

Introduction

What do Jonathan the grandson of Moses, Alexander the Great, Usain Bolt, Adolph Hitler, Walt Disney, Sam Walton, Jay Van Andel, Margaret Thatcher, Martin Luther, Martin Luther King, Jr. Leonardo da Vinci, Marie Curie, Ernest Shackleton, and Amelia Earhart have in common? *Ambition*.

Most of humanity's great discoveries, our technological advances, our medical innovations, going to the moon, as well as our cultural and social advancements such as the end of slavery and the beginning of the Civil Rights Era, have been accomplished by ambitious men and women who not only had the strong desire to achieve something great, they had the willingness to work hard and the determination required to do so. They were driven by *ambition*.

You may have noticed that I slipped Adolph Hitler into that list of world and culture-changing people. If nothing else, Hitler was ambitious. He was motivated to do great evil, and he was successful in doing great evil. Ambition itself is neutral. It is the desire to achieve something, often something difficult. What makes ambition good or bad is both the motivation behind the ambition and the intended outcome of that hard work. Pursuing hard science to improve, say, health care? Great! Pursuing hard science to make a better bomb? Erm. Not so great.

Today we will see the consequences of ambition when it is selfish, and we will see the real alternative that godly ambition offers us. Will covered all of chapter 18 last week but we'll take a look at the big reveal and dig a little deeper in it. We're in Judges 18, starting in verse 27.

Jdgs 18:27 But the people of Dan took what Micah had made, and the priest who belonged to him, and they came to Laish, to a people quiet and unsuspecting, and struck them with the edge of the sword and burned the city with fire. ²⁸ And there was no deliverer because it was far from Sidon, and they had no dealings with anyone. It was in the valley that belongs to Beth-rehob. Then they rebuilt the city and lived in it. ²⁹ And they named the city Dan, after the name of Dan their ancestor, who was born to Israel; but the name of the city was Laish at the first. ³⁰ And the people of Dan set up the carved image for themselves, and Jonathan the son of Gershom, son of Moses, and his sons were priests to the tribe of the Danites until the day of the captivity of the land. ³¹ So they set up Micah's carved image that he made, as long as the house of God was at Shiloh.

Judges 18:27–31

Grasping

When we look at the book of Judges as a whole we see a pattern emerge. God instructed the people to take the land he had given them. Under Joshua's leadership they entered the land of Canaan and whenever there was armed opposition Israel met on the battlefield and God gave them the victory. Sometimes the victory came without a battle, and sometimes it came with a limited battle. Jericho, for example, was conquered by Israel marching in circles while worshiping the Lord.

We see a similar tactic in Judges with Gideon. The Midianites were oppressing Israel from afar. They were outside the land of Israel but would come into the land to steal Israel's crops right at harvest. God raised up Gideon to defeat the oppressors and God instructed Gideon to take just 300 men into battle, except they weren't there to fight. They blew trumpets and held torches. Their job was *to worship* as God sent confusion on the Midianites and they fought each other.

Over and over again we see God calling his people to enter into the battle in faith, that God himself may give them the victory. Under Joshua, the people of Israel entered battles faithfully. Then Joshua died. Right away in the book of Judges something changes. Joshua dies in the opening verse and Israel inquires of the Lord. God tells them Judah is to go into battle against the Canaanites as they continued to conquer the land. Rather than obey fully and completely, Judah changes the battle plans and invites Simeon to join them.

They fought Adoni-bezek and were victorious, but they cut off his thumbs and big toes—just like he used to do to his enemies. Rather than act like Israelites, the Israelites acted like Canaanites. It went downhill from there. God called all Israel to faithfully obey him, yet we read throughout chapter 1 that Israel could not drive out the inhabitants of the land. Under Joshua they had victory. After Joshua they had defeat. What changed?

