

# GODLY AMBITION

October 04, 2009

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Old Testament Lesson; Jeremiah 11:18-20

Gospel Lesson; Mark 9:30-37

Sermon Text; James 3:13-18

The text, or scripture reading that we will look at today is taken from James, chapter three, verses 13 – 18 and reads as follows, in our Savior's name.

Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom. But if you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do no boast about it or deny the truth. Such “wisdom” does not come down from heaven but is earthly, unspiritual, of the devil. For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.

But the wisdom that comes from heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness.

Several thousand years ago, legend was told that there was a man who was told that he could have whatever he wished for, with the stipulation that his neighbor would get twice as much of whatever he had wished for. The man thought it was great! So, the first day he wished for a chariot. He got a brand new golden chariot! The best chariot you could possibly imagine. He was all happy about it. His

neighbor got two brand new, golden chariots. And, he was really happy for his neighbor, too.

The next day the man wished for a brand new house. He got a brand new house! It was big and spacious, and it was everything that he had hoped for. But then, he noticed that his neighbor got twice as big a house as he got! He got twice as many rooms, and it was twice as huge and spacious. He frowned a little bit at that.

The next day the man wished for friends. He got friends, good friends and plenty of them! He was having a good time, until he noticed that his neighbor got twice as many friends as he did. He began to get a little bit perturbed that no matter what he got, his neighbor got twice as much.

And so, the next day he wished that one of his eyes would go blind...so that both of his neighbor's eyes would go blind.

That is what happens, when we begin to envy, when we begin to look, not at what God has given to us, and the blessings He has given to us, but we begin to look at the blessings that God has given to others, and we are not satisfied with what God has given us. We begin to think things and do things that bring pain and sorrow to ourselves or to others. Our scripture reading today tells us that we should be rid of bitter envy, and we should be rid of selfish ambition. It says,

“Where you have envy and selfish ambition,  
there you find disorder and every evil practice.”

Let's talk a little bit about envy, bitter envy, and selfish ambition.

This is written to Christians. And as Christians, we can struggle with things like envy. We can struggle with things like selfishness. In fact, that really is kind of the base sin. Augustine, who was a very deep, theologian and lived back in the fourth century, described sin basically as humanity “incurvatus” or “curved in on itself”. So, he was saying that basically, what we do is we curve everything in on ourselves.

We are just concerned about ourselves.

You know, if we could keep the Ten Commandments, it would not be 'just about me'. The Ten Commandments are about loving God and loving other people. But when we sin against any one of the Ten Commandments, we are curving things in on ourselves. And so, even as Christians, we have that base sin of being concerned more about ourselves than anyone else. And, we can struggle with things like envy.

What is it that we can envy about other people? We can envy other people's possessions. We can look at the money that somebody has, or the house that somebody has, or the toys somebody has, or the clothes somebody has and we can, in our hearts, envy that and wish it were ours, so that the attention were on us and not on them! That is what it is all about.

**It is all about me.**

It is about the attention being on me,  
not on that other person!

We can envy other people's personalities. We may envy the fact that they have a great sense of humor. We may envy the fact that they are so smart. We may envy the fact that they really are good at athletics. And, we wish that we had that sense of humor, we had that ability to think like they do, or that we had that athletic ability. We want the attention to be on us, on me, not on them.

**It is all about me.**

It is humanity curved in on itself.

We may be envious about other people's positions. That person has a better job at work. They sit in a better position in the classroom. I want it to be all about me! I don't want the attention to be on them.

**I want the attention to be on me.**

That is what we call envy. Every person in this room, sometimes, struggles in one way or another, with envying either something that somebody has, something about somebody else's personality,

something about somebody else's position or power that they have. Some may not struggle so much with envy, (which is looking at what other people have and wishing it were my own), but some may struggle with plain old selfishness, plain old selfish ambition. Maybe I am not even thinking about the other person. I am just thinking about me.

