

Ambition used to be a vice

Now we tend to see it as a virtue—at least for some people.

by [Adam Hearlson](#) in the [May 4, 2022](#) issue



(Illustration by Jorm Sangsorn / iStock / Getty)

I am convinced that Peter should have stayed in the boat. For all the praise he receives for water walking, it was a bad choice.

It's simple: no one, no matter how much faith they have, should exit a boat in the midst of a raging storm. Peter endangers everyone—himself and the rest of the disciples—by leaving the boat. Instead of focusing on surviving a storm, everyone on the boat now needs to pay attention to Peter.

Take a look at the story in Matthew again (14:22-33). The boat is besieged by a storm. Jesus has opted to stay on the shore to pray. In the middle of a terrifying storm, Jesus walks on the water to meet the disciples. Thinking Jesus is a ghost, Peter creates a ghost test. “If it is you, command me to come to you.”

This is a ridiculous request. When giving a test, failure should not result in the death of the test giver. That is testing 101. Even so, Jesus is gracious even amid our worst ideas. He grants Peter's wish, and Peter treads a few steps atop the water. Mind you, the storm is still raging. The disciples, presumably, have not stopped bailing water and trying to steady the ship. Eventually Peter sinks, and Jesus saves him from his bad idea. Lifting Peter from the water, Jesus asks, "Why did you doubt?" Then he deposits Peter in the boat, the very place Jesus was coming to save.

My friend Jerusha pointed out that this story is a cipher for personalities in church leadership. When you hear how preachers interpret Peter, you understand how they see themselves in ministry. John Ortberg once wrote about Peter's water walk as an example of the courage necessary to do something great. Peter did what all the other bozos were too scared to do. Examples abound that interpret Peter as courageous, faithful, and bold. Occasionally Peter is interpreted as a bit of a diva, too dramatic by half. Wind in his hair, rain pelting his robe, striding atop the water, you can hear him calling out in his best stage voice, "Lord, if it is you. . . ." But he is generally admired by preachers for his willingness to step out in the midst of danger.

But that interpretation misses a great deal about this passage. What it reveals is the changing understanding of ambition that we've undergone as a society.

Ambition has a complicated history within the church. In his wonderful book *Ambition, a History: From Vice to Virtue*, William Casey King traces its long history as a social concept. Put simply, ambition has transformed from a categorical sin to a virtue of the powerful.

When Peter steps out of the boat, he endangers himself and everyone else.

In the *Confessions*, Augustine speaks of "worldly ambition" as a primary obstacle in the way of Christian piety. Later he describes humans as inheritors of a *libido principandi*, a lust for being first. Like other patristic writers, Augustine sees ambition as a pernicious sin. Ambition, in Augustine's final estimation, inspires a self-centeredness that is antithetical to Christ's call to seeking God in care and love in the world. Gregory the Great agrees: "Avarice is not only a matter of money, but of high standing as well. For it is correctly called avarice when someone strives for loftiness beyond measure." Thomas Aquinas is unequivocal in his *Summa Theologica*: "It is evident that it [ambition] is always a sin."

King notes that theological connotations of ambition began to turn during the age of European exploration, when the colonial impulses of the West needed rationales to support their projects of domination and exploitation. Seen originally as sinful, ambition is laundered by colonizers as passion that can be used toward virtuous ends. King writes, “The harnessing of ambition for colonization redefined it in fundamental ways that would have been unimaginable a century before: as a vice with virtuous possibilities, as a virtue with a dark side.”

By reframing ambition, colonizing forces created social permission to engage in violent and inhumane practices of subjugation of indigenous people and, in time, enslaved Africans. Augustine’s *libido principandi* was regarded no longer as an obstacle to piety but as a necessary posture for human flourishing. Colonists were confident that they were first—the most righteous, most noble, most intelligent—and that any ambition they might harbor was an irrefutable good for everyone they might subjugate. By the beginning of the American democratic experiment, ambition held within it a duality—a vice or virtue depending on the context and the person. Unsurprisingly, for White, landowning males, ambition was a necessary virtue; for everyone else, it was a vice that threatened to upend the social order.

Augustine sees ambition as a pernicious sin. Gregory the Great and Aquinas agree.

