

Presbyterian Church of Stanley
14895 Antioch Road
Overland Park, KS 66221
913-681-8180 / www.stanleypres.org

“Holding Holy Ambition”

Sermon Series: “ Keeping Your Edge”

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Eric Laverentz, Senior Pastor

Scripture Lesson: *Leviticus 20:22-26*

Do you have holy ambition or is your ambition wholly yours? Let us pray.

Lord God, we thank you for that desire you place in our heart to be someone greater, something more than we are. We ask God that you would pour out your Holy Spirit this morning into our hearts and minds so through your Word we would desire to be someone greater in You. We pray this in Jesus name. Amen.

In our time, in this day and age, ambition is “in.” There was a story in the news last week where an admissions director from a prestigious private elementary school recounted receiving a phone call from a father whose daughter was six weeks old. He wanted to know from what preschool they accepted most of their students. Her response was “Sir, can your daughter hold her head up yet?” Or course his question is not outside the norm. Some preschools in their recruiting pitch are now presenting pie charts which show the percentage of their graduates who go on to Ivy League universities. Parents wanting the best for their family place their children in sports almost as soon as they move their legs any faster than a walk. This week Forbes magazine produced its list of the 400 richest people in the world. To be included you had to have a net worth of \$1.3 billion. Type in the word “success” on Amazon.com’s on-line book search and you will come up with 530,337 titles. One of the fastest growing college majors worldwide is entrepreneurship. Surveys tell us that more

people than ever under the age of 20 desire to own their own business. Hundreds of thousands, even millions, of people video tape themselves doing outrageous stunts hoping to become the next internet celebrity.

Jen and I are not immune to ambition. The other night, over dinner, we wondered out loud what we thought Calvin was going to be like when he got older. Would he be a Type A personality, a go getter? What sports would he like? Baseball, football, lacrosse maybe? Would he love to read theology like his Dad? He has a head start on that since I already read John Calvin to him. I teased Jen a little bit, a Mizzou grad, by musing that perhaps Calvin would be a KU fan growing up on this side of the State line. That little joke brought our little fanciful conversation to a screeching halt. Of course, there is little chance of that happening because every large-billed bird of blue and red feather has been permanently banned from our home. We don’t even buy “Froot Loops” for that reason alone—only Frosted Flakes, the one with the Tiger.

All of this begs the question, “Is ambition a bad thing?” Scripture teaches us that it depends upon what you are ambitious about. In *Romans 15:20* Paul states that it is his “ambition to preach the Gospel” in places where it has never been preached. And that’s how Paul spent his life. Jesus Christ had an ambition to die on the cross for the sins of the world, and nothing could dissuade him from it.

The Word teaches us that Jesus set his face like flint toward Jerusalem and the cross. (*Luke 9:53*) When Peter tried to convince Jesus that going to the cross was a bad idea, Jesus responded with the harshest of rebukes, “*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man...If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*” (*Matthew 16:23-24*). That kind of single-mindedness could almost define ambition.

How can we know if our ambition serves God and His vision for our life, or if it serves ourselves? How do we know if our ambition is holy or if it is simply wholly ours?

This passage in Leviticus can help us with that question. Leviticus is a book of God’s rules and regulations. Some might call them the limits which God set for his people. In the 27 chapters of Leviticus there are well over a thousand imperatives from God, commanding His people how to act in this world. Some of it is general and well known by most—like *you shall not make idols for yourselves* (*26:1*) or *you shall love your neighbor as yourself* (*19:18*) or prohibitions against adultery in all its various and sundry forms. But some of Leviticus gets very specific; like what kind of spices you are supposed to burn with a grain offering (*2:16*) or how to know if someone has leprosy or is just going bald. (*Chapter 13*) I take that a little personally. There is a long list of what animals not to eat including: the camel, the bat, the rock badger, shrimp, lobster, the nighthawk, the barn owl, the short-eared owl, the vulture, the stork, the cricket, the bald locust, the grasshopper, and the hoopoe. (*Chapter 11*) Even though the book of Acts tells us that, as people of grace, people of the new Covenant, Jesus Christ has released us from most of these laws, you wouldn’t have to tell me to cross most of those animals off my diet—a nice bat sandwich on rye has never sounded very good.

