

Grace Fellowship Church

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Ambition, Approval, or Appetite: Which One Defines You?

Luke 4

Today, what am I going to do? Well today what I'm going to do today is I'm going to ask this simple question... *What kind of person are you?* There are all kinds of tests you can do online, in books, in seminars, and there are all kinds of approaches to discovering the kind of person you are.

Human beings have a great propensity, a great joy, about talking about themselves. We love to talk about ourselves. We love to find out about ourselves. We think the most important discoveries of the discoveries we make about ourselves, and I guess I'm no different from anyone else, and I've done those tests, and I've taught those tests, and there are all kinds of different ways of discovering what kind of person you are.

Well this morning we're going to go back to an ancient wisdom rooted in Scripture that helps us to understand the kind of person we are, and more importantly, in understanding the kind of person we are discover the way in which God will impact our lives and bring us to the cross so that we can live the resurrected life.

There are particular ways, particular avenues, God has built into the heart of every human being. Every person here has a well-worn track in their heart that is defined by the kind of person they are. The kind of person you are will define the way in which Jesus will often impact your life, come into your life, bring you to the place of recognizing His lordship, bring you to the place where you can bow at the cross, and then give you the grace to live the resurrected life.

So that's the journey we're going to go on today. I'll be mostly in Luke's Gospel, and the first place we're going to go to is Luke 4, because this ancient wisdom is an ancient wisdom that was discovered or was taught by a group of men who lived in the desert around about the third century, 250-300. A group of men called the Desert Fathers (I think we have a slide about that) were a group of leaders who believed the church was coming to a great moment of breakthrough, and they were absolutely right. It wasn't very long after they went to the desert to pray that the emperor himself bowed his knee and said the Roman Empire will become a Christian empire.

It was that sense that the world was coming to this cataclysmic moment when the church would rise up and when the peoples would bow their knee, and so they went to the desert to pray. Some of them spent *years* in the desert. Antony, the great leader of the Desert Fathers, stayed 70 years in the desert. He lived to 105, and he spent his time worshipping God and praying for the breakthrough.

People from all around the world would gather to him to seek his wisdom, and others would gather to him to watch his life and imitate his ways. Over these years as he and others spent their time meditating on Scripture, counseling the good and the great, living in prayer and worship,

they focused their energy on understanding what it was that Jesus came to do, and particularly because they'd been called to the desert to pray, they remembered the beginning of Jesus' ministry and the temptations He faced in the wilderness.

As they pored and meditated over these temptations, they recognized that Jesus, the new Adam, represented the whole of humanity, and that these temptations He faced represented the kinds of people who are found in humanity. There are particular temptations, particular traits and tendencies within the human heart that are defined by the temptations.

The temptations you'll remember in Luke 4 are temptations about the appetite, are temptations about ambition. Appetite is obvious when you're hungry as Jesus was in the desert. The devil comes and says, "You're the Son of God. Turn these stones into bread." Obviously, that's a distinct temptation.

The Desert Fathers and others who followed them said, "There are particular kinds of people where that kind of temptation is the first temptation in their life. It's the big temptation. It's the defining temptation, the temptation to look to deal with their needs. They recognize there's a need. They recognize there's an unsatisfied place in their life, and that's the place where they are most likely to be tempted, and that's the place where God can meet them."

There's a place in the temptations of Jesus where the devil comes to Him and says, "Look, I know You've come to kind of set up the kingdom of God, so how about I give You all of the nations of the world?" That'd be a good starting point, wouldn't it? "I'll give You all the nations

of the world and their authority and glory. All You have to do is You just have to worship me." It's a temptation about ambition. Jesus came with an ambition put in His heart by the Father.

Ambition is a good thing, but it's a tendency, it's a trait, it's a temptation in the hearts of some that comes first. The thing they will be drawn towards first is a sense of wanting to fulfill an ambition. It may even be a God-given ambition, but it's the definition of their life.

Then thirdly, there is this other temptation. The devil says to Jesus, "Look, I have You on the highest point of the temple." Now we don't whether He was taken there in the Spirit or physically taken there, but whatever it was, there's Jesus and the devil, and they're on the highest point of the temple in Jerusalem.

