


Tozer called these sermons the most important he ever preached. Looking closely at Philippians 3, he describes the Christian as a modern-day Lazarus who hears the call to arise—but can't escape the grave clothes. These sermons usher you into a deeper life of love and maturity in Jesus Christ.

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Spiritual Leadership

PRINCIPLES OF EXCELLENCE
FOR EVERY BELIEVER

J. OSWALD SANDERS

An Honorable Ambition

To aspire to leadership is an honourable ambition.

1 TIMOTHY 3:1 NEB

Should you then seek great things for yourself?

Seek them not.

JEREMIAH 45:5

Most Christians have reservations about aspiring to leadership. They are unsure about whether it is truly right for a person to want to be a leader. After all, is it not better for the position to seek out the person rather than the person to seek out the position? Has not ambition caused the downfall of numerous otherwise great leaders in the church, people who fell victim to “the last infirmity of noble minds”? Shakespeare expressed a profound truth when his character Wolsey said to the great English general:

*Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambitions,
By that sin fell the angels; how can a man then,
The image of his Maker, hope to profit by't?*

No doubt, Christians must resist a certain kind of ambition and rid it from their lives. But we must also acknowledge

other ambitions as noble, worthy, and honorable. The two verses at the beginning of this chapter provide a warning—and an encouragement—for sorting out the difference. When our ambition carries out a burning desire to be effective in the service of God—to realize God’s highest potential for our lives—we can keep both of these verses in mind and hold them in healthy tension.

Part of that tension is the difference between Paul’s situation and ours. We may understand his statement (1 Timothy 3:1, above) in terms of the prestige and respect given to Christian leaders today. But such was far from Paul’s mind. In his day, a bishop faced great danger and worrisome responsibility. Rewards for the work of leading the church were hardship, contempt, rejection, and even death. The leader was first to draw fire in persecution, first in line to suffer.

Seen in this light, Paul’s encouragement does not seem so open to misuse by people merely seeking status in the church. Phonies would have little heart for such a difficult assignment. Under the dangerous circumstances that prevailed in the first century, even stouthearted Christians needed encouragement and incentive to lead. And so Paul called leadership an “honorable ambition.”

We ought never to forget that the same situation faces Christians today in certain parts of the world. Leaders of the church in China suffered most at the hands of Communists. The leader of the Little Flock in Nepal suffered years in prison after church members had been released. In many troubled areas today, spiritual leadership is no task for those who seek stable benefits and upscale working conditions. It remains true that any form of spiritual warfare

will inevitably single out leaders who by their role present obvious targets.

Paul urges us to the work of leading within the church, the most important work in the world. When our motives are right, this work pays eternal dividends. In Paul's day, only a deep love for Christ and genuine concern for the church could motivate people to lead. But in many cultures today where Christian leadership carries prestige and privilege, people aspire to leadership for reasons quite unworthy and self-seeking. Holy ambition has always been surrounded by distortions.

And so we find the ancient prophet Jeremiah giving his servant Baruch some very wise and simple counsel: "Are you seeking great things for yourself? Don't do it!" (Jeremiah 45:5 NLT). Jeremiah was not condemning all ambition as sinful, but he was pointing to selfish motivation that makes ambition wrong—"great things for yourself." Desiring to excel is not a sin. It is motivation that determines ambition's character. Our Lord never taught against the urge to high achievement, but He did expose and condemn unworthy motivation.

All Christians are called to develop God-given talents, to make the most of their lives, and to develop to the fullest their God-given gifts and capabilities. But Jesus taught that ambition that centers on the self is wrong. Speaking to young ministers about to be ordained, the great missionary leader Bishop Stephen Neill said: "I am inclined to think that ambition in any ordinary sense of the term is nearly always sinful in ordinary men. I am certain that in the Christian it is always sinful, and that it is most inexcusable of all in the ordained minister."¹

Ambition which centers on the glory of God and welfare of the church is a mighty force for good.

The word *ambition* comes from a Latin word meaning “campaigning for promotion.” The phrase suggests a variety of elements: social visibility and approval, popularity, peer recognition, the exercise of authority over others. Ambitious people, in this sense, enjoy the power that comes with money, prestige, and authority. Jesus had no time for such ego-driven ambitions. The true spiritual leader will never “campaign for promotion.”

To His “ambitious” disciples Jesus announced a new standard of greatness: “You know that those who are regarded as 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 slave of all” (Mark 10:42–44). We will consider this amazing statement at length in a later chapter. Here at the outset of this study of spiritual leadership, we will simply highlight Jesus’ master principle: True greatness, true leadership, is found in giving yourself in service to others, not in coaxing or inducing others to serve you. True service is never without cost. Often it comes with a bitter cup of challenges and a painful baptism of suffering. For genuine godly leadership weighs carefully Jesus’ question: “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” (Mark 10:38b). The real spiritual leader is focused on the service he and she can render to God and other people, not on the residuals and perks of high office or holy title. We must aim to put more into life than we take out.

“One of the outstanding ironies of history is the utter disregard of ranks and titles in the final judgments men pass on each other,” said Samuel Brengle, the great Salvation Army revival preacher. “The final estimate of men shows that history cares not an iota for the rank or title a man has borne, or the office he has held, but only the quality of his deeds and the character of his mind and heart.”²

“Let it once be fixed that a man’s ambition is to fit into God’s plan for him, and he has a North Star ever in sight to guide him steadily over any sea, however shoreless it seems,” wrote S. D. Gordon in one of his well-known devotional books. “He has a compass that points true in the thickest fog and fiercest storm, and regardless of magnetic rocks.”

The great leader Count Nikolaus von Zinzendorf (1700–1760) was tempted by rank and riches; indeed, he is most widely known by the title of honor noted here. But his attitude toward ambition was summed up in one simple statement: “I have one passion: it is He, He alone.” Zinzendorf turned from self-seeking to become the founder and leader of the Moravian Church. His followers learned from their leader and circled the world with his passion. Before missionary work was popular or well-organized, the Moravians established overseas churches that had three times as many members as did their churches back home—a most unusual accomplishment. Indeed, one of every ninety-two Moravians left home to serve as a missionary.

*Because we children of Adam want to become great,
He became small.*

*Because we will not stoop,
He humbled Himself.
Because we want to rule,
He came to serve.*

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