

Message No: AR223
Series: Appearance and Reality
Section: The Lord Jesus Christ
Subsection: Overcoming the World
Date preached: 31 Jan 99
Date edited: 05 Mar 09

DESIRE FOR POWER, STATUS, FAME AND RECOGNITION

In the previous message, we considered the subject of greed and covetousness. The message today is also related to the issue of covetousness.

Longings and striving for power, status, fame and recognition is a common feature of everyday life. It is regarded as normal by the world. People of the world give much attention to attaining power, status, fame and recognition. This problem is seen in all strata of society and in many different areas of life.

Pervasive desire for power, status, fame and recognition

In the political arena

The corridors of history are littered with much destruction, pain and suffering because of the unrestrained lust for power and glory. Often, this lust goes together with abuse of power, corruption and greed for material gains. This can take place among small groups of people as well as in whole nations embroiled in bitter conflicts and devastating wars. These hostilities and clashes may arise from the ambitions of a few dictators and their followers. Thousands and millions suffer and die because of the tyrannical rule and the whims and fancies of these leaders. In many countries, there seems to be unending political and social instability due to constant jostling for power and all kinds of political intrigues.

In the workplace

We see this in the workplace as well. Why do people strive and work so hard in their workplace? A common reason is worldly motivations. They want to gain a certain position or status where they could wield authority, gain recognition and enjoy a sense of prestige. They think that when they reach that position, they could do what they wish and gain many other things they crave for.

Rivalry, envy and jealousy abound when one strives for recognition and status. People engage in "office politics" and resort to reprehensible tactics and strategies to gain an upper hand. Office politics affects many people, even those who do not wish to be a part of it. At times, it can cause much difficulty to those who simply want to be responsible and do an honest day's work.

In school

This problematic area also exists in schools. Some students may not be very clear why they are studying very hard. But often, underlying their aim to excel in their studies is the unhealthy desire for recognition, fame and adulation. This also extends to sports and extra-curricular activities in school.

Among believers

Sadly, this problem also exists among Christians and those engaged in the Lord's work. This, in fact, is a major problem. It is a significant hindrance to personal growth and development and to personal walk and fellowship with God. It also causes considerable problems and hindrances to the advancement of God's Kingdom. This is an area the evil one is actively promoting and exploiting.

It is possible for a person to have this problem without himself realising it, even when it has been damaging his life. In some people, this problem is deep-seated. Let us soberly examine our lives and ask the Lord to help us be free from this problem.

Biblical example – Simon the sorcerer

Let us look at one biblical character who had the problem of covetousness in this area. He is Simon the sorcerer. His story is recorded in Acts 8:9-24. He had this problem even before he became a believer. After his conversion, we see evidence of faith in his life, yet the problem persisted. This shows how serious this problem can be in a person's life.

In Acts 8:4, we are told that Philip went to Samaria and preached the gospel. There, the power of the Spirit of God was clearly seen through signs and miracles and through evil spirits coming out of people. There was rejoicing in that city.

Acts 8:9-11

9 Now there was a man named Simon, who formerly was practicing magic in the city and astonishing the people of Samaria, claiming to be someone great;

10 and they all, from smallest to greatest, were giving attention to him, saying, "This man is what is called the Great Power of God."

11 And they were giving him attention because he had for a long time astonished them with his magic arts.

Simon had this longing for greatness, power, recognition, fame and prestige. He achieved his desire by practicing magic and astonishing the people. He clearly enjoyed the attention given to him. Although this power came from the powers of darkness, Simon was not concerned because he was more interested in the attention he was getting and the sense of greatness and power he was enjoying.

When Philip came to the city and preached the gospel, many people believed and were baptised. Simon was among them (v. 13). It is likely that Simon truly believed, but did not have depth in his faith. Before his profession of faith, he had observed signs and great miracles taking place through Philip and he was amazed. He continued to be so after he was baptised.

When the apostles Peter and John came down from Jerusalem, they prayed for the people and the Holy Spirit came upon them (v. 17). Verses 18 and 19 tell us that Simon offered money for the power to bestow the Holy Spirit on those he would lay hands on. His motivation and attitude of heart were clearly improper. It was a carry-over from the past.

Acts 8:17-19

17 Then they began laying them hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

18 Now when Simon saw that the Spirit was bestowed through the laying on of the apostles' hands, he offered them money,

19 saying, "Give this authority to me as well, so that everyone on whom I lay my hands may receive the Holy Spirit."