The devil says to Jesus, "Now look, I know the messianic passages from the Scriptures, and doesn't one of those messianic passages from the Old Testament say that the Lord will prevent You from even stubbing Your foot against a stone? So how about You just jump? When You jump, You can demonstrate to everybody You have the approval of God, that You are the Messiah, that Your ministry is being supported and backed up by the Father because obviously the angels will come and carry You fluttering to the ground, and You won't harm even a hair on Your head?"

It's really a temptation about someone who's seeking the approval of another because it's all about the approval of the Messiah by God. The Desert Fathers said there are whole groups of people in humanity where their principal temptation in life is whether they have the approval of

another, whether when they behave or when they speak or when they act in any way, shape, or form, it's the approval of others that defines whether they're being successful in life.

Now this ancient wisdom has been passed down to us, and it's rooted deeply in the Scriptures. So what I want to do this morning is I want to just go through each one of these, and I want to just look at what it would mean for each of us to recognize where our basic temptation, where our basic tendency lies, and how it would be that God would meet us, bring us to the cross, deliver grace to our lives in a fresh way, and give us a fresh experience of living the resurrected life. Is that a good deal for us this morning? Are you prepared to come with me? Okay.

So let's look at *ambition*. Let's just think about some biblical characters who were ambitious.

Now there are lots of biblical characters who were ambitious, but I'm thinking principally of two characters right now, one in the Old and one in the New...David and Paul.

So here's David. Now David has a great ambition, and his ambition is to establish the land God has given to the people of God as a place that is free from all of the pagan peoples that need to be driven out, and so his ambition is to establish the kingdom of God on earth, and he desires that, he looks for it, he works for it, and he sees it in his life.

Like so often with a person who has ambition at their heart, it really depends upon strength to fulfill that ambition. The thing about ambitious people is that it's strength that fulfills the ambition, and if it's your strength to fulfill your ambition, you won't have enough because human beings are fallen. Human beings do not have the capacity now that we have fallen away from, the

original relationship we had with God. The only way we can fulfill the ambitions God gives us, the ambitions we would like to fulfill in life, is that He strengthens us.

Now here's the key: The only way we will ever get to the point of receiving God's strength to fulfill the ambitions He has put in our heart is that we recognize our weakness. It is by weakness we are able to embrace God's strength because unless you need God's strength, you can't get it. Everybody knows that. It's only when you need something that you look for it. It's only when you look for something that you find it. You won't find it if you don't look, and you won't look if you don't need. So clearly there is a fundamental recognition in the heart of the ambitious person of their own weakness to achieve that ambition.

David's weakness was revealed to him when he saw one more conquest. She was called Bathsheba, and that one conquest led to catastrophe in his life...the death of a child, the shaking of his nation, the rocking of his life because in that moment he didn't recognize his need for God's strength.

Paul, ambitious to see this renegade sect persecuted and driven out... He was called Saul at the time. He was one of the principal young Pharisees. He wanted to have this ambition fulfilled to remove this scourge from among the Jewish people. You know the story. He was overwhelmed by Jesus on the road to Damascus, brought to his knees, and it was demonstrated to him that he had no strength in himself.

Constantly through his life after he encountered Jesus and then took up the great call, the new ambition to be the apostle to the Gentiles, the constant battle in his life was the battle between strength and weakness. He had a thorn in his flesh he describes and says, "I went to the Lord and I said, 'Lord, remove this thorn from my flesh.'"

Thorn in the flesh is the same thing as pain in the neck. It really is. That's the biblical reference. It means a person or a group of people that are troubling you and giving you great difficulty. He was now the one who was persecuted.

"Remove this thorn from my flesh." The Lord said, "No!" Paul said, "Please?" The Lord said, "No." Paul said, "No, really please." The Lord said, "No. My grace is enough for you, Paul, for My power is made perfect in your weakness. My power is made perfect in your weakness." Let's try saying that. My power is made perfect in your weakness.

You see, Paul had the ambition Jesus gave him, to evangelize, to be the apostle to the Gentiles, but he could not fulfill that ambition in his own strength. He needed to embrace his weakness so that God's strength could meet him in his weakness and he could live that resurrected, empowered life. That's true, isn't it?

