

For the past 500 years, literature has been full of the telling and retelling of a classic German legend. It is a story based on an actual person whose name was Johann Georg Faust. Many of you are familiar with the story. The ever-ambitious Faust makes a deal with the devil: give Faust a lifetime of power and success and, in exchange, he'll give the devil his soul. It is a cautionary tale about what we might be tempted to do when we are driven by a desire to live our lives on our own terms and for our own glory and benefit.

This morning we are going to finish our series called Life Drifts. We've been looking at Jesus' temptation in the wilderness as a way of understanding how the devil tries to tempt us into disobedience, causing us to drift off course from the plan God has for our lives and sabotaging our ministry. The third temptation we are going to look at this morning very much resembles this idea of a Faustian pact. It's the Life Drift of ambition.

Ambition is a word that often carries with it a negative connotation, but I would suggest that ambition, by itself, is not wrong. We are made in the image of an ambitious God; a God who, for six days, made something out of nothing, declaring it all good because it declared his glory. A God who created of man and woman, united them in marriage, and gave them the mission of filling the whole earth. A God who, when it all was broken because of sin, didn't give up but instead immediately began to implement the ambitious plan of redemption to reconcile the world back to himself. Ambition is not necessarily wrong. It's the kind of ambition that we must consider. I believe there are two kinds of ambition: a selfish ambition and a holy ambition. Selfish ambition is a desired outcome pursued on my terms and for my benefit and glory. A holy ambition is a desired outcome pursued on God's terms, for God's glory, and for the benefit and blessing of others. And oftentimes, these two ambitions are two sides of the same coin.

And while we worship, and are made in the image of an ambitious God, we are also up against an ambitious enemy. In the third and final temptation, the devil is going to attempt to twist the holy ambition of Jesus and get him to drift into a selfish one.

**[LUKE 4:5-8] <sup>5</sup> And the devil took him up and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in a moment of time, <sup>6</sup> and said to him, "To you I will give all this authority and their glory, for it has been delivered to me, and I give it to whom I will. <sup>7</sup> If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours." <sup>8</sup> And Jesus answered him, "It is written, "You shall worship the Lord your God, and him only shall you serve."**

It's not entirely clear how the devil took Jesus up and showed him all this at once, but Jesus is given a snapshot of all the kingdoms of the world, and the trap is set. This is like an episode of *Shark Tank*. The devil has a great proposition for Jesus to buy an ownership interest in, and all it's going to take is a moment of worship. Notice Jesus doesn't argue that the devil has the authority to make this offer. We might balk at it, thinking that God has authority over everything and the devil has no standing in this proposal. But remember that God also delegates his authority. In the beginning, Adam and Eve were given dominion and authority to rule creation, but they forfeited it because of their selfish ambition in the Garden. That authority now belongs to the devil. Jesus' silence on the matter here implies it's true, and the Gospels include several instances where Jesus refers to the devil's power and calls him "the ruler of this world".

But the offer is an interesting one because Jesus was going to receive the authority and glory of all the kingdoms of the world one way or another. Go back to his baptism. Jesus is affirmed by the words of his Father, who quotes from Psalm 2, meaning Jesus will reign as King in Israel. He's also commissioned as the Messiah by the anointing of the Holy Spirit. It is on the banks of the Jordan River that Jesus receives his holy ambition, an ambition ultimately realized at the end of his earthly ministry when Jesus tells his followers, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me."

So then where is the temptation? Isn't the devil just offering Jesus what's coming to him anyway? Yes, but would he receive it from the devil through his ways or from his Father through his ways? Because, understand, the offer from the devil is for Jesus to get the crown without the cross. The temptation is to pursue the right and good outcome, but according to his own terms, and solely for his glory. If he received it from the devil, the beneficiary would be Jesus alone (actually, Jesus and the devil). Jesus would have his throne, have his authority...but Jesus would not have his bride. There would be no salvation, there would be no redemption, there would be no Church. All of creation would remain in the power of sin and death, and life would be an exercise in hopelessness. But if he received it on his Father's terms, and we know that he did, there would be a path to reconciliation, and we all would be beneficiaries.

I read a fascinating article this week that I'm sure will be exciting news for all of you. Scientists are working on a pill that would replace...exercise! The article explains how scientists are figuring out the molecular processes that occur when we exercise and will try to create a pill to reproduce those processes. And, while that all sounds fantastic, don't you have a check in your spirit? Even the writer of the article sounded a bit dubious, because he begins by saying this: "An exercise pill feels like cheating. It doesn't seem right that a simple drug should allow you to avoid the crucible of pain, sweating and aggravation that we've come to see as the price that must be paid for a fit and low-fat body."

