

Why You Must Kill Your Ambitions

Spiritual fulfillment begins when we lay down selfish motives to pursue the heart of God.

When I first came to Christ, the Lord gave me a dream about my future. I was so excited! I thought everything He showed me in the dream would occur immediately. I didn't know I would have to go through a process of preparation that involved dying to self, learning patience and maintaining vision through testing before God's promise would be fulfilled.

In fact, I thought having a promise from God was the same as receiving a command from Him. I wasn't aware that I did not yet have what it took to step into His perfect plan.

Because of my desire to see God's promises come to pass, I became filled with ambition—the first motive that arises in the spiritually immature. I was like the disciples, who, a few days after Jesus' resurrection, were already asking, “‘Lord, will You at this time restore the kingdom to Israel?’” (Acts 1:6, NKJV).

Webster's dictionary tells us that ambition is “an earnest desire for some type of achievement or distinction, as wealth or fame, and the willingness to strive for it.” The word translated “ambition” in the New American Standard Bible is rendered “strife” in the King James Version.

Where there is ambition, the apostle James says, there is also “disorder and every evil thing” (James 3:16, NASB). Why? Because we try to accomplish the will of God through the strength of man. We are seeking a breakthrough, but God wants us to experience brokenness.

Ambition is very deceptive. It can seem just like obedience to

us, but because we don't truly know the Lord, we find ourselves obeying our own voices rather than God's.

Ambition seeks to put to death what stands between it and spiritual fulfillment. Yet it is ambition itself that must die for us to reach fulfillment.

Today I am living in the spiritual substance of what was just a dream 30 years ago. My ambitions have suffered greatly, yet my dreams are being fulfilled. Though I have not yet stepped into the fullness of my calling, I understand the difference between ambition and ministry, and it is this: Ministry is a call, not to lead but to die.

Take Up Your Cross

Remember: A godly vision is not the same as a godly motive. Jesus preached that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. This is vision. But He also taught that if any man were to follow Him, he had to "take up his cross daily" (Luke 9:23, NKJV). Carrying the cross is the only way to die to the ambition that hinders us.

And it requires that our definition of success be transformed. Ambition defines "achievement" as "a well-known name and praise from man." God says success is becoming Christlike.

In order to develop the character of Christ in us, God provides opportunities for us to be transformed—opportunities for us to take up the cross. Often these challenges take the form of an offense.

When offense comes, you have the choice to pick up one of two things: either the offense or the cross. You will know you have chosen the offense if, when you look at the past, you remember more clearly how people hurt you than how God delivered you.

The Father allows offenses to come because His goal is not to

start churches, take cities or have revivals; His goal is for you to become Christlike. He wants you to learn to forgive offenses and use them as an opportunity to grow in love.

“Why doesn’t the Lord protect me from hardship?” you ask. He does. Your protection is to carry the cross. The cross represents the perfection of love in your life. If you don’t carry the cross, you will lose your love. Jesus warned, “Because lawlessness will abound, the love of many will grow cold” (Matt. 24:12).

En route to your spiritual fulfillment, there will inevitably be many opportunities for you to stumble. I have heard that out of every 40 seminary graduates, only one retires as a pastor. Few are those who carry the cross throughout their lives. But only those who do will ever find true fulfillment.

True Ministry

On occasion, ministers approach me and confess they are jealous of how the Lord has used me. They see the outward signs of ministry: churches uniting, large conferences, travel and book sales. But they do not see the cost.

I have faced death threats from satanists. I have seen satanic graffiti on the street signs of churches that hosted me and witnessed the effects of the vandalism perpetrated against them.

I have also faced persecution from other Christians, particularly those who fear the idea of unity. As a result, I’ve had my name maligned in books and periodicals and been pegged by misguided Christians as a “false prophet.”

One time a host pastor was murdered just before I went to speak for a conference. When I heard about it, I decided to take along my associate pastors, Bill and Tim, from River of Life. Tim shared with me recently that the first night there he had to search his heart to determine whether he would be

willing to step between me and an assailant or to take a knife for me if I were attacked.

I was grateful that his answer was yes. But at a hundred other conferences, where there has been no one to stand between me and a crazed assailant, I've had to prayerfully consider, "Am I willing to die for the Lord by going to this conference armed only with the gospel?"

I've had to combat fears caused by threats and the possibilities of evil more terrible than most people ever consider. I've also had to wrestle with deep concerns about my children and their safety, wondering how to deal with their vulnerability to potential physical attack.

Any volunteers for my assignment? Like Paul, I've had to say, "I die daily." I have learned through experience that a call to ministry is a call to die. In fact, I have discovered that only to the degree that we die to self do we lead others. Everything else is just religion without power.

When He was on Earth, Jesus sought to prepare His disciples for the hardships that awaited them. He warned them that a time was coming when He would be mocked, scourged and crucified. Incredibly, right in the middle of His sober warning, the mother of James and John requested that Jesus fulfill her family's ambitions! She said, "'Grant that these two sons of mine may sit, one on Your right hand and the other on the left, in Your kingdom'" (v. 21).

She was thinking advancement, position and place; Jesus was thinking scourging, mocking and death. She was looking for the crown; Christ was pointing to the cross.

Jesus' answer was intended to silence not only her ambitions, but ours as well: "'You do not know what you ask. Are you able to drink the cup that I am about to drink?'" (v. 22). The disciples said they were, but they hadn't the foggiest idea of the price to be paid.

Jesus answered them: “‘You will indeed drink My to sit on My right and on My left is not Mine to give,’” (v. 23). He was telling them: “‘I cannot fulfill your ambitions. I can only show you how to die.’”

We too must drink the cup Jesus described. Its contents fly in the face of ambition: “‘Whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave—just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many’” (vv. 27-28). What are these contents? Elements that bring about suffering for the sake of love. This is the cup that leads to destiny.

Paul wrote of the source of power in his life. He said, “We are hard-pressed on every side, yet not carrying about in the body the dying of the Lord Jesus, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our body” (2 Cor. 4:7-10).

What is this “dying of Jesus”? It is dying the way Jesus died, uttering “Father, forgive them.” The only way ambition can be fulfilled is if we are ambitious to die for the redemption of others.

“For we who live are constantly delivered to death for Jesus’ sake, that the life of Jesus also may be manifested in our mortal flesh. So then death is working in us, but life in you” (2 Cor. 4:11-12). This is the heart of the ministry every believer is called to: We are delivered over to death that the very life of Jesus, the actual substance of His character, may be manifested in our mortal flesh.

Ambition will fail us, but Paul says, “Death works in us.” Death of self leads to the manifest life of Jesus. And this is true success.

Francis Frangipane is the founder of River of Life Ministries in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, and has traveled throughout the world

ministering to thousands of pastors and intercessors from many backgrounds. His heartfelt prayer is to see established in every city Christlike pastors and intercessors, united before God, revealing the love of Christ to their communities. Since 1985, Frangipane has written 14 books plus a number of study booklets. Over the past decades, he has served on a number of other ministry boards. However, in recent years he has gradually resigned from these various boards. As of June 2009, he has also retired from his position as senior pastor of River of Life Ministries. In his more simplified life, Frangipane is devoting himself to prayer and the ministry of God's Word.