Yet we may still ask the question, “Why?” Why would God go to so much trouble to place all these limits on His children? Why go into so much detail? Did it really matter that much if someone fashioned up a nice, hearty bowl of rock badger stew or a

steaming plate of grasshopper nachos? Does it matter today if I, in following my ambitions, am not exactly 100% honest with someone just to expedite things or if I covet my neighbor’s new luxury sedan or his children’s success? Does it matter if I run down that rival employee a little bit behind his back? He’s a jerk anyway, he hasn’t worked very hard and I deserve some of his success. Does it matter?

It does. It matters absolutely because Scripture teaches that the best things in life come from God, not from us. *Leviticus 20:22-24* “*You shall therefore keep all my statutes and all my rules and do them, that the land where I am bringing you to live may not vomit you out. And you shall not walk in the customs of the nation that I am driving out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I detested them. But I have said to you, ‘You shall inherit their land, and I will give it to you to possess, a land flowing with milk and honey.’”* If we live by God’s limits, we are given a land of milk and honey—if we choose to live like any other person and not follow God, we are like walking Ipecac to God. We are saved by grace and I do not believe God ever vomits out those whom He has called and claimed—but the way we live may make Him nauseous.

Whether we see anything right or wrong with how we choose to follow God depends upon what it is for which we are ambitious. Do we have holy ambition or do our ambitions belong wholly and completely to our sinful self?

I have told some of you that when I was in my early twenties I was an intern on Capitol Hill for a Congressman. This Congressman, at the time, was one of the most powerful men in Washington—the highest ranking member of his party in the House of Representatives. I saw it as a grand opportunity and I worked very hard. I arrived before anyone else did in the mornings and I stayed late. As soon as someone gave me a job to do, I did it. And then I was back at their desk seeing what else I could do. If I was asked to get a sandwich for the Congressman, one of my most important jobs, I sprinted down and back from the commissary as fast as my legs would carry me.

One morning I was sitting alone in the office answering phones, thinking I was the only person there. When suddenly out of his big office at the end of hallway, came the Congressman. Two months into the internship, I had not yet had the chance to speak with him. This was my golden opportunity to make a good impression. He came down the hallway, said a gruff morning hello and then went into the kitchen for a morning drink. I steeled myself for a life-changing conversation. The Congressman came back out of the kitchen empty handed, looked at me sitting there and asked, “Are there any Diet Cokes in the fridge?” I panicked. Stocking the fridge was also my job and I hadn’t done it yet that morning. So I said the first thing which came into my slow-working brain, “Did you see any?” The Congressman was dumbfounded. “No,” he replied incredulously. My next response was even more brilliant, “Well, I guess there aren’t any.” My political ambitions died that day. And this was a good thing because my ambitions at that time were not holy but they were wholly mine. But now freed from any possibility of getting a job working for that Congressman, I thought, “maybe I will let God bless me now,” and He did. It totally changed the way I acted. Up to that point I had dreaded every day believing that my entire future depended upon reproducing and collating this policy document in record time or having the right amount of mayonnaise in the Congressman’s tuna fish sandwich. Given no choice, I laid those ambitions aside and placed the hope for my future, at least for a while, into God’s hands. And life was so much better.

So what is holy ambition? We know what the word ambition means, but what about the word holy? Holy ambition, quite simply, means taking our ambitions and our hopes for the future and laying them in God’s hands. We tend to think that holy simply means pure or untainted. But a better way to understand holy means to be set aside for a special purpose, a certain use, an extraordinary task. When God calls someone and says He will make them Holy as *Leviticus 20:26* tells us He does, “*You shall be holy to me, for I the LORD am holy,*” it means that He has placed a special yoke upon their shoulders and set them aside to be used in an extraordinary way by Him. Holy ambition means, quite simply, to be ambitious—to carry that special yoke which God

has given you. No one is more ambitious for our lives than God our Father. He has a grand ambition for our life, and that is to be a person set aside for a special purpose—to be set aside to belong to God and God alone. When we can be ambitious for those things about which God is ambitious, that is Holy ambition.