Israel stopped obeying the Lord. Israel stopped trusting the Lord. He had shown himself faithful time and time again, yet instead of entering into battle confident the Lord would do it again, they refused to enter the battle. We're told in chapter 1 the Lord was with Judah, yet Judah could not take possession of the plains around the hill country *because the people had iron chariots*. Except in chapter 4 God defeated another army with army chariots, and with *rain*. Judah couldn't take possession because Judah didn't trust the Lord.

Israel was suddenly unable to be victorious. Instead of taking what God had given, Israel had begun grasping for what God had not given. Remember what it means for Israel to conquer the land, to devote the inhabitants "to complete destruction". God explained what it means to devote them to complete destruction: they must not marry the Canaanites and they must not make covenants with them. Instead, they are to destroy their altars and the pillars and their Asherim and their carved images. They were to cleanse the land of idolatry. This is what it meant to devote the people to complete destruction. It meant to not engage with them in their idolatry.

Rather than obey the Lord and take what God had given them, Israel chose to grasp for what God had not given. Rather than receive, Israel chose to grasp. We see this in chapter 1. Look at this depiction of Dan.

Jdgs 1:34 The Amorites pressed the people of Dan back into the hill country, for they did not allow them to come down to the plain. ³⁵ The Amorites persisted in

dwelling in Mount Heres, in Aijalon, and in Shaalbim, but the hand of the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor.

Judges 1:34–35

The tribe of Dan refused to take what God had given them, the territory allotted to them. They remained in the hill country rather than taking the plain. What was there to stop Dan from conquering its territory? Not the Amorites! What are the Amorites next to God? If Dan would enter the battle in faith, Dan would be able to come down from the hill country and live in the plains, but they refused to enter the battle in faith. Notice, however, that “the house of Joseph rested heavily on them, and they became subject to forced labor”. That is, the tribe of Ephraim, which was right next to Dan’s territory, was able to put them to forced labor but Dan could not defeat them?

To put them to forced labor is to enter into an agreement with them—a covenant, the very thing God said they could not do. Further, people don’t willingly enter into forced labor agreements, for they are, essentially, “give us these things and we won’t kill you”. The fact that Ephraim could impose such an arrangement on them shows they could defeat them in battle. Rather than take what God had given, Israel chose to grasp for what God had not given. In this case, whatever goods and services the Amorites provided.

Instead of devoting the people to complete destruction, that is, instead of having nothing to do with them and destroying their idolatrous religious furniture, Israel grasped for the prosperity they thought such arrangements would provide. God offered them prosperity! God offered them victory! Rather than receive, they grasped for it on their own terms.

We see this grasping in Gideon. While he refused the title “king”, he grasped for the power and wealth and prestige such a title offered. He named his son Abimelech—“my dad is king”. He grasped for personal vengeance when he pursued Zebah and Zalmunna in chapter 8. He grasped for even more prominence when he made the golden ephod and put it on display in his home.

Jephthah grasped for what God had not given by trying to manipulate God with a promise of human sacrifice. God would give the victory but Jephthah wanted that victory on his own terms, because of what he had done. Samson, of course, grasped for everything he could possibly want and never pursued real faithfulness to God.

Celebrity

Then we come to chapter 17. The author shifts back to the beginning of the book of Judges. The events in chapters 17–18 happen in the timeline of chapter 1. Micah steals from his mother and then is given the silver he stole to make images to worship. He does this and appoints one of his sons—an Ephraimite—to be his priest. Then a wandering Levite happens by and Micah recognizes his opportunity. Rather than trust the Lord for blessings, he hires this Levite to be his personal priest, assured that hiring a Levite would result in God’s blessing.

In chapter 1 the Danites were unable to defeat the Amorites, even though the Ephraimites had military control over them. At that time the Danites send scouts to look for a land that would be easier to conquer. Rather than receive what God had given, they chose to grasp

for what he had not. On their way to scout out some land, they stop by Micah's estate. Notice what happens when they stop to rest there.

