

# The Power of a Master Ambition

by J. Oswald Sanders

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*To make a significant impact on the world, we need to have a master ambition, a dominating motive that inspires and drives us forward, centered on Christ and his glory.*

**Duration:** 33:46

**Scripture:** Philippians 3:13

**Topics:** "Desiring God"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker shares a testimony of a girl who held up a blank sheet of paper with only her signature on it, symbolizing her complete surrender to God's plan for her life. The speaker emphasizes the importance of being fully abandoned to the Lord and allowing Him to guide and direct our lives. He encourages listeners to examine their own lives and identify any areas where they may be 'leaking' or not fully aligned with God's plan. The speaker also challenges listeners to have a clearly defined goal in life and to integrate their entire lives into that goal.

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## Transcript

As you continue in your study and application of the biblical principles of spiritual leadership, may the truth be illuminated by the Holy Spirit. It is the responsibility of every Christian man and woman to be the best they can be for God. He wants us to make the most of ourselves, and it's good every now and again in the midst of the pressure of studies and so on, to stop and take stock.

The wise businessman, if he finds he's going into the red, he stops, he takes stock. He tries to discover where the leaps are in his business, and then he plugs the leaps. Are we sufficiently wise to do the same thing, and to see how we are moving in our Christian life? I've been working among students for more than 50 years, and I've watched generation after generation of students move on.

And I've been able to see those who have made a significant contribution to the work of God. It isn't always those who are the most brilliant, thank God many of them are, do, but not always that by any means. But I've noticed it is those people who were most willing to place themselves at God's disposal, and who most had the spirit of a servant.

They're the ones who made the greatest impression on their generation. Now many of us fail to achieve anything significant in our lives, because we've got no over-mastering ambition, no dominating motive that inspires us and drives us forward. And I believe this is what is needed.

We need to have something like that. When I was traveling in China before the Communists took over, I was traveling with Mr. Fred Mitchell, who was the British director of our mission, the Overseas Missionary Fellowship. And he was telling me about some of his earlier years.

He had been a pharmacist, and he said in connection with that he had also taken a course in optometry. He said one day the young fellow that he used to attend lectures with, they both came from the north country, in Britain. He said one day he said to me, Fred I'm going to be the king's physician, or the king's optometrist.

And Fred said to him what I think you would say if one of your fellow students said he's going to be President Reagan's advisor. He just said oh yes, he's going to be the king's optometrist. And yet Fred said to me, do you know who the king's optometrist is? I said no.

He said that young man. Now he was a young fellow, he came from an insignificant background, but there had been from earliest days a determination, I am going to be the king's optometrist. And the whole of his life was channeled into that one narrow stream.

And he became the king's optometrist. He achieved something significant. Why? Because he fully abandoned himself to that objective.

Now have you got an objective like that? What is your goal in life? If I came and sat alongside you now, without giving you notice what I was going to do, and I said to you what is your goal in life? Could you answer me immediately in a word or two? Have you got a goal? Or are you just slipping along from day to day, living at haphazard, doing the next thing and hoping it will all be well in the future? Or have you got some clearly defined goal ahead of you to which you're working, so that the whole of your life is integrated into that one narrow channel? I believe this is what we need to do. Paul says here, this one thing I do. What is the one thing you do? Is there any one thing that would mark your life out? What would your fellow students say was the one thing, the dominating thing in your life? What is the over-mastering ambition, the dominating motive in your life? Now that's worth asking yourself, so that you really are aiming at something.

Our word, our word ambition comes from the Latin, and it's got a rather ignoble significance. It means looking both ways to try to gain an objective. You can get a good illustration of that in the politician who is canvassing for votes.

He goes to one group, and they've got this viewpoint, and he says, yes, yes, yes, yes, that's right, I agree, and I'll do so and so for you. And next place he goes to another group, and they've got entirely opposite views, and yes, yes, yes, that's right, I agree, I'll do so and so for you. Not a very noble attitude.

Well that's the background of the word, our word for ambition. But that's not the word Paul used. Paul used the Greek equivalent, and it has a more noble history.

It carries the idea of a love of honour, striving for noble ends. For example, he said, I make it a point of honour to be well-pleasing to Christ. Well, that is the word which Paul used.

I say he'll let, here is an ambition of the right kind that we should entertain. There are ambitions that are unworthy. You know it's been said that ambition is the last infirmity of noble minds, and there are some ambitions which warrant a scripture like that.

You may remember that Shakespeare made wolves, he said. Cromwell, I charge thee, fling away ambition, by that sin tell the angels. How can man then the image of his maker hope to profit by it? He didn't have much of an idea of that kind of ambition.

Why? Because it was a worldly ambition, and worldly ambition generally runs in three lines. And it can run over into Christians too, and into Christian work. The same kind of ambition can be present.

