

“Redeeming Ambition” //Philippians 4:11–13//Homewreckers, #1

Announcement: Cary/Apex campus launch!

This weekend we’re beginning a series called “Homewreckers,” in which we’re going to look at some of things that corrode our relationships and destroy our homes.

For the last several years, about once a year, I have done a series on relationships.

- I realize a lot of you in here are not married; for some of you it’s because God hasn’t brought the right person to you yet; for some of you He has brought along the right person but they won’t go out with you; for others of you, you are single by choice.
- Bottom line, there are a lot of you in here that are single, and so, our team works really hard to make sure this is helpful for everybody.
- And I think if you’re single you’ll get as much out of it as if you’re married, because we’re learning principles about relationships that apply to a whole lot more than marriage.

I want to start this series in an unusual place... I’m going to talk for a couple of weeks of how your relationship with God is lived out in your jobs. Here’s why: Many of you, especially you men: your home life is out of whack because your work life is out of whack.

Think about it:

- What is the source of a lot of the stress you bring into your home? WORK.
 - You are dissatisfied in your job; you hate your boss; money is tight; you’re under a lot of pressure... and you take that out on your family. If you could ever get your job-life right a lot of your issues at home would dissolve.
- The majority of your life as an adult is spent at work. And I think the church has done a patently bad job teaching people what it means to follow Jesus in the workplace. Sometimes we talk about working for God as if it is a half-hour of volunteer work we do on the weekend, when you serve as an usher. Volunteering at the church is important, but for many of you, your primary ministry place ought to be the workplace. I’m not discouraging volunteering; everybody in here who is a part of our church should volunteer (this weekend experience is crucial in reaching our community). It’s just that your workplace ought to be your primary place of ministry.
 - I’ve often pointed out to you that 37 out of 40 miracles in Acts...

So, over the next few weeks I want to teach you a little bit about what it means to be a believer in your workplace.

Here’s specifically the subject today: *the role of ambition in your life*. Ambition is something that drives us in work.

Now, ambition, on the surface, has really gotten a bad rap in our society. To say that somebody is “ambitious” usually has a bad connotation. We think of Michael Douglas in *Wall Street*; greedy, proud, cut-throat, overly-competitive.

- And let me be clear: selfish ambition is definitely wrong. James 3:13-14 says that selfish ambition is the root of all kinds of bad sins – in leads, James says, to exploitation, bitter jealousy, rivalry, strife, and constant dissatisfaction.
- So Jeremiah 45:5 says plainly, “Do you then seek great things for yourself? Seek them not.”

But there is another kind of ambition that is good and right

- It was ambition that led David to expand the borders of Israel.
- It was ambition that led Solomon to build the Temple.
- It was ambition that led Nehemiah to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem.
- It was ambition that led Paul to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth. Paul even said, "I make it my ambition..." (Romans 15:26).
- Jesus Himself was driven by an unparalleled ambition. The Gospels say of Jesus, "Zeal (or, you could translate that 'ambition,') for God's house has eaten Him up." (John 2:17)

Yes, selfish ambition has caused greedy executives to exploit the poor and ruin our economy; selfish ambition has driven some dictators to send nations to war; selfish ambition has made some men and women destroy their families and neglect their children. But in our reaction to that we definitely don't need to get rid of all ambition. We need to redeem ambition; to rescue it.

We live in a world desperately in need of people who are ambitious for the right things.

Soap box warning: I hate, I hate the emasculation of our society. Our society has gone to war against some traditionally male traits like ambition. It's attempted to neuter them.

- Probably the ultimate example of this is one cited by James Dobson from a county in California that required it's boys to sit down when they urinate because standing up you pee while girls sit down somehow reinforces some kind of attitude of domination.
- Our society says, "See? Ambition causes war and strife and selfish ambition is bad. So, let's tone down all ambition."
- Yes, selfish ambition is bad. So that's why we need men and women with the right ambitions for the right reasons.

Let me be clear: the goal of this sermon is not that you become more ambitious, not less. That ambition you've been given is a gift, and we want you to have the right kind of ambition for the right reasons.