The firm rebuke by Peter (v. 20) shows the seriousness of these wrongful desires in Simon's heart. Peter's response sounds harsh, but it was fitting for the occasion.

Acts 8:20-23

20 But Peter said to him, "May your silver perish with you, because you thought you could obtain the gift of God with money!"

21 "You have no part or portion in this matter, for your heart is not right before God.

22 "Therefore repent of this wickedness of yours, and pray the Lord that, if possible, the intention of your heart may be forgiven you.

23 "For I see that you are in the gall of bitterness and in the bondage of iniquity."

Peter spoke very strongly because this kind of attitude of heart is very dangerous and very serious in the eyes of God. Simon's heart was not right; so too was his approach. He thought he could buy spiritual power and authority with money. He needed to "repent of this wickedness" (v. 22). Not only had he fallen into sin, he was still under spiritual bondage, like a prisoner in chains. In the past, his practice of magic together with his desire for greatness and attention-seeking gave ground to the evil one and resulted in spiritual bondage. And though he now professed faith in God, the wrongful desires in his heart had not been properly resolved and he was still in spiritual bondage.

Let us learn from here that wrongful desire for power and authority can exist even after a person professes faith in God. Such wrongful desires can result in bondage

and it can be difficult for us to come out of. It can express itself in both secular and the Christian context.

We may think that this kind of problem exists for a person like Simon, and we may view him as a terrible person. But the scriptural records show that such wrongful desires may be present among believers with positive qualities and those whom the Lord appreciates. It may also be present in contexts of relationship amongst the brethren and Christian service. We see this illustrated in the lives of the apostles.

The apostles' desire for power and authority

The Lord Jesus deeply loved His apostles and had spent time to teach and nurture them. Yet this desire for power was still present in them even just before the Cross and at the end of the three years that the Lord had spent with them.

Let us look at Luke 22. The occasion was the Lord's Supper, and the Lord Jesus was telling His disciples about His imminent betrayal.

Luke 22:21-24

21 "But behold, the hand of the one betraying Me is with Mine on the table.

22 "For indeed, the Son of Man is going as it has been determined; but woe to that man by whom He is betrayed!"

23 And they began to discuss among themselves which one of them it might be who was going to do this thing.

24 And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest.

At such a solemn time as this, the apostles were disputing among themselves who was the greatest (v. 24). The way the Lord Jesus responded in verses 25-27 shows clearly the apostles were not engaged in an innocent discussion; there was something amiss in their hearts. The word "dispute" indicates there was a wrong spirit in them.

Luke 22:25-27

25 And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.'

26 "But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.

27 "For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

The Lord said: "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; ... But it is not this way with you" (vs. 25-26). This indicates that the Lord Jesus read their hearts. He was

telling them that what they were doing was not the way of God's kingdom. "This way" here refers to the inward, the heart and not merely external conduct. The Lord pointed them to the correct way, which is the spirit of humility, the heart of a servant. That is the example the Lord has set for them (v. 27). The Lord Jesus is truly great; He is prepared to serve. True greatness goes together with true humility.

It is helpful for us to reflect on the Lord's conduct, spirit and the way He lived His life. The failure of Christians to have such a spirit as the Lord Jesus' is a major reason for the many problems and complications that exist in the Lord's work.

Identifying wrongful desires

The kinds of wrongful desires and aspirations that we have been considering can be very strong and deeply entrenched in the lives of many. It can be blatantly manifested. It can also be a hidden desire for recognition that even the person harbouring it may not be conscious of.

How do we tell if we have such wrongful desires? One indication is when we are enthusiastic about doing something when others are watching, but are not so motivated to do the same thing if no one knows about it, although it is meaningful in the eyes of the Lord and pleasing to Him.

Another indication is when we are upset and unhappy when other people do not show the recognition and appreciation that we expect or desire. We may be so angry and bitter that we cannot carry on living our life properly. It affects our whole walk with God and it eats into us. Instead of recognising this problem within our own hearts and dealing with it, we are angry with those who do not show us their appreciation. These wrongful desires have negative effects on our heart. It is foolish for us to cling on to them.

Satan's lust for status and power and his fall

The desire for status and power is a major reason for Satan's downfall (Isa. 14:12-15).

Isaiah 14:12-15

12 "How you have fallen from heaven,
O star of the morning, son of the dawn!
You have been cut down to the earth,
You who have weakened the nations!
13 "But you said in your heart,
'I will ascend to heaven;
I will raise my throne above the stars of God,
And I will sit on the mount of assembly
In the recesses of the north.
14 'I will ascend above the heights of the clouds;
I will make myself like the Most High.'

