

Wisdom of the Bible ~ Ambition ~ Leader's Guide

1. In the dictionary, the word "ambition" has two primary meanings: a) an ardent desire for rank, fame, or power and b) a desire to achieve a particular end. What's the difference between these two meanings? Is having ambition good or bad?

The first meaning primarily focuses on self and one's personal pride. The second focuses on achieving an end such as graduating from school, getting a job, accomplishing a task, etc., which may or may not emphasize self.

2. What does God think about the first kind of ambition? (Genesis 11:5-8)

God doesn't like it. He may not destroy what you're building as he did with the Tower of Babel, but it most certainly will not win his praise.

The Tower of Babel was not really an attempt to scale the heights of heaven and it was not for that reason that God was displeased with it. Is God anti-city and anti-skyscraper? Anti-civilization? Was God intimidated and threatened by their progress? Hardly. God was upset because this whole ambitious project was an act of rebellion against him.

The thrust of the story is against man's egotistical attempt to make and leave a "name," the overweening confidence of humanity in the feats of technology, the proud attempt of the human race to take its destiny into its own hands, and man's undertaking a huge project without seeking the counsel of God.

In Verse 6, God's concern is not that they will progress beyond his knowledge, but that they will progress in rebellion and evil to such an extent that the human race would degenerate to a level like the days of Noah. However, as God had made an unconditional covenant with Noah (Genesis 9:12-17) to never again destroy all life, he did not want to be in a position of feeling he had to do so because man was out of control. God's elegant solution is to give men different languages and let them go in different directions to settle the whole earth.

3. What is the motivation behind this first kind of ambition? (Ecclesiastes 4:4)

Envy and jealousy, which often lead to resentment (see Q 4).

4. What is often the result of this type of ambition? (1 Timothy 6:9-10)

Envy leads to resentment which, in turn, makes one vulnerable to temptation and "foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction." Even more damaging, these desires cause people to forget their faith in Jesus.

5. How did Jesus respond to the ambition of Zebedee's sons and their mother? Why were the other disciples indignant? (Matthew 20:20-28, Mark 10:35-45)?

Both Matthew and Mark spell out Jesus' response. In Verse 22, the expression "drink the cup" means the share someone's fate. Jesus correctly foretold their futures: James was martyred and James was exiled. The other disciples were indignant possibly because they were opposed to prideful ambition but possible they desired these positions of prestige and power for themselves.

6. When does honorable ambition become dishonorable?

7. How can jealousy and pride destroy the unity of a group of people?

The ten other disciples were angry with James and John, which would certainly be disruptive to working together as a group. More often, members of a group will observe one or more others being overly ambitious and prideful and not say anything to the offenders, but gossip among themselves or to others outside the group. Also, people resent working to make someone else look good. If you want to see this process at work, just watch some of the reality TV shows that start with two big teams working to defeat the opposing team but quickly degenerate into backbiting and ugly competition among members of the same team. If you want to see the very worst in human nature, tune in to Survivor, The Apprentice, or Hell's Kitchen.

8. How does our culture follow the Gentile pattern of leadership? (Matthew 20:25)

9. Do we ever make unreasonable requests of God? How? Why do we do so?

10. What does God say should be the pattern of our ambition? (Proverbs 16:1, 19:21, Joshua 1:8, James 4:13-16, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12)

As a group these verses advise you to seek the Lord's will by prayer and reading his word before making your plans. Your plans should be in concert with the Lord if you expect them to be successful.

Wisdom of the Bible ~ Ambition ~ Scripture Verses

Genesis 11:4-8 - ⁴ Then they said, “Come, let us build ourselves a city, with a tower that reaches to the heavens, so that we may make a name for ourselves and not be scattered over the face of the whole earth.”

⁵ But the Lord came down to see the city and the tower that the men were building.

⁶ The Lord said, “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them. ⁷ Come, let us go down and confuse their language so they will not understand each other.” ⁸ So the Lord scattered them from there over all the earth, and they stopped building the city.

Ecclesiastes 4:4 - (Contemporary English Version) Then I realized that we work and do wonderful things just because we are jealous of others. This makes no more sense than chasing the wind.

Timothy 6:9-10 - ⁹ People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. ¹⁰ For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.

Matthew 20:20-28 - ²⁰ Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Jesus with her sons and, kneeling down, asked a favor of him.

²¹ “What is it you want?” he asked.

She said, “Grant that one of these two sons of mine may sit at your right and the other at your left in your kingdom.”

²² “You don’t know what you are asking,” Jesus said to them. “Can you drink the cup I am going to drink?”

“We can,” they answered.

²³ Jesus said to them, “You will indeed drink from my cup, but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared by my Father.”

²⁴ When the ten heard about this, they were indignant with the two brothers. ²⁵ Jesus called them together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. ²⁶ Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, ²⁷ and whoever wants to be first must be your slave—²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”

Proverbs 16:1 (New Living Translation)

We can make our own plans, but the Lord gives the right answer.

Proverbs 19:21 (New Living Translation)

You can make many plans, but the Lord’s purpose will prevail.

Look up **Joshua 1:8, James 4:13-16, 1 Thessalonians 4:11-12**