Jdgs 18:3 When they were by the house of Micah, they recognized the voice of the young Levite. And they turned aside and said to him, "Who brought *you* here? What are *you* doing in this place? What is your business *here*?"
Judges 18:3

The men *recognized* the voice of this young Levite. How? The author has not yet revealed the young Levite's identity, but these men recognized his voice. At the very least the young man has something like a celebrity status. They ask him, with great incredulity, "What are *you* doing here?". Why would someone as well known and as prominent as you be in a place like this?

The young Levite thought he had a great gig! Micah pays him a decent salary and provides him his clothing and did you see the ephod he gets to wear? And the idols and household gods? What more could a guy want? I mean, other than what God offered?

The scouts returned to their army of 600 soldiers and told them the land they had scouted was ripe for the taking. The people there are not at all connected to other cities and territories. It's a wide open land that will be a perfect home for the tribe—except it's not the land God gave them. Further, the scouts told them about the young Levite and Micah's household gods and his ephod. They showed up at Micah's place and take these things. The young Levite demanded to know what they're doing. Here's their response:

Jdgs 18:19 And they said to him, "Keep quiet; put your hand on your mouth and come with us and be to us a father and a priest. Is it better for you to be priest to the house of one man, or to be priest to a tribe and clan in Israel?"
²⁰ And the priest's heart was glad. He took the ephod and the household gods and the carved image and went along with the people.
Judges 18:19–20

I've had some jobs over the years that I did not enjoy, with difficult working conditions. I cannot imagine, however, interviewing for a job and being told, "Shut up! This is a good offer!", and still thinking that job would be an upgrade. Notice their appeal to his pride. They ask him, essentially, which is better: priest over a single household or priest over an entire tribe? You wanna be a small-church pastor, or a mega-church pastor? It didn't matter to them that he was not actually qualified to be a priest; his celebrity status was all that mattered.

Rather than receive what God had given him, which was service to the priests at the tabernacle—not as a priest, for this Levite was not a descendant of Aaron and could not be a priest—he chose to grasp for what God had not given. The author says his "heart was glad". "*I must be somebody. They want me.*"

In verse 27 the army of Dan took Micah's illicit idols and the priest he had hired, and went north to Laish. As Will pointed out last week, Laish was a quiet and unsuspecting people—the very sort of folk Israel was supposed to be. Though they had no warrant to do so, they grasped for what belonged to those people and drove them out of their homes.

They then rebuilt the city and the entire tribe moved north, with the new city of Dan as their capital.

In verse 30 they set up the carved image they stole and established a false priesthood. Again as Will illustrated last week, the author went all M. Night Shyamalan and gave the big reveal: the young Levite is Jonathan, the son of Gershom, the son of Moses. He's the grandson of *Moses*. Moses is the most highly esteemed man in Israel's history, greater than even king David. Moses spoke with God face to face, as a man speaks to another man. Moses was the lawgiver. In his own M. Night Shyamalan moment, Moses even wrote in Numbers 12 that he is the most humble man on the face of the earth. *No wonder they recognized Jonathan's voice*. Being the grandson of Moses made him a celebrity!

Idolatry

Surely Jonathan knew the law Moses had given. Surely he had been instructed by his family. His second cousin Phinehas was the high priest over all Israel! Phinehas is the one who exhibited great faithfulness and zeal for God's glory in Numbers 25. Jonathan has everything available to him to know he should not be a priest, and he certainly should not be a priest with household gods and carved and metal images!

It is Jonathan's vainglory, his desire to be somebody, that leads him to sin against God and his people by enabling—by *leading*—their idolatry, their violations of the Ten Commandments. Jonathan's personal ambition led him to break the covenant with God, for the covenant begins with these requirements:

Ex 20:3 “You shall have no other gods before me.

4 “You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.

Exodus 20:3–4

The first and second requirements of the covenant God had made with Israel through Jonathan's *grandfather* and personally witnessed by his father Gershom, were completely ignored by Jonathan. In verse 30 the author says that Jonathan and his sons were priests to the tribe of Dan until the day of the captivity of the land, some 500 years later. In fact, it was this that led to the destruction of the northern tribes in response to their rebellion against God and their absolute commitment to idolatry.

