

Ambition

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[0 : 0 0] Thank you so much for hopping online and joining us. We saw some pictures of families gathering around tables and folks hopping onto the chat, and this is really, really cool. We owe a lot of thanks to a bunch of people. We'll do that at the end, but just know that there was this kind of Herculean effort to get this all going tonight, and we're really, really, really incredibly grateful for it. I just want to say a couple things as your pastor. One, yes, this is a weird time to come on board for the Table Church, and all I have to say is, like, don't worry about us. Emily and me and the kids, we're fine, we're healthy, and we will be, you know, getting to know you once the CDC says that we're allowed to. So looking forward to that. A couple other things. One, a word of hope.

The word of hope is I've heard some people, not a lot, but some people kind of use the phrase, hey, don't worry about it. Jesus is on the throne somewhat dismissively, that as the world kind of falls into a little bit of chaos that it's falling into, that, hey, you don't need to worry about it.

Jesus is on the throne. There's nothing to be, you know, that we need to be changing about our lives, and Jesus is on the throne is true, but it's a statement that leads us to action. It's true, but it's not a statement that leads us towards complacency. It's a statement that leads us towards action. Actions like Allie McGill, our director of care, putting up a tweet that says, hey, if I can get food to those who can't get food and resources to those who can't get out right now, and then 700 volunteers came and said that they'd be willing to help. It's worth a couple of thousand dollars that we've already raised to help supply some of those needs. That's what it means for Jesus to be on the throne. It means that we take action, and that we as Christians, as Jesus followers, are at our best when we take action because Jesus is on the throne. Because Jesus is on the throne, that allows us to love people that are hard to love, to reach people that are hard to reach, to be Jesus to those who need

Jesus. So well done to everybody who is doing that, and I want to give you that hope because this is the time when the church shines best. Number two is a word of caution as your pastor. This is also a time where it can be really easy to become self-righteous. Self-righteous because we took these precautions and somebody else didn't, or self-righteous because, oh, we're not filled with fear and anxiety and somebody else is. Don't do that. Get off the self-righteous throne. You don't need to be there. This is a, I think this is all of our first pandemic as a church, as people, as families, as people who enjoy going out on dates or bars or whatever it is you want to do. This is all our first pandemic. So we all need to extend each other a little bit of grace, a little bit of compassion, and just put the self-righteousness down. And that's when we can then say, Jesus is on the throne. What are we going to do to reveal God's kingdom even in times like these? So with all that said, we are continuing on to talk about Jesus, to talk about his word, and for that we are turning things over to Pastor Richard. So from your comfy places at home, give Pastor Richard a warm welcome. And everybody shouted to you from across the city.

Okay. Good evening, church. I hope everyone is doing well, hopefully also feeling well, and caring for themselves during this time. While I'm sad we can't be together, I am happy that technology allows us to always gather, even when we can't be in the same room. For any of you who know me, technology is never my first choice and rarely my second. But I believe that computers probably have an active vendetta against me. So if this cuts out at some point, it is probably my fault. And yet, I have such faith in God, and time after time, we are shown that God works in mysterious ways. So it is my deepest prayer that this goes smoothly throughout this time, no one vendetta. But over the past couple weeks, we've been wrestling with the beginning of chapter four of the Gospel of Matthew, often referred to as the temptations of Jesus. In the first week of this series, we explored with Becky a theme of hunger, wanting, and speaking of how God is in the business of restoration.

