

James & John: Seeking to Be the Greatest

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[0 : 00] The pursuit of recognition and acclamation can be found in every walk of life and the church is no exception.

! I've worked for the church now since I was 21 years old and I was just a few weeks! I was just a few weeks into my first job as a youth worker for a church.

And in a church in South Essex. And I was made aware of this reality when I attended a national youth workers conference, Christian youth workers conference.

There were Christian youth workers from all over the country and there were a lot of speakers there who were quite well known within the UK church, what we might refer to as Christian celebrities.

And during a coffee break I didn't seek this out but I found myself sat at a table with a group of these Christian celebrities.

[1 : 12] And I just listened to them conversing with each other and it quickly became apparent they were, seemed to be jostling over who was going to get the platform at the next major Christian event.

And I was like, you know, you might well have the big top at Spring Arvis but I've got the main stage at New Wine kind of thing. I was shocked. I was shocked. I was really shocked. But I probably shouldn't have been.

Because it exists in every walk of life. It is in our human nature to aspire towards greatness.

There is something in us, in our human nature that seeks out either power or financial wealth or just simply recognition in this case.

So much so that it didn't actually take long for it to surface among the very first followers of Jesus even during Jesus' time on earth with them.

[2 : 19] We're not talking here about the early church after Jesus has ascended into the heavens. Oh no, this was why Jesus was still here with them in the flesh. And that side of human nature begins to surface.

The mother of James and John approaches Jesus and says, I want you to give my sons the highest honour in the kingdom.

Interestingly, we don't know for sure, but there is a strong possibility that this lady was actually Jesus' aunt and that James and John were the cousins of Jesus.

We don't know that for sure because it's not explicitly stated. But when you put the pieces together of the Gospels, particularly when you look at the descriptions of the crucifixion and you match the names up and you join the dots, it would appear that the mother of James and John is indeed Jesus' aunt.

There could be the possibility that what might have been going on here is, well, you know, we're the inner circle here. We're closer than the rest.

[3 : 32] This is family, so come on. We don't know, but it's a possibility. Either way, the human nature remains. Now, we should perhaps note that it's not James and John themselves, but it's their mother that approaches Jesus.

With this question, although, and we look at the other Gospels and their versions of this story, we find in Mark's version of this story that mum's not involved. It's James and John themselves.

Either way, James and John go along with it, and that's the point. Will there be a special place afforded to them in the kingdom?

So the question I think this raises, and this is where this applies to each and every one of us, is this. Can it ever be right to have ambition? In the Bible, there are two types of ambition.

[4 : 41] And clearly there is one of them that we should resist and reject. We could perhaps have up on the screen the first slide. It's got the words here from Philippians chapter 2.

Particularly the first part of this reading. Philippians 2, verses 3 to 4. Paul writes, So clearly there is such a thing as ambition that is selfish.

And that's to do with vain conceit. Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, Paul writes. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves.

Not looking to your own interests, but each of you to the interests of others. So a question might be, when we're coming to think about our own ambitions, how do we know if our own ambition is, in Paul's words, a selfish ambition or not?

Maybe we might ask ourselves some of the following questions. Firstly, is our ambition self-seeking? Or does our ambition serve others?

[5 : 59] Does our ambition seek recognition? Does our own ambition involve any form of manipulation? Is it fuelled by pride or entitlement?

So there is such a thing as selfish ambition. But even if we are successful in reaching those kind of ambitions, we need to remember something so important.

And it's this. We can be too big for God to use.

But you can never be too small for God to use. I'm going to say that again, and then I'm going to invite us to pause and to reflect and to pray. Pray with me for one moment.

Lord, forgive us for when we chase after ambitions that are purely for our own selfish pursuits, when we're self-seeking, for those times when we seek to make ourselves big.

[7 : 22] But Lord, you know our hearts and you know our minds. You know our motives.

Help us always to remember that no matter how, in worldly terms, successful we might become, the more we choose to lean on our own strength and greatness, the more we can squeeze you out.