When the kingdom is split into two, Solomon's son Jeroboam becomes king of the ten northern tribes. He's concerned that his people would travel to the temple in Jerusalem—the capital of the kingdom of Judah!—and return to the king there. He followed in Jonathan's footsteps, down the path Jonathan made for him, and did this to prevent his people from returning to his brother the king of Judah:

¹ Kgs 12:28 So the king took counsel and made two calves of gold. And he said to the people, “You have gone up to Jerusalem long enough. Behold your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt.” ²⁹ And he set one in Bethel, and the other he put in Dan. ³⁰ Then this thing became a sin, for the people went as far as Dan to be before one.

1 Kings 12:28–30

Jonathan’s pride, his selfish ambition, would ultimately lead to the destruction of Israel. The ten northern tribes would be largely exiled elsewhere by the Assyrian empire and would assimilate into those peoples. Those few who remained in the land would also assimilate by marrying the exiles Assyria placed in the land from elsewhere. Eventually their offspring would be known as the Samaritans.

Selfish Ambition

Our culture tells us to pursue everything with utter abandon, to give ourselves fully and completely to our desires—whether sexual desires or our fitness goals. We’re told to pursue our career and financial goals first and foremost, for when we achieve them, then we’ll have a life worth living. We’re constantly bombarded with the idea that we’re supposed to have it all, that the primary goal of life is to achieve every hope and dream—and desire—you’ve ever had. We come up with bucket lists to describe the things we want to accomplish. There are even preachers out there who will tell you that you are to live your best life *now*. That guy is *almost* right. We are, in fact, supposed to live our *second-best* life now, for the new heavens and new earth are coming, and with them everything we’ve hoped and dreamed for will be here in its fullness.

We see this in our constant desire for fame. We post on social media and check back for how many likes or reposts we get, as if someone somewhere is actually keeping score. Everyone wants to go viral, it seems, so what was once a candid moment caught on camera now becomes elaborately staged—that is, *a fake*—situation. People have carefully curated online profiles, all in hopes of becoming an “influencer”—of what, I don’t know.

Sadly, we see this in ministry, too, with men who have been set apart for the office of elder, elders who labor at preaching, men whom Paul says should be worthy of *double honor*, pursuing ministry out of selfish ambition. This is what Jonathan did. He wanted to be a priest. He wanted to be a *prominent* priest. Far better to lead *more* people in worship than *less*, amirite?

Jonathan’s name means “YHWH has given”—that’s great, isn’t it? How great that he can give back to the Lord, right? Except he’s not giving back to the Lord. He’s grasping. He’s not supposed to be a priest. He’s supposed to be an assistant to his cousins, who are priests. They descend from their grandfather Aaron. Jonathan descends from Aaron’s brother Moses. The Levites were given a supportive role but rather than take what God has given, Jonathan grasps for what God has not given. Hundreds of years later his selfish ambition remains unchecked and all Israel follows after the golden idols Jeroboam will place in a false temple in the city of Dan.

We see this in vocational ministry all the time. We see men pursue things out of selfish ambition, though, like Jonathan, always *in the name of the Lord*. No one would ever say, “I’m in ministry for me, for what I can get out of it”. We know we can’t say this so instead we say we’re trying to grow Christ’s church or we’re trying to reach the lost, and then proceed to do whatever it takes to achieve that selfish ambition, regardless of the number of people who end up hurt.

This is how we end up with men like Bill Hybels, Mark Driscoll, Ravi Zacharias, or even Billy Graham's grandson Tullian Tchividjian. These were all highly ambitious men whose ambition led them to do terrible things. Driscoll once said the Mars Hill bus—that was his church's name—has a pile of bodies behind it, men and women who had been run over by his ambition, and even declared that by God's grace, by the time he was done the pile of bodies would be a mountain. He claims, of course, that the ambition wasn't *personal* but *ministerial*. He didn't merely hurt ministries, though. He hurt *people*.