One is the ambition to be popular, to build a reputation. That's very easy for a preacher to attract, for the preacher that Paul called it. More concerned about the way his message is received by his congregation than whether the Lord is pleased with its content.

Another line in which a worldly ambition runs is the desire to amass a fortune, a desire for wealth. You know Christian workers are not above that. I'll guarantee that not every student here is absolutely on top of money.

Yes they haven't got much. Well are you on top of what you've got? Do you think you're exercising a wise stewardship over it? It's quite easy for a person to go into Christian work and to be overcome by a desire for money. And the third way in which a worldly ambition usually runs is a desire for power, to wield authority.

You know when a person gets into the ministry they have a rare opportunity of wielding authority, and some become little popes. Well here are the dangers of worldly ambition coming into the church. But what kind of ambition is a worthy ambition, and one of which God will approve? You see all these worldly ambitions terminate on self.

The worthy ambition centers on Christ. And if your ambition centers on Christ you can be as ambitious as you like. If your ambition is that through you he might be glorified, the Holy Spirit will cooperate with you to the limit.

If your ambition is to make yourself great you'll seek in vain for the cooperation of the Holy Spirit. He's not interested in making me great. He's interested in making Christ great.

A worthy ambition. Now Count Zinzendorf, who was the founder of the great Moravian church. That church which began in almost the missionary enterprise of modern day.

A church which had probably five times as many converts abroad as it did at home. A church which sent out one out of 70 of its members to the mission field in a day when missions were hardly known. He was a man who had one over-mastering passion.

What was it? He said I have one passion. It is He. He alone.

Have you got a passion? Something into which the whole fervor of your being is poured? Or do you only have opinion? A passion. I have one passion. It is He.

He alone. And that passion infused the whole of that Moravian church. So that it made such a tremendous impact in the world of that day.

Notice that our Lord didn't stigmatize the desire to be great. The thing he stigmatized was the desire to be greatest. You've probably read in C.S. Lewis's *Near Christianity*, I think it is, where he's speaking about pride.

He says you know nobody's proud because they're clever. Or proud because they're rich. Nobody's proud because they're good looking.

When I read that I thought boy this is he's not right there is he? But I read on. The next thing he says they are proud because they are cleverer. Or richer.

Or better looking. And you see there is the competitive element in this. And that's where the thing came in.

James and John didn't want to be great. They wanted to be greatest. To be number one and number two.

And the Lord said nothing do we. It shall not be so among you. God has got no objection to us being as great as ever we can.

But he will not have us desire to be greatness. That's a very significant difference. When I was a young man there was one task in Christian work that I covered that very much it was something that I felt I could do and it appealed to me.

And I wanted that. And I knew I had friends if I only asked them they could just pull a string and I could get it. And I was battling with the tendency to pull a string to get a spiritual opening.

I was going down our main street in Auckland and New Zealand. Crowds of people around about me. I can see the very spot now.

And as clearly as though it were words spoken by a man alongside me. There came the words of Jeremiah to Bara. Speakest thou great things for thyself? Speak them not.

And it was a word of God that came with singular authority and clarity. I was almost arrested on the spot. And God gave me the grace to renounce that ambition.

Actually it came to me automatically later on without my seeking it. But I had first to gain that victory. And looking back I believe that that was a very real turning point in my Christian life.

When I renounced seeking great things for myself. Allowing God to maneuver if he wanted me somewhere. And I think I can say truthfully I've never since then ever angled for anything of that kind.

You can't do it in a spiritual ministry. You can't lobby for office. Never do it.

Leave it for the Lord. If he wants you there he'll give it to you. And if he doesn't want you there far better you shouldn't be there.

But you'll notice that in that passage Jeremiah didn't say speakest thou great things speak them not. He said speakest thou great things for thyself. Those are the operated words.

If it is self-seeking that makes you want to be great then God is not interested. If you want Lord I want my life to count for the very most for you and for your glory and for the blessing of my fellow men. Then God is interested and he's concerned.

And that is a worthy ambition because it centers on Christ and his glory. So I need to ask myself is my supreme objective God's glory and not my own. Will my if I secure this ambition of mine will it bring greater glory to God and more blessing for my fellow men.

If so then the Holy Spirit will be with me to achieve that. David Brainerd whose biography you ought to read if you haven't already read it. There's a very good one written by Richard Ellsworth Day.

But David Brainerd was so consumed with a passion to glorify Christ in the winning of souls that he said this. He said I cared not where or how I lived or what hardships I endured so that I could but gain souls for Christ. Didn't care where or he lived or how he lived if only he could gain souls for Christ.

My brothers and sisters wouldn't it be wonderful to be able to say something like that. I don't care where I live. I don't care how I live.

