

GOOD NEWS ABOUT AMBITION

Back in 2003 Jim Hager of Oakland, California, earned a place in the Guinness Book of World Records. He accomplished this feat by eating 115 M&M candies in three minutes with chopsticks! I don't know how long it took Mr. Hager to perfect this skill, and I certainly have no idea why he undertook this task, but I do know this. All of us have our dreams.

Dwight D. Eisenhower, 34th President of the United States says that when he was a small boy in Kansas, he went fishing with a friend of his. Young Eisenhower confided to his friend that his dream was to one day be a major league baseball player. Interestingly, Eisenhower's friend said that his dream was to be President of the United States. Eisenhower said wistfully, "Neither of us got our wish."

In 1976 motivational speaker Steve Chandler interviewed an aspiring young actor named Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger was promoting his first film. "Now that you have retired from bodybuilding, what are you going to do next?" with a calm voice, Schwarzenegger said, "I'm going to be the No. 1 box office star in all of Hollywood." Chandler said he tried not to show his amusement. Schwarzenegger's first attempt at movies hadn't shown much promise, and his Austrian accent and monstrous build didn't suggest instant acceptance by audiences. "It's the same process I use in bodybuilding." Schwarzenegger went on to explain. "What you do is create a vision of who you want to be, and then live into the picture, as if it were already true." "It sounded ridiculously simple," says Chandler, "Too simple to mean anything. But I wrote it down and never forgot it." I wonder what Chandler would have thought if Arnold had said his dream was to become governor of California. Most of us at one time or another have had our own dreams. Some of these dreams were childish. Many were unrealistic.

James and John, the sons of Zebedee had dreams, ambitions. They along with Peter were Jesus' closest disciples. They were with Jesus for all of the significant events in Jesus' ministry. For example, when Jesus went up on the Mount of Transfiguration, certainly one of the more dramatic moments in his ministry, he chose these three to go with him. Jesus nicknamed James and John the "Sons of Thunder." That's quite descriptive. My guess is that they were quite dynamic individuals. They had been fishermen when Jesus called them. Undoubtedly they were quite successful in their fishing enterprise. "Sons of thunder" sounds like a pair of leaders, entrepreneurs, movers and shakers. It is only natural that they would move into a leadership role among the disciples. So, it should not surprise us that one day these "sons of thunder" came to Jesus with a request. They wanted to negotiate a better position in the company. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

That's happened to us parents, hasn't it? "Daddy, I need you to do me a favor." They don't tell you up front what it is. They expect, because you are their Mom or Dad, you will automatically grant whatever they request. James and John feel they have that kind of relationship with Jesus. At least they feel they've somehow earned special consideration. Sometimes you and I go to God with that same kind of attitude, don't we? We're Christians. We're Sunday School teachers. Some of us are even preachers. We give generously to the church. We deserve for God to listen to our requests and to grant them even though God may have a different plan altogether. James and John said, "Teacher, we want you to do for us

whatever we ask.” Jesus asked, “What do you want me to do for you?” They replied, “Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory.”

This request seems to hit a sensitive nerve with Jesus. “Jesus said, “You don’t know what you are asking. Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” Here is where we see a real disconnect between the disciples’ expectations of why Christ has come into the world and Christ’s own plans. “Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?” “We can,” they answered. “Sons of thunder” believe they can do anything, don’t they? James and John were still very young men. They still believed they were invincible.

Jesus said to them, “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with, 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.” Like most of Jesus’ answers this one is not easily deciphered. Jesus seems to be telling them that they will experience what he experiences, but it might not be what they expect. He will suffer; they will suffer. He will be betrayed; they will be betrayed. He will give up his life in service to the Father; they will give up their lives in service to the Father. “You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with...” They, of course, have no idea what this means until much later in their lives. In fact, James was the very first of the apostles to die, as recorded in the 22nd chapter of Acts. He was taken and murdered, beheaded, by Herod the first of the apostles to be martyred. John lived a much longer life, but much of it was in exile. They would drink Christ’s cup, but they will not get what they are asking for here. Jesus says, “But to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant.” Sorry guys, this isn’t going to happen.

When the other ten disciples hear about James and John’s request, they are indignant, as we might expect. Jesus calls them together and turns this into a moment of teaching, “You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them,” said Jesus, “and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to be first must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” It’s a powerful story. James and John were ambitious. They wanted to be stars in Jesus’ enterprise. They wanted greatness. And that’s exactly what they got. It just didn’t happen in the way they expected. After all, here we are talking about them 2,000 years later. Do you think anyone will be talking about us 2000 years from now? They could be... if we too, are willing to drink the same cup and be baptized with the same baptism as Christ. But it’s not an invitation to live on easy street. What are the lessons we can derive from the question James and John asked Jesus about sitting at his right and left in his glory?

