

PERSPECTIVE

JULY 2017



**WHAT
DO
YOU
WANT?**

PASTORAL REFLECTIONS ON FAITHFULNESS

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What Do You Want?: Pastoral Reflections on Faithfulness

Ambition is intoxicating. A few years ago I came close—a couple times—to having a book picked up by a premier, academic publisher. I'm not sure what bothered me more: the fact that both publishers ultimately turned me down, or the fact that I cared so much.

Even now, I hate thinking about this. What a petty concern! I know an Afghan brother laboring to help the underground church in Kabul. I'm praying for a sister battling cancer. My personal tremor doesn't register on the Richter scale, but I can't change the fact that rejection hurts. Ambition is intoxicating. Unfulfilled ambitions can be devastating.

I tried to baptize my discontent, to make it seem godly. After all, being published by a high-profile press would have meant greater respect. Greater respect would have meant a wider platform. A wider platform would have meant a larger audience. A larger audience would have meant more gospel impact, and so on. Nice try. The fact of the matter is that I cared more about my fame than God's.

Renowned author David Foster Wallace didn't try to hide his ambition. An interviewer once told him, "Respect means a lot to you." "Show me somebody who doesn't like to be respected," Wallace responded, "I don't think I'm more hungry for respect than the average person."¹ Maybe he's right; but by God's grace, Christians ought to be different. We must hunger for God's glory, not ours. I know my own heart, and for a season I wanted to be successful more than faithful.

Looking back, God was kind to kill the book deal. He taught me the importance of longing for faithfulness—a precious piece of the fruit of the Spirit (Gal. 5:22).

A COMMON STRUGGLE

Wallace and I aren't alone in our desires. There is a reason so many books are filled with frustrated characters. Michael Henchard of *The Mayor of Casterbridge* lost his money and his office. Willy Loman of *Death of a Salesman* longed to be more than he was. Even virtuous Lucy of Narnia convinced herself that life

would be better if she had the looks of her older sister, Susan.

Perhaps you can relate. Have you ever battled for wealth, prominence, or beauty—worldly metrics of success—only to come up short? How many kids, when asked what they want to be when they grow up, answer, "I want to be faithful." I fear not many.

GODLY AMBITION

There is such a thing as godly ambition. Dave Harvey warns us not to kill that God-given desire to achieve. He calls it "the instinctual motivation to aspire to things, to make something happen, to have an impact, to count for something in life."² Christians ought not squelch the craving to accomplish something big. Harvey is spot on: "Humility, rightly understood, shouldn't be a fabric softener on our aspirations."³

The last thing I want to do is demotivate you from the kind of visionary action that marks a true believer. After all, there is such a thing as false humility. It says with a sly grin, "Look at me now. I'm not trying to do anything great because I don't want the attention. Don't you wish you were as humble as I am?"

Instead of hiding your talents, take a page out of Jim Eliot's life: "Expect great things from God, attempt great things for God." There is plenty of room in the Christian life for godly ambition.

Unfortunately, it's all too easy to say you are attempting great things for God when you are really attempting great things for yourself. Before you know it, a hunger for personal fame elbows out a zeal for God's glory.

How can you know if your ambition is godly or sinful? Our motives will never be pure this side of the heavenly Jerusalem; indwelling sin makes sure of that. Nonetheless, we can and must pursue faithfulness, leaving the results to God.

WHAT IS FAITHFULNESS?

Fundamentally, the faithful are simply those "full of faith." The Greek meaning behind "faithful" in the New Testament usually refers to trust in the crucified, risen, and reigning King Jesus. In fact, God's people have always put their confidence in the Lord. When Paul said Abraham "believed against hope, that he should become the father of many nations," he meant Abraham was faithful—clinging to the promises of God despite

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evidence to the contrary. Simply put, the faithful rely on God; they believe his Word.

However, faithfulness has another, related meaning. Those full of faith are reliable and trustworthy. The faithful have a proven track record of obedience to God.

The esteemed members of Hebrews 11 exemplified faithfulness in a variety of ways, not least by refusing to recant under fire (Heb. 11:26–38). When Paul explained how he “fought the good fight” and “kept the faith” (2 Tim. 4:7), he described faithfulness to the Lord. In the Parable of the Tenants, the one who wisely stewards his master’s property is called a “faithful servant” (Matt. 25:23). Likewise, the Christian who wisely stewards the gospel is called faithful, too.