[4 : 47] And last week, Pastor Angela asked us to do a hard check on the role that we play. Where we often want to associate ourselves with Jesus in this narrative, we have to ask, when are we in fact playing the role of the accuser? Asking God to demonstrate miracles, asking for affirmation of God's divinity or God's love for us. Now, this focus on temptations of Jesus is an invitation for us to analyze our own temptations, our own distractions from who God wants us to be. And it is an invitation into the season of Lent in whatever way you need to be renewed, whether that's through confession, or fasting, or repentance, or self-reflection. Before we continue to focus on this, though, I want to take a moment to pray. Now, this has been a tough week. If your week has been anything like mine, your inbox has been flooded with emails about coronavirus plans from organizations that you may have forgotten you were even part of. There have been cancellations of events and closures of spaces that are important to us. For some, this time can feel really scary, either for your own health, or for the health of those you love, or frankly, because sometimes major disruptions to our schedules and patterns can feel really overwhelming. So I want to hold everyone in prayer, but particularly lift up a few things. So please bow your head and pray with me. God, as we come to this virtual space, we come to you in prayer in a time that feels unsettling, a time that's changing and unpredictable.

And Lord, as we continue to navigate these new territories for many of us, we lift up those in our community who are particularly susceptible to this virus, that God, that you can bring safety and protection to them. We lift up those in our community who are anxious or scared, that you can bring calm and security. And we lift up those in our community who feel powerless, that you can show us ways to bring about the kingdom, even when times seem hard.

Lord, we know that you are present in everything and pray that you reveal yourself to us in this as well. In your name we pray. Amen. Now maybe it's appropriate that we are focusing today on Jesus's third temptation.

And I say this because right now, most of our fear, anxiety, and worry is focused on what might be, what could occur. And Jesus's third temptation is one that plays off of that very concern.

I want to begin by reading the passage we have been focusing on, Matthew 4, 1 through 11. Then the devil took him to the holy city and had him stand on the highest point of the temple.

[8 : 06] If you are the Son of God, he said, throw yourself down, for it is written, he will command his angels concerning you, and they will lift you up in their hands, so that you will not strike your foot against a stone.

Jesus answered him, it is also written, do not put the Lord your God to the test. And again the devil took him to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor. All this I will give to you, he said, if you will bow down and worship me.

Jesus said to him, away from me, Satan, for it is written, worship the Lord your God and serve him only. Then the devil left him and angels came and attended him.

Now over the past couple weeks, we've looked at each of these temptations, and this sermon will focus on verses 8 through 10, where the devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world in their splendor, and said, all this I will give to you, if you will bow down and worship me.

And where Jesus responded, away from me, Satan, for it is written, only. When I was a younger person listening to this Bible story in Sunday school, I actually always thought that the third temptation was the silliest.

[9 : 24] See, my younger self could relate to the idea of being hungry, and how tempted Jesus must have been to create bread after not eating for 40 days. And I could also relate to the idea of falling from the top of the temple so that all could see who Jesus was, right? How spectacular a miracle would that have been? You know, as a kid, I always wanted to be able to perform miracles because I wanted to people see signs so that they could come to know Jesus. And I had always thought it must have been tempting for Jesus to perform that one miracle so that all those people down there could have seen the power and come to follow him. But the third temptation, that's the one that made no sense. See, because when Satan takes Jesus to a very high mountain and shows Jesus all of the kingdoms of the world and offers them all to him, my seven-year-old mind didn't understand because I knew that you can't give someone something that doesn't belong to you. As I grew up, I would later rationalize my seven-year-old objection to the effect of hindsight, that I knew how the story ended, that I understood that God had deemed that Jesus would be the savior of the earth all along no deal with the devil necessary. And more importantly, that God had a much more extraordinary plan for Jesus than Satan could have ever understood. Now, my seven-year-old understanding of Jesus's third temptation highlights one important type of ambition, one based in fear that we might not actually get what we were promised. Satan, in this moment, was offering something to Jesus that was already promised, the earthly kingdoms. But we have to remember that at this time that Jesus was challenged by Satan, he hadn't even performed his first public recorded miracle. What was promised to

Jesus and his present situation? Instead of being the Messiah and Savior who had risen from the dead, Jesus was 40 days into a fast, hungry, tired, and largely unknown. We'd equate this in modern times to being an intern on the hill. What he had been told was so far away of what he had been promised, and Satan was offering him a shortcut, a sure way to get to end goal promised. All Jesus had to do was bow down and worship Satan.

