

Me First!

Breaking up Stony Ground, Part 4

Selected Scripture

The Guinness Book of World Records, records a host of things which people have accomplished – records that they’ve set, which set them apart.

There are a lot of interesting achievements recorded – in fact, they are a lot of interesting people recorded as well. After reading from their online site, I found the people often more interesting than the 1st place record they hold.

There’s the man who holds the record for running the fastest 100 meter hurdles wearing swim fins – who would even think that one up? He did . . . and he ran it, in swim fins, in September 2008, and now holds the record of flip flopping it over the hurdles in 14.82 seconds.

Johanna Quaas, the oldest living gymnast, was born in November, 1925 in Germany; at the age of 86 years, was still a regular competitor in amateur gymnastic competitions

A preacher has gone down in history as having preached the longest sermon. Reverend Ronald Gallager, of Appomattox, Virginia, in the mid-80’s preached a sermon for 120 hours, June 26th to July 1st. I said that so you’d really appreciate my really short sermons.

Another entry shows a man who holds the world record for sitting, without any other support, in a tree. He sat in a tree for a total of 431 days.

Then there’s a woman who holds the world record for throwing a 2 ½ pound rolling pin – that thing in the kitchen you use to mash things . . . I obviously speak with experience.

Well, Mrs. Lori Adams of Iowa holds the Guinness World record for throwing a rolling pin 175 feet in the air. I’ll bet all she has to do is reach

for it and her husband immediately takes out the trash. With no complaint; who knows, her husband might have been running in the direction of her world record!

One more – college student Kevin McCartney of Buffalo, New York, holds the world record after taking a 340 hour shower. It lasted 14 days . . . can you imagine? Of course, if he were anything like my college roommates, he needed every bit of it.

The truth is, even among most of us – who are average, normal people, we hope – we don’t live in trees or in the shower – there is still within us all something desirable about being first . . . holding some sort of record, at something.

Frankly, we all would rather be at the head of the line . . . in front . . . ahead of the pack . . . to be first.

It’s something we could call – in a word, ambition.

It’s that ever-present, ever-ready besetting sin that so easily winds itself around our hearts to trip us up.

Ambition has a lot of cousins; relatives with names like, pride, selfishness, vanity, arrogance, conceit, self-importance, haughtiness, superiority.

The words, “me first”, are in the DNA of all of them.

This doesn’t mean we shouldn’t be industrious – hardworking – committed – steadfast or motivated . . . we’ll cover that in a few minutes.

Webster defines the wrong side of ambition as “an ardent desire for rank, fame, power . . . personal advancement.”¹

Let me show you a perfect illustration of this kind of ambition.

Take your New Testament and turn to the first gospel account – the Book of Matthew.

You'll discover both the problem, and solution, to self-centered ambition.

Matthew, chapter 18 at verse 1, "At that time the disciples came to Jesus, saying, 'Who is greatest in the kingdom of heaven?'"

If you can believe it, this happened to be one of the most talked about subjects among the disciples.

That was one of their most difficult question and they struggled with it throughout Christ's entire ministry.

In Luke 9:46, we're told that they actually began arguing about it – Luke records, "**And an argument arose among them**" - that is, the disciples - "**as to which of them was the greatest.**"

Come on . . . these are the future leaders of the church. They must have argued over what kind of discipleship method would be most effective; how long it might take to get the gospel around the world . . . uh uh.

"Which among us twelve is the greatest?"

This word translated, greatest, contains the little Greek meigon (μεῖγρον) which gives us our word, mega.

We talk about the rich persona with mega-bucks; or the megastar with international fame; or the mega-church that so large; we refer to the person who makes mega deals – they top the charts in sales.

This is the idea behind the disciples' question – "Lord, who makes it to the top of the charts . . . who's the greatest saint – the mega-disciple who has it all together.

"Lord, go ahead and name him for us . . . we'd like you to hand out some gold medals for super-disciples."