I'll never forget the class in seminary. It was that singular, seminal moment that shaped me. Dr. Gombis was walking us through a New Testament passage in Greek, working through the grammar. I don't remember the text but I remember the conversation steered toward selfish ambition. There were about 30 or so students in the class, mostly young men pursuing vocational ministry. Dr. Gombis looked at each one of us and explained what would happen after seminary.

Many of us, he said, would get the only job we can get, which would likely be a youth pastor role at a small church. The pay would be quite inadequate so the entire time at that church would be spent looking for a better job. After a few years of ministry experience, we might be offered a "better" job: a youth pastor position at a larger church. We don't want to be youth pastors, though, so most of the time there will be spent looking for a better job.

Then we'll find an assistant pastor role at a smaller church again. We'll deal with adults and by that time we will not have yet matured sufficiently to deal with adults and adult problems. Inevitably there will be some conflict, but we've been looking for another job the entire time anyway.

We'll move on from that church to a larger church, again, likely an assistant pastor role. After a few years and more interpersonal conflict due to our immaturity and lack of commitment to those people, we might accept a senior pastoral position at a much smaller church. We're not satisfied with small so when we can legitimately put this on our resumé we will move on to a larger church. Besides, the number of conflicts with people has likely grown too big.

At that larger church we will still be looking for bigger and better and since by now the pattern is firm, we won't commit to a group of people. There will be friction and people will be hurt, but hey! That much larger church just issued a "call"! The smaller one we're leaving? The people we've harmed? Not our problem anymore!

He then said, "If—*if*—you make it all the way to retirement serving churches three to five years at a time, there will be a string of hurting and injured people left behind, men and women for whom Christ died who were hurt deeply by you and your lack of love and commitment to them." He then said something that shocked the entire classroom into stunned silence: "If that is your ambition, then God *damn* your ambition." Selfish ambition always brings harm, whether immediately or in the future.

Selfish ambition is not merely in vocational ministry, of course. It is particularly deadly in vocational ministry. Jonathan the grandson of Moses is a clear example of this. We see selfish ambition all over the place and it only brings harm. Lay people in the church can be motivated by selfish ambition.

I'm sure many of us have heard stories of people who start ministries in their local churches and soon act as though they *own* that particular ministry. Listen: God is not an emperor. This means his kingdom is not made up of individual sub-kingdoms. It is a

singular kingdom and there is only one King and his name is Jesus—not *J-T*. Or Jim or Dan or Pat or Jane or Ryan or Taylor or Anna or Scott or any one else. Far too many folk end up acting like the area in which they serve belongs to them, as if it exists to give them meaning and purpose, or is their means for boosting themselves in the eyes of others.

We see selfish ambition in how some people try to give to their local church. I’ve heard of wealthy individuals at other churches who have wanted to steer the church in a particular direction so they designate their offerings to that direction, whether missions or youth ministry, etc. “I think we should build so my vast and extensive offerings are designated to a building fund.” Or, “I don’t like the direction this church is going so I won’t give anything.” Rather than trust the leadership of the church they make it their personal ambition to adjust the direction of the church through their offerings.

We see selfish ambition in marriage when one spouse seeks what he or she wants from the other, or makes decisions without regard for the other. A man can be entirely faithful to his wife in that he never strays from her *physically* and never uses pornography, etc., and yet that man can be entirely broken sexually for looking to his wife selfishly—or vice versa. Or maybe a spouse ignores the other in pursuit of personal hobbies or “me time” with friends.

We see selfish ambition with parents and their children. How many parents push their children into sports in order to validate their own image in the eyes of their peers? Or they push them to excel in academics, not for the child, but so they look good as parents? Parents who seek to control every life decision of their children—even their grown children—are selfishly ambitious! They want their children to make wise choices, but not because they’re wise but because wise choices are believed to reflect well on the *parents*.