So, Lord, help us to remember that we can become too big, in worldly terms, to be of use in the kingdom. But we can never be too small.

So, help us, Lord, always to have confidence in your strength and not ours. Amen.

That's part one. There is such a thing as what Paul describes as selfish ambition. But not all ambition is selfish. And there is a type of ambition that we find in Scripture that the Bible affirms and indeed, applauds.

[8 : 44] Can we have the next slide up? And these are words of Jesus. Where Jesus says, Seek first his, that is God's kingdom, and his righteousness. And all these things will be given to you as well.

You see, if ambition is focused not on our own personal aspirations and wanting to be big, but on the promises of God, it's a different thing.

Indeed, the Bible, the words of Jesus, calls us to get excited about the future that God is promising us. To be expectant, to be ready for it, to search it out, to long for it to break into our lives, ultimately in eternity, but right here and right now.

Such that we are called to lead our lives in such a way that aspires the amazing things that God is going to do in eternity to happen right now.

And when we look ahead with that conviction that there's a future kingdom to be excited about, that we're called to usher in now, when that happens, then the kind of ambition that we're talking about is one that is God-honouring and God-centred.

[10 : 02] One that is servant-hearted. That's what kingdom-focused ambition is about. And it's good, and it's right, and we should all be after it.

William Kerry, the Baptist missionary in India, he was founder of the Baptist Missionary Society in 1792, that he said this, Attempt great things for God.

Expect great things from God. That's ambition for the kingdom. In our humanity, we reach out with our God-given gifts to aspire for great things for God.

And we, with all of that, expect the strength of the kingdom, of God's promises, the Holy Spirit in our lives right here and right now.

Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God. There was a missionary who was working as a nurse, or a nurse working as a missionary, however way you want to put it, many, many years ago.

[11 : 22] I don't know exactly where this story comes from. It doesn't really matter for the purposes of the story. And somebody was visiting the place where this nurse was working, where she was ministering particularly to those suffering with leprosy.

And this visitor watched very carefully as this nurse ministered some very intimate care to this person with leprosy. It involved them getting very close up and doing some procedure that most of us would probably never go near.

And this visitor, after the nurse had finished, said, I wouldn't do that for a million dollars.

The nurse replied, For one million dollars, I wouldn't do it either. Attempt great things for God. Expect great things from God. Now if we go back to James and John and we fast forward to their own stories. As the scriptures unfold, so they tell us that indeed, they did serve out their call.

[12:42] They followed Jesus. In such a way that reminds us that ambition for the kingdom will represent enormous cost. If you follow Jesus, you will be taken into situations where you will be called to lay things down for Christ.

But you will be blessed beyond words or figures. James, one of these two, we're told in Acts chapter 12, was martyred.

He was murdered by the sword. His brother, John, who it seems was the only one of the twelve who actually wasn't martyred, nevertheless would have witnessed the murder of his brother and indeed his other friends as followers of Jesus, before being exiled for the rest of his life.

So the question that that perhaps leaves with us is what might ambition mean for us? In what ways are we called to lay down for the sake of Christ in his kingdom and to be ambitious for him?

To attempt great things for God and to expect great things from God? You know, the great thing about, one of the many wonderful things about the Christian gospel, is that whatever stage in life you are at, the word ambition can still carry meaning.

[14:11] You can never get to the point in life where actually, well, I've accomplished this or not accomplished this or whatever throughout my life, and I've only had a relatively short time left.

Because ambition for the kingdom means something so different. See, when we think about ambition to the lens of kingdom, we ultimately look to that promise of the kingdom that will come in all its fullness, which Revelation 21 talks about.

Where it talks about there will be a kingdom where there is no more dying, no more sickness, no more pain, no more evil, no more tears. Where there will be an infinite overflow of everything we could ever need, and so much more besides.

