passage in the Bible is in Matthew 7. There Jesus says that on the Day of Judgment many will come to him saying, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophecy in your name, and cast out demons in your

name, and do many mighty works in your name?" But Jesus will say to them, "I never knew you; depart from me." These are people who are absolutely convinced that they belong to Christ because they have spent their lives on mission for Him, and they have been very effective. They have preached in His name, they have fought evil in His name, and they have performed miracles in His name. And yet, they never knew Him. That is the great danger of confusing effectiveness for God as intimacy with God. For me the most frightening word in this most frightening passage is "many." Jesus says *many* will come to Him on that day completely convinced that they belong to Him because of their effectiveness.

You may be thinking, *How is that possible? How can they do those amazing things and not know Christ? How can they be so effective in ministry and be rejected at the judgment?* The Idol of Effectiveness has power because it causes us to look at the wrong fruit. We become enamored by relevance, power, impact, and how much we have changed the world. While all of those things are measures of effectiveness, none of them are a measure of faithfulness.

In Numbers 20, Moses has just led the people of God out of Egypt and into the wilderness. There they begin to complain about not having any water. They're ready to riot against Moses. So he falls on his face before the Lord in the tabernacle and prays for a solution. God says to him, "Speak to the rock and it will bring forth water for the people and their animals" (see Num. 20:8).

Something happened to Moses after leaving the pres-

ence of God, however, and rather than speaking to the rock as he had been commanded, Moses struck it twice with his staff. Incredibly, a miracle happened anyway. Water flowed abundantly. The people were saved. Moses was a hero.

Now consider the scene from a human point of view, or from the perspective of the Idol of Effectiveness. Was Moses's ministry effective? Absolutely! By any human standard, Moses was an effective leader. Was his ministry powerful? Yes, a miracle occurred! Was Moses's ministry relevant? Clearly. It's difficult to be more relevant than giving water to thirsty people in a desert. Was his ministry strategic? Without a doubt. He equipped the people with what they needed to reach their goal, the Promised Land. If Moses were here today, he'd be selling books on 3 Steps to Drawing Water from Rocks. He'd be speaking on the ministry conference circuit and hosting webinars for dehydrated churches. From a human perspective, Moses was outrageously effective.

But what about from the Lord's perspective? Not so much. God was far less impressed. In fact, Moses was punished severely for his disobedience. He was forbidden from entering the Promised Land. Instead, the Lord determined he would die within sight of it. Why? Because God does not judge our effectiveness. He judges our faithfulness. It's clear in Numbers 20 that God decided to perform a miracle in spite of Moses, not because of him.

So, when we focus on effectiveness, we are focusing on the wrong fruit. We assume that if people are coming to faith, if the church is growing, if the world is changing,

then we must be right with God. But in fact God may be working in spite of us, not because of us. And here's the real truth we don't like to admit—every time God works, it is in spite of us. He does not need us to accomplish His work. If He did, He wouldn't be a God worthy of our worship. There is an important truth that ministers need to hear as much as, if not more than, everyone else: *God does not need you. He wants you.* He did not send His Son to recruit you to change the world. He sent His Son to reconcile you to Himself. Your value to God is not in your effectiveness, but in your presence.

Before we are called to something or somewhere, our highest calling is to Someone.

I'm not saying the mission of Christ isn't important. I'm saying it's not most important. Tim Keller has reminded us that an idol is a good thing that we make into an ultimate thing. Effectiveness is a good thing, but it's not the ultimate thing. I care about the mission of God too much to care about the mission of God too much.

If we are to slay the Idol of Effectiveness, we must look for the right fruit both in ourselves and in the leaders we choose to follow. That fruit is not relevance or power or global impact. The fruit of a life lived in communion with Jesus Christ is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, goodness, faithfulness, and self-control. If we are to slay the Idol of Effectiveness then we must recapture the glorious truth that before we are called to something or somewhere, our highest calling is to Someone.

REFLECTION AND APPLICATION

What "fruit" does your ministry measure? How might this make you susceptible to the Idol of Effectiveness? Reflect on a season when your ministry was effective, but your soul was unhealthy. What questions can you regularly ask as leaders to ensure you see more than the human perspective of your ministry?

Ask your leaders if they are experiencing joy. If so, where? How? If not, what is stealing it from them? If those at the center of your ministry are not experiencing the fruit of the Spirit, why would you expect those at the periphery to? Use this to begin a longer conversation about the fruit of the Spirit in your community.