15 "Nevertheless you will be thrust down to Sheol,
To the recesses of the pit.

In the margin of the NASB, "star of the morning" in verse 12 is also referred to as "the shining one". The authorised King James Version translates this word as Lucifer. In this passage, the phrase "I will" is repeated four times. It gives a sense of personal desire and aspiration in Satan that is not of God. It is a wrongful desire for status, prestige, power, authority and recognition: "I will ascend to heaven; I will raise my throne above the stars of God" (v. 13). Verse 13 tells us that this intense desire was present in Satan's heart and it led to his downfall and to his severe judgement by God (v. 15).

Having fallen, Satan now lures and tempts us in the same direction. He wants to bring us under his influence and, together with him, oppose God and His purposes. He promotes negative desires in us and exploits our weaknesses so he could use us to serve his own purposes. As we come under his insidious influence, we come under bondage to him. That was what happened to Simon the sorcerer. And that could also happen to us believers.

Beware of giving ground to the evil one

The desire for power and recognition is a major reason for people coming under bondage to the evil one.

Whenever we harbour wrongful aspirations for power and recognition, it becomes an issue in the spiritual realm because it means our hearts are not aligned along God's purposes. In fact, we are moving away from God and even opposing Him.

We may have a sincere love for God and desire to be useful in His kingdom. Yet, we may also harbour negative desires in our hearts. To the degree we harbour such wrong desires, to that degree we ruin our own lives and become a problem in God's kingdom. There are many ways we may give ground to the evil one. I would consider this to be one of the most serious.

The evil one is actively at work to promote such wrongful desires and aspirations. However, we cannot place the blame entirely on him because we have failed morally when we yield to him. The evil one will then exploit the weaknesses in us to destroy us and the Lord's work.

Such wrongful aspirations have led to envy, strife, self-centredness, scheming, violence and cruelty. Precious relationships have been ruined. The outcome is pain, suffering and destruction, degradation and damage to the inner man, and adverse effects on the Lord's work. When such wrongful aspirations are present, even acts of love and kindness will become tainted. Its presence can render our service unacceptable to God.

Beware of practising righteousness to be noticed by men

Let us heed the words of the Lord Jesus in Matthew 6.

Matthew 6:1-2

1 "Beware of practicing your righteousness before men to be noticed by them; otherwise you have no reward with your Father who is in heaven.

2 "So when you give to the poor, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be honored by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

Matthew 6:5

"When you pray, you are not to be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in the synagogues and on the street corners so that they may be seen by men. Truly I say to you, they have their reward in full.

In verse 1, the Lord Jesus is not saying that we should serve God or practise righteousness without people knowing it, for He also says: "Let your light shine before men in such a way that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:16). As we walk with God and serve Him humbly, people may benefit from and appreciate our service and they may notice what we do. This is proper. What is wrong is doing things to be noticed by men so that we may be honoured by them. The presence of such wrong motives is serious in the eyes of the Lord.

Here in verse 1, the Lord Jesus says: "Beware". This means that we can easily falter in this area. It is a serious matter and we must therefore be careful. Giving alms to the poor is meaningful. But the Lord denounces as hypocrites those who give alms and pray because they desire to be honoured by men (vs. 2, 5).

We can apply this principle to our worship service. When we participate in sharing and prayer, let us do so out of faithfulness to God, to exalt His name and edify the brethren. Let us not draw attention to ourselves. The critical issue is not the outward conduct but the motivation behind our actions.

When there are wrongful desires for recognition, serious complications can result. For example, when we over-emphasise and long for more dramatic spiritual gifts like tongues, healing and miracles, it gives the evil one freedom to offer counterfeits and to exploit us. Wrongful desires and emphasis on dramatic spiritual gifts is a lethal combination. The evil one uses it to shift our attention away from what is really important to God and from the true goals of Christian service.

The futility of lustng for power and glory

Thomas Gray in his poem, Elegy in a Country Churchyard, said:

The boast of heraldry, the pomp of power,
And all that beauty, all that wealth e'er gave,
Await alike the inevitable hour,
The paths of glory lead but to the grave.

Many take much pride in power and pomp. But the paths of glory of the world all lead to the grave. This is not true glory.

The Scriptures puts it in stronger terms. When we take pride in our achievements and bask in the glory of public recognition and adulation, we are like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49:12

But man in his pomp will not endure;
He is like the beasts that perish.