Where there will be perfect riches and beauty beyond comprehension. Where there will be perfect peace and harmony, and untold intimacy, and we'll be lost in wonder, love and praise.

Now, those are what might be referred to as the rewards of heaven. They are the undeserved gift of grace that we don't earn, but we are given.

[15:25] But I want to share with you, and we're going to take a little bit of a deep dive theologically here, but I want to share with you, I suppose, some of my own wrestling with this question, how do we make sense of what Jesus appeared to imply when he spoke of rewards in heaven?

I don't know about you, but that's something that over the years I've wrestled with, and tried to make sense of. How on the one hand can we talk of heaven as the free gift of God's grace, and yet at the same time live with conviction that Jesus promises great rewards for those in heaven?

Great will be your reward in heaven, he says. And in Matthew 16, he says that each will be rewarded according to what each has done.

Does that imply that there will actually be reward in heaven that is somehow, it varies depending on the kind of life that you have led?

And how does that fit with the parable of the vineyard, the workers in the vineyard, that Jesus spoke of when he described that there were workers and the same came and worked for all day, some worked for half a day and some worked for the last hour or so, and yet when it came to the end of the day and the master came to the vineyard, everybody was given the same pay.

[16:54] How does that square? What about somebody who has served Christ faithfully all their lives? Somebody who may have actually been martyred for their faith, compared with somebody who just becomes a Christian in the last five minutes.

How do we make sense of that? I'm not going to pretend there's easy answers, and what I'm about to share with you, I must frame around this introduction to say that it is what we might call speculative theology.

Okay? Sometimes there are certain mysteries that we can't prove or disprove this side of eternity, we can only be guided by scripture, but even then scripture leaves a certain gap of mystery, within which we can speculate so long as we are careful in that speculation, and we are honest with

ourselves and with others and to say, well, scripture doesn't directly say this, but perhaps there is room within scripture to speculate this.

So what I'm about to share with you comes with that in mind. But it comes from one of my favourite theologians in the world at the moment, a guy called James Bilby, who shares an image, and this idea that when we think about the reward in heaven, we're talking about two things.

Firstly, we were talking about the reward of heaven. This is for everybody, whatever kind of life we have lived, but has been saved, and we find ourselves in heaven for all eternity.

[18:32] The rewards of heaven is the same in the sense that, you know, there is no more death, no more dying, no more pain, no more suffering, no more tears, all of those things that we read of in Revelation 21.

That's the reward of heaven. But then, there is what Jesus is referring to as rewards in heaven, when he says that each will be rewarded according to what he has done.

Now, how then can we understand those differences? Well, rather than me try and put it into my own words, I'm just going to read to you from James Bilby, because he puts it in a far more articulate way than I ever could.

He says this, When I was a kid, and I heard about the idea of rewards in heaven, I combined the idea with Jesus' words, I go and prepare a place for you, and assumed that if I was a good Christian, I would get to live in a mansion in heaven.

But if I was not, something I judged to be the more likely scenario, I would live in a box in somebody's backyard in heaven.

[19:49] Even if we set aside some of the childishness of my imagery, some object that the state of affairs in which there are some who receive a greater reward than others in heaven is problematic.

Would not those with less reward eventually come to resent those with the greater reward? And even if we assume that existence in heaven is compatible with that sort of resentment, it might still be asked whether the concept of maximal bliss in heaven is compatible with the variable bliss associated with the idea of rewards in heaven.

So here is a way of explaining how the rewards in heaven are dependent on one's earthly deeds, and how this idea is consistent with our intuitions about the nature of heaven.

He says this, Let's draw a distinction between the degree of joy and the quantity of joy a person experiences. Let me illustrate this with an example.

Imagine a person who has never played golf and never really followed the sport, watching Bubba Watson hit his shot on the second playoff hole in the 2012 Masters.

[21:14] He had hit his drive way right and was in a thick stand of trees, 163 yards from the pin, with no shot at the green. Instead of punching out, he chose to aim to the left, almost 60 degrees off line from a straight path to the green.