The first lesson that we learn is that Jesus did not condemn James and John for their ambition. Jesus wants his followers to seek after greatness. Why would we ever think that Jesus wants his people living mediocre lives? Set your course, whatever it might be, on achieving stardom.

I hope every person here knows the story of Booker T. Washington. Washington was born in 1856 on the Burroughs tobacco farm in southern Virginia. His mother was a cook, his father a white man from a nearby farm. He went to school not as a student, but as a slave. Each day he

carried books for one of the Burroughs's daughters. It was illegal to educate slaves. Washington wrote, "I had the feeling that to get into a schoolhouse and study would be about the same as getting into paradise." But the Civil War brought an end to slavery while Washington was still a boy. And so, fortunately, he earned a high school education. Still, there was no higher education at that time for African-Americans. Then, just at the right time, a university opened that was devoted to the education of the descendants of slaves. It meant a walk of 500 miles, but Booker T. Washington got to that school. Can you imagine that? Five hundred miles! Some of us wouldn't make that trip if the air quit working in our car, much less on foot. But Washington walked all the way. When he got there he discovered that the last place in the school had been filled. He was denied admission. All they could offer him was the job of a servant, sweeping the bedrooms and making the beds. He took this menial job and, in due time, was allowed in as a student. From this humble start he became a principal and guiding force behind Tuskegee Institute in Alabama, which he founded in 1881. Soon he was recognized as the nation's foremost African-American educator.

There is nothing wrong with aspiring to be the best we can be at the things we do, as long as these are honorable things. Indeed, this is why God gave us good minds and healthy bodies. Jesus did not condemn James and John for their ambition. People who achieve great things in this world by definition are ambitious people. It is important to note, however, that ambition can be misguided. There is a fine line between ambition and ruthlessness. Or ambition and greed. Our economy has been crippled and many people have lost their life savings over the past few years because some people chose dishonest means to satisfy their ambitions. It's an old story. Some people will do anything, even to the point of destroying others, to achieve their goals.

Some of you will remember an award-winning film from the 1970's titled *Network*. It was a satire about a ruthless group of executives who transform a major U.S. television network into a thoroughly evil entity. The UBS Network would do just about anything to boost audience ratings and generate advertising revenue. For example, there is a talk show hosted by psychotic and deranged people. The schedule is filled with dramas featuring explicit sex and gratuitous violence.

The biggest scene in the movie occurs when veteran news anchor Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch, goes insane on the air. Beale's show suffers from low rating, so when the entertainment division of the network takes over the news they fire him. That evening on the air, Beale announces that the firing has ruined his life and that he'll commit suicide on the air in one week. Ratings skyrocket as the day approaches and Beale becomes a superstar, thus quenching his willingness to take his own life. He does still act deranged and his rage attracts an enormous following. By the end of the movie though, he changes his message, his ratings decline and he is murdered on the air at the order of the network executives. The film is over the top, of course. That's why it's a satire. However it's scary how prophetic the movie was in some ways.

Jesus did not condemn James and John for their ambition. However, it is important to acknowledge that misguided ambition is at the heart of many of the world's great tragedies.

The primary lesson Jesus is teaching is that the path to true greatness is service. If your ambition in life is to truly be one of the greatest people who ever lived, you will need to learn to

serve others and to serve god. Another movie came out this past year that makes this point in an interesting way. It's the film *The Soloist*. *The Soloist* is a powerful movie that will cause you to think new thoughts about people who are homeless. The movie stars Robert Downey Jr. and Jamie Foxx. It is a true story based on the real life experience of Los Angeles Times journalist Steve Lopez, played by Downey. As the movie opens, Lopez's life is a wreck. He drinks too much. His marriage is over and he is estranged from his son.

Then he stumbles across a homeless man Nathaniel Ayers, played by Jamie Foxx. Ayers is on the street playing beautiful music on a violin with only two strings. Lopez discovers that Nathaniel is a gifted man. He had been a cello student at New York's Juilliard School, but his studies were cut short by a battle with schizophrenia. Lopez gets Ayers settled in the Lamp Community, a homeless shelter on LA's skid row. It is a difficult transition for Ayers to leave the streets. The extent of his psychological problems is painfully obvious.

At first, Lopez sees Ayers only as material for his column in the Times. However, as he moves into this homeless man's world and begins to befriend him, they develop a relationship that transcends that of journalist and subject. What is most interesting is the change that takes place in Steve Lopez's life as he tries to relate to Nathaniel. He starts getting his own life together. He begins to understand the importance of relationships and of commitment to others. Steve Lopez in helping Nathaniel Ayers discovers the truth to Jesus' words: whoever wants to become great must first be a servant. The story of James and John says to us that it's all right to be ambitious, though misused ambition can be a dangerous thing. It also challenges us to seek after a greatness the world simply cannot understand. It is the greatness exemplified by our master who laid down his life for all humanity. If we want to be great, we must learn how to serve.