

## **Ambition and Contentment.**

Text: Prov 13:14, 19a, Mat 25.15, Prov 24:30-32

Suggested Hymns:

366, 358, 416, 377, 379

- 1) Ambition
- 2) Contentment
- 3) Put the Kingdom of God first
- 4) The motive
- 5) The key to Contentment

The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ, and the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit, be with you all. Amen.

The theme for our sermon today is Ambition and Contentment. It is based on three Scripture texts, Proverbs 13:14, 19a, <sup>14</sup> *The law of the wise is a fountain of life, To turn one away from the snares of death. ...* <sup>19</sup> *A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.*

Matthew 25:15, <sup>15</sup> *“And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.*

And Proverbs 24:30-32, <sup>30</sup> *I went by the field of the lazy man, And by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding;* <sup>31</sup> *And there it was, all overgrown with thorns; Its surface was covered with nettles; Its stone wall was broken down.* <sup>32</sup> *When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction.* (NKJV)

Lord God, heavenly Father, sanctify us through Your truth. Your Word is truth. Amen.

Dear friends in Christ,

The Apostle Paul once described the Christians *“as unknown, and yet well known; as dying, and behold we live; as chastened, and yet not killed; <sup>10</sup> as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing all things.”*<sup>11</sup>

This series of statements seems to bring conflicting ideas, but a careful study will show that the contradiction is only apparent. Technically, such figures of speech are called paradoxes. A paradox may be defined, as *“an assertion or sentiment seemingly contradictory, or opposed to common sense, but that yet may be true in fact.”*

Many of our familiar expressions are paradoxical, for example, *“The pen is mightier than the sword.”* In one sense this statement is obviously untrue. In another sense it is quite true, for the pen as an instrument of ideas is mightier than the sword.

Our Christian faith has a number of such paradoxes. It is essential that we understand how the ideas or facts expressed are only seemingly in conflict.

Over the coming Sundays, will examine three such paradoxical Scriptural truths, *“Ambition and Contentment,” “Lost by Man’s Fault; Saved by God’s Grace,”* and *“Justified by Faith; Justified by Works.”*

So today let us examine the Christian principles regarding Ambition and Contentment. May the Lord bless our meditation.

### **1. Ambition**

Sometimes the Bible tells us to be satisfied with conditions as they are; yet many other texts demand that we be active workers, seeking to improve ourselves, working to build up our Christian faith, working for the betterment of our Church, our community, our schools, and our nation.

The word “ambition” refers to a person’s desire to get ahead. While the word is sometimes used to denote an excessive desire to push oneself ahead, yet the word is more often used in a praiseworthy sense. It is the kind of ambition that remains within proper bounds that we are considering.

Several texts were read before. Let us examine them to find the answers to the questions that arise in our minds as to the line which marks off God-pleasing contentment from excessive ambition.

First let us consider Matthew 25:15, <sup>15</sup> *“And to one he gave five talents, to another two, and to another one, to each according to his own ability; and immediately he went on a journey.* We all know the parable of the five talents. This parable teaches Ambition. It is significantly sandwiched in between the Parable of the Wise and Foolish Virgins and the account of the Last Judgment.

The word “talents” is here used in the widest sense — spiritual gifts, natural abilities, physical blessings, money, and education. These are all blessings of God to be looked upon as a sacred trust.

God bestows various gifts upon His children, as is indicated by the one-talent, the two-talent, and the five-talent men. Plainly it is not the number of talents given, but the faithful use of them that counts. The five-talent man and the two-talent man profitably put their gifts to work. The harsh verdict on the single-talent individual was pronounced on him, not because he was less gifted materially, but because he did not put to work what he had.

He wasn't wasteful. He is called "*lazy*."<sup>2</sup> He simply made no use of his talent, and then he explains away his laziness and resultant fruitlessness by trying to shift the blame on the master. He didn't do anything against his master. He simply didn't do anything for him. What an reproach we have here against the non-use of our God-given abilities! What an incentive for us to cultivate Christian aspirations with our talents, be they few or many!