Now, the Greek doesn't even imply that this had to be a continued thing, just a small acknowledgement of Satan's command of the world as it was, and it would be all Jesus's. But Jesus responds that we are to worship and serve God only. See, Jesus was proclaiming where our trust must remain, and reminded Satan of the surety of God's promises, even when they seem impossible, like they must have at that moment.

Now, one thing I love about Scripture is that it can speak to us differently at different stages in our life. And as I grew more in my faith and became more confident in my relationship with God, I saw this third temptation a bit differently. This third temptation spoke to me less as a temptation of ambition driven by fear, and more as a temptation based in pride. More and more, I wondered why Jesus didn't just take up Satan on this offer, and then use his position of power to bring God's kingdom to earth. Now, I didn't put my curiosity in those words exactly, but I began to think about it in my own life. See, I began to wrestle with this second type of ambition, an ambition based in pride or hubris, where we believe that we know more than God does about how to get to God's kingdom on earth.

This type of thinking, which led me to seek for God to intervene more aggressively, really began for me as I struggled with the concept of suffering. I saw so much pain in my world and the world of others. So because I couldn't understand it, I had come to a pretty firm conclusion that God should intervene more and that God was doing it wrong. Now, there's an entirely different sermon in here about how patient God has been with me and how far grace extends, and probably a second sermon about suffering as well. But we're going to focus at this point on my prideful ambition.

[14:16] And I've shared this story before, but possibly the moment in my life where this was on fullest display was an argument I had with God when I was processing my own sexual orientation.

Now, I had spent over a year studying the Bible, praying, talking to people, trying to better understand whether the Bible affirms same-sex relationships. And by the end of that time, I'd realized that my relationship with God was actually stronger than it had ever been, that I was not a mistake, and in fact was a purposeful part of the complex image of God. And then I became angry, and angry for the silliest of reasons. See, I had understood God to be calling me to ministry very early in my life. And at that moment, I was mad at God because he ruined my chance of going into ministry because I was gay. I went from a state of comfort and acceptance because I knew God loved me and created me exactly as I am, to being upset because somehow or another, I knew how to be God better than God did. I basically told my creator that now that I knew I was gay, I can't be in ministry anymore, that somehow God had ruined God's own game plan for my life. And I was mad about it.

Now, there is a lot of cognitive dissonance required to follow that argument. But if you fast forward, you'll know that I actually went on to do education-based ministry, and of course, I'm now an associate pastor here at the table. So not only do I owe God an apology, but we can confirm that God is better than I am at this. But that's kind of the point. I didn't want to wait for God's timing because I had a plan to get there. Even when I knew where God was calling me, somehow I still felt like I needed to take the shortcut, to get there faster, the way I thought it was supposed to be done. And in that moment, as much as I hate to admit it, if Satan would have come and offered me an easy road to the end, I probably would have taken it. Honestly, this is why I find things like conversion therapy or quick religious fixes to our problems to be so dangerous, so tempting, but that's also an entire other sermon or conversation over coffee. Now, I want to be clear. Ambition can have a positive or negative connotation. Definitionally, ambition is simply a strong desire to do or to achieve something, typically requiring determination and hard work. So we shouldn't be asking, am I too ambitious? But instead, we need to be asking, what am I ambitious for? Put differently, what do I have a strong desire to do? What am I willing to put my determination and hard work into? See, the idea, and often the literal word ambition is mentioned over and over again in the Bible. Of course, there are warnings of ambition for the wrong things. For example, in Philippians 2-3, we're told, do not act out of selfish ambition or conceit, but with humility, think of others as being better than yourselves. In Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter 2, verse 8, if you're following along, we're told, but wrath and anger to those who live in selfish ambition and do not obey the truth, but follow unrighteousness. And in James 3-14, we're told that if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your heart, don't brag and deny the truth.