I don't care what hardships are involved. If only I can win souls for Christ. There was a worthy ambition was it not.

And look at the way in which God used and honored that man. Now the apostle Paul was an extremely ambitious man. You read the story of his in the Acts of the Apostles and read the incidental references in the letters that he wrote.

And you'll see there that there was a burning consuming passion. There was something in him that couldn't be denied. It was there before his conversion.

He said I excelled, exceeded in zeal my contemporaries. He was he was more zealous than any of the others. But his zeal, his passion, his ambition led him to terrible excesses.

So that he said I persecuted the church of God. He hailed them to prison. He did everything.

He had one ambition. What to do? To efface the name of Christ and to exterminate his church. That's what he wanted to do.

When he was converted all his ambition ran out of his fingers. Did it? Indeed no. After his conversion there was just as much ambition if not more.

But now it's redirected into constructive channels. What is he desiring to do now? He wants to magnify Christ. He says I don't care whether it's by life or by death.

If only Christ is magnified in my body. Instead of exterminating the church he spends himself in building up the church. The same ambition but directed into new channels.

And I believe that we need to have an ambition like this so that God can use us to build up his church and to magnify his name. When Billy Graham was giving the funeral address at Dawson Trotman funeral. Dawson Trotman was the founder of the Navigators as you know.

Billy Graham said of him. Here was a man who did not say these 40 things I dabble in but this one thing I do. Are you a dabbler or are you a person with a single track mind? I use that expression in a limited way of course.

But are you a person who says this one thing I do or do you play around with a lot of other things do you dabble? Why did Dawson Trotman make such a significant impression on his generation? Because there was only one thing before him. Navigators. He lived for us.

He ate for us. He prayed for us. He works for us.

One thing. This one thing I do. And God used him to bring to the world a navigator movement which now is spread right to the ends of the earth and having a significant ministry because one man said this one thing I do.

What is the one thing you are going to do? Define it. Don't let it be fuzzy. Have something clear before you that will unify and integrate the whole of your life.

If we are going to make any significant impact on this disoriented world in which we live we will need to absolutely abandon ourselves without reserve for that time. And yet today we're so slow to commit ourselves irrevocably. There are some few who are prepared to commit themselves without reservation.

They'll commit themselves for a year or two. They don't mind being a short-term missionary or going to see something and see whether they will like it or not. They don't mind that.

But as for an unreserved commitment that is for life and for irrevocable that's something different. But I believe it's tremendously important that we abandon ourselves to God without any reservation. Let him fill in the blank.

There was a girl at a conference up at Ben Lippin conference ground in South Carolina and she gave a testimony. And in her testimony she held up a blank sheet of paper. The only thing on that paper was her signature.

And she said, this is God's plan for my life. What was she saying? She was just saying this. My life is at God's disposal.

There's my signature. I concur in what God plans for my life. Could you do that? Here is somebody who was completely abandoned for the Lord.

And I have no doubt that that girl found that the plan which the Lord wrote on that paper for her life was something which was good and acceptable and perfect. The master to me was a great Greek orator as well as a philosopher. When he first appeared on the platform in the Greeks in Athens he was hissed off because his performance was so deplorable.

He had a weak voice. His voice was harsh and weak. His personality was unimpressive.

He had a painful stammer. He, as he spoke, he had facial distortions. And in addition to that he had an ugly hitching of his shoulder that every now and again he'd give it a hitch.

Well, interesting watching preachers isn't it? You're watching me and seeing my peculiarities. Well, he had this one which was not very attractive. Well, when he was going away from the platform he said to himself, they'll hear me yet.

So what did he do? He went away and he isolated himself. He shaved off half his hair. Well, you're not very acceptable in company if you've only got half your hair.

And that saved him wasting time socializing. And then he gave himself the practicing elocution day and night. This one thing he did.

He used to do it in front of a mirror so that he could correct the facial contortions. He went down to the shores of the Aegean Sea and there he competed with the waves so that he could develop volume in his

voice. He used to speak with pebbles in his mouth to enable him to overcome his stammer.

But then there was the problem of the hitching of his shoulder. How could he get over that? Well, he found a very satisfactory solution. He got suspended from the ceiling of sword with the point resting on his shoulder.

It was remarkable how little desire he had to hitch his shoulder. But here was this man who said, this one thing I do, the nation will hear me yet. The time came when they were fighting against Philip and the nation wasn't being aroused.

And so Demosthenes and Aristotle were called upon to make an oration to arouse the nation. But Aristotle spoke first and he gave a marvellous oration. The people were carried away and when he finished they said, what wonderful oratory.

And they praised him tremendously. Then it came Demosthenes' turn. And after he had spoken with great ability did they say, what marvellous oratory? No they didn't.