As we close, I think there are two ways we can know if we have holy ambition or if our ambition belongs wholly to our sinful self. First, are God’s limits limiting or liberating? *I John 5:3* teaches us, “*For this is the love of God, that we keep his commandments. And his commandments are not burdensome.*” If we do not have holy ambition, we look at God’s law, we consider his Lordship and it seems like a burden. But do you know what it truly burdensome, do you know what truly weighs us down? Sin. Nothing is heavier than sin. Nothing holds us down—distorts our truest self—and in fact limits us from being the full woman or man whom God intends, like unchecked sin.

The former pastor at Hollywood Presbyterian Church and the Chaplain of the Senate, Lloyd Ogilvie tells the story of getting to a point in his life as a young man where he was so burdened by his sin that he simply could not take it. So, he spent the better part of a couple of days writing down every sin he could ever recall having committed. By the time he was finished the list was several hundred items long. The next morning Ogilvie rose early, went to a quiet place and went through each and every item on the list, confessed it, and gave it to God. He then took the list and burned it. and as the dark pieces of charred, ashen paper floated into the sky, Ogilvie said he felt a tremendous liberty—unlike any he had ever felt before. He felt, for the first time in a long time, truly free.

Second, do we praise or pout over our partnership with God? Why are we willing to sacrifice so much, pursue so doggedly, give of ourselves so freely to get the good things from life? It is deeply scripted within us that the key to a good life, fulfillment, happiness, joy, delight is ultimately up to us, and that our ambition to achieve that life will empower us to live out our dreams. We have been taught if it is to be, it is up to me.

But is that right? Is our joy and fulfillment ultimately up to us? Or Someone else? In our ignorance and arrogance, we may believe that this is a human centered universe, but it is really God centered. And for the good things in it, we are dependent upon Him. *Psalm 37:4* teaches us, “*Delight yourself in the Lord and He will give you the desires of your heart.*” This is God’s ultimate grace—that we are not responsible for our hopes and dreams and happiness and joy, but He is. We said last week that one of the reasons that God places limits in our life is so that we can partner with Him. Holy ambition quite simply revels in that partnership with God. Holy ambition wants what God wants. Holy ambition sees what God is doing in this world and gets on board.

Let me close with a story some of you may know, which illustrates the principle of God working through us beyond our wildest dreams because of our holy ambition. Living in Bethlehem about 3200 years ago was a man named Boaz. Boaz was a wealthy man, beyond normal marrying age, and he loved the Lord. As his men worked in the field he would shout out to them “The Lord be with you,” and his men would shout back, “The Lord bless you.” Boaz loved God so much that he followed his law, He observed God’s limits for his life. He did not harvest his field all the way to the edge and he left the gleanings behind for the poor and the stranger to gather. In the land of Moab lived a woman named Ruth. Ruth had married into a family with three sons, all of whom were married. In the span of a few years—all the men of the family died, the three sons as well as their father and the women left behind were plunged into wretched poverty. In fact, because what happened to them was so terrible, some would have assumed they were under a curse from God.

Ruth and her mother-in-law, Naomi, left Moab and settled in Bethlehem. One day Boaz looked out in his barley field and he saw gleaning behind his men a

young woman he did not know. It was Ruth. And Boaz told his men to be very generous with Ruth and even if she gleaned beyond where she was supposed to, taking some of the good crop, they were told to allow it. And not only that, Boaz fed her with bread and wine vinegar and for the first time in a long time, Ruth ate all she wanted with some left over.

It was not long before Boaz and Ruth became husband and wife. They were both blessed because Boaz lived within God’s limits for his life. But God was also doing something. He was bringing redemption to the world and he used Ruth and Boaz to do it. The two of them had a son named Obed. Obed was grandfather of a ruddy little shepherd boy who became King over Israel and Judah—David. And some 1200 years later, their great, great, great, great grandson—a man named Joseph—would himself take a young wife, a woman named Mary. And he would have the incredible privilege of being the earthly father to the Lord and Savior of the Universe and the redeemer of all humankind, Jesus Christ. The names of Ruth and Boaz will be forever linked with the particular redemption of humanity because they had a holy ambition.

Is your ambition holy? Or is it simply wholly yours?

Amen.

¹ Contra Costa Times, Preschoolers to Face Academic Pressures by Jackie Burrell, September 16, 2007.