

Ambition (1-Hour Small Group Study)

Small Group Study / Produced by TOW Project



Note to the Leader

This study is intended to engage Christians who work in a discussion about ambition. It brings together the practical reality of life at work and the spiritual guidance of the Bible. The study begins with an optional, provocative video. It is not intended as a statement of what's right, but as a vivid discussion starter. Participants then read a passage of the Bible and talk about its perspective on ambition. Then they explore how to apply what they've discussed to their own work.

The study does not require any reading or preparation in advance. The study is intended to take about an hour, including reading the passages out loud. If your group has more time, or if you'd like to continue the discussion next time, three additional Bible passages and a case study are provided for further exploration.

GETTING STARTED:

[Optional] Begin with a prayer, according to your group's custom.

Discuss:

1. What comes to your mind when you hear the word "ambition"?

2. **[Optional]** Watch this video clip: "[Ambition vs Discontentment - What is the difference?](#)" (The link takes you to 37 sec from the start. From there to the end is 7 minutes). **Note:** this video is intentionally provocative! It only expresses the opinion of the presenter. What's your opinion?
3. Does God want us to be ambitious? If no, why not? If yes, ambitious for what?

A BIBLICAL VIEW OF AMBITION

Ambition vs. Selfish Ambition

Read together ([Philippians 2:3-11](#)):

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness. And being found in human form, he humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death— even death on a cross. Therefore, God also highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

Discuss:

1. What words, images or characters do you see in the passage that relate to ambition at work?
2. How does what you observe in the passage relate to what comes to mind when you hear the word "ambition"?

APPLYING IT TO YOUR WORK

The passage above from Philippians speaks against "selfish" motivation, but not against ambition itself. "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility, value others above yourselves. " If our ambition is to serve the interests of others--for example by excelling in our work, expanding our sphere of action, or gaining power to make things better—ambition may be a form of service to God. But if our work is motivated by selfishness or is done with indifference to others, we are not aligned with the mind of Jesus. A biblical perspective on ambition may result in a major paradigm shift for some people, both for those who think that *all* ambition is un-Christ-like and for those who think God doesn't care much about how they go about their work.

Adapted from the Theology of Work Bible Commentary.

Discuss:

1. What are you ambitious for?
2. If your ambitions succeed, how will it benefit you? Who else will your success benefit, and how exactly? Can you ever be completely free of selfish ambitions?
3. What practical steps can you take now to turn your ambitions more toward serving others?

4. What do you need to ask Christ for?

[Optional] End with a prayer, according to your group's custom.

This ends the one-hour study on ambition.

Additional Study Material on Ambition

For a longer session, or for follow-on sessions, choose from the material below.

CHARACTER MATTERS

Read together [1 Timothy 3:1-7](#):

The saying is sure: whoever aspires to the office of bishop desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, married only once, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, an apt teacher, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way—for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how can he take care of God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.

This passage views ambition for leadership (at least in the church) as a “noble task.” (The Greek word translated “bishop” is *episkope*, literally meaning “overseer.”) But this ambition must be paired with a lifelong commitment to Christ-like character formation.

Discuss:

- The passage doesn't say why aspiring to leadership is a noble task. What do you think is noble about ambition for leadership? Does this only apply to church leadership?
- Look at the specific character traits in the passage. Which of them are the most important in your workplace? What happens when a leader has or does not have them?
- Which leadership characteristics do you most wish to develop? How does following Christ help you grow towards them?

GOALS MATTER

Read together the following excerpt from “Ambition” in *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*:

Since Scripture is somewhat ambiguous on the subject of ambition, it is not surprising that many Christians are confused. Paul warned against unbridled appetites ([Phil 3:19](#)) and the danger of loving money ([1 Tim 6:10](#)). But there are also positive statements like the one approving those who set their hearts on being an elder—a godly ambition ([1 Tim 3:1](#)). While Paul counseled against being conformed to the mindset of the world ([Romans 12:2](#)) and rejoiced to see his enemies preach the

gospel even though they wanted to make life more difficult for him ([Phil 1:18](#)), he was ambitious to have a harvest among the Romans ([Romans 1:13](#)) and to evangelize Spain. It has often been suggested that when Paul got converted, so was his ambition: 'What Paul can teach us is that there is a gospel-centered way to speak about competitiveness, a way to be ambitious for the sake of Christ, a way to raise the desire for success above the level of self-interest or ideology' (Kuck, p. 175).

From: Robert Banks & R. Paul Stevens, eds., *The Complete Book of Everyday Christianity*, (InterVarsity Press, 1997, p. 34).

Discuss:

- What kinds of “unbridled appetites” underlying ambition have you observed where you work? Have you been conformed to these mindsets at all?
 - Is it really possible to be competitive “for the sake of Christ.” Doesn’t competition necessarily mean that someone wins and someone else loses? How could competition and ambition not ultimately end up benefiting yourself at the expense of others?
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