He shot from his 52 degree wedge hooked 45 yards and ended up on the green, only 15 feet from the pin. Even a golf novice would have to be impressed with such a shot.

If you asked them to rate the impressiveness of the shot on a scale of one to 100, they would undoubtedly rate it at 100. In other words, their degree of appreciation for the shot would be maximal.

Now compare that person's experience with my own experience watching the same shot. I have golfed for much of my life and have spent hours at the driving range trying to control shots like that. Because of my experience playing the game, I know that Watson's shot was not only amazing, it was borderline miraculous. My degree of appreciation for that shot, like that of the golf novice, is maximal.

[22:35] I'd rate it 100. But I submit that my quantity of appreciation for the shot exceeds the golf novices by many orders of magnitude.

Now, if golf examples don't work for you, imagine the appreciation of hearing a Stradivaris by a world class concert violinist, compared to one who has never even heard a violin.

Or a Jimi Hendrix guitar solo by an accomplished guitarist, compared to one who has never picked up a guitar. Similarly, he goes on to say, similarly, while every person's degree of joy in heaven will be the same, the quantity of joy will be much, much greater for those who have spent their life following Christ.

Further, this difference will be a purely subjective internal one, and therefore, even if resentment was possible in heaven, there will be nothing to resent.

For the differences in experiences would not be discernible. Consequently, one of the reasons why this life matters is because our experiences in heaven will be a function of, an extension of, our decisions and behaviours in this life.

[24 : 01] Now, if you're still with me, what Bilby is saying there is that it's not that we earn our way into heaven.

Of course we don't. It's a free gift of God that is undeserved. But the more we engage our ambition with the vision of heaven, the more will be our capacity to appreciate and know the love of Jesus, such that you will not be greater than somebody else because salvation is an equal free gift.

But what you can look towards is that capacity to appreciate the love of Jesus for all eternity, and the presence of Jesus for all eternity.

And that is something that you can experience and get used to experiencing right now. Attempt great things for God.

Expect great things from God. I'll close by sharing with you just one last thing.

[25 : 16] And it's a do with a man called John Stott. Some of you may have heard of him.

There's a story that reminds us that spending time with God is indeed the most important thing you can do now. That's the ambition to engage in.

Because John Stott's life, he died a number of years ago now, but John Stott's life was a real testimony to the greatness of God and accomplishing great things for God.

Attempting great things for God and expecting great things from God. John Stott was arguably one of the most prominent and prolific Christian leaders of the 20th century.

He started out quite well. He had several Cambridge degrees. He ended up eventually with four doctorates and a CBE. He published over 50 books translated into multiple languages worldwide, which sold in their millions.

[26 : 23] The money, however, he put into the charities that he set up, among them being the Langham Trust, the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity, and the Church of England Evangelical Council.

During his lifetime, he spoke to thousands and thousands and thousands and thousands and led multitudes to Christ. He was a chaplain to the Queen.

He was an advisor to Billy Graham. 2005 Time Magazine ranked him as one of the 100 most influential people in the world.

He said, towards the end of his life, John Stott was asked the question, if you had your time all over again, what would you do differently?

He said this, I would pray more. Let's pray.

[27 : 29] Let's pray. Lord, thank you that you call us to be ambitious in a very specific way.

Thank you that you prepare great things for us in heaven, that is an eternal reward, that is nothing to do with our earning, that is a free, undeserved gift of your grace.

You call us to engage in expectation now, and to be connected to that future promise in hope now. Help us, Lord, to give our lives over attempting things for you, that we may expect great things from you. Lord, in our daily lives, may we reach out to serve your purposes, to aspire to great things of your kingdom, that others may know your love, your peace, and your truth, and your hope in their everyday lives.

Holy Spirit, continue to move in our lives now, and in the time to come. Keep us always ambitious for you, and for your kingdom.

[28 : 56] In Jesus' name. Amen.