Matthew informs us in verse 2 that Jesus called to himself a child – a paidion (παῖδιον) – a toddler and said, "**Truly I say to you, unless you turn and become like children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Whoever humbles himself like this child, he is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven.**"

"You see this little toddler here? He is the greatest in the kingdom."

And why would that be?

The hint Jesus provides is in the term, humility. This is the opposite of ambitious pride.

You might think the Lord referred to the child as the greatest because he's transparent, or trusting, or even innocent?" I don't know about innocent. My

wife and I raised four toddlers and the word "innocent" doesn't fit my memories.

Transparency or innocence isn't really what the Lord is talking about. I believe Jesus was referring to the fact that a child is absolutely, utterly, helplessly dependent on someone else.

You want to get into the kingdom? You have to be absolutely, utterly, helplessly dependent on God to ever make it in. You try and enter the kingdom with your works, your deeds, your efforts your gold medals and world records . . . forget it.

Jesus is telling them, you get into the kingdom by child-likeness.

And He says, "And the greatest in the kingdom are those who are child-like." Not childish – that can be stubborn, self-centeredness; but child-like, that is humble dependence.

Did the disciples get the message?

Did this answer from the Lord end their pursuit of ambition?

Turn over a couple of pages – and a few weeks later - to **Matthew, chapter 20, verse 20. "Then the mother of the sons of Zebedee came to Him with her sons, bowing down, and making a request of Him. And He said to her,"** - this cracks me up every time I read this - "**What do you wish?" She said to Him, 'Command that in Your kingdom these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right and one on Your left.'**"

In other words, Lord, when you write out your seating chart for all these thrones in the kingdom, put my boys on either side of you – as if to imply – they deserve it more than these other guys. And James and John are just standing there.

You can just see the other 10 disciples somewhere around the corner, doubled over in laughter, "Look at those poor Mama's boys . . . they've gotta be embarrassed by what she's springing on the Lord."

Not exactly – **verse 24. And when the ten heard it, they were indignant at the two brothers.**

That word, indignant, means they were literally furious. And the tense of the verb implies they expressed their anger.

Why? Because they've got the same desire.

Listen, before we're too hard on them, the Lord has already informed them that they're going to occupy 12 thrones in the kingdom (Matthew 19:28) Okay, if that's true, who gets to sit closest to the King of Kings?

I have read how Chuck Colson, once the advisor to President Nixon, traveled with Nixon on Air Force One – with other advisors – and they would battle over who sat closest to the President. They even measured the distance between their seats, so that none of them were an inch closer.

Talk about ambition.

Talk about namedropping . . . and pictures on the wall with who's who.

What really infuriated the other disciples was the fact that James and John had the advantage. They were first cousins with Jesus. The mother of James and John was the sister of Mary. James and John have the inside track.

Everybody knows blood is thicker than water . . . hey, that's not fair . . .

The Lord straightens them out again by reminding them in the next few verses that close fellowship with Him will bring great a cross, long before it brings a crown.

Being a cousin doesn't make you the greatest . . . carrying your cross does.

So did they get the picture?

Listen, the last chapter of Jesus Christ's ministry before He goes to the cross, takes us into the upper room!

Luke's Gospel account records that in that upper room – in fact, after the appointment of the bread and wine as tokens of Christ's suffering, the text says – if you can believe – *A dispute arose among them as to which of them was to be regarded as the greatest (Luke 22:24).*

Can you imagine – there in the upper room, after Jesus Christ informs them all that He's about to be rejected and crucified, they start arguing about who deserves top billing in the coming kingdom.

James and John are fairly confident that they're going to hold the world record for being the closest to Jesus in the seating arrangement.

Peter would have argued back, "Oh no, no, no – Jesus said I had the insight like nobody else – I'm going to be the greatest."

And Andrew would have piped up – "Hey, I might be your little brother, Peter, but don't forget I was the first disciple called to join the Lord – so I've been with Him the longest!

Can you imagine? In the upper room?

Do you remember what Jesus did?

He must have sighed one of those really weary sighs . . . but He got up and went and got the basin

of water and a towel and washed every disciples feet.

And listen, they never got over that.