- We are ambitious as a church: 1000 churches. Ministries in the 5 areas. Reaching our city. Jesus commanded us to be. Zeal for building the house of God in RDU ought to "eat us up" like it did Jesus.

And don't think, by the way, that ambition is only for one personality type: if you're not aggressive, a firstborn, or a natural leader you're not ambitious. We all have goals and we are ambitious for them. Some of you want to be married. Some of you strongly desire to have a family. You want your kids to turn out well. You want a comfortable life. You're ambitious for those things.

Unless you have no wants, no needs, no desires, then you have ambitions. And if you have no, wants, needs, desires... you're dead.

- And so we'll be ambitious to get you buried.

Paul displays the good kind ambition in the book of Philippians. I want to show you what his ambition looked like, and then use his example to show you how you can tell if your ambition is the good kind or the bad kind. (We'll do a little ambition test)

- I read a book last year called *Rescuing Ambition*, because godly ambition is something I've struggled with a lot in my life, and a lot of my thinking on this subject has been inspired by that book.
- By the way, at all of our campuses this week, we'll be making those books available to you for purchase. Here's my copy that looks like a pen barfed on it.

- Great vacation reading. I know that some of you are getting caught up on all the HP books in anticipation of the final movie; or, I know some of you after the May 22 Jesus coming back prediction a few weeks ago are back into the Left Behind series...
- But you, especially you men, should make this book a priority; it will be available at our campuses and on the campus blogs.

Background of Philippians: Things are not going that well for Paul. His career has taken a pretty substantial turn for the worse.

- He's in prison
- People are telling lies about him.
- Other people have taken credit for his work and then trashed him. (kind of like President Bush feels about Osama).
 - It's bad enough when somebody steals credit for your work, but then uses credit for your work to trash you... ever had that happen? That's happening to Paul.
- And he is unable to be with those he loves! He loves this church he is writing, and they are in danger—they are getting some bad teaching and they are being persecuted for what they believe. But he's in prison, and so he can't be there to protect them? *Ever been in a situation where you wanted to protect someone you loved, but you were unable to?*
 - **Ex.:** When Veronica and I had just moved to Durham, she called me one night after midnight. I was in FL speaking at a camp... she thought someone was in the house. More than I got spooked... she thought she could hear something.

The point: Paul is in some pretty discouraging circumstances. His ministry, in many ways, seems to be in the decline. He seems to be losing popularity; his reputation is being trashed; some of his work is being undone; and he's in prison unable to really do anything about it.

- That's when most of us grow discontented. A lot of things are not turning out like they are supposed to be.
 - You think, "By now I should be in this leadership position;"
 - "By this age, I wanted to be here in my career;"
 - "By now, I should be making this much money;"
 - "At this age, I should have been married."
 - "I should have kids;" "I should have travelled here or accomplished that by now..."
 - And listen, those things are not wrong desires. They are God-given. Desiring positions of leadership; success; marriage. Those things can be signs of spiritual maturity.
- ***But it is how we respond when our ambitions are disappointed that reveals whether they are godly or selfish ones.***

Paul says this: **Philippians 4:11–13 (ESV):** [11] ... I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. [12] I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound.

- When you abound is when you land the contract; you get the raise; you're engaged; you're pregnant after you've been praying for years.
- Brought low is when you face failure. You get overlooked for the promotion; you're still single; you knock on the door of your dreams and it just doesn't open. Knuckles are bloody and you're saying, "Why is this door shut? I'm qualified. God, what's wrong?"

[12] In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.

I love this phrase: "I have learned."

- I find this comforting. This did not come natural to Paul. It wasn't a little benefit that was included with his conversion, an attachment to a salvation email where you point, click and apply.

Like the updates that come from Microsoft about your computer; you get a little service package that updates some program. The Holy Spirit uploads this program to fix your discontentment bug.

- Learned it.

