

Selfish Ambition

Proverbs 25:6-7; John 3:30

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There is a paradox in life and in the Christian life in particular that goes like this: The more we promote our own honor and advancement before others, the more we are likely to be dishonored and humiliated before others. For it is not those who trumpet forth their own giftedness or greatness that endear the trust and confidence of others, but rather those who humbly go about doing their job efficiently without drawing attention to themselves by self-advertisement.

I don't know if you have noticed how most people do not like to listen to someone rattle on about how well they have done this or that. It's a sure way to turn people off. Such a one is more likely to be demoted in the sight of others than to be promoted. For if we are given to our own selfish ambition and shine the spotlight upon our own accomplishments before others, it generally indicates that we are more interested in serving ourselves than we are in serving others. This being the case, we usually will not work well with others and will not really care for others (except only in so far as others may be used to promote our own agenda).

Dear ones, if you would have the confidence of fellow employees, fellow family members, and fellow Christians so that you are honored before others for your faithfulness, you must not seek your own glory and honor, but must rather seek the glory and honor of Christ and the good of your neighbor. With John the Baptist, this should be the theme of our lives: "He [i.e. Christ—GLP] must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). Who do people see when they look at your life? Do they merely hear and see you? Or do they hear and see Jesus Christ? A wonderful evidence of the work of God's grace in your life is that although you may daily fall into selfish ambition in various ways, nevertheless, it is your earnest desire and fervent prayer that others see and hear more of Jesus Christ in your life and less of you.

From our text in Proverbs 25:6-7, let us consider and learn well the following two truths: (1) Do Not Promote Yourself before Others (Proverbs 25:6); and (2) Let Others Promote You (Proverbs 25:7).

I. Do Not Promote Yourself before Others (Proverbs 25:6).

A. Let us be clear as to the meaning of Proverbs 25:6. The form of command used by the inspired author, Solomon, denotes an urgency to immediately stop doing something that is being done. What is being done by those in view here? They are putting themselves forth in the presence of the king and standing in the place that great men occupy. That is, those in question are literally honoring themselves, adorning themselves, and swelling with pride in the presence of the king. Furthermore, they not only boast about their own abilities before the king, but also presume to compare themselves to truly great men. In other words, they talk and act as if they had gifts and graces equal to honored men—proven giants in the field. They so desire to promote their own advancement that they cannot see their own littleness and the greatness of those to whom they compare themselves.

1. Let me give some examples of how you may fall into this sin.

a. You may voluntarily offer to your "kings" or leaders (whether your boss, your parents, your elders, etc.) how well you did a job, hoping to impress them and to receive a pat on the back, or a promotion. In so doing, you are usually looking to be promoted in their eyes, or even promoted to a higher rank with a better title, or more prestige.

b. You who are in some leadership capacity may also voluntarily promote your own gifts and graces before others so as to exalt yourself in their eyes hoping to earn the respect of those you lead.

You may use your academic degrees, your accomplishments, or your experience to honor yourself when talking to others. How subtle this can be. You may even seek to disguise how you adorn yourself with honor by adding the qualification that all these things have been accomplished “by God’s grace.” It is certainly by God’s grace that you can do anything, but do not abuse God’s grace in seeking to cloak your own selfish ambition.

c. You may at times feel somewhat intimidated by others who have noticeable gifts and graces, and so you compare yourself with others or put others down so as to make yourself look good. In so doing, you have likewise honored yourself before others.

d. You may personally take credit for work that was really the work of a whole committee. It may be that you actually invested more time in a project than all of the other committee members; however, the finished product is still the work of the whole committee and not that of one person.

2. Growing up, there was a term that was used for a basketball player who had to dribble and shoot all of the time rather than looking to pass the ball to someone else who had an open shot. He was called a glory-hog. He was one who did not want to share the glory, but hogged it up for himself. This is what we do, dear ones, when conversations must focus on me, and what I think, and what I said, and what I did. Such a one is a glory-hog. He is marketing himself. The only problem is that when you market yourself in this way, the value of the product usually hits bottom.