They no doubt recalled Jesus saying to them, *"Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant . . . even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:27-28)*

The dark side to ambition is self-serving, self-promoting, self-protecting, self-centering lifestyles. "Me first!"

The right side of ambition is dedication to something that matters. It means to be steadfast – persistent and passionate.

I find it interesting that the Apostle Paul used the word ambition three times in his letters.

Let me take you to them – briefly – and define godly ambition, over and against, ungodly, self-centered ambition that we've seen displayed.

Paul is going to effectively challenge us as disciples of Jesus Christ to be ambitious about three projects.

1. Project #1: We must be ambitious to shoulder your own load

In 1 Thessalonians 4 Paul writes, beginning in verse 9. Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another, 10. For that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. Bu we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more, 11 and to aspire (there's that word ambition – and to be ambitious) to live quietly, and to mind your own affairs, and to work with your hands, as we instructed you, 12. So that you may walk properly before outsiders and be dependent on no one.

Paul picks up this same challenge in his second letter – with even stronger language in *chapter 3 of 2 Thessalonians and verse 10. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command; if anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. 11. For we hear that some among you walk in idleness, not busy at work, but busybodies. 12. Now such persons we command and encourage in the Lord Jesus Christ to do their work quietly and to earn their own living.*

Most New Testament scholars point out the fact that within this context – there was kingdom fever – there was eschatological anticipation . . . the Lord

was coming for His church and He was coming soon.

And there were people who basically said, “Why work?”

I mean if you knew the Lord was coming back tomorrow, would you put in that load of laundry? Why cut the grass? I can’t get some of it to grow anyway!

We’ve seen in the 80’s and 90’s and even into the last few years, people set dates for the rapture of the church and other people buy into it and quit their jobs, sell their homes . . . hike out to mountain peaks and await the upward call.

It’s not a new phenomenon.

John Phillips dug back into history and revealed a man by the name of Lactantius who would be among the first to set the date for the Lord’s coming – he set it at A.D. 500. When that didn’t happen, things settled down. Then another group decided it would take place at the dawning of the new century – A.D. 1000. Multitudes of people sold their possessions and many of them went to the land of Israel to await His coming. Prominent leaders of the church were among the crowd.ⁱⁱ

May 21, 2011 was the first date one Christian leader announced as the date for the rapture of the church. This businessman poured millions of his own money into the campaign to let the world know this date.

In fact, his followers donated 70 million dollars to get this announcement to the world.

People spent their entire life’s savings on it . . . and why not – you’re not going to need any money after May 21st.

One woman interviewed said that knowing the date of the end of the world changed her future plans – she had planned to go to medical school until she began tuning in to a radio station devoted to this rapture date. Then she and her husband decided to spend the remaining year – note that – the remaining year – with their infant daughter as a family, just getting by . . . she dropped her plans for medical school along the way.

In other words, forget the gospel, forget the church, forget the medical community, forget the job, we’ll spend the last year closeted up as a family.

National Public radio interviewed one couple who said, “We budgeted everything so that on May 21st, we wouldn’t have anything left.”ⁱⁱⁱ

This isn’t a new problem.

The fact that Jesus is going to come for His church and that His coming is imminent, leads misguided people to assume they’ve figured out the mystery and they know the date.

Overlooking the simple fact that the Lord said, “You’re not going to know the day – but here’s what matters – you’re going to be My disciples spreading the gospel to *Jerusalem, Judea, Samaria, and to the end of the earth.*” (Acts 1:8)

Listen, before Lactantius ever predicted his date of A.D. 500, the preaching of the reality of the rapture of the church by the Apostle Paul had produced an awkward situation in Thessalonica among misguided people. Many people had given up their day jobs and were standing about in excited groups, upsetting themselves and everybody else, while they waited for the Lord’s appearing.^{iv}

Paul’s advice is basically this – when the Lord comes and if He should come for you today – let Him find you shouldering your responsibilities . . . carrying your share of the load . . . in other words, let Christ find you at the task He’s given you today.

Make your daily tasks your ambition. Be ambitious to shoulder your own load – even if it’s a load of laundry.