Vs. 12: There's a secret to all of this. He doesn't just tell us that he's content, and you should be to so get on with it. He's going to tell us how. He said there is a secret to it. So we all lean in to hear it. And then he gives us one of the most often misquoted verses in the New Testament: **[13] I can do all things through him who strengthens me.**

- (Basketball players who quote the verse before a foul shot). He's not really talking about making foul shots. He's talking about how he has learned to be content in all things.
- Scholars say that word could really be translated "in Him" instead of "through Him." He is saying that I have found in Christ both the resources to succeed and the resources to have my dreams disappointed.

What Paul is showing you about himself here is pretty remarkable:

- He is disappointed, but he hasn't grown bitter or given up on his dreams.
 - A lot of times after we've had a dream disappointed, we try to pay God back. "Fine God. I'll just be normal. I guess that will make you happy."
 - Or we shift into a self-protection mode: You kind of think, even if you never verbalize it: "I just can't handle getting disappointed again. I'll just aim at nothing because I know I can hit that, and then I won't feel like I let everyone else or myself down." So you settle.
 - Paul doesn't do that. He is a man who is disappointed in his ambitions, but has not given up on his dreams. He faces disappointment without disillusionment; He's genuinely sad at his losses, but is not in despair.
- He's hungry for more; yet happy with less. He wanted to preach to large audiences; but he was content to sit in prison.
- He's not sitting there angrily brooding over the question, "By now, God, I should have been..." God, what's wrong with me? What did I do wrong. What did *You* do wrong?
- And he's not taking it out on those around him.
 - That's what a lot of us do. A lot of us are disappointed at work and we take it out on our family, trying to get them to fill in that gap in our heart that is left by the disappointment we face in our jobs.
 - You'll see in the book of Philippians that there are a lot of people who have let him down. He's not taking it out on them.

How you handle disappointment is the test of whether your ambitions are selfish or godly.

- How do you handle it when you haven't made 1 million?
- Not married? Didn't have kids?
- Didn't get into the program?
- Do you get mad at God? Give up on your dream? Despair about yourself?

Paul could face disappointment because his ambitions were godly ambitions, and they were godly ambitions because they were rooted in Christ. So what does it mean for your ambitions to be rooted "in Christ"? 4 things that come from the book of Philippians:

1. Paul had found His approval in Christ (3:5-9)

- In Philippians 3, Paul went through a list of his accomplishments. It would be kind of like his resume; his CV. It's pretty impressive by anybody's standard, especially for someone in that day.
 - He said, I came from the right family.
 - I went to the right school.

- I was a rising star in the top job.
- And I was famous.
- And then he says this: **"I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord... I count them as rubbish that I may gain Christ" Philippians 3:8**
 - Scholars tell us that that word rubbish is a pretty rough word: *scubala*. Not trying to give you gratuitous potty humor here, but it really means, "crap."
 - He's like these degrees from Harvard; that Pulitzer Prize; Congressional Medal of Honor? Those seminary degrees? These national championships? That 200K a year salary; It's all crap to me...
- ... *Compared to the worth of knowing Jesus.*
 - Jesus gives my soul more fulfillment and significance than I could have found in anything I obtained.
 - And Jesus, he says, vs. 9, was given to me not because of what I have accomplished, but as a gift. It was not a reward for my merits, but a gift of God's grace.
 - And everything I have obtained, or could obtain, is rubbish compared to the gift-righteousness of Christ.
- Paul's selfish ambitions were satisfied in knowing Christ.
 - So that meant if he died in seeming failure, in prison, and with a trashed reputation, with his work undone, he could be personally content with that.
- Can you say that about your prison?
 - Can you say? "If I die poor; single; my reputation trashed; Christ is enough for me"?
 - What do you need in addition to Jesus to be happy, you idolater?
 - If the ministry doesn't succeed, like Paul's doesn't appear to me, I can be happy with that.
 - If I'm overlooked for promotion, wrongly, I can resolve myself to that.
 - I'm not saying you won't protest, you will; Paul did. And I'm not saying you don't keep working for it! You will. Paul did. Paul never gave up on his ambitions for a big ministry and a prospering church. He was hungry for more; yet satisfied with less.
 - At the end of the day can you be satisfied in God's will regardless of what it is?
 - If I never get married. If we never have kids naturally.
- Here's the secret. If you don't feel that way, you'll never be satisfied no matter what you obtain. It will always be beyond you. You'll never get to the place in your job where it satisfies you.
 - Your marriage, your family, all the stuff you think will complete your life and make you happy, won't.
 - **A completed job is not a completed life. Dave Harvey**
 - Some of you are going spend your lives ambitious climbing the ladder of success only to find out it's been leaning on the wrong building. What you're looking for is in Christ.
- Some of you are taking out your dissatisfaction with your job out on your family. Here's how it sounds:
 - Man: To your wife: "I need affirmation! Why don't you affirm me more?" And, spouse, you probably do need to affirm them more. Ladies, write that down. But your problem, sir, is you are not satisfied in Christ. That's why you crave your wife's affirmation so much. You are not satisfied in Christ's opinion of you, so you crave the affirmation and approval of others. And I speak as a certified expert on that.
 - Whenever I feel myself needing, craving the approval of others, I ask myself, "Why am I not satisfied with what Christ thinks about me?"
- The cravings of selfish ambition end in Christ. In Him you have the absolute approval of the only One whose opinion really matters.