In each of these passages, a specific Greek word, *erethea*, is used. Now, interestingly, this word literally translates to work for hire, and is sometimes translated as mercenary work. And the word itself is often used to denote rivalry or ambition. And the connotation is one where you are doing something for your own gain and in opposition to another. In contrast, we also see Paul use to the Romans, chapter 15, preach the gospel to where the name of Christ has never been heard, rather than to where a church has already been started by someone else. Similarly, in 2 Corinthians 5-9, we are told that we make it our ambition to please God, whether we are at home or in the body, in the body or away from it. Now, in both of these passages, a different word, *philotime omahi*, is used. And that word, which I may or may not have pronounced slightly wrong, is actually made up of the word *philos*, which is love, and *time*, which is to acknowledge or honor.

Meaning that the word ambition here means to love, to acknowledge or honor, or otherwise translated as aspiring for what is honorable. See, this ambition is outward and other-focused. Now, when we talk about ambition, we need to focus on how we are being ambitious for God rather than ambitious for ourselves. Why does this matter? Because when our ambition is driven by fear or hubris, sin is able to enter. Sin, after all, is really just separation from God. It is the things that keep us from being closer to our Creator. And it is not often what we do, but rather what we're afraid of doing, that is most ripe for Satan to enter. See, when we focus on worldly things, we miss what God has for us. We replace God's will for our lives with our own expectations for it. And we're so concerned with the future that we miss what is happening in the present. And it's curious that this is the last temptation, because it is the temptation that has constantly plagued institutions, including the institution of the church. The want of worldly power is one of the most damaging ambitions to the institution of the church throughout history, starting with Rome in 330 CE, when Constantine made Christianity the religion of all of Rome. Throughout history, we see the institution of the church, whether the historical relationship between the Anglican Church and England's monarch, or the Catholic papacy and worldly political power, or churches in America seeking connections with politicians and power brokers.

[21 : 05] That too often, our narratives of institutions are ones that fail to stand up for what is right, fail to be ambitious for God, because instead they support what is convenient and what keeps access to power.

Their ambition is one driven by fear, by pride, and not by God. C.S. Lewis, and my favorite book by C.S. Lewis is *The Screwtape Letters*.

And in that book, he comments on the vulnerability of ambition to sin. He writes that a chastity or honesty or mercy which yields to danger will be chaste or honest or merciful only on conditions. Pilate, after all, was merciful until it became risky.

Perhaps this is what Jesus understood about the last temptation that I was missing, that it wasn't the initial deal with the devil that was most damaging. Certainly, Jesus could have had an amazing impact ruling the earthly kingdoms, but rather Jesus understood the consequence of aligning himself with earthly principalities rather than heavenly ones. He understood that worldly institutions will inherently fail, and the more we align ourselves to them, the more control we've ceded, because we are desperate to maintain that power, and frankly fearful of losing it when we have invested there instead of heavenly purposes. See, when we get so wrapped up and absorbed in selfish ambition, we forget our purpose.