### **I am just thinking about me!**

For example, maybe I make the decisions that I make at home, about what we are going to do over the weekend, because I am thinking about me. I am not thinking about anybody else in my family. That is selfish ambition. That is our base nature. That is what we are like, by nature.

Maybe I make the decisions at work, not because I am thinking about other people, but I am thinking about me. That is selfish ambition. I want it to be all about me.

All of us struggle with selfish ambition. It does not matter who you are. There was a time when Martin Luther was lecturing in the city of Wittenburg. He lectured at the university there. He was lecturing to a bunch of young men, who were studying to be pastors. He was lecturing on the Psalms. When he got to one of the Psalms, Psalm 26, he told all of these young men that were sitting out there, *“One of the things that you really need to be concerned about, if you are going to be a pastor is envy, bitter envy, and selfish ambition. It can touch anybody, even you, as a pastor. You could be out there, see some other pastor, and think, 'Everybody thinks he is a better preacher than I am. Everyone thinks he is more friendly than I am.' And, you could have selfish, bitter envy in your heart. And that would ruin you as a pastor. Be careful about that. And, be careful about selfish ambition.”*

He also told them, *“Don't go into your parishes and think, 'My goal is to have everybody tell me what a great pastor I am, what a good preacher I am, and how good I am at this and that.' That is selfish*

*ambition and that will ruin you as a pastor.”*

It can happen to anybody. Look at the ruin and the trouble it brings in life. Our scripture reading says we should not have envy and selfish ambition, because there you find disorder and every evil practice. Let's just run a little bit through the pages of scripture and see how envy and selfish ambition can bring all kinds of trouble - trouble in families, in kingdoms, in churches.

•Why did Cain kill Abel? Envy. Envy.

•Why did Saul hate David? The people said, “Saul has slain his thousands, but David has slain his ten thousands.” Envy. Saul wanted to kill David.

•Why did Absalom try to take his father's throne? Envy, envy and selfish ambition. Look at the ruin it brought into that family.

•What did Judas say when the woman had anointed Jesus with costly perfume? What did Judas say? “She should have sold that perfume and given it to the poor.” Envy. Envy at the praise that she got from Jesus. Selfish. Really wanting that money for himself. He turned his envy into a sort of righteous indignation. Envy.

Envy can cause us to do all kinds of things. Envy can cause us to try to cut other people down, to try to get people to see that they are not so big, so important. Envy can cause us to not like somebody very much, anymore, and as a result not want to be with them, anymore. It can cause us to do all kinds of things. You know what envy can finally lead to?

### **Do you know what envy can finally lead to?**

Do you know why Jesus was put on the cross? The Bible tells us that Pilate knew that they had turned Jesus over to him, because of envy. Envy. What were they envious about? What were the religious leaders envious about? What were the people saying? They were saying that Jesus doesn't speak like the religious leaders. He speaks like one who has authority. They were envious that Jesus preached with power and authority. The people wanted to hear Jesus

preaching. They wanted to hear Him speak the authoritative Word of God, because it struck at their hearts, and it brought them comfort to hear that their sins were forgiven. The religious leaders were envious that Jesus was a better preacher than they were. And, they wanted to have Him crucified. They were envious of Jesus' personality. The people followed after Jesus. They put their children in His arms. They wanted Jesus to bless their children. And, the religious leaders were envious that the whole world would go after Him. They were envious of His power. When He performed miracles, they tried to cut Him down by saying He did it by Beelzebub, not by the power of God. It was because of envy. Look at what they did to our Savior.

**It was because of envy,  
that our Lord Jesus  
was crucified.**

Envy can lead to such terrible things. And, scripture warns us all against the sin of envy.

We all come to our Lord with repentant hearts. And, we can only turn to one place and that is to our Savior. We have to, from the bottom of our hearts, be so thankful, so thankful that our Lord Jesus came to this earth. Why did He leave His throne in Heaven? Why did He do that? Did He do it so that you can have the things that you are envious of? Was it so important, so important that you have those good looks that you are envious of that Jesus came and died, so that you can have those good looks? Was it so important for Jesus to leave His throne in Heaven so that you could have that sense of humor that someone else has? Those things weren't so important for Him to come and leave His throne in Heaven, and die for you.

