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The Glory and the Dream: Nurturing Godly Aspiration and Grateful Contentment “Aspiring for More, Part III: When Aspiration Goes Astray” Philippians 2:3, et al

Take a first look.

I. The colorful and controversial Italian diplomat and philosopher Niccolo Machavelli wrote, “Men rise from one ambition to another: first, they seek to secure themselves against attack, and then they attack others.”¹ That is based on a lot of observation of people in positions of power.

II. Missionary author Stephen Neill gave *ambition* a very negative rating, defining it only in the bad sense of “*selfish ambition*,” and he considered it always bad in the Christian life (see Philippians 1:17; 2:3). Where the Spirit of God is hindered in His work in human lives—where virtue is lacking—all sorts of evil are the result. Hitler, Stalin, and the entire atheist-communist experiment of the 20th century are illustrative. No one with an ounce of accurate history could support such socialism. The Islamist intention to make the world one big Islamist Caliphate is a current example, as well. When God is pressed into the service of human ends, when His character is misunderstood based on faulty information, or when He is denied or strategically excluded from any meaningful consideration, the result is tyranny, injustice, and death.

III. So how does human aspiration go wrong? It is separated from virtue. Let’s look at some examples of this in Scripture.

The Biblical Warning: Philippians 2:1-4, especially v. 3, FJV (my emphasis)

¹ Since, then, there is some encouragement in Christ, since there is some consolation coming from love, since there is some fellowship in the Spirit, since there is some compassion and mercy—² make my joy full so that you^{p2} might keep thinking the same way, having the same love, united in spirit, thinking the one thing, ³ *doing nothing according to selfish ambition or according to empty pride*, but in humility considering each other better than themselves, ⁴ not each one looking out for his own things, but also those things of others.

Take a closer look at the corruption of aspiration.

Our question is: What shape does “selfish ambition” take?

I. Greed. Proverbs 30:15-16; Luke 12:16-21; Colossians 3:5

2. *We must avoid greed because it is a leech on the soul.* Proverbs 30:15-16. The Hebrew Proverbial Counselor named Agur, son of Jakeh, gives us a vivid word picture:

“The leech has two daughters: Give and Give.

Three things are never satisfied;

four never say, ‘Enough’:

Sheol, the barren womb,

¹ https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/niccolo_machiavelli_166592?src=t_ambition.

² The superscript “p” indicates that the pronoun is plural or that the verb includes a plural subject.

the land never satisfied with water,
and the fire that never says, 'Enough.'”

I may have met Mr. Leech’s 2 daughters once. If we are unable to say, “Enough,” then we have a definite lack of virtue, a virtue which all the Wisdom Literature of the Bible is intended to inculcate into the hearer and reader. If we lack wisdom and virtue, we will never be contented with less than everything that we desire. According to Agur, that will mean that we will never be contented at all. All aspirations must be checked by virtue, and such personal character will always include a generous measure of gratefulness and the spirit of contentment that comes from it. Greed is the absence of both gratefulness and contentment.

A—Greed causes us to give in to base motivations without restriction. We must seek God’s help to avoid this.

I—Let’s face it, most of us are not happy being Minions, unless it is me as I carry my lovely wife’s art from place to place. I am an unofficial Art Minion. Usually, we want to be The Boss. Perhaps our personal milieu will not allow this to happen fully. Facets of our early childhood experience, our present circumstances, and our personality style combine to restrain us somewhat. That does not mean that we do not really want control over everything else outside of ourselves. Maybe a god-complex is not that rare, after all. We just don’t always have the courage or the opportunity to exert it.

2. Greed causes us to place ultimate meaning in the wrong object. Luke 12:13-21

Jesus addressed greed rather directly in his interactions with people during his public ministry. In one incident, a man approached him with a demand. He cried out to Jesus from the crowd that was surrounding Him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the inheritance with me!” (Luke 12:13, FJV). That probably seemed rather cheeky, I suspect, because Jesus’ reply was first personal and then general. First, he called back to the guy, “Man, who appointed me judge or arbitrator over you?” But then, he turned to everyone and said this: “Pay attention and guard yourselves from every kind of greediness, because one’s life is not in the abundance of his possessions” (Luke 12:15, FJV). After that, as usual, Jesus told a simple story, a parable, to illustrate his point. Here it is (Luke 12:16-21):