Psalm 49:16-20

16 Do not be afraid when a man becomes rich,
When the glory of his house is increased;
17 For when he dies he will carry nothing away;
His glory will not descend after him.
18 Though while he lives he congratulates himself—
And though men praise you when you do well for yourself—
19 He shall go to the generation of his fathers;
20 Man in his pomp, yet without understanding,
Is like the beasts that perish.

We may think we are great and everybody is paying attention to us. But it is foolishness. We are without understanding and we are like the beasts that perish. All the adulation we crave is temporary. Ultimately, it is eternity that counts. Do we follow the way of God or go the direction of the evil one and do damage to our inner man?

In the Book of Ecclesiastes, Solomon tried many ways to satisfy himself through wealth, power and fame. The recurring theme that comes through is that it is vanity of vanities, striving after the wind. It is foolishness. It leads to nowhere. It does not help him attain anything useful. In the end, it destroyed him.

The proper and wholesome approach

There is a place for power, status, glory and recognition. In fact, power and authority is important in God's order and in the effective functioning of society, church life and God's kingdom.

God is a God of order and it is His desire that there is power – secular power as well as spiritual power. Romans 13 tells us that secular authority is in line with God's will and we should submit to it. In like manner, failure to recognise and submit to proper spiritual authority according to the will of God is a serious matter.

If there is a place for power and recognition, where then does the problem lie? The heart of the problem is the exaltation of self, pride, self-gratification and the desire to project ourselves, a desire for a sense of power and authority so that what we say goes. It is the wrongful desire for status, power and authority outside of the will of God.

The desire for recognition may in part be linked to other problems. It may also be motivated by a wrong understanding and a wrong approach to attaining self-worth and usefulness.

It is not wrong to have a sense of self-worth. We are not worth nothing. But we do not need to prove our worth to anybody, not even to ourselves. Our true worth does not arise from and is not dependent on recognition by others. We are God's children, precious to Him, and redeemed by the blood of Christ, with great potential in Him. This is the intrinsic worth of each one of us.

True worth and true usefulness comes about as we learn to submit to God and abide in Christ. The Lord Jesus says: "I am the vine, you are the branches; he who abides in Me and I in him, he bears much fruit, for apart from Me you can do nothing" (John 15:5). It doesn't come about by personal ambitions, by striving, or projection of self and self-assertiveness, which only hurt us and move us in the opposite direction.

When we come to see and live by these truths, we will be truly liberated. This does not mean we do not care about what others think of us. We do care because we do not want to stumble others or hinder the Lord's work by what we say or do. But we do not need recognition from others in order to have a sense of self-worth. Rather, we concentrate on the reality of our true state in Christ and whether we are walking in Him and growing in Him. What others think of us in itself will not elevate or downgrade our true state and position in Christ. On the other hand, wrongful desires for recognition and projection of self would downgrade our true state. It will also give ground for the evil one to exploit.

The proper and wholesome approach is humble submission to the perfect will of God for our lives. Within the framework of God's will for us, we must be active in the right way. We shoulder whatever He sees fit for us to shoulder and take our proper place

in the body of Christ. We exercise our faculties to the full, in fellowship with God. We look to the Spirit of God to fill us, so that our faculties can function at the optimum according to God's will.

Concluding remarks

While we should not entertain personal desires and ambition for power, status, position and recognition, we must humbly submit to the Lord and shoulder the responsibilities He deems fit for us and seek to do them well. We do it because we want to be faithful to the Lord. This is the most meaningful path for our lives and also for the advancement of God's kingdom.

There is this teaching that the problems and suffering in this world is due to the wrongful desires in the hearts of men and so the solution is the obliteration of all desires. This is a wrong understanding and approach to life. It can lead to unhealthy passivity and withdrawal from relating with others and what the Lord desires us to participate in.

The answer doesn't lie in obliterating all desires. The Scriptures strongly encourages us to nurture healthy desires such as to love the Lord our God with all our hearts, to be concerned about God's kingdom, to work hard, to be earnest and to be full of zeal for the house of God. We are to love our neighbour as ourselves and to take an active interest in the lives and well-being of our fellowmen. The Lord Jesus is the perfect example of one who has healthy desires.

Let us be free from any personal ambition and desire for power and greatness. At the same time, let us not run away from responsibilities that the Lord wants us to fulfil. Let us not be deterred by the difficulties in the path of true discipleship and service. Instead, let us nurture healthy zeal and earnestness and be faithful to carry out what God desires of us.

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