- Knowing Jesus is the greatest treasure; walking with Him the greatest pleasure; living out His plan on earth the greatest significance.

2. Paul knew what He deserved (2:3-8)

- Phil 2: Paul says, "My view of myself, and what I have, I see through the lens of what I deserve."
- Another secret: The heart of discontentment is not getting what we think we deserve. When you complain, you are saying, "I deserve better than I have."
- Some of you will think this is over the top, but it's not. What does the gospel show you that you deserve? Hell. Everything you have is grace.
 - Trying to teach this to my kids: Allie, what does your complaining show that you think you deserve?
 - *"If we have not what we desire, we have more than we deserve."* Puritan Thomas Watson
 - You don't have what you deserve, you're right; and you can thank God for that. And when you realize that, you'll find it remarkably easier to be content.
- There's kind of Disney, Oprah version of this that says the way you find contentment is by comparison yourself with others less fortunate than you:
 - You've probably heard a story like this one, before. There's an American who is all dejected, depressed... "Lord why haven't I prospered? I've tithed faithfully, I've served you. Why haven't you blessed me." And then he goes on a mission trip and he sees people living in squalor... and everybody says, "Wow, how rich you are. You have a cabinet full of food?" Wow. We have one fish to share with all 10 of us. You have a garage? *You have house, just for your car?* We have one room that me and all 9 of my kids sleep in." Or you visit a leper colony and start feeling like you shouldn't complain about your health. **Bottom line**, you come back from the mission trip feeling like you're filthy rich, and that's how you obtain contentment.
 - *And I guess there is a little value in that, but* **the Bible never tells you to find contentment by comparing yourself to those in less fortunate circumstances, it tells you to compare your situation with what your sins deserve.**
 - *"If we have not what we desire, we have more than we deserve."* Puritan Thomas Watson
 - Paul 2nd secret of contentment in disappointed ambitions was in understanding the gospel. The fact that I woke up this morning in any place other than hell is grace. I have a family. Food on the table. Friends. That's all grace. And if you get that, you'll probably stop complaining.

3. Paul trusted God's control over all things (4:6-7)

- **Philippians 4:6-7 (ESV)** [6] do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God.
 - Can't you hear Paul... but God, what about that church? What's going to happen to them?
 - Or for you: God, what about my kids, my wife? I need to provide for them. God, what about my church?
 - This is a verse Paul had *lived* in prison. He said, I've learned to be anxious for nothing, not even for those I loved. You moms, does the word "anything" include your kids? So, are you reading that it's a sin to be anxious or worried about how your kids will turn out? Yes.
- Now again, Paul had not given up.
 - He wasn't apathetically submitting to the will of God. I'll just give up. I can't change anything. I'll just quit caring.
 - That's called Buddhism, not Christianity.
- Paul had just found that He could trust God's loving control of all things.