Then He told a parable to them saying, “The land bore good crops for a certain rich man. And he reasoned in himself saying, ‘What shall I do, because I do not have a place where I will gather together my crops?’ And he said, ‘This I will do, I will tear down my barns and I will build greater ones, and I’ll gather together there all the wheat and my good things, And I will say to my soul, “Soul, you have many good things laid up for many years; keep on resting, eat, drink, enjoy yourself.”’ But God said to him, ‘Fool, on this night they will demand your soul from you, and what things you have prepared, to whom will they be?’ In this way it will be for the one who stores up for himself and is not rich toward God” (Luke 12:16-21, FJV).

Greed turns our focus only to what we can gain from the world in general and from other people in particular. We become consumed with how we can get more and preserve all that we have gained for our own use. It will warp our souls.

3. Greed makes us idolaters. That is what the Apostle Paul called those who give in to the spirit of greed (see Colossians 3:5). He equated “greed” with “idolatry.” And that makes sense, really. If our aspirations are not checked by a balance point of grateful contentment, they consume us. They become our reason for living, our point of reference for every action and relationship. They make us idolaters. This is not good.

II. Stubbornness. Proverbs 10:8

The Proverbial counselor says, “The wise of heart will receive commandments, but a babbling fool will come to ruin” (Proverbs 10:8, ESV). The “fool” is one considered intellectually and morally deficient. That person will not “receive commandments,” or will not accept godly counsel. Aspiration, unchecked by other aspects of godly character, notably fortitude and the self-giving love of Christ, will make a person inflexible, unyielding, and unable or unwilling to receive counsel from others, unless that counsel is merely self-confirming. We could argue that stubbornness is just the selfish distortion of fortitude. If the virtue of fortitude enables us to “stick to our guns” when the battle rages all around us, stubbornness will make us “stick to our opinions” even when they are bad ones. Stubbornness isolates our limited perspective, that could become so much fuller and enriching if we were not so bull-headed. It negates the spiritual principle of Body Life, as we adopt the unwise and ultimately self-defeating attitude, “I don’t need you” (See 1 Corinthians 12:21ff.).

A—We must resist the urge to be stubborn and fail to learn from the knowledge and experience of others.

I—First Kings 12 tells the story of the division of the ancient kingdom of Israel. In his later years, Solomon became unfaithful to God through the rampant idolatry he practiced because of his many wives and concubines (1,000 of them according to 1 Kings 11:3!). This is another illustration of the lack of self-control by a fallen man in such a position of power. What God used to bring about his judgment on Solomon’s idolatry, which was the division of the kingdom after the reign of Solomon, was an appeal to pride and the seduction of power—a stubborn unwillingness to listen to godly counsel.

Rehoboam was the son of Solomon who was set to become king of Israel. He went to Shechem “for all Israel had come to Shechem to make him king” (1 Kings 12:1, ESV). Before the coronation began, the exiled Jeroboam, who had been Solomon’s foreman for forced labor, returned to Shechem with “all the assembly of Israel” to ask Rehoboam to relax the “hard service” that Solomon had laid on the people. Rehoboam asked for 3 days to consider it. Then, he called in his father’s advisers for their counsel. They said, “If you will be a servant to this people today and serve them, and speak good words to them when you answer them, then they will be your servants forever” (1 Kings 12:7, ESV). Pretty wise advice. Then, Rehoboam “took counsel with the young men who had grown up with him and stood before him” (1 Kings 12:8, ESV). In other words, he looked for a final word of advice from his peers, the trust-fund children of their prosperous parents, who lacked experience and perspective, the “Yes-men” that served him and who had grown up with the prosperity gained by their parents and grandparents. They gave him bad advice. They told him to stand fiercely before the people and say, “My father disciplined you with whips, but I will discipline you with scorpions!” (1 Kings 12:15, ESV). That split the nation, leaving only Judah and what was left of Benjamin under Rehoboam’s rule. God prevented him from waging war to return the rebelling tribes to his control. So, the kingdom was divided. Again, it is important to remember that God had decreed the division of the kingdom as a judgment on idolatry, but the human means He used to bring it about was *the stubbornness of a young man* who refused to hear wise counsel from his elders and valued more highly the advice of his privileged peers. Something to think about.