It is the fear of future that prevents us from making kingdom choices today. And inasmuch as institutions fall into the pattern of selfish ambition and lose sight of what we are meant to be ambitious for, so do we individually. It is so easy to forget where our focus is meant to be when the world tells us over and over and over again what we're supposed to be, reminded over and over again by society that it's supposed to be all about us. It's an us first model. We got to take care of us before we look outwards. As a recent example, many of you might know that I switched back into the non-profit field recently. Surprising to me in some ways is a lot of close mentors and friends told me I was making the wrong choice. See, I had a prestigious job at a big law firm, and it was a desired job, and I was told by individuals that I was on the highway of success and that I had all these open doors if I stayed here. Why would I close them? I was asked why I would ruin my career with something I could do at any time. I was told that I'm making the wrong choice for me and my family, and hearing that message enough, I began to feel like maybe I was making the wrong choice going back to the non-profit world. So I spent time praying and reminding myself of who I am meant to be ambitious for. See, for me, I've always known that the way I am meant to bring the kingdom to this earth is by representing vulnerable communities, right? And in my current job, I get to help domestic violence survivors. I get to represent children in unstable environments. I get to work with vulnerable immigrants, and I seek to understand and help them amplify their voice. Now, it's not fancy. It's certainly not well paid. But I know it's who God would have me work alongside. It's always been. Now, this is not meant to be a sermon that tells you there's only one type of work that fits God's plan. Instead, what I'm trying to point out is that the right path for each of us individually, whether it's career or marriage or geography or friendships, should not be measured by worldly definitions of success, but instead by how close they bring us to God's vision for our lives. And that the worldly measures may feel more important, may feel more prominent, but they're worthless. Now, when we look at the story of Jesus's final temptation, if we put ourselves there, I imagine that very few of us would imagine ourselves literally bowing down to whatever we imagine Satan to look like. But we still submit to earthly pressures and subvert our godly calling all the time. See, sometimes we can justify that selfish ambition for seemingly selfless motives. If I make more money, I can give more to the table church. If I have more power, I can influence policies at a bigger level. Sometimes we feel like we might be making a choice that feels like it's leading us away from God for the right reason, because we think in the future it'll pay off. But each of those right reasons pulls us more and more away from God. Maybe we think we can return at some point. But this is us again, either for fear or for hubris, focusing on the future rather than the now. It's us wanting to shortcut God's plan. These shortcuts, though, build up and continue to build a rift between us and our creator. As I mentioned, my favorite book from C.S. Lewis is

[26 : 38] Screwtape Letters. And for those of you who haven't read it, it is effectively C.S. Lewis writing from a tempter's perspective. And it's this uncle or sort of well-versed tempter giving advice to a younger or a new tempter. And one of the passages that has really stuck with me is this one. C.S. Lewis wrote, It does not matter how small the sins are, provided that their cumulative effect is to edge the man away from the light and into the nothing. Murder is no better than cards, if cards can do the trick.

Indeed, the safest road to hell is the gradual one, the gentle slope, soft underfoot, without sudden turnings, without milestones, without signposts. Especially in a place like Washington, D.C., it is so easy to get wrapped up in selfish ambition. And while ambition itself is not bad, we need to check in and ask ourselves, what am I actually ambitious for? We're jolted daily with definitions of success.

To do that the only ambition, because when we're ambitious for the gospel in the present, that ambition that is love in action, we are too focused on the present to fear the future.

And without fear, Satan can't shove his way into our lives and build distance between us and God. And when we are ambitious for the gospel in the present, we are too focused on others and who God is calling us to be, to be focused on our own desires and expectations.

So during this Lenten season, and since many of you may find yourself with unexpected time at home, I challenge you to reflect on your own ambition and to ask yourself what motivates you.

[28 : 37] Is it a present focus on the gospel? Or is it fear? Or pride? Honestly, for most of us, it's likely a mix.

And this is where the opportunity to reflect helps. Take time to check in with yourself. Ask yourself where you are letting fear or hubris lead rather than God. And then think about how you can start turning that part of your life towards God. Because ultimately, our call as followers of Jesus is simple. To live life ambitiously for God. We are called to respond to every temptation, just as Jesus did, by reminding Satan that we are called to worship the Lord our God and serve him only. Let us pray.

God, as we walk through this Lenten season, as we explore the way that your son was tempted, tested, challenged, as we think about what that looks like in our own lives and how we mold ourselves to be more like you as followers. Lord, we pray that you can help us understand the spaces in our life that we might be selfishly ambitious. Help us understand the ways that we are prioritizing fear or hubris over our calling to prioritize you. And Lord, help us see the ways that we can adjust those to be more focused on you. That we can reside in those promises, Lord. That we can be as confident as Jesus was in understanding that when you promise it, we know it will be. Lord, we pray all these things in your name. Amen.