B. Before moving on, I would like to say something about what honoring yourself before others is not.

1. Honoring yourself before others is not submitting a resume for a job and giving information about your education, degrees, past jobs and experience in the field. Are you honoring yourself by submitting an honest report? Absolutely not! This is expected as long as it is an objective statement about certain facts rather than a mere subjective statement about your own personal thoughts as to your great accomplishments. A good resume does not have to be embellished by your own personal feelings. It speaks for itself. Humility and modesty may also be evidenced in accurately evaluating one’s own gifts and graces when called to do so, but not in order to honor oneself, nor to trumpet your own success and accomplishments before others, nor to compare yourself with others in order to make yourself look good, but ultimately with a view to honor your gracious God who has so mercifully gifted and graced you. The questions to be asked here are these: Why are you sharing your accomplishments with others? Is it because you have been asked to do so? Is it because it is necessary for a supervisor to know your qualifications in order to fill a position? Have you simply stated the facts in the description of your accomplishments or have you embellished your resume with editorial notes about your greatness? Dear ones, when you embellish and editorialize, you inevitably do yourself no favors; for a good report does not need to be interpreted through your eyes—it is clear to all who read it or hear it.

2. It is not a case of honoring yourself if you must assure someone that you have the experience to do what you are doing. If you go to a doctor to have a particular procedure done who seeks to settle and calm you with words to the effect: “I have performed this procedure on a thousand patients with success”, it may in fact not be for the purpose of building himself up, but for the purpose of establishing a human trust and confidence in his ability to get the job done.

3. It is not a case of honoring yourself if in your presence someone else commends you for a job well done and you accept the complement. However, be sure that what is said is the truth and not flattery. Be willing to set the record straight publicly if that is necessary.

4. It is not a case of honoring yourself if you have a title (such as Doctor, Professor, Reverend, Pastor or Elder) and in particular situations use that title or place your degree in a conspicuous place within your office. It is one thing to insist that everyone use that title whenever speaking to you regardless of the situation (whether professional or familiar). It is something altogether different when in a professional capacity titles are used. You should not live and die by titles which you have received, for Paul can

refer to himself either as an apostle (as in 1 Timothy 1:1) or as a servant of the church (as in 1 Corinthians 9:19) depending upon the situation. Titles can be used to the glory of God or to the glory of oneself.

C. Solomon commands those who are honoring themselves (which to varying degrees I dare say we are all guilty of doing): “Do not do this any longer. You’re only hurting yourself rather than helping yourself” (even if what you say is 100% the truth). For even the truth may be spoken from a selfish motive and to a wrong end to promote your own advancement in position or prestige. Satan, you will recall, quoted the Scripture in tempting Jesus to cast himself from the pinnacle of the temple (Matthew 4:5-7). Here Satan tempted Christ with selfish ambition. “Just imagine the name you will make for yourself when you fall and the multitudes watch as the angels bear you up.” Just as it would have been a sin for even the Son of God to exalt Himself apart from the will of the Father, how much more is it a sin for us to honor ourselves (as sinful human beings) before others. Every time we fall into this sin of honoring ourselves in the presence of others, it’s as if we threw mud at our own faces. Dear ones, there are enough people around who through the years will sling mud at us without us helping them as well.

D. Why should you not honor yourself before kings and for that matter before anyone else?

1. The Spirit of God calls others to honor you with their praise rather than your praise to come from your own lips (Proverbs 27:2; Proverbs 31:31).

2. To honor yourself out of selfish ambition and for your own advancement is the fruit of pride which is one of the deadly sins that God says is an abomination to Him (Proverbs 6:16-17).

3. To promote yourself before others is to seek the approval of man rather than the approval of God (John 12:42-43). This is robbing God of His divine honor who has blessed you with every gift and grace you possess (John 5:44; 1 Corinthians 4:6-7). In so doing, you act blasphemously as though you were God.

4. Pride and self-exaltation bring shame not honor (Proverbs 11:2).

5. Pride and self-praise bring contention among brethren (Proverbs 13:10). They produce a destructive rivalry among brethren rather than unifying brethren.