Paul uses that word again in his letter to the Corinthians.

Here’s project #2.

He will challenge the believer to not only shoulder your load, but to be . . .

2. Ambitious to shape up your lives

Turn over to 2 Corinthians 5 where Paul informs us that we will one day stand before the Lord and give an account of our lives – verse 10. For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due for what he has done in the body, whether good or evil.

For those of you who are newer to the faith, there are several end times judgments. This is one of them.

And this judgment is for believers only. It might at first appear that believers are being judged for their sin – because we read of judgment for their actions – whether good or evil.

The word evil is not from the typical Greek words for moral evil or sinful actions. It’s the word paulos (φάυλος) which New Testament scholars agree is a word that refers to that which is worthless – good-for-nothingness.^v

Believers will not be judged for sin at the judgment seat of Christ. Every sin – past, present and future – in every believer’s life has already been judged in Christ at the cross. He has taken our sin and robed us in His righteousness (*Galatians 3:27; Philippians 3:9*).

We cannot be judged again for sin because Christ has already been judged for our sin and paid the penalty in full.

There is no double jeopardy in the court of Heaven.

The Judgment seat – the Bema seat – was also the place where athletes were awarded for their efforts.

Paul effectively says, “You’re going to be evaluated on the way in which you ran your race – that which was worthless will not be rewarded – but that which was good – worthwhile – that which was pleasing to God – that kind of life will be rewarded.

Look back one verse at how this governed Paul’s ambition in life – **verse 9. So whether we are at home or away** (that is, whether we’re alive or dead), **we make it our aim** – there’s that same word – **we make it our ambition – to please Him.**

If you want a good reason to shape up your life and discipline your mind and dedicate yourself to the Lord for His pleasure in whatever you do – Paul simply reminds us of the fact that one day we will stand before our Lord.

Selfish ambition – self-centered lifestyles – self-promoting pursuit – and even self-promoting ministry – will not be rewarded.

Let me put it this way – as practically as I can – our ambition isn’t for our glory, but for God’s glory. Some of us never rest because we want glory from others – we live for their praise – some people will never rest from trying to prove something to their parents, or their spouses, to hear some word of praise from their boyfriend or their ex-girlfriend or their high school coach or college professor.^{vi}

Dying as it were to hear from them, some word of praise.

Paul says, “I live with that kind of passion and that kind of longing for a word of praise and commendation from my Lord.”

That’s God-pleasing ambition . . . and it will be rewarded.

Let me provide the third and final project or activity of ambition that is worthy of commendation.

The believer should be ambitious:

- To shape up their lives

- To shoulder the load
- Thirdly, the believer should be:

3. Ambitious to showcase the light

Paul uses this same word – a word he uses only three times in his New Testament letters – in *Romans 15*.

I love this transparent peek into the heart of Paul – notice verse 20. ***And thus I make it my ambition to preach the gospel, not where Christ has already been named, lest I build on someone else’s foundation, 21 but as it is written, “those who have never been told of him will see, and those who have never heard will understand.”***

Paul’s great ambition was to showcase the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Paul never stopped being on the lookout for someone to share Christ with.

Let’s adopt the ambitions of the Apostle Paul.

Let’s be ambitious to discipline our lives and focus our lives on that coming evaluation!

Let’s be ambitious to shoulder the load of responsibilities that God has given us!

Let’s be ambitious to showcase the light – to make much of Jesus Christ in the world where He has placed us!

God may choose to place us somewhere new, or difficult, or challenging . . . but our ambitions should never change.

For several decades, Dr. Charles McCoy pastored a church in Oyster Bay, New York. While pastoring, as a single man, he had time to continue his education, and he eventually earned 7 graduate and post-graduate degrees. When he turned 72, his Baptist denomination required that he retire from ministry, and reluctantly stepped away from the pulpit and people he had faithfully pastored for many decades.

In reality, he wasn’t quite sure what to do with himself. He wrote, “I keep thinking that my life’s over, and I haven’t really done anything yet. I’ve pastored this church for so many years . . . I’ve spent a lot of time working for degrees, but I haven’t won very many people the Lord.