- So he made his request known to God. And he prayed ambitious requests for those he loved. He'd work ambitiously for them; and then he'd rest in God's loving sovereignty.
- And when I do that, he says, [7] **And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.**
 - Think about how real of an example this is to him. There, to his right, guards...
 - And then he says, "There's a couple of guards who protect the peace of my heart are knowing that I can commit my ambitions to God in prayer, leave my deepest desires and ambitions at His feet, and then trust what *He does* with them.
 - **"There is no peace in life until we're convinced that our place is his choice." Dave Harvey**

4. Paul knew God sometimes ordains our suffering so that we can know Him more and He can be glorified through us (1:14-18; 3:10-11)

- Philippians 1:14-18. Paul describes how his imprisonment is leading to the spread of the gospel. People were talking about it. Even the trashing of his bad reputation was making people talk more about Christ. And he says, "Even in my unfair circumstances, Christ is preached, so I rejoice."
 - What if what is best for the kingdom of God is not best for you personally? Are you willing for God to do that? Can you rejoice and say, *"Christ is glorified and the gospel magnified so I am satisfied."*
- If you study the ministry of John the Baptist... He started his ministry with a bang. He was the talk of the town. He ended it less popular. Nobody paying him any attention.
 - "He must increase, but I must decrease."
- Same thing here. Paul was decreasing but he was content with that because He knew God was magnifying His name.
 - Are you willing for that to happen?
 - Charles Simeon
 - And by the way, you may not even see it... Paul could. You say, "If I could see it all working out for God's good plan, then maybe I'd be ok with it." But you may not. You may just have to trust that God's word; that He is sovereignly pursuing the agenda in your life His word says He is.
 - How about this: What if God ordains your failure to increase the glory of His name?
 - We all dream about God bringing glory to His name through our successes. We think know how to pass the test of prosperity. Or, at least we think we do. "Come on, God!" Pour that prosperity on me. I'll show you how I can handle it." None of us ever say, "No, I want to glorify God in pain or poverty."
 - But what if God uses disappointment, failure?
- Paul knew that God was also using his suffering in his own life.
 - Philippians 3:10-11. He says that I am able to know God in my suffering I could not know as well in prosperity. I am willing to walk with Christ through (Phil 3:10) the fellowship of His sufferings if it means I can know more of His power at work in my heart.
- There is a God who loves you so much that he'll ordain your hunger to save your soul. And there is a God who can sometimes bring more glory to His name by leaving you in prison than He can by promoting you to speak at the conference.
- **"The idea that all people from childhood on should be successful at whatever they put their hand to and be able to achieve success in immeasurable ways, and that it is a disgrace not to, hangs over the church like a pall of acrid smoke. J.I. Packer**
- **"Let us not accept the world's definition of success that says 'always abounding and increasing;' and has no room for 'he must increase even though I must decrease.'" Dave Harvey**
- **Do you suffer well? Are you content? Can you say, "God and His approval are enough, regardless what comes?"**

The test of ambition is how you face disappointment. Your discontentment, fear, jealousies and conflict are all like smoke from a fire.

- Paul's joy was in Christ. That was given to him as a gift. It didn't depend on him obtaining a bunch of stuff or accomplishing a bunch of things. It was found in Christ.
 - God had to put Paul in prison to learn that. Most of our ambitions are pursued by doing something. Paul is prison. In chains. So he can't do anything. So the joys of his heart would have to be found in knowing Someone; belonging to Someone. Has God had to do that to you? Keep you from doing something, and accomplishing something, so you could find your joy in KNOWING Someone?
- Paul's earthly dreams and desires had been placed into the sovereign hand of a good God. As such, they were beyond the touch of His enemies and Paul could rejoice in all things.

One of *Jonathan Edwards* biographers said of him: *"His happiness was out of the reach of his enemies."*

- Paul's was too. Is yours? What do you have to obtain to find joy? What can't be taken away because without that you'll go into despair?

Christ is the only reliable, lasting anchor for your contentment.

Your discontentment, fear, jealousies and conflict are all like smoke from a fire. Those things can work like the "find and search" function on your computer.

