

But after Uzziah became powerful, his pride led to his downfall. He was unfaithful to the LORD his God, and entered the temple of the LORD to burn incense on the altar of incense. ¹⁷ Azariah the priest with eighty other courageous priests of the LORD followed him in. ¹⁸ They confronted him and said, “It is not right for you, Uzziah, to burn incense to the LORD. That is for the priests, the descendants of Aaron, who have been consecrated to burn incense. Leave the sanctuary, for you have been unfaithful; and you will not be honored by the LORD God.”

¹⁹ Uzziah, who had a censer in his hand ready to burn incense, became angry. While he was raging at the priests in their presence before the incense altar in the LORD’s temple, leprosy broke out on his forehead. ²⁰ When Azariah the chief priest and all the other priests looked at him, they saw that he had leprosy on his forehead, so they hurried him out. Indeed, he himself was eager to leave, because the LORD had afflicted him.

²¹ King Uzziah had leprosy until the day he died. He lived in a separate house—leprosy, and excluded from the temple of the LORD. Jotham his son had charge of the palace and governed the people of the land.

²² The other events of Uzziah’s reign, from beginning to end, are recorded by the prophet Isaiah son of Amoz. ²³ Uzziah rested with his fathers and was buried near them in a field for burial that belonged to the kings, for people said, “He had leprosy.” And Jotham his son succeeded him as king. (NIV 84)

Theme: The Goal is the Gospel

A life without ambition is a life that never amounts to much. But equally important is the goal of that ambition. Many a promising career has been derailed because of lack of ambition or because their ambition was for something else. Each year there are stories about great athletes—five star recruits coming out of high school who never amount to much in college because they weren’t in the weight room, the practice field, or the film room often enough. Or there is the smart and gifted teenager who would rather hang out with his buddies instead of going off to college and sharpen his knowledge. Or maybe it’s someone else you know—not particularly gifted, just a regular Joe,

who instead of getting a job or going off to college, his life ambition was to play video games and watch movies, soon he began drinking and getting high and now he not much use to society at all.

Uzziah was another gifted teenager with a promising career. He became king of Judah, the southern kingdom, at age 16. He did was what right in the eyes of the Lord so the Lord blessed him. He defeated some of their biggest enemies, gaining territory back; he fortified Jerusalem and built up some of the infrastructure of Judah. He built up and organized the army. He had many flocks and fields full of produce. He was a gifted king—one blessed by the Lord. And so he was popular, everyone loved him, and his fame spread throughout the region.

But (and there is almost always a “but” isn’t there); he became proud and conceited as his power and popularity increased. One day he decided that he was going to go into the temple and go the altar of incense and light up some incense to the Lord. At the altar of incense the priests would offer up prayers to God on behalf of the people and then light some incense. The picture behind it is that prayers went up to God as the incense went up to the sky. We sing about this on page 55 in the hymnal, part of the Vespers service, from Psalm 141: “Let my prayer rise before you as incense, the lifting up of my hands as the evening sacrifice.”

Sounds good, right? What could be wrong about Uzziah wanting to light some incense he offered up a prayer to the Lord? The problem is that the altar of incense was in the Holy Place. And only priests, direct descendants of Aaron who had been consecrated, or made holy, could enter the Holy Place. The priests were to represent the people before God, and they could only approach God after they had been made holy. And Uzziah was just a king; he wasn’t a priest. There are numerous commands from God that make this notably clear. For instance in Numbers three he says, **Appoint Aaron and his sons to serve as priests; anyone else who approaches the sanctuary must be put to death.**

Why exactly would Uzziah do such a thing when it was clearly against God’s will? Honestly, we are never told; but we can offer up a guess. Uzziah wasn’t content to worship the way God prescribed for him—he was above that. As great as he was, why he couldn’t go above and

beyond his predecessors, and not only lead the people as king, but also lead them in worship—he could offer up some incense on his own! He became so successful in his wealth and power that he decided that he knew more than God did. So his ambition was on himself—his ambition was to further his career or to become better than those around him and before him. His ambition blinded him from seeing God and his will.

What about you? What is your ambition? It could be to become a better athlete, or to get good grades and get into a good college which will lead to a successful career. Maybe your ambitions are to take good care of your family, to make sure that your children are happy and have every opportunity to do what they want to do. Maybe you have ambitions to save up a lot of money for an early retirement or for a cabin in the U.P. Maybe it's to get a promotion so that people would be under you, or to become more popular, or happier in your life. I could go on—I'm sure you have many different ambitions in your life, different things that drive you.