Now this same equation is true for all of the others. It may be that you're particularly driven by ambition. I'm one of those kinds of people. So is Buddy. Honestly he is. The reality for the ambitious person is that they have to come to their point of weakness.

I was recently (this is a story from several years ago...long years ago) ordained. I was preaching as hard as I could. I was doing the best I could. I was visiting. I was praying. Nothing happened. One day one person came to faith and they joined another church. I mean, I was just desperate, and I'm saying, "God, please do something! Give me a breakthrough! Don't You know how hard I've tried?"

I'm out in the yard, and my daughter who's out there on the resources table had just started walking, and I was trying to clear the backyard. What we were doing, you see, is I was trying to clear the backyard for a place for her to play, so we had grass that was kind of up to your armpits and wild animals and all kinds of stuff, even wild animals that don't normally live in England. We're driving back these wild animals. You could hear the elephants and the tigers kind of disappearing into the woods.

We're cutting back the grass, and I come across two ants' nests...red ants, the kinds that eat toddlers. I thought to myself, *I don't know how to get rid of them*. For some reason I couldn't think how to kill them, and I thought, *What would my dad do?* Then I thought, *I know, gasoline. That's what he would do.*

We call it *petrol* in England, so I went to the shed and I found some gasoline, and I sloshed it around, and I couldn't find any matches, so I went back to the house. I think there was an angel in the house saying, "Get the matches!" because they were way on top of a cupboard, but I got them anyway, and I went back out. It's the middle of August, and even in England you don't even have to throw the match. All you have to do is strike it.

Well I struck it, and my life... In England we'd say, "I was surrounded by the ensuing conflagration." The whole yard was on fire! The ants had had their private Hiroshima, but I was thinking right now about the trail of fire that was going back to the plastic gas can. I looked at that and I thought, *Oh my goodness! I just made a bomb.*

So I grabbed the can. It just shows you I'm as dumb as a rock. I grabbed the can. Now the spout of the can had already come alight, so I thought, *I have to get that can away.* So I took the can away, and for some reason the can was hot. I mean, who'd have thought? So I dropped the can. Now if you want to make a flamethrower, kids, the way you do it is you get a can, and you fill it full of gas, and then you get a spout, and you light the spout, and then you eject the contents of the can through the spout, and you have a flamethrower!

So now I have gouts of flame gushing out all over the yard and all over me! So now my feet and my pants are on fire. Now in my mind I have the announcer on one of the safety films from the BBC saying something like this: "In the event of a household fire, roll around on the ground." I thought, *I'm not going to roll around on this ground; this is all on fire.* "Find somebody with a blanket to extinguish the flame." I'm looking around. There's nobody in the yard with a blanket. "Anybody have a blanket?" We're all on fire.

Well the only thing I could think to do was to take my pants off. I'm ordained, but I have to get the pants off, so I flicked one of my shoes off (it was on fire), and it was like one of those pictures from the Second World War of the bombers disappearing with the flames coming out of

the back, and it kind of went into the neighbor's yard. It started a small fire on his lawn, but it was okay.

It was kind of like my faith kind of got the better of me at that point, and as I was about to take my pants off, I said, "Lord, help me." As I looked down, all the flames are out. I walked back to the house and I thought, *Wow that was so close! That could have been really terrible.*

Sally came back from walking the dog and taking Rebecca for a walk, and she said, "What's that smell?" I said, "Well it's just a bit of gardening. It's no big thing." She said, "You smell like you're... Have you been on fire?" I said, "Well only a little." She said, "Well you'd better show me your leg," so I showed her my legs, and there are big folds of skin hanging off my legs, and I'm looking at that, thinking, *I bet you that's going to hurt at some point.*

So they took me to the ER, and I was in hospital for weeks. I had third degree burns. I couldn't feel it until I got to the hospital when it really hit me. I was put in an isolation ward because the wounds weren't septic, and nobody could come in, and it was horrible. I was by myself for a whole week, and no one could come in and see me, and at that moment in that place of weakness, God changed my life because He said to me, "Let Me do it." His strength became the thing I began to lean on.

From that moment, we have seen thousands of people come to Christ, hundreds of people healed, hundreds of people delivered. We've worked on every continent. We have hundreds of missionaries whom we resource and support from that moment. Before that, reliant on my own

strength; after that, learning how to start embracing weakness that God's strength might come through.