The offer from the devil to Jesus is...cheating. It's a shortcut. It's the devil saying "Jesus, you can have all of this. You are the Son of God. It's yours anyway. You will be exalted as king of creation, which you are due, you will rule over the people you love so much, you'll have all that power and authority, your glory will abound throughout, and you can have it all on your terms. It won't cost you a single drop of blood, a single moment of pain, no rejection, no suffering. All you have to do is worship me, and it's all yours."

It's a pretty tempting offer because all of those things are legitimate desires of the Messiah. But Jesus understood the only acceptable pathway was the one his Father laid out for him. After his resurrection, Jesus said [LUKE 24:26] <sup>26</sup> **Was it not necessary that the Christ should suffer these things and enter into his glory?"** There was no magic pill for him to take. For Jesus to fulfill the holy ambition given to him by his Father and confirmed upon him by the Holy Spirit, he could not avoid the crucible of pain, the price that must be paid for the redemption of creation. First the cross, then the crown.

The devil tempts us much in the same way. The temptation of ambition plays on the fear that we will never accomplish enough, that we must prove ourselves constantly. The temptation of ambition tells us that the purpose God has for our lives is insufficient. It won't satisfy us. It

won't be enough. We know what's right, and we're going to go make it happen. While approval is seeking affirmation externally, ambition is internally driven. The devil uses ambition to get us to believe that we must exalt ourselves, and do it in the way of our choosing. And we begin to drift away from the mission of making much of God and begin to live our lives in an effort to make much of ourselves. A holy ambition becomes a selfish one.

How does this play out in our lives? An important question to regularly ask ourselves is: **Who is the source, and who is the beneficiary, of my ambition?** Is this about me, or does my ambition glorify God and bless others? Because while we may not be concerned about world power and authority, we are still tempted with selfish ambition.

Think about the world of professional sports. The desired outcome of success and winning is a good one, but how many athletes have you heard of who succumbed to ambition by taking performance enhancing drugs? Every discussion about who should go into the baseball hall of fame these days includes who is known as a steroid user.

Bring it right here in this room. For those of you who own or run a business, the desired outcome of profit and the creation of jobs is a good one, but the ambition to be the biggest dog on the block may tempt you to operate in an unethical way.

For students, I wish they were in here today, the desired outcome of good grades and getting into college is good and right, but the ambition to be first in your class, to get accepted to the most prestigious institutions may tempt you to cheat.

For all of us, the desired outcome of being in an intimate romantic relationship is good, but ambition may tempt some to show how much of a player they are by having several of these relationships, or tempt some by creating an unwillingness to abide by God's standard of lifelong covenant with one another before living together and engaging in sexual activity.

Parents, how about us? What about our ambitions for our kids? The desired outcome of having well-rounded kids who are exposed to a lot of things and have a pretty good childhood is commendable, but ambition will drive us to get so busy, and live by the philosophy that he who has the most trophies wins, that we drift away from the most important things and really don't enjoy the stuff we're doing anyway. Listen, I wrestle with that ambition myself. You all know I have three sons. All of them are athletic, but one is particularly gifted...like his dad. He just started baseball season, and we've told our boys only one activity at a time. But we got an email from his school's track coach, asking us if we'd reconsider and let him be on the team. WOW! My seventh-grader is getting recruited! That'll get the ambition going!

Now you might be saying that none of these are on par with worshipping the devil, and I would agree. But I think the devil will be just fine if he gets us worshipping ourselves. All of these are examples of how we can start to turn our focus and affection inward, and the devil will take the good things in your life, twist them up, and tempt you to pursue your glory on your terms.

I know this because I experienced it. Around ten years ago is when I developed an ambition to lead a church. And it made sense. I loved Jesus. I had a history of leadership in school and sports and extra-curricular activities, I believed I had the gifting to do it, I was influential with my peers. The idea very much looked like a holy ambition. And thank God he didn't let it happen, because I wasn't ready. Because while leading a church would have tapped into who God made me to be, it would have been used by devil to tempt me to exalt myself. Not only was I driven for God, I was driven for myself. And this desire that I had for significant accomplishment could have been satisfied in leading a church. To a great extent, it would have been on my terms, for my benefit. So how did I get free of it? What was the key? The key for me is the key for all of us, and Jesus tells us what that is in his response to the devil.