Faithfulness shows up in so many different, practical, and beautiful ways:

- ✦ Making time to meditate on Scripture in the midst of a busy schedule (Psa. 1:2)
- ✦ Getting up early and working hard all day to provide for your family (1 Tim. 5:8)
- ✦ Commending Christ in an workplace that makes fun of him (Matt. 10:33)
- ✦ Showing up at the widow’s doorstep to mend her fence (James 1:27)
- ✦ Teaching the Bible every week to a small crowd (2 Tim. 4:2)
- ✦ Holding fast to the gospel when those around you are watering it down (Gal. 1:8)
- ✦ Gently correcting your kids when inside you want to scream (Eph. 6:4)
- ✦ Getting to the service early so you have a chance to encourage the saints (Heb. 10:25)
- ✦ Submitting to your husband when you think he’s wrong (Eph. 5:22)
- ✦ Leading your wife humbly and sacrificially (Eph. 5:25)
- ✦ Giving money and time to a neighbor in need (Luke 10:37)

These are just some of the marks of a Spirit-filled life of faithfulness. The world cares about plaques and popularity, real estate and revenue, glitz and glamour. God cares about faithfulness—the steadfast commitment to honor the Lord in a thousand simple ways.

How can we be sure God cares about this? We know Jesus Christ, God incarnate, gave up heaven for a life of faithful obedience culminating in a cross. Faithfulness is nothing more—or less—than Christlikeness.

MY HEART TURNED

There’s nothing wrong with being disappointed, but when the publisher gave me bad news the sting was sharper than it should have been. I clearly cared more about being noticed than being helpful. It didn’t happen overnight, but somewhere along the way my heart turned. I took my eyes off of the faithfulness of my Savior and put them on myself.

At least I’m in good company. Solomon prayed and received wisdom from God. With this wisdom he settled disputes, managed a kingdom, and oversaw the construction of the very house of God. Solomon asked for wisdom that he might rule justly. God, as he often does, gave him so much more: “King Solomon excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And the whole earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom” (1 Ki. 10:23–24). He had it all: wisdom, wealth, and prestige.

But somewhere along the way, his heart turned. Solomon started believing his own press. Though he once elevated the name of the Lord above his own fame (see 1 Ki. 10:1), he eventually neglected God’s Word, disobeyed God’s commands, and allowed the kingdom to reflect his glory and not God’s. By accumulating wealth, weapons, and wives—all in defiance of God (Deut 17:14–20)—Solomon proved he loved success more than faithfulness.

THANKFUL FOR FAILURE

Solomon lost his kingdom; I just lost my pride. Looking back, I’m thankful my book was rejected. God splashed a cold glass of water on my face, reminding me he’s important, and I’m not. In the big scheme of things, it was a tiny trial; but it was *my* trial, and God used it to pry my fingers off a brittle ego.

More than that, God pressed into my soul what every Christian ought to know. In his divine economy, the metrics of success aren’t the amount of followers, likes, retweets, or mentions you get on social media. It’s not the number of letters behind your name, books on your shelf, or how fast you can run a mile (at my age, not very fast at all). Christians, above all others, ought to understand this: our value isn’t found in what we do, but in the perfect love of a Savior condemned in our place. And the fruit of the Spirit isn’t success; it’s faithfulness.

WHAT ONE CHASES

David Foster Wallace, that great American writer, committed suicide in 2008 at the age of 46. He struggled with depression for years and couldn't find a way out. He achieved worldly success early on in life (everyone wanted to publish his books), but it wasn't enough to appease his ambition. In the interview where he admitted he wanted respect, he also confessed he didn't know where to find it. "A lot of my problem," he said, "is I don't really have a brass ring, and I'm kind of open to suggestions about what one chases."

Wallace, like Solomon, had the world in the palm of his hand, but it couldn't shake the despair in his head. Worldly ambition, the carnal desire for success, is a bus with just two stops. One stop is failure—you get out knowing you didn't achieve what you wanted. The other stop is success, but it doesn't satisfy—you debark only to look for another brass ring that still won't leave you fulfilled. Either way you look at it, worldly ambition is a ride to nowhere.