Shall we keep going? Okay. So if you're ambitious (and that's a good thing), that's the way God made you. You have to learn that strength cannot be found in you to fulfill the ambition. It's weakness that needs to be embraced so God's strength can come through.

Well let's look at another one, one that's particularly relevant in the American culture...the whole issue of *approval*, approval that leads a person to desire success in the eyes of other people. You have to be good looking, you have to be talented, and you have to be skilled. There has to be something about you that causes others to approve of you, and surely we look around us at the icons of our age and the images of our culture, and surely it's the beautiful and clever ones who are most approved of, and surely that tells us and our children that the way to be approved of by other people is to be this glittering image other people look at and say, "Yeah, that's the way we want to be."

Now the problem of course is that success based upon our own capacity to succeed is a very limited success indeed. It's a vain hope. It's a vanishing dream because there's no substance in it. Our children still long to look like the heroes they have in the media. They long to look like the prettiest ones in the school, the most handsome ones amongst the boys. They want to be the ones who are approved of by others, and it defines their life.

Jesus faced the temptation in the desert. We face the temptation daily. Are you going to be one of those whom others look to and say, "Do you know what? That's what I want to be like, approved of, successful"? When you look at the Bible, you can see people like Moses and Peter.

Moses was desperate for the approval of others, but his problem was his approval was dependent upon *his* approach to being successful. He killed an Egyptian guard I believe simply because he wanted to identify with his own people and show them he really was the kind of guy they could love and look to. When he faced God at the burning bush, the real issue in his life was, *I don't feel very confident about going forward because I just don't know whether people are going to listen to me.*

Do you remember that? Do you remember how he said, "I don't know whether people would approve of me. I don't know whether I look good enough or sound right. I stutter. God, send somebody else"? You can see this battle with his insecurities and his lack of approval. You can even see it later on in life in Exodus 33, where he has taken the children of Israel into the wilderness and he's leading them towards the Promised Land, and there in Exodus 33, he says, "Lord, if You don't go with us we're lost!" Now it's not the approval of men or women he's concerned about; it's the approval of God! The Lord says, "I'll always go with you, Moses."

Now what's the dynamic that's going on here? Well the dynamic is everybody wants to be successful, and so we find out how to be successful, and the way you're successful is you're approved of by other people. There are a lot of people here this morning who are defined by the need to be successful in the eyes of others...parents, kids, peers.

I remember there was a study done on the churches in England a few years ago, about 10 years ago, and they kind of counted who had what going on and all of that kind of thing. In the score table, the church I led was the largest church in the UK, and I looked at that and I thought, *Hmm, I don't know quite what to do about that now.*

Immediately the phone started ringing from people who'd never called me before. They started saying to me things like, "Mike, what a great thing you've achieved. You're so successful now. We'd love to come to your church and find out what you do." I'm thinking, *You wouldn't come near me with a sticky pole, but now that I'm successful, you approve of me.*

The funny thing is I was on the phone with my mother, and she wasn't interested at all at how big my church was. It's fascinating. It's a military family. I was potty trained at gunpoint. You don't expect a lot of props from parents. I called my mother and she says, "How are things going?" I said, "It's fine." She said, "How's the church?" I said, "It's the biggest in England." She said, "Oh good, yeah. Don't get proud about that." I said, "Aren't you proud of me, mum?" She said, "Sure I'm proud of you. I just want to keep your feet on the ground."

The thing about a successful person is that they need to fail. You really need to fail, and you know why you need to fail? Because you need to run out of the personal resources you rely on. You have to run out of the approval given to you by others so you can look into the face of the Father, knowing you failed and hear His words that say, "I love you, and I'm proud of you." You

know what? He says that every time. "I love you, and I'm proud of you." Usually we don't get there until we've run out of the resources usually we rely on.

Peter failed didn't he? You remember how Jesus dealt with his failure? He dealt with his failure by reminding him it wasn't what he *did* that was important; it was the relationship he *had* that was significant. So when Jesus restores Peter from denying Him three times, three times the question is not, "What did you do that for, Peter? What were you thinking?" That wasn't the question. The question was, "Let's just get this straight, Peter. Do you love Me?"