This duality is easy to see in our own world. White, male tech barons are praised for their ambition, even as it requires dehumanizing workers with unjust conditions. Meanwhile, women and people of color are criticized for their ambition, even as they seek righteous causes of equality. Scholars like Carol Gilligan and Mary Pipher have thoroughly documented the ways in which the ambitions of girls are discounted, undermined, and rerouted at the earliest stages of life. Last year, music producer Pharrell Williams launched a new nonprofit initiative, Black Ambition, to help Black entrepreneurs succeed in fields where their ambition has been stifled by historic inequities. Black Ambition was formed because the duality within the idea of ambition has rarely been affirmed as virtuous for historically subjugated peoples.

In her book *Necessary Dreams: Ambition in Women’s Changing Lives*, Anna Fels describes ambition as the intersection of expertise and recognition. Fels notes that when people talk about their ambitions, “special talent is assumed.” We want to be good at the things we do. What counts as good is conditioned by a variety of factors, but the fact remains, ambition seeks mastery, expertise, and skill.

And yet, for most of us, being good at something is not enough to satisfy our ambition. We also need to be recognized for our work. As Fels writes, “Ambition requires an imagined future that can be worked toward by the development of skills and expertise.” My son currently loves to practice magic. He spends hours alone honing skills. But eventually, his practice will only be fulfilled by the appreciation of an audience.

Fels’s description of ambition is helpful to me. It organizes the ways in which the duality of ambition operates in my own work. I want to be a good minister—wise, skilled, and compassionate. I have worked to hone the skills necessary to be a good minister. I also deeply want to be recognized as being a good minister. The level of recognition I get infrequently corresponds to my own perception of the quality of my work. This mismatch is, from my unscientific vantage, a leading cause of clergy burnout. Not only do clergy feel unappreciated, they so often feel appreciated for the wrong things.

In my own life, the mismatch is made more complicated by the fact that my ambition has always lived in the same neighborhood as my entitlement. I don’t just want proper recognition of my work, I want more recognition than my skills warrant.

Years ago, I lost my job at the time when I thought I would be achieving the ambitious goals I had set for myself. The circumstances surrounding my unemployment weren’t particularly novel. Seminaries are insecure places right now, and I stand as one of many who have lost seminary jobs due to the rising tide of secularism. But I lost mine just as my friends, spouse, and colleagues were receiving jobs—as they were being affirmed for their skills. I felt (and on bad days still feel) deep shame at losing that job. I wanted recognition for good work, and I received a pink slip.

In my role as a pastor, I am daily faced with the limits of my abilities. Churches face monumental challenges that are upending a previous generation’s expectations of the pastor. Old models are no longer viable. In an anxious era of change, recognition that could be expected in times past is no longer awarded.

Of course, these challenges are no comparison to the daily injustice that others face when their skills receive far less recognition than they deserve. There is some promise in continuing to think of ambition as both virtue and vice. I believe the church would be wise to consider how it extends opportunity, awards recognition,

and lifts up the gifts of its members. These considerations would go a long way toward correcting the historical prejudices that ignored those whose ambitions would have benefited the world.

But where I most relate to Peter and his water walk is in his desire to separate himself from the others on the boat. I want to be distinguished, set apart, and significant. My heart swells when I am asked to step forward and be recognized. And, like Peter, I have sunk under these desires when the recognition that others receive inspires a depressive insecurity. My own ambitions, like Peter's I think, have led me astray as much as they have led me to Christ.

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As someone who is learning to repent of the *libido principandi*, I am haunted by Jesus' question to Peter, "Why did you doubt?" For a long time, I assumed that Jesus is implying that Peter has doubted Jesus. Jesus is present; no need to fear. In the midst of my own wrestles with ambition, I am now convinced that Jesus is not talking about himself. I think Jesus is asking Peter why he doubted the boat. Why did you doubt the community? Why did you chase a ghost? For those of us who struggle with ambition, the hard part is affirming that some storms require a strong back and some willing hands, without the promise of any recognition.

Peter doesn't wait to see if Christ makes it to the boat in time. He stops rowing and leaves his friends to fight the waves without him. And there, alone between boat and shore, he sinks. He has become, quite literally, unmoored by his ambition, however noble it might have been.

Then Jesus grabs him and sets him back in the boat. Note that Jesus doesn't place Peter back on the water, but back in the boat. I imagine that Peter picked up his oar and started paddling again so that everyone made it safely home. I hope he found more purpose in that rowing than in his water walking. As a member of the order of the overly ambitious, I hope I can too.