One week after his retirement party, he met a missionary who invited him to come to India to preach. Dr. McCoy deferred, citing his age. Besides, he’d never been overseas, had never traveled across America, for that matter, he’d never flown in a plane. He couldn’t imagine traveling to

India. Not the least of his concerns was the fact that he didn't have that kind of money.

The thought, however, nagged at him.

Until finally, 72 year old-white haired Dr. Charles McCoy announced he would indeed go to India. He sold his car and a few possessions and bought a one-way ticket to Bombay. His friends were horrified. "What if you fall ill? What if you should die in India?"

He replied with new-found faith and courage, "It's just as close to heaven from there as it is from here."

Dr. McCoy arrived in Bombay with his billfold, his passport, a satchel of clothes and his Bible – all of which were taken in a matter of minutes by some very clever pickpockets.

He was left with only the clothes on his back and the address of missionaries. The man who had originally invited him to come and preach had decided to stay in America and when he showed up on the missionary's doorstep, they weren't sure what to do with him. They invited him in and gave him a small guest room.

Dr. McCoy was anxious to do something for Christ and after 2 days of getting acclimated, he announced to the missionaries that he was going to visit the mayor of Bombay. "Don't waste your time," his new friends advised. After several years of trying, they had never been able to see the mayor. But Dr. McCoy had prayed about it and he went anyway, without any appointment. He presented his business card to the receptionist and she looked at it carefully, and then disappeared through a door. Returning, she told him to come back at 3 o'clock.

Dr. McCoy returned that afternoon to find a reception in his honor attended by some of the most important civic leaders in Bombay. It seems the city fathers had been greatly impressed by McCoy's tall frame (he was 6'4"), his distinguished white hair and all those degrees after his name. "He is a very important person" they thought, "perhaps even a representative of the President of the United States."

Dr. McCoy was able to speak for a half-hour, giving his testimony and speaking to them about

Jesus Christ. At the end, he was politely applauded by the assembled crowd. Afterward he was approached by a man in an impressive military uniform who invited him to speak to the students of his military school, which – as it turned out – was India's equivalent to West Point. After his first address, McCoy was invited back repeatedly.

Invitations soon poured in from all over India, and he began an itinerant ministry of preaching the gospel. In Calcutta he started a church for Chinese believers. He was asked to do the same in Hong Kong where he was invited to come and live. He was then invited to Egypt and the Middle East, traveling everywhere an energy that he had seldom before felt.

He traveled and preached, planting churches, teaching in schools discipling believers, speaking before government leaders and dignitaries in several countries.

His international ministry would last for 16 years. He died at the age of 88, in a hotel in Calcutta India, just before he was to preach at a special rally to men downtown.

Dr. Charles McCoy never once came back to America.

Had God informed him what He had up His divine sleeve, when Dr. McCoy was in his 72 year, he would have probably fainted dead away.

He was willing to be ambitious to showcase the light.

Beloved, let's reject the dark side of ambition.

One Monday morning, our world will renew their climb over everything and anyone as they pursue "Me First!"

As believers, let's pursue the redemptive side of ambition:

- No matter what the task – no matter how mundane – let's shoulder it.
- No matter how tempting to slack off – to lead undisciplined lives – let's shape up.
- No matter how challenging – or new – or uncomfortable – let's showcase the light.

This manuscript is from a sermon preached on 10/12/2014 by Stephen Davey.

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- i Quoted in Charles R. Swindoll, Christ at the Crossroads (Insight For Living, 1991), p. 39
- ii John Phillips, Exploring 1 & 2 Thessalonians (Kregel, 2005), p. 109
- iii Npr.org/2011
- iv William Barclay, The Letters to the Philippians, Colossians, and Thessalonians (Westminster, 1975), p. 201
- v Fritz Rienecker/Cleon Rogers, The Linguistic Key to the Greek New Testament (Regency, 1976), p. 468
- vi Adapted from Kevin DeYoung, Crazy Busy (Crossway, 2013), p. 36