And ambition is a good thing—a drive and a want-to are certainly good gifts from God. But the problem comes when our worldly or earthly ambitions get in the way of us obeying his will. Do your ambitions contradict what God wants you to do? Do they prohibit you from the worship of God or the study of his Word? It's one thing to work in order to support your family or to make sure your child participates in every activity known to man so as to get a variety of experiences, but it's another thing to do so at times where you regularly have to miss worship because of it—your worldly ambition then trumps God's will. Or maybe your ambition blinds your spiritual thinking like it did Uzziah. Do you begin to think that since God's goals don't really match up to what you are striving toward, then it must be God's problem and not yours? So in your mind, or maybe to your friends and family, you change God's Word to make it fit your priorities; or you conveniently forget about a certain portion of his Word; or think to yourself that a what God says in that passage doesn't really apply to you, but to someone else? There are many times that we must admit that we have changed or denied God's Word to make it for your own agenda—so that it matches up with your ambitions. That is what happened to Uzziah. And in his ambition God punished him. He struck him with leprosy—an infectious skin disease, often

contagious. For defiling the temple, God made him permanently unclean. We are told that he lived in a separate house, but really lepers were forced to live by themselves outside of the city so as to not infect others. He was no longer allowed to live in the palace, he was no longer able to reign over his people, converse with people, or even worship the Lord in the temple.

Seem harsh? It could have been worse—he could have been killed for entering the Holy Place. And those who don't repent of their sinful ambition will face an eternal punishment. They will be cut off from God and from his people. Not just for a while or for a lifetime—but for an eternity.

But there is another king, about 800 years later who walked the same land. But he didn't reign over any earthly kingdom. He is the king of kings, Jesus Christ. And his ambition was the same as Uzziah's when he first became king. But unlike Uzziah, Jesus's ambition never became self-centered or conceited. His ambition was always pure and noble. His ambition was to always do the will of the Lord by both obeying his Word and not going against what he commands.

His ambition was not to further himself, but to save us. That is why he came to live here with us. We know that Jesus' ambition was for us in that he gave up everything for us. First off, he gave up the glories and riches of heaven. He was dwelling in heaven and ruling over his entire creation when he decided to be born as a weak, defenseless, little boy—completely humbling himself. Paul talks about this in his letter to the Philippians, **Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped.** Jesus is true God, yet he made himself lower than God, and in his human nature didn't consider himself equal to God. He became one of us, even making himself subject to his own law. And when he became a man, he didn't chose to become some sort of great and powerful ruler; but a commoner, one who had to obey the rulers of this earth—the rulers, you remember, he created and set in place. He made himself so low that the almighty, eternal God, died on the cross.

This wasn't pleasant for Jesus to do. He didn't take great pleasure in being rejected, betrayed, beaten, flogged, and crucified. He cried out in agony when he was forsaken by his Father and suffered through the eternity of hell that our sins deserve. And yet he willingly obeyed. He

willingly suffered and died for us. Why? So that he could save us. As he told his disciples in our gospel for today, **the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.**

What was Jesus' ambition? It was clearly not for him, but for us. Jesus didn't do everything he did for his own gain, for his own pleasure. Everything he did—from always obeying the Lord, to his suffering, death, and resurrection, it was all for us. His ambition was our salvation—so that he could pay for the sins of the whole world, Uzziah's included. And there is good news with his story. It seems as if Uzziah repented. The leprosy drove him to repent and turn back to God. And we look forward to seeing him in heaven one day. Christ's ambition—the driving force in his life was to remove the guilt of our sins and their condemnation and to win for us the victory over death by his resurrection. His number one ambition was to save us and everything he did was geared toward doing just that.

Ambition is a good thing—it truly is a gift from God. It is greatly beneficial in our lives—as long as the goal of our ambition is on the right thing. No one should be more ambitious as you and I—as us. We have the pure message of the gospel. The Bible alone tells us of our Savior, Jesus Christ and that all who believe in him will not be condemned but will live with him in heaven forever. This message has been entrusted to us to share with others that they may believe and be saved. That is our goal, that is our ambition. We are driven for the Word. Our ambition is to share the gospel with those in our congregation and community and to spread the word throughout the world. It's not for ourselves and our lives, happiness, enjoyment, or prosperity. But it's for the spread of the gospel and for the growth of our faith and that of our loved ones.

There is another thing we are ambitious about—God and his Word and obedience to that Word. Look at the high priest Azariah and the 80 priests with him. They saw the king sinning, so they went and pointed out his sin to him. They weren't afraid that he was the king, but they confronted him anyway and didn't back down. He was doing something unlawful; and when he defiled the temple by his leprosy they didn't hesitate to kick him out of there—king or not! May we have the same ambition for God and his Word. May we see have the same goal and desire—that we hate all sin and what everyone to obey

him. May we not back down in showing our love and concern for God's Word by pointing out others their sins that they may repent and turn back to him.

Ambition is a good thing, but equally important is the goal of that ambition. Like Christ's, whose ambition was to save us, our ambition is salvation—the salvation of others. For us, the goal is the gospel. It's not to have a great and comfortable life. It's not to further our relationships with others; it's not to alter God's Word to make it fit our agenda. Rather, our ambition is for God and his Word and the spread of his gospel. Everything we do is geared toward this gospel so that many more may join us in heaven forever. And that is a goal worthy of your ambition. Amen.