- Run that search, and replace those with God-glorifying ambitions.

Conclusion: My own struggle: Jealousies, etc.

- I have found the end of my ambition in Christ. And that has freed me up, for the first time in my life, for God glorifying ambitions.
- Can dream 1000 churches. Can dream of a movement in RDU and on our campuses. I dream of raising great kids as champions for God. I dream of making lots of money for Jesus and giving it away.
- But if God doesn't give me that, I can be satisfied. Hungry for more, satisfied with less. The things I am ambitious for are more about His kingdom and blessing others than they are personal satisfaction, for I have found that satisfaction in Christ.
- So can you. Find it in Him today, and you'll be freed to real, God-glorifying eternity changing ambitions.

Bullpen:

- But more often than not, we fail the test of prosperity. **Charles Spurgeon:** *"The Christian more often disgraces his profession in prosperity than when he's being abased."*

James Dobson's father

Mix in: HOW DO YOU REACT TO OTHERS?

This is ingrained in me.

Completed job is not a completed life.
Whenever there is a gift there is a limit.

- **Philippians 3:8–14; Philippians 4:11–13, pp. 121–135:** We are frustrated b/c we are not fruitful: Many men live with a nagging sense of unfulfillment and low self-esteem because they are not more successful. Sometimes it is easy for us pastor to be frustrated we are not more fruitful. Ask yourself this: why do you need to be fruitful? A lot of us need to be fruitful to validate ourselves. That shows that we do not really understand the Gospel. Any good fruit we bear is the result of Christ in us. If we believe the Gospel, we are in Christ and Christ is in us. Christ doesn't need to be validated. If we need to be validated, it shows that our identity is not really being "in Christ," but being successful. The irony is that Jesus promises to make us massively fruitful if we don't need to be fruitful to be successful. He says the Father is glorified by our "bearing much fruit," and that fruit comes from "abiding in Him." To abide in Him means that our identity comes from our status in Him and our joy comes from our possession of Him. The irony is that it is when we don't *need* to be fruitful that God can make us fruitful.

There's a word many Christians are afraid of. It's almost a bad word. If you have it, many people assume it means you're self-serving. Power hungry. But most of all, **arrogant**.

I'm talking about **ambition**.

It's almost like if you want to excel at something or do big things with your life or organization, then you must have a God-complex. An all too elevated sense of self-importance.

There's no denying that that's definitely true in the case of some people. But I also fear that our fear of ambition is severely limiting other people who have been called to do great things for God. Why should we put a cap on their **potential** because some people can't put a cap on their **pride**?

I've seen too many pastors settle for reaching hundreds when God called them to reach thousands. I've seen too many talented businessmen stop short of the impact God had called them to make on their field. All because they feared being thought of as ambitious.

So let's clear this up once and for all: *nowhere* in the Bible is ambition condemned. *Selfish* ambition is definitely warned against. But ambition for the sake of God's glory is not only condoned, it's commended. It's a required asset for anyone wanting to rise above the mass of men and do something extraordinary.

Ambition led Noah to build the ark. David to expand the borders of Israel. Solomon to build the Temple. Nehemiah to rebuild the walls. Paul to spread the gospel to the ends of the earth.

I wonder if people accused them of being arrogant? Maybe. But then again, **if you're never accused of being arrogant, it's probably a sign that you're not being ambitious enough**. You're dreaming too small. Your goals are too easily attainable.

Let me free you: it's ok to want to be the best at what you do. It's ok to want to achieve as much as you can with your life for the sake of the God who gave it to you. I sincerely doubt God is going to look at you at the end of your life and say, "you did *too much* for me." But I do sincerely believe that God is going to look at many people and say you were too "humble" for your own good. And the good of countless people you could have impacted if you had a little more ambition.

Don't let anyone ever tell you that ambition is synonymous with arrogance. Godly ambition is what God uses to do incredible things in our world.

If that makes you look arrogant, don't back down from what God has called you to do. Instead mourn for the people who are living so far beneath their potential that anything greater must be arrogance.