III. Misplaced Trust. Isaiah 31:1, 3

If greed is a perversion of aspiration and stubbornness is a distortion and misapplication of fortitude, then misplaced trust can take the place of true spiritual hope. Put simply, without the

correcting perspective brought by the Spirit of God through His revelation in salvation-history (read here, the Bible), we will easily put our trust in the wrong object.

1. *We must resist the urge to see a mere human as the Savior. We already have a Savior, Jesus Christ.* Every 4 years, America goes through something of a political convulsion. After the first 2 presidential elections, in which George Washington was elected with almost no opposition, presidential elections have been hotly contested. After reading somewhat widely about the President Washington, I find myself thinking, *If only George Washington had not set such a high standard for character as the first president. He left a tough act to follow!* And even at that, he was also a mere man who made some mistakes, also. He is the only president we have ever had who did not campaign for the office and was elected twice with huge (unanimous?) majorities of electoral votes. It was evidence of his greatness of character that he relinquished that power after 2, 4-year terms while the country, for the most part, would have loved for him to continue.³ Many would have liked to draft the constitution so that it allowed for King George I of America, but he resisted that push, also.

2. *Here's the problem: We are always looking for some human person to save us.* The people of Israel had a standing temptation on this front, and their actions illustrate this feature of human nature quite well. At one point late in their history, they concluded that an alliance with Egypt would be their ticket to national security, even though trust in the LORD was at a low ebb. God sent Isaiah to shock them awake (Isaiah 31:1, 3, ESV):

“Woe to those who go down to Egypt for help
And rely on horses,
Who trust in chariots because they are many
And in horsemen because they are very strong,
But do not look to the Holy One of Israel
Or consult the LORD!”

...

And he reminds them:

“The Egyptians are man, and not God,
And their horses are flesh, and not spirit.
When the LORD stretches out his hand,
The helper will stumble,
and he who is helped will fall,
And they will all perish together.”

The political solution is to believe that a new Leader, a new alliance with other nations, a military buildup will bring us lasting security. But, if we do this without reference to the LORD and without the restraint of the character borne of His Spirit, we will eventually self-destruct. It may take a while, but it will certainly happen. The whole history of ancient Israel is an object lesson in this simple insight.

The ancient Hebrew philosopher and preacher helps us here. In Ecclesiastes 3:11 (NIV), he writes, “[God] has also set eternity in the hearts of men; but they cannot fathom what God has done from beginning to end.” His refrain throughout that pre-existentialist meditation is “futility of futilities.” What is the futility of futilities? It is trying to draw ultimate meaning for life in a

³ Read Eric Metaxas’ treatment of George Washington in his book, *Seven Men and the Secret of Their Greatness* (Thomas Nelson, 2016). Edward Larson has applied his historical skills to George Washington in *The Return of George Washington: 1783-1789* (William Morrow, 2013). He covers the period between the end of the Revolutionary War and the Constitutional Convention with thoroughness and care. And while you are at it, read *1776* (Simon and Schuster, 2006) by David McCollough, which was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for the book. That will get you up to speed on President Washington.

temporary and fallen world from things that are not ultimate. Even Mick Jagger got this in the 1960s:

"I can't get no satisfaction.

I can't get no satisfaction.

Cause I try, and I try, and I try, and I try;

I can't get no ... I can't get no Hey, hey, hey."

"Repetition is the mother of learning," as Aristotle is reputed to have said. The book of Ecclesiastes is a much more eloquent statement, but it essentially affirms the same truth. Without the corrective lens of God's truth applied to the heart by God's Spirit, we will try (and try, and try, and try) to pin our hope on something that can't deliver.

IV. The "Hagar Solution." Genesis 16

We might boil what I am calling the "Hagar Solution" down to one word: compromise—compromise where something essential and non-negotiable is traded away for a quick-and-dirty fix to the situation. The Hagar Solution is the temptation to become so impatient with the seemingly slow working of God in our lives and circumstances that we try to "help things along" by our own ingenious and plausible schemes.