6. Pride and self-glory come before a big fall (Proverbs 18:12). When pride swells your head, it also distorts your vision so that you cannot see the snare that the enemy has set for you. Your eyes are turned inward not looking to the trap that is awaiting us. If you would truly do yourself good as you ought, then you must watch carefully your words that you do not build yourself up before others. In the careless pouring forth of many words about yourself, you will build yourself up and cast others down.

E. Consider some of the biblical examples of those who honored themselves before men and what befell them.

1. Balaam (Jude 11). He was slain at Baal-Peor with the wicked Midianites (Numbers 31:8).

2. Haman (Esther 5:11). He was hanged on the very gallows he had built for Mordecai.

3. Disciples of Christ (Luke 22:24). Peter denied the Lord 3 times, and all of the disciples fled in fear in the Garden of Gethsemane.

4. Diotrephes (3 John 9-11). He suffered the censure of God in being cast off as an unfaithful minister. Dear ones, those who are given over to honor themselves will not promote the Cause of Christ, but will bring shame and dishonor to it.

II. Let Others Promote You (Proverbs 25:7).

A. If you are to be promoted before others, let others honor you rather than yourself (Proverbs 27:2).

B. This Proverb is actually used by the Lord Jesus as He dined with one of the chief Pharisees (Luke 14:1-11). Here the Lord judges in the most simple details of life how we may by our actions (even without words) selfishly promote ourselves before others. To be seated as close to the host as possible was in that culture a sign of great honor. Whereas to be seated farther from the host meant you were farther down the ladder.

1. Are you willing to start at the bottom and work your way up to the top at work or in the church? Are you willing to wash toilets, or wash feet? Or are there some jobs that are beneath you? Are you willing to invest the time and to make the sacrifices necessary so that your devotion to Jesus and service to the people of God speak for you without you having to say a single word on your own behalf? This is not an observation of any one in particular, but rather a general observation. So many men immediately crave high positions within the church. Dear men, desire church offices (1 Timothy 3:1), but desire them not for your own honor or glory, but for the honor of the Lord Jesus, the advancement of His kingdom, and the welfare of your fellow Christians. Do not get all wrapped up in how you can get those in leadership to notice you. Believe me, your life and conversation will speak louder than commending yourself. How much better for the congregation to come to us as leaders and say, "We believe God has called this man to this church office." Rather than have a man come alone saying, "I believe I have been called to this church office." Do not seek out glory and honor for yourself, but simply seek to be used of the Lord in whatever capacity He sees fit and at what time He appoints. Do not consider your time of preparation in whatever you are presently doing to be a waste of time. God is teaching you. Are you learning? Fill your time, not in hungering and thirsting for an office, but in being busy in your calling, growing in the grace and knowledge of Christ, working on your weaknesses, and serving Jesus Christ and others.

2. Remember that promotion ultimately does not come from people, but from the living God (Psalm 75:6-7—here David speaks of his own exaltation by God not by men from being a lowly shepherd to being the King of Israel). Entrust to the Lord your desire to be used by Him to lead His people to Him. Pray fervently that the Lord would give you a servant's heart and then get busy. Your works will speak for you in the gates.

C. Consider the following biblical examples of those who were exalted by God as they trusted Him and quietly performed the work given to them.

1. Mordecai (Esther 6:10-11). Promotion comes from the Lord.
2. Joseph (at Potiphar's house, in prison, and in the kingdom of Egypt). Advancement comes from the Lord.
3. Hannah (1 Samuel 1-2). Exaltation comes from the Lord.
4. Mary, the mother of Jesus (Luke 1:27—a virgin espoused to Joseph). Honor comes from the Lord.
5. Jesus Christ (Luke 2:51; Philippians 2). If there were no short cuts for the Son of God, who do we think we in looking for short cuts to places of promotion and authority? Would a short cut by Christ in skipping over the years of submission to His parents, serving as a lowly carpenter, ministering as an itinerate preacher, suffering the shame of being forsaken by His disciples, and dying as a common criminal, have led to His exaltation to God's right hand or to your salvation? Of course not! Dear ones, if Jesus had not been willing to pass through his time of humiliation before men, He would not have known the glory of His exaltation before men. Never ever forget that His humiliation was the path to His exaltation and to your salvation. As students and scholars in the school of Christ, let us do likewise.

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