

Maturing downward

by [L. Gregory Jones](#) in the [August 29, 2001](#) issue

What are your ambitions?" an administrative colleague asked me recently. I am not often speechless, but this time I didn't know what to say. I briefly considered explaining my understanding of vocation, especially in relation to my primary identity as an ordained minister of the gospel. That would make clear why I have presumed that the church has a legitimate claim on my life. It might also explain why I think less in terms of ambition for a career than faithfulness to a vocation.

I doubted that he wanted that kind of answer. So I responded that I assumed I would return to teaching full-time. I could tell that he was looking for something more. My friend looked puzzled and was surprised that I hadn't thought more clearly about my ambitions.

I wondered why I had been startled by a straightforward question. Unexpected clarity about my discomfort came later that day. A student who has become a friend had written a reflection on the death of a mutual friend, a faithful and impressive Christian. Here's what he wrote: "He had rocketed upward from a prestigious Oxford scholarship to a spectacular academic career to a prominent national platform. But as John began to internalize weakness, and then grace, he gradually matured downward. As far as success is defined, John had chosen to make himself irrelevant."

He gradually matured downward. . . . Those words seem odd in a culture defined by upward mobility, career ladders and unbridled ambition. Yet they are peculiarly appropriate to following One who came to serve rather than be served, who said we would have to lose our lives in order to find them.

Yet as beautiful and truthful as John's life was, I found the clarity fading and my puzzlement returning. I realized that I was uncomfortable with the assumptions of downward mobility. Are all of us called to maturing downward? Is there any place for the appropriate use of power, of office?

Surely in the diversity of gifts given by God, not all are called to the faithful, simple yet difficult life of cultural or ecclesiastical “irrelevance.” But neither are we called to define ourselves by cultural assumptions about success and upward mobility. If ambition denotes and inspires a striving for excellence, then should we not be hoping for people who are ambitious for the gospel?

Interestingly, in both James and Philippians we are enjoined against pursuing “selfish ambition.” This would seem to suggest that there is a selfless ambition—or, perhaps more accurately, an ambition that strives to resist selfishness in the hope of learning to become selfless.

This is difficult psychological, moral and theological territory. There is enormous potential for self-deception, and there are deeply troubling consequences of people who trample others in the pursuit of self-aggrandizing power clothed in false humility. This is particularly galling—and dangerous—when done in the name of Christ.

In the Letter of James, selfish ambition is linked to envy, and both produce “disorder and wickedness of every kind.” They are part of a false wisdom “from below.” By contrast, “the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy” (3:16-17).

James recognizes the dangers of self-deception. He suggests that we cannot seek both selfish ambition and the wisdom from above; we cannot be simultaneously a friend of the world and a friend of God. Rather, by focusing our lives and our ambition on serving God faithfully, we equip ourselves to serve *in* the world with integrity.

Similarly, Philippians calls followers of Christ to reject selfish ambition. Here Paul is clearly concerned about selfishness, but also about shaping a common life marked by Christ. He writes, “Be of the same mind, having the same love, being in full accord and of one mind. Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others. Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus . . .” (2:2b-5). The paradigm, Paul suggests, is following Christ, whose life is marked by self-emptying, by humility, by obedience.

Can ambition coexist with self-emptying, humility, obedience? If we try to moderate our ambition with altruism, ambition will win and self-deception will intensify.

Rather, we need a transformation of what we desire, what we aspire to and count as important. Our lives are to be focused on Christ and appropriate, faithful service to Christ. In order to unlearn sin—including bitter envy and selfish ambition—and learn the ways of holy living, we need to cultivate a common life with others in Christian community. Our brothers and sisters in Christ become resources for us, offering both support and challenge in discerning how to serve Christ most faithfully. And we become resources for them. The task is to cultivate the same mind that was in Christ Jesus, maintaining a consistent vigilance against bitter envy and selfish ambition—and against the ennui that can set in if and when others seem more successful by the standards of the world.

For some people, like my friend John, cultivating the mind of Christ in community involves gradually maturing downward. For others, it may mean a willingness to serve in positions the world counts as successful. But in either case, the call is to measure ourselves not by worldly stature or success, but by our fidelity to Christ. Easier said than done.