That is not why He came.

He came so that He could take from you, and He wanted from you something no one else would ever want. Think about that. He wanted from you something that no one else would ever want from

you.

He wanted your shame.

He wanted your guilt.

He wanted your sin.

He wanted so dearly to take that from you, that He left His throne in Heaven. He came down to this earth. He took on human flesh. And, He carried in His body on the cross your sin, your shame, your guilt, because He wanted you to be free from all of that. He didn't want you to have to suffer what you deserve because of your selfish ambition and your envy toward other people. He did not want you to have to suffer what you deserve, because of that. And so, He took it as His own. He suffered the wrath of God. He has washed away your sin. In His mercy, God does not see your sin, because of what Christ has done for you. It is gone, as far as the east is from the west. It is tossed into the depths of the sea, never to be brought up again.

Jesus, in His mercy, has given you something that nobody in this world even begins to compare to. He has given you the holy life that He lived. That is why He lived it. He lived it for you. He lived it so He could give it to you. He lived it so you could be credited with His righteousness. That is yours, as a free gift! Look at what our Savior has done for us. He has given us more than we could ever, ever, **ever** possibly imagine.

He has forgiven our sins.

He has made us right with God.

He has given us a home in Heaven.

And, He gives us a new start every day,  
with sins forgiven.

As God's people, as God's people, God calls us to live, not for ourselves, not curved in on ourselves, but pointed out toward Christ and toward others.

Our scripture reading says, "But the wisdom that comes from

Heaven is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere.”

Those are all qualities that point out toward others.

To be **submissive** is to say, *“I willingly put you in rank above myself. It is not all about me. It's about you. It is about meeting your needs and helping you.”*

To be **considerate** is not all about me. It is about you. *“Because Christ loves us both, I want to live for you, too.”*

There was a young lady, who I read about. She was struggling with envy. She lived in a dormitory. Her roommate seemed to have everything going for her. Her roommate had more money. She was better looking. Her roommate had a really good, Christian boyfriend. This college girl was struggling with terrible envy. It made her very bitter toward her roommate, to the point that she did not even like her roommate and they did not get along at all, because she was so envious of her.

Finally, she went to her pastor and told him, “Pastor, I am struggling with this envy toward my roommate”, and then she explained why. The pastor told her that it was a sin. She said, “I know,” and she repented of all of those sins.

Then the pastor absolved her and told her, “You know, for Jesus' sake, all of those sins are forgiven.” Then, he declared to her that her sins are forgiven, for Christ's sake.

She was so happy to know and to hear from the voice of another person that the guilt that she had, the guilt that she bore was all removed. God never holds that against us.

He told her, “Now, you go back. Let's make a plan on what you can do, instead of being envious toward your roommate.” So, they came up with a plan. Instead of being envious of her roommate's boyfriend, she would pray for them. She would pray that God would bless that relationship. And if it was God's Will, that relationship would grow. She really began to pray for her roommate and her

roommate's boyfriend. She even gave her roommate a necklace to wear on a date!

And you know what happened? The two roommates grew closer together, now, instead of being separated! Our scripture talks about how that makes peace.

And instead of being envious at other people, she and her pastor made the plan that whenever she saw something good in somebody else, she would pause and take time to thank God that the person had that skill, that quality, or that ability. That caused her to be more at peace with others, instead of putting up walls between herself and others.

All of us, in our hearts, have that base sin of self-centeredness, which causes us to have selfish ambition and be envious. Thank God we have a Savior who forgives us.

Let's have Christ reign in our hearts.

Let's live, not curved in on ourselves, but pointed out toward others, because, instead of divisiveness, that brings peace, for Christ's sake.  
Amen