

July 19, 2009 2 Corinthians 5:6-10 “Holy Ambition” by Richard Boatman

“Therefore [*because we know God’s purpose of transforming us into Christ’s image from mortal to immortal, and because we have been given a foretaste of this realm through the “deposit” of the Holy Spirit*] we are always confident and know that as long as we are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord—⁷for we walk by faith, not by sight—⁸we are confident, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord. ⁹Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him. ¹⁰For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.

It’s good to know who you are and who you are not. The other day one of our younger members was visiting in the church office. I commented on her tattoos—this being the blue-ink generation. I then told her that I’ve casually thought of getting an earring. After all, I asserted, Harrison Ford has one. Without a second passing, the young woman said, “Yeah, but he’s hot.” I guess I’ll not be getting an earring anytime soon. It’s good to know who you are and who you are not.

In today’s passage, Paul is helping us to know who we are and who we are not. Though we live in a human body often surrounded by secular structures and emphases, our identity is from another realm. We are to live as Christians in an absent-minded way. By this I do not mean forgetful or foolish, but fully aware of our ultimate home, our ultimate completion as new creations, absent from this present body. For as long as we remain housed in flesh and blood, we can only nibble from the “sampler plate,” what verse five calls the “deposit” of the Holy Spirit. The food is good, but the entrees are limited because our spiritual palates are still underdeveloped, incapable as yet of feasting on the indescribable cuisine.

So, as the apostle says, “as long as we [the spirit/soul] are at home in the body we are absent from the Lord...” In other words, absent from the completed work, the unfiltered glory, ecstasy and power of God’s presence that comes with a glorified body, a body like Jesus’ capable of drinking in such intense splendor. When we are finally “at home with the Lord,” then it will only be because we are absent from this current limited flesh and blood edition. So to live absent-mindedly, i.e. with our mind set on the movement of God’s purpose from mortal to immortal, we must do so by faith, “for we walk by faith, not by sight” (verse 7).

It is through faith that we are both focused and formed. The other evening Curtis Brinkmeyer took me on a truck tour of some of his hunting sites. I’ve got to

tell you, seeing the deer and feeling the rock of the truck as we rolled over ruts and through ravines, my macho juices were stirred. I'm usually a man of books and ideas and arguments and postulations, but hearing Curtis talk, my primeval hunter instincts were engaged. I get the same feeling when I go to Cabela's. A couple of weeks ago, I used some of my Cabela's points to purchase binoculars. For spotting deer? Nope...birds, specifically cardinals. In August we're going to a St. Louis baseball game...those kinds of Cardinals.

Binoculars give us focus allowing us to see more clearly what is otherwise obscured. As we adjust the focal dial, we are reminded that there is a world of reality all around us that we are unaware of until we gaze at it with powerful lenses. Faith allows us to focus our spiritual eyes on a very real realm that otherwise goes unnoticed. Through interacting with Scripture, concentrated prayer and communion with God, through fellowship and teaching, our spiritual binoculars are focused.

And as we stay focused on that heavenly reality, we are formed by it. **Verse 8** says, "we are confident, I say, and prefer rather to be absent from the body and to be at home with the Lord..." Paul's inclinations, his affinities have been formed by his focus upon kingdom reality. What we spend our time focused on will be the very thing that forms us. I think this is the meaning of Psalm 37:4 – "Delight yourself in the Lord; and he will give you the desires of your heart." I've been in church cultures that have reduced this to "Give God praise and he'll give you a new car or the best job in town." But at the heart of this verse is focus and formation. "Delight yourself in the Lord..." That's our focus. As we do so then "he will give you [or place within you] the desires of your heart." That's formation. In other words, as we focus our energies on the Lord, he forms the desires in us that motivate and move us in a godly and spiritually productive way.

Romans 4:18 avers, "In hope against hope [Abraham] believed, in order that he might become a father of many nations, according to that which had been spoken [by God], 'So shall your descendants be.'" Did you see the pattern? Abraham believed [focused on God's reality], in order that he might become—become is a process of being formed by. He focused *on* God in order to be formed *by* God. This passage crescendos, "And without becoming weak in faith he contemplated his own body, now as good as dead...and the deadness of Sarah's womb; yet, with respect to the promise of God [Abraham's focus], he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith [this is formation]...being fully assured that what God had promised [focus], He was able also to perform [formation]" (19-21).