Secondly, realised ambitions refresh the soul. Prov. 13:14 speaks of "*The law of the wise is a fountain of life, To turn one away from the snares of death.*" The Scriptural truth here is that the wise use of our talents is like a fountain, a spring, that brings refreshment to life's way. The other passage in the same chapter assures us that "*A desire accomplished is sweet to the soul.*" When we eagerly desire something God-pleasing, plan carefully to bring it about, and then accomplish it, we reap sweet contentment for our soul.

Thirdly, there is no contentment in laziness. Our text says in Proverbs 24:30-32, <sup>30</sup> *I went by the field of the lazy man, And by the vineyard of the man devoid of understanding;* <sup>31</sup> *And there it was, all overgrown with thorns; Its surface was covered with nettles; Its stone wall was broken down.* <sup>32</sup> *When I saw it, I considered it well; I looked on it and received instruction.* This section of Scripture severely censures the lack of ambition. The writer says he went by a field which betrayed the lack of understanding and laziness of the owner.

The presence of such noxious weeds as thorns and thistles as well as the broken down stone fence betrayed a lack of ambition. The writer received instruction from this sight — a warning against falling into the snare of laziness.

## 2. Contentment

Let us now define contentment. These texts present us with guiding principles to stimulate our God-pleasing ambition and to make Christian contentment possible for us.

There is a small but important difference between satisfaction and contentment. Satisfaction *“implies appeasement to the point where one is satisfied.”* Contentment however, *“implies appeasement to the point where one is not disquieted or disturbed by a desire for what one does not have, even though every wish is not fully satisfied.”*

Such contentment is a Christian characteristic greatly to be desired. In today’s texts we find this trait illustrated. The writer of Proverbs says that wise living, like an ever-bubbling spring, will bring refreshment to life. Again, desires accomplished bring sweetness to the soul. The weedy field and vineyard and the neglected fence could only bring frustration to the owner.

Conversely, a workman who keeps his fields carefully cultivated will experience the joys of contentment. The text from Matthew surely teaches by inference the satisfaction that comes with being good stewards of the talents the Master gives us. We hear the five-talent man and the two-talent man joyfully give their favourable report. Then there is implied contentment as we hear each receive the commendation, *“Well done, good and faithful servant; you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord.”*<sup>3</sup>

God’s Word often sets Christian contentment before us as a goal. <sup>6</sup> *Now godliness with contentment is great gain. ....* <sup>8</sup> *And having food and clothing, with these we shall be content.*<sup>4</sup>

We read in Philippians 4:11, *“I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content,”* and lest there be any doubt as to the source of his content, Paul adds two verses later, *“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”*

In Hebrews we are told, *“Be content with such things as you have.”*<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, we should remember that a discontent which the evils in life and the use of proper procedures to remedy them is helpful. We must follow the guidelines given us in God’s Word in this area if we are to cultivate holy ambitions.

### 3. Put The Kingdom Of God First

First of all, in our thoughts, words, and deeds we are to indicate the primacy of the spiritual in our lives. A firm faith in God's merciful providence is basic. Then follows Christ's demand as it is written in Matthew 6:33, <sup>33</sup> ***“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you.”*** These things refer to the material side of life.

In paradoxical form Jesus states the same truth in Matthew 16:25-26 <sup>25</sup> ***“For whoever desires to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for My sake will find it. 26 “For what profit is it to a man if he gains the whole world, and loses his own soul? Or what will a man give in exchange for his soul?”***

We are to desire spiritual gifts, writes Paul to the Corinthians.<sup>6</sup> Later, in the same chapter, he lists as a worthy ambition in life, ***Even so you, since you are zealous for spiritual gifts, let it be for the edification of the church that you seek to excel.***<sup>7</sup>

Only when the gulf of sin that separates natural man from God has been bridged by a personal faith in the all-sufficient Saviour, who emphasised that no man comes to the Father but by Him,<sup>8</sup> can a man reach Christian contentment.