The Biblical story of Hagar is told in Genesis 16 and following. Here is the *Cliff Notes* version. Abraham was promised by God that his offspring would become a great nation. After some years, Abraham questioned that promise. God repeated it, and told him, "Look toward heaven, and number the stars, if you are able to number them.... So shall your offspring be" (Genesis 15:5, ESV). That led to the dramatic and theologically weighted statement: "And he believed the LORD, and he [the LORD] counted it to him as righteousness" (Genesis 15:6, ESV). But then the years kept relentlessly passing. Maybe every time Abraham and his wife Sarai were intimate, they hoped against hope that this would lead to the conception of their long-awaited son and heir. Nope.

One day, a little over a decade after the first promise from the LORD, Sarai had a seemingly brilliant idea. Abraham could take her servant Hagar as a wife/concubine, have sex with her, and maybe she would conceive. Since Hagar was Sarai's servant, the child would legally be Sarai's, and Abraham could get that uncountable number of offspring started with "their" first son. It was legal, after all. Abraham probably took a look at Hagar and thought, *I can do this*. So "he went in to Hagar, and she conceived" (Genesis 16:4a, ESV).

The Hagar Solution was to rush the timing of God for the true son of promise, Isaac, who would come in a God-ish manner in another 14-15 years. The plan of Sarai and Abraham to use Hagar to fulfill God's promise was legal, sensible, successful, and stupid all at the same time. It has always struck me that the Arab peoples trace their lineage back to Ishmael, the son of Abraham and Sarai, while the Israelis trace theirs back to Isaac, the son born to Abraham *and Sarai* 15 years later. Food for thought, eh?

A—We must beware of thinking that "the end justifies the means" in the plan of God. It does not.

I—How many young women have given away their virginity to a young man lacking self-control, because "we are getting married anyway" or because "we are in love"? That is a difficult temptation to resist, but it undermines the plan of God for sexual fulfillment within marriage.

V. Harmful Comparisons. 2 Corinthians 10:12

1. We can easily corrupt aspiration when we are motivated by harmful comparisons with others.

A—Each of us is unique in the sight of God, and our stories are unique. Comparison can rob us of this insight.

I—The first temptation in the Garden of Eden was “to be *like God*, knowing good and evil” (Genesis 3:5).

Then, Cain, the son of Adam and Eve, murdered his brother Abel because Cain and his sacrifice was rejected and Abel and his sacrifice was accepted. Jealousy.

The people of Israel rejected God’s more direct rule over them after the time of Samuel, so that they could have “a king ... just like all the other nations have” (1 Samuel 8:5, NET). Comparison.

2. Comparison between ourselves and others is a trap and a distraction that can lead us to seek more only so that we can say we have what other people have, or rather, perhaps that we can say we have *more* than they do.

A—Comparison can tempt everyone.

I—The Apostle Paul defended his calling and service to God in his letter called 2 Corinthians. In chapter 10, he asserted that his gifting and calling was from God and that he did not need to compare himself with others who claimed to be apostles. “We do not dare to classify or compare ourselves with some who commend themselves. When they measure themselves by themselves and compare themselves with themselves, they are not wise” (2 Corinthians 10:12, NIV).

In one of the post-resurrection appearances of Jesus to His disciples, Jesus renewed Peter’s calling and position as an apostle. That interchange concluded with, “Follow me!” But immediately, Peter glanced over at another disciple, perhaps John, the writer of the Fourth Gospel, and said, “Lord, what about him?” Jesus then answered Peter, “If I want him to remain until I come, what is that to you? You keep on following Me!” (John 21:22, FJV). Whether from jealousy or not, Peter was certainly making an unfruitful comparison between himself and the other disciple.

C. S. Lewis captured the spirit of this interchange between Jesus and Peter well in his Chronicles of Narnia series. In *The Horse and His Boy*, one of the children is concerned about what will happen to another character in the story. Aslan, the Christ-figure in the stories, says gently but firmly, “Child, ... I am telling you your story, not hers. No one is told any story but their own.”⁴ If only we could remember this, that each of our stories is unique and not to be compared with that of any other person.

Take it home (applications).

I. We must beware the corruptions of aspiration: greed, stubbornness, misplaced trust, “Hagar Solutions,” and harmful comparisons.

II. We must seek the Spirit of Jesus to transform our souls to bring the fruit of godly character into all that we desire and all that we do.

⁴ C. S. Lewis, *The Horse and His Boy* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Inc., 1954), p. 171, also p. 139.