Selfish ambition, whether in the home or the workplace or in the church or in personal relationships, is idolatry. It is raising up something good to a place it has no business being. Just because an activity can be called “ministry” doesn’t mean it cannot be done from selfish ambition.

Selfish ambition rears its ugly in in all sorts of relationships. Any time a person approaches a relationship with a “me first” attitude, selfish ambition is wreaking havoc. That’s what selfish ambition is: it is the desire to gain everything for one’s self, with little regard for anyone else.

Godly Ambition

Consider with me Paul’s words in his letter to the Philippians.

Phil 2:3 Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. ⁴ Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Philippians 2:3–4

Do you see the opposite of selfish ambition? It’s counting others more significant than yourself. It isn’t a wholesale denial of personal ambition, of the fruit of one’s labor and effort. Look to your own interests, Paul says, *but also to the interests of others*.

One of the things I love about this church is how we have married folk and single folk and families, and how many of them sacrifice time and money and energy to help out that

single parent or that young married couple or the single person regardless of age, all of whom struggle in a variety of ways. We have people who come alongside others and assist them, not merely by giving them money, though that happens. We *walk alongside* them. This is counting others more significant than yourselves.

Look to your own interests, Paul says! I know at least a couple guys here who are looking for promotions to better provide for their families. Paul says look to that! Work hard to earn a raise! He also says to also look to the interests of others. Don't let your personal ambition be merely selfish ambition.

You see, ambition is not the problem. As I said at the start, many men and women in history have been ambitious and have brought about great good in this world—this world. What we're looking for here is *godly* ambition, for godly ambition benefits not only this world, but the next one. Paul goes on in this same letter to tell the Philippians to be like Jesus, for Jesus did not look out for his own interests. Instead, he took on the form of a servant in order to be able to die for his people. *Be like that*, Paul says. Be like Jesus who made it his ambition to give his life for others.

We see Paul himself doing this, pursuing godly ambition. After listing all his bonafides in chapter 3, being a Jew and being zealous for the law as a Pharisee and being blameless according to the law of Moses, Paul writes this:

Phil 3:7 But whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ.
8 Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ 9 and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which comes through faith in Christ, the righteousness from God that depends on faith— 10 that I may know him and the power of his resurrection, and may share his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, 11 that by any means possible I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

Philippians 3:7–11

Do you see Paul's ambition? Paul wants to do great things for the Lord. He gladly embraced suffering to bring that about. If ever you hear a preacher talk about all the great blessings God wants to give you and suffering is not listed among those blessings, don't listen to another word. That is not the apostolic message passed on! Paul's ambition was to be like Christ, to be formed by him, that the righteousness given him in Christ would permeate every area of his life.

Here's how you can know your ambition is godly ambition: are you becoming more like Christ? Is your life demonstrating increasing fruit of the Spirit? When you think of a ministry you serve in, are you filled with increasing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control? When you think about your work, are you filled with these things in increasing measure? When you interact with others in the church, do these characteristics begin to dominate your discourse, your life with them in community?

Godly ambition, by its very nature, evidences the Spirit of God at work in you. When you look at the things you enjoy, whether politics or sports or work or entertainment or even

your relationships, what is the fruit? Is it anger? Malice? Indignation? Personal offense? Do you feel like your rights are being trampled on? Are you primarily concerned about seeking power and control over a situation?

Paul says to be like Jesus, for though he was God in every way, he did not consider equality with God something to be grasped. Instead, he embraced the form of a servant and suffered and died for his people. Be like him. Embrace godly ambition in all you do. Pursue love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. Pursue Jesus. That's godly ambition.

If we will embrace godly ambition the church will benefit and this world will benefit, for godly ambition is a kingdom ambition. Godly ambition is a gospel ambition. Godly ambition pursues Christ with utter abandon. This is the ambition we must embrace.