"Yes, Lord."

"Good, because that's what it's about." Clearly what happened in the heart of Peter was a reorientation that helped him to realize it wasn't his strength, it wasn't his success, it wasn't his capacity that was going to be the thing that enabled him to lead the people of God; it was going to be this relationship with Jesus, and Jesus loved him. So if approval is your thing and that leads to the success in your life, I promise you now unequivocally God will bring you to a place of failure, and He'll do it out of His kindness to you.

Lastly, *appetite*. The devil says to Jesus, "Turn these stones into bread. You know You need it."

There is a fundamental issue in the life of every person which is we have needs that are legitimate. There are legitimate needs everyone has, and those needs require satisfaction. You have needs for intimacy, for support, for security. You have needs for food and shelter and drink.

We have fundamental needs. These are the appetites that will be at the core of our being, and there are some people here whose lives are defined by their needs.

You're no greater or better than anyone else in the room. It's just the way you are. You're the ones who, if God works in you, are the stewards, the caregivers, the ones who understand how it is to meet the needs of others.

Solomon was confronted by this question from the Lord: "What is it you want? You have the nation. What would you like?" Solomon said, "I'd like wisdom. I don't want to deal with the other stuff. I want wisdom." In other words, "I want a relationship with You where I get revelation from You so I can do the job You've given me." Good answer.

Unfortunately, as his life progressed, he recognized his needs, and he recognized that needs never get satisfied, and so he became compulsive about satisfying particular needs. He piled up treasures for himself. He piled up approval for himself and pleasures for himself. He had 700 wives. That's somebody who's not particularly well satisfied.

James, the leader of the church in the New Testament, the brother of Jesus... James the Great is the one who is one of the Twelve. James the Less (that's his name in Christian tradition) was the one who gave the final word of support and release to Paul and Barnabas when they came back to report about the mission to the Gentiles, and the one thing Paul reports James says is, "Remember the poor."

James has come to the point of recognizing that needs need to be met by God. Often God's meeting needs will be God meeting needs through people who are the conduit of His grace to others. If you're the kind of person who is defined by your need to be satisfied, if you find yourself at times being drawn into compulsive behavior that is defined by a particular appetite, if you find yourself a person who's always looking for the next way to be satisfied or excited or to be captured by a new form of enjoyment, then you will be brought to a place of need.

Now why does God do that? Why does God do this? Why does God make the strong weak? Why does God make the successful fail? Why does God make those who long for satisfaction experience need? Why does He do that? Because He wants you to receive grace.

Now there are lots of ways of defining grace. The simplest way to define grace is this... *It's God's gift to you in your place of need.* What do you need to fulfill God's ambition? You need His strength, not yours. What do you need to be successful in terms of the kingdom? You need God to give you that success. You need God to empower that success. You need God to direct that success. You need God to keep your heart in a place of humility so that His success doesn't turn your heart towards yourself, but forever keeps your heart cleaving to Him.

What do you need? You need Jesus. He is God's grace. He is God's gift. In whatever condition of life you find yourself today, and whatever personality type you happen to have, you need Jesus, but the place we find Him is at the place of weakness, the place of failure, the place of need. He turns that weakness, that failure, and that need into a crucible where He can pour out more and more of His grace so you receive more and more of His capacity to be the person He has called

you to be, and as you receive His grace and as you flow in His grace so you become more aware of the fact that this resurrected life is a life where you live in the shadow of the cross, but you have the capacity in the name of Jesus to change the world.

We can't change this world, but He can, and He's looking for people whose hearts are hollowed out by weakness, whose hearts are hollowed out by failure, whose hearts are hollowed out by need, and those hollow hearts long for Him to fill them with His grace, and in His grace He uses them to change the world.

I don't care how strong you are, how clever you are, how talented you are, you can't change anything. You'll go to your grave a desperate and sad individual, but if you're weak, He can give you strength. If you're a failure, He can make you successful. If you're in need, He cannot only satisfy your needs but the needs of others through you. That's the resurrected life.

So my encouragement to you this morning whatever kind of person you are, come to the cross. The cross is the place where Jesus demonstrates