What you chase matters. Christians are called to chase after Christ. To love him, to long for him, to pursue him with everything we have. What does this chase look like? Faithfulness: the steadfast commitment to honor the Lord in the nitty-gritty details of everyday life.

HOW CAN YOU GROW IN FAITHFULNESS?

Now more than ever the church needs models of faithfulness. We are bombarded by airbrushed images of success. They belittle faithfulness and commend acclaim. How can we grow in our pursuit of faithfulness?

- ✦ Believe the gospel. Only those who have put their faith in the atoning work of Jesus Christ can be found faithful. Have you done this? Submit your life to Christ. Trust in him for your salvation. Believe he died on the cross for your sins and rose from the dead for your justification. Without faith, faithfulness is impossible.
- ✦ Rethink success. It's one thing to say success is a life of obedience to Christ, a life of faithfulness; but consider how you react when you don't get what you want. Perhaps your heart hasn't caught up to your head's definition of success. If you think success is a big family, a stable career, or a large church, then you've wrongly accepted the world's metric. It's time to rethink success.
- ✦ If you are in ministry, listen to Mark Dever's message, "Endurance Needed."⁴ It's a sweet reminder that worldly ambition poisons the pastorate.

- ✦ Get to work. Faithfulness is a gift of the Spirit, but it's also hard work. Think back to the list of what faithfulness can look like. Checking off those boxes is not the pathway to heaven; we are justified by grace alone, through faith alone, in Christ alone. But if God has given us new life, if he has changed our hearts, than we will roll up our sleeves and obey his commands.
- ✦ Leave the results to God. Paul wrote, "I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the growth. So neither he who plants nor he who waters is anything, but only God who gives the growth" (1 Cor. 3:6–7). The call to faithfulness is not a call to laziness, but it is a call to rest. We are finite. We may write the best book we could possibly write, and never find a publisher. We may work as hard as we possibly can, and yet never be promoted. We may share the gospel a thousand times, and yet never see a convert. It's our job to be faithful. The rest is up to God.

~Aaron Menikoff

¹ "David Foster Wallace Interview (03/1997)." Found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=91ytSdSM-Kk>. Accessed 21 June 2017.

² Dave Harvey, *Rescuing Ambition* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Books, 2010), 12.

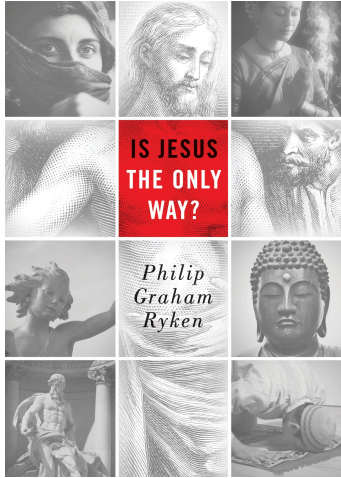
³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴ Mark Dever, "Endurance Needed: Strength for a Slow Reformation and the Dangerous Allure of Speed." Found at T4G.org.

Is Jesus The Only Way?

Written by Philip Graham Ryken

Bookstall Price \$8



America is built on the ideals of freedom and choice. As Americans, we want the freedom to choose what career to pursue, who our spouse will be, how many kids we want, Coca-Cola or Pepsi, and on and on. We love choice. It is no mystery then that when confronted with the question “Is Jesus the only way?” we see so many well-intentioned brothers and sisters stumble.

Philip Graham Ryken addresses this question in his booklet *Is Jesus the Only Way?* by examining the root of this

question and ultimately its answer. Ryken explains that the exclusivity of Christianity is no secret as secular writer Alan Watts succinctly states, “Christianity is a contentious faith which requires an all-or-nothing commitment to Jesus as the one and only incarnation of the Son of God” yet this very question has occupied the minds of countless Christians. Ryken argues that the Bible is clear and that “Jesus Christ is the only way because he has solved your only problem,” which is sin. Ultimately, Ryken’s booklet teaches and reminds us that while the world and other religions may offer temporary solace, none can have the lasting, life-giving effect that Christ can.