**You serve what you worship.**

In his response to the devil's offer, Jesus offers the antidote to self-serving ambition. It's interesting to compare what the devil says and how Jesus responds. The devil says nothing about service. He simply says "Worship me, and all this is yours." But Jesus answers the devil with a quotation from Deuteronomy 6. "You shall worship the Lord your God, and only him shall you serve." The implication is clear: If I worship you, Satan, I will serve you. If I worship God, I will serve him. If ambition causes us to worship ourselves, we will ultimately serve ourselves. But if we worship God, we will serve God. Think about all that worship does to accomplish this. Worship honors and praises God, it is an act of devotion. Worship diminishes self, it is an act of humility. Worship directs our will to God's will, it is an act of submission. Worship turns our heart and affections away from ourselves and towards God, it is an act of realignment. And if our heart and wills are aligned with God through worshipping him, we will have a holy ambition to serve him.

Many of you know the command to make disciples found in Matthew 28, but we don't often talk about what happens right before.

**[Matthew 28:16-19a]** <sup>16</sup> Now the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain to which Jesus had directed them. <sup>17</sup> And when they saw him they worshiped him, but some doubted. <sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. <sup>19</sup> Go therefore and make disciples of all nations.

Their worship of Jesus prepared their hearts to receive the holy ambition called the Great Commission. Men, who only days earlier ambitiously argued over who was the greatest among them, were given a heart transplant as they worshipped the risen Christ. They became sold out for the God-exalting work of the Gospel, propelled forward to live for God's glory and on God's terms. If you are struggling with the temptation of ambition, worship the Lord and see what he does. He'll change your heart now and he'll prepare you for what's to come.

**[LUKE 4:13]** <sup>13</sup> And when the devil had ended every temptation, he departed from him until an opportune time.

Our worship must be persistent because our enemy never quits. Overcoming a temptation once does not set us free from being burdened by it ever again. Our enemy is an opportunist. He is observing, evaluating, and strategizing, waiting for the perfect time to strike again.

Remember that Jesus is our example. Throughout all of his life and ministry, Jesus kept his heart turned away from himself and towards his Father through prayer and praise. Jesus lived with the ideals, “I do not seek my own glory.” “I came not to do my own will but the will of the one who sent me.” He stayed in the humble posture of worship, and never wavered from the holy ambition given to him at his baptism.

And evidence of that is what we celebrate today: Palm Sunday. Jesus knew what would happen if he ever set foot again in Jerusalem. The Gospels record the misunderstood Messiah was greeted by a large crowd who had their own idea of what Jesus’ ambition should be. This scene is called the Triumphal Entry, a ceremony typically of great pomp and circumstance and usually reserved for a Roman general who had killed 5,000 or more enemy troops in battle. But instead of a man of stature and power, riding a stallion, and carrying with him the spoils of war, through the gates of Jerusalem came a poor and humble Jewish man riding in on a donkey.

The crowd shouted “Hosanna”, which in Hebrew means “save now”, they waved palm branches, which were symbols of victory and peace. Their desired outcome was for Jesus to act as a conquering king, bring victory over Rome, and peace to Israel. But Jesus knew these aspirations were but a shadow of his real mission. He knew that, without the Cross, there would be no true victory and peace; no victory over sin and death, and no peace between God and his children. That was the holy ambition of our Messiah. That was the mission given by the Father, affirmed by the Spirit, for the glory of God and for the benefit and the blessing of you and me. That accomplishment was enough for Jesus. He pursued the Father’s plan, on the Father’s terms, for the Father’s glory, and the outcome of his ambition was eternal life for all who believe in him.

It’s also a reminder that, if you follow in the footsteps of Jesus, you eventually end up at the cross. Like Jesus, we too have been given a holy ambition. The source and beneficiary of that ambition is the same as Jesus’...that we would glorify God and bless others through the mission given to us by God. It is an outcome pursued down a path of self-denial, self-sacrifice, self-surrender. It is a path littered with the potholes of life in a fallen world, and a path often visited by an enemy who seeks to cause us to drift off course. Our job is to continue worshipping the Lord, keeping our hearts turned towards him, and eagerly pursuing the holy ambition he has given to each of us. And I promise you, there will be no greater feeling of accomplishment than when we fulfill that calling.