What did they say? They said, come let us fight Philip. He had said, they'll hear me yet. He was prepared to make end sacrifice in order that this one thing might be achieved.

My brothers and sisters, if we could have a worthy ambition that we are prepared to sacrifice anything for, we too will be able to make a significant contribution to our day and to our generation. Now Paul uses the word ambition three times I think in the New Testament. In one case he said, I make it, 2nd Corinthians 5, I make it my ambition, what to do? To be well-pleasing unto people.

Well, wouldn't that be a worthy objective? That in all I do, Lord will this please you? If I do this, will this please you? If I don't do that, will that please you? This was one of Paul's ambitions. Ambition, to be well-pleasing to people. Another ambition he records in Romans chapter 15 and verse 20.

And this is one that had more involvement. He said, I make it my ambition, what to do? To preach Christ, not where he is already named. I don't want merely to build upon another man's foundation.

I want to preach Christ where he has not been named. And it was that which was the tremendous driving force behind Paul. He had been told when the Lord called him, I will send you far hence to the Gentiles.

He knew that his calling was not to be at home, it was to be far hence. He knew it wasn't to be his own people, the Jews, but to the Gentiles. And so here was this man who had the tremendous ambition, I must see Rome.

I must go to Spain, the farthest limits of the then known world. No limits to him. He must preach to the regions beyond the places where Christ has not been named.

Now you know very well that your own missionary societies are doing this very thing. But I wonder how many of you have personally come to the place where you say, Lord without any reservation whatsoever, I am prepared to make my life available to you to take me to minister to some of the two and a half thousand million people in the world today, who have never yet had any vital contact, opportunity of vital contact with Christ. Have you really faced up to that? I believe that people are not fitted for the home ministry unless they have first faced up to the implications of the people who are without Christ overseas.

If the Lord says I want you to serve at home, then that is the highest possible thing you can do. But I wonder whether with all, almost half the world without Christ, I wonder whether more of us should not be moving out into the regions beyond. Paul says I don't want, I want to preach Christ where he has not been named.

May I close with this. Whenever I speak to a group of young people, especially theological students, I can't help thinking of the tremendous potential that lies hidden in a group like this. I've seen so many young people who, having taken their course, just melt away into mediocrity.

They just don't, don't make any much, much mark for God at all. They're good Christians, they do good work and so on, but they really don't make any significant contribution to our disoriented world. I was invited some years ago to give the graduation address at Columbia Bible College.

And after the services were over, the graduates, the alumni, turned on a dinner. And they kindly invited me to it, and I went along, enjoyed the dinner. Then afterwards they were showing pictures of former graduates.

Well, it had no interest to me because I didn't know any of them, and I just sat in the dark feeling pretty bored, until I heard a name. And it was somebody I knew. And I saw a face on the picture, a face on the screen.

They went on, showed other names, but my mind was going in a different direction. And I thought, now supposing someone had come to that girl when she was a student in Columbia, just as you are here. Supposing somebody had come to her and said, you know that God is going to use you to take the gospel to people in all parts of the world in 4,500 different languages.

What do you think that girl would have said? Supposing somebody whispered that in the ear of one of you girls, what would you think? Wouldn't you think, well how stupid, how impossible. I only know two languages, you mightn't even know two. And yet that's exactly what God did with that girl.

Her name was Joy Ridderhoff. And she founded the gospel recording, which has given the elements of the gospel to people all over the world in 4,500 languages. Not one person, not one fellow student, not one staff member of Columbia College had any idea that sitting in their classes every day, there was a girl who was going to make one of the most significant missionary contributions that's been made in the history of mission.

And she had no idea herself. You don't know who's sitting next to you. You don't know who's sitting on your own seat.

You don't know what God could do with that life of yours, if without any reservation you passed it over to him. If you said, Lord this one thing I do. Say like Paul, I have not already obtained, neither am I already perfect.

But this one thing I do, I press on to the prize, for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. Make us, may God make us, men and women who do one thing, and who do it supremely well. Thank you for letting the Overseas Missionary Fellowship share this message on spiritual leadership with you.

If God has used this message in your life, please share it with others. May the Lord bless as you move forward in training other Christians in the biblical principles of spiritual leadership. Mr. Sanders' book,

Spiritual Leadership, is now in over 20 different languages.

To help in the teaching of the biblical principles in his book, Moody Press has published a leader's guide. We also have a series of eight of his messages on spiritual leadership on VHS. Sanders' book, Paul the Leader, demonstrates these principles worked out in Paul's life and ministry.

For detailed information about the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, please write to us at 404 South Church Street, Robesonia, Pennsylvania 19551. In Canada, write to 1058 Avenue Road, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M5N 2C6.

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