Giving primacy to the spiritual includes avoiding undue emphasis of the material side of life. We are to heed our Lord's assurance that ***“one's life does not consist in the abundance of the things he possesses.”***<sup>9</sup>

These include such ambitions as the inhabitants of the plain of Shinar held when they said, ***“Come, let us build ourselves a city, and a tower whose top is in the heavens; let us make a name for ourselves, lest we be scattered abroad over the face of the whole earth.”***<sup>10</sup> Clearly these types of ambitions are to be avoided.

When the disciples bickered as to whom should be accounted the greatest, Christ reprimanded them with, ***“But not so among you.”***<sup>11</sup> The mother of James and John was shown the error of her thinking when she wanted the two chief places of honour in Christ's kingdom for her two sons.<sup>12</sup> The rich young ruler went away sorrowful, not because he was rich, but because he had built on a materialistic foundation; and with his life geared to this philosophy, he could see no other way. Such ambitions are off limits for the Christian.

However, the Christian philosophy of life dare not result in a complacency born of laziness and indifference. For we children of God have a divine commission that should give us the proper incentive and ambition, knowing that God from the beginning gave man *“dominion over the fish of the sea, over the birds of the air, and over the cattle, over all the earth and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.”*<sup>13</sup>

To Noah God repeated this charge, telling him of all natural beings and forces as we read in Genesis 9:2, <sup>2</sup> *“And the fear of you and the dread of you shall be on every beast of the earth, on every bird of the air, on all that move on the earth, and on all the fish of the sea. They are given into your hand.”*

A Psalm of David adds its weight, *“O LORD, our Lord, ... You have made [man] to have dominion over the works of Your hands; You have put all things under his feet.”*<sup>14</sup> As good stewards we are now to work faithfully under God’s blessings to develop life and science to its full potential.

A biochemist devoting his life to research with a large chemical company wrote that the command of the first chapter of Genesis to man to have dominion over the earth and everything in it was for him an adequate mandate for a life of scientific research.

#### 4. The Motive

Clearly, the motive must be right. Another guiding principle for charting our course away from excessive ambition and toward Christian contentment is to remember that God tells us, as he told Samuel, *“Do not look at his appearance or at the height of his stature, because I have refused him. For the Lord does not see as man sees; for man looks at the outward appearance, but the LORD looks at the heart.”*<sup>15</sup>

We are told in Proverbs 4:23, <sup>23</sup> *Keep your heart with all diligence, For out of it spring the issues of life.* And in Proverbs 23:7, <sup>7</sup> *For as he thinks in his heart, so is he.* If the inner motive is right, then paradoxically we can be ambitious on the one hand and contented on the other.

The one-talent man was motivated by wickedness and laziness, while the guiding motive of the two and five-talent men was one of unselfish ambition to put their talents to good use. Modern psychology and psychiatry confirm these

Scriptural truths regarding the mental condition as paramount in living a healthy life.

Life's blessings bring with them corresponding duties and obligations. Since God from the beginning created man in His own image and endowed him with special gifts — the power of speech, the ability to think, the position of dominance in His world, and, above all, the gift of an immortal soul — man now has special obligations.

Man is not a mere animal. He is a fallen saint the Bible tells us. The animals work only to maintain physical life. A large condensed-milk company has advertised for years that its product comes from "*contented cows*." But in the true sense the characteristics of contentment and ambition can never apply to the animal world, lived only on the physical level.

Human beings, however, are to live also on the mental and spiritual levels. Only of human beings does the Bible say that after "*the dust shall return to the earth as it was,*" then shall "*the spirit return to God, who gave it.*"<sup>16</sup> Only of redeemed men and women are we told in John 6:40, <sup>40</sup> "*And this is the will of Him who sent Me, that everyone who sees the Son and believes in Him may have everlasting life; and I will raise him up at the last day.*"

God expects results corresponding to ability. Many of the heartaches and frustrations of life can be avoided if we remember the principle that God has not endowed us all with the same gifts and that in fairness He expects us to make good use only of the talents He has given us, as is taught so well in the parable of our text.