I recommend this booklet to anyone who has ever wrestled with the question “Is Jesus the Only Way?” We usually ask this out of love because we loathe the idea of family, friends, co-workers, and others who aren’t saved suffering, separated from Christ. This book will give you comfort in God’s sovereignty and can help navigate those conversations with non-believers. Additionally, I recommend this book to anyone that is discipling a new believer. This question is sure to come up and it will equip you for when the time comes (and would be a terrific book to read together).

– RECOMMENDED BY BLAKE EGAN

Excerpts From the Book

1

“Jesus Christ refuses to have any colleagues.”

–The Problem with Christians, p. 13

2

“The way to begin to recognize such questions is to recognize that human beings have only one basic problem: sin.”

–Why Jesus is the Only Way, p. 47

3

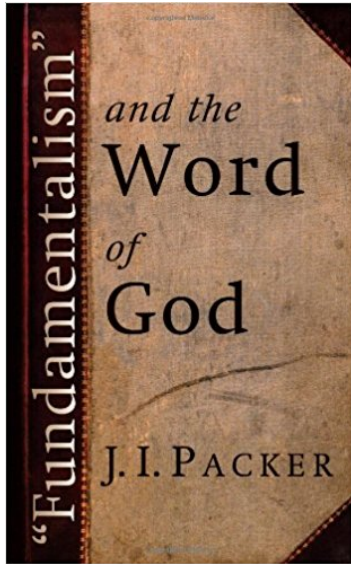
“Nor should we think that only ignorant savages worship dumb idols. In our supposed sophistication we worship lesser things like affluence and personal space. The twenty-first century seems poised for a new outbreak of true paganism.”

–Christianity for the Pluralistic Age, p. 33

Fundamentalism and the Word of God

Written by J. I. Packer

Bookstall Price \$13



In *Fundamentalism and the Word of God*, theologian J.I. Packer skillfully defends those who have been labeled “fundamentalists.” He argues that fundamentalists read the Bible as it ought to be read; as the authoritative, infallible, and the inerrant Word of God. Packer clarifies the divide between fundamentalist and liberal Christians as essentially the difference between being an evangelical versus having a subjective view of Scripture. He does this by addressing the two sides’ approach to the Bible. The evangelical believes that “Scripture has complete and final authority over the church as a self-contained, self-interpreting revelation of God” (p. 73). This is in contrast to a subjectivist

view of Scripture in which the reader approaches the Bible as if its authority is their own reason and the world’s current scientific consensus. J.I. Packer sees the authority of God’s Word as the issue in Christianity.

Whether it was the serpent saying to Eve, “did God actually say...?” (Genesis 3:1) or Paul urging Christians to grow in the Word rather than being “carried about by every wind of doctrine” (Ephesians 4:14); God’s people have always needed to remember their greatest authority is God’s Word. Packer makes it clear that approaching the Bible with something else as the ultimate authority is “fundamentally un-Christian” (p. 140). Fortunately, this book can act as a mirror for the reader; Packer’s sharp distinctions will move them to question for themselves, “Who or what is my authority?”

This book is extremely helpful to those inside or outside the church. Christians will find it helpful for understanding the evangelical doctrine of the Word of God through a logical, step-by-step process. For example, Packer covers questions concerning Old Testament inspiration, and why we should interpret Scripture with Scripture. He also includes apologetic notes on how to address attacks against the Bible. For those outside of Christianity, this is like sitting in on a closed-door discussion. The way that Packer fairly lays out the differences between evangelicals and liberal Christians will help those investigating Christianity to know the foundation of the Christian faith—God powerfully revealing himself to rebellious sinners within the pages of the Bible.

— RECOMMENDED BY DANNY SANDERSON

Excerpts From the Book

1

“The problem of authority is the most fundamental problem that the Christian church ever faces. This is because Christianity is built upon truth: that is to say, on the content of a divine revelation.”

—Authority, p. 42

2

“Faith and reason only come into conflict when reason defies God’s authority, refuses to be a servant of faith, and reverts to some sort of unbelief; and we have observed that the much-vaunted ‘freedom’ which reason thus gains is actually perfect slavery.”

—Conclusion, p. 170

3

“The proper ground for believing a thing is that God says it in His written Word, and a readiness to take God’s Word and accept what He asserts in the Bible is thus fundamental to faith.”

—Authority, p. 49