Abraham had at his center a growing aspiration that can genuinely be called **Holy Ambition**. Verse nine in today's passage says, "Therefore we also have as our ambition, whether at home or absent, to be pleasing to Him..." So the most compelling call in this earthly realm that will be continued in the heavenly realm is the Holy Ambition "to be pleasing to [God]." Jesus said, "My food is to do the will of him who sent me and to complete his work" (John 4:34). His entire rubric for living was centered in this Holy Ambition. Soren Kierkegaard, the nineteenth century Danish Christian thinker and writer wrote a book entitled Purity of Heart Is to Will One Thing. The title is a simple directive and yet the author spends the entire book raising the complex issues that divert us and distort within us such a pure pursuit.

Jill brought her fiancé Joe home to meet her parents, Mike and Mary. After dinner, Mike asked Joe to join him on the patio for a visit. "So," Mike asked, "what do you do?" "I'm a biblical scholar," Joe replied. "Hmmm," Mike reflected, "That's admirable, but what will you do to provide a nice home for my daughter to live in?" Joe said, "I will study and God will provide for us." "I see," Mike responded, "And how will you buy Jill clothes and furniture and all the things she needs and deserves?" "I will concentrate on my studies, and God will provide for us," Joe insisted. "And children? How will you support my grandchildren?" Mike continued. "Don't worry, sir," Joe replied, "God will provide for us." The conversation continued like this, each time Mike asking a question, Joe declaring that "God will provide." After the young couple left, Mary asked her husband, "So, how did it go?" "Well, I found out that he has no job and no plans," Mike said, "but the good news is that he thinks *I'm* God."

Our God-talk can become empty rhetoric. We may speak of God providing or of holy ambition and even nod our heads at such lofty implications. But without "will[ing] one thing," we are destined to circle the airport without ever landing. That which grounds our being is this holy ambition of our will surrendered and pleasing to the will of God.

If holy ambition is indeed to be our pursuit, as it so closely connects us with the mindset of heaven, it seems that two initial aspects must be considered. **First**, we must hunger and thirst. If we are not hungry and thirsty for God, this must of necessity be our primary prayer: "Lord, create a hunger and thirst within me for your Spirit and Word and for your ways." We cannot grow spiritually any more than we will grow physically without hunger and thirst. **Second**, we need an ethos for examination. We need to be within a spiritual climate conducive for conviction, repentance, forgiveness, accountability, truth, encouragement, etc. If someone

spoke of possessing an ambition for living a healthy lifestyle but always ate junk food, never exercised and avoided all contact with physical examinations that might make them uneasy, we might call this person delusional. Are not Christians who rarely feed on God's word or remain too busy for serious prayer or avoid vital and challenging small group studies equally delusional? An ethos for examination is a biblical culture that gives us traction in our spiritual growth; it gives us leverage for confronting inner deceptive strongholds and gives us footholds for gaining new positions in Christ.

And these new positions in Christ enable us to more productively enter into the works of God—forgiveness, mercy, hospitality, humility, assistance, generosity, etc. Ephesians 2:10 says, “We are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand that we should walk in them.”

So, holy ambition leads us to works that are worthy of our position in Christ while unholy ambition to works that are worth-less than such a position dictates. Vs 10 says, “For we must all appear before the judgment seat of Christ, so that each one may receive what is due him for the things done while in the body, whether good or bad.” In 1 Corinthians 3:13-15 Paul says, “Each person's work will [at the day of the Lord]...be revealed with fire; and the fire itself will test the quality of each person's work. If any person's work which has been built [upon the foundation of Christ] remains, he shall receive a reward. If any person's work is burned up this person will suffer loss; but he himself shall be saved, yet so as through fire.”

Notice that Paul is speaking to Christians. With that in mind, allow me to share some concluding observations from these verses: **1)** We will appear before the judgment seat of Christ; **2)** The content and motivation of our works will be revealed; related to this, **3)** Works initiated by our old nature and for any motive other than pleasing the Lord will be burned up by the holy presence of God; **4)** Those whose works stand the test receive a reward; **5)** Those whose works are burned up will suffer loss, but their souls will be saved, yet through [the] fire (presumably) of God's holy presence. **Works and rewards**—Protestants have a pretty good handle on works: Good works can't get us to heaven, only Jesus' gift can; but good works certainly validate the genuineness of God's grace within us. Regarding rewards, we have little theology. So I speculate. I suspect that the believer's suffering by fire that Paul speaks of is begun in our earthly bodies and continued as the process of completing our glorified bodies. And I surmise that as believers our place in heaven is commensurate with the place we have given heaven in us. In Saint Louis I'll be sitting in the bleacher seats; but I'm still in the ball park! Whether bleacher seats or box seats, there is still cause for singing!