The Bible says that we "*Having then gifts differing according to the grace that is given to us.*"<sup>17</sup> Paul tells the Corinthians<sup>18</sup> that "*there are diversities of gifts.*" The Christian will therefore not peer regularly over the fence restlessly to see the gifts and talents God has given his neighbour. Rather he will endeavour to be a good steward of the blessings given to him.

We read in Ecclesiastes 9:10, <sup>10</sup> "*Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.*" And in 2 Timothy 2:15, <sup>15</sup> "*Be diligent to present yourself approved to God, a worker who does not need to be ashamed.*" Then in John 9:4, <sup>4</sup> "*I must work the works of Him who sent Me while it is day; the night is coming when no one can work.*"

While the words of Paul refer to Christian giving, they have a general application also. We read in 2 Corinthians 8:12, *“For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.* Our Lord says, *“to whom much is given, from him much will be required.”*<sup>19</sup>

Our omniscient heavenly Father knows our gifts. Whether our talents are many or few, he expects us to use them in His Kingdom. *“She has done what she could”*<sup>20</sup> Jesus once remarked of one of His followers. If we do what we can in making the most of life’s opportunities with those talents God has given us, we, too, shall receive this commendation from the lips of our Lord.

### 5. The Key to Contentment

A well-known chorale refers to *“Jesus, the Joy of Man’s Desiring.”* Here then is the real key to contentment. For our Christian faith is indeed “good news.” It tells us of God’s love in promising a Saviour and then in the fullness of time sending His only Son. Jesus is our substitute for us in fulfilling every demand of the Law, and He shed His life’s blood on the cross so that complete atonement for our sins was made. He gives us this guarantee in John 6:37, *the one who comes to Me I will by no means cast out.* Here, then, is the real key to a happy and contented life, to a solution of the problems of this life and of those of the world to come.

Thus our greatest ambition in life is to be faithful caretakers of our talents, for then we shall hear the most blessed words *“Enter into the joy of the Lord.”* Again, *“Come, you blessed of My Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.”*<sup>21</sup>

A sports writer once interviewed a famous base-ball player and asked him, “What’s your biggest ambition in life?” The sportswriter expected the answer to be that his greatest ambition would be to be a major-league manager. But the answer was different, for base-ball player sincerely but simply said, *“My biggest ambition is to go to heaven.”*

So it should be with us. We are to be faithful workers, but we are always to live with eternity in view. With Paul we summarise our ideas concerning ambition and contentment by giving as our goal in life, what we read in Philippians 3:12-14, *but I press on, that I may lay hold of that for which Christ*



*Jesus has also laid hold of me. <sup>1 3</sup> Brethren, I do not count myself to have apprehended; but one thing I do, forgetting those things which are behind and reaching forward to those things which are ahead, <sup>14</sup> I press toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. Amen.*

The peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds, in Christ Jesus. Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> 2 Corinthians 6:9-10

<sup>2</sup> Matthew 25:26

<sup>3</sup> Matthew 25:21, 23

<sup>4</sup> 1 Timothy 6:6,8

<sup>5</sup> Hebrews 13:5

<sup>6</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:1

<sup>7</sup> 1 Corinthians 14:12

<sup>8</sup> John 14:6

<sup>9</sup> Luke 12:15

<sup>10</sup> Genesis 11:4

<sup>11</sup> Luke 22:26

<sup>12</sup> Matthew 20:20

<sup>13</sup> Genesis 1:26

<sup>14</sup> Psalm 8:1, 6

<sup>15</sup> 1 Samuel 16:7

<sup>16</sup> Ecclesiastes 12:7

<sup>17</sup> Romans 12:6

<sup>18</sup> 1 Cor. 12:4

<sup>19</sup> Luke 12:48

<sup>20</sup> Mark 14:8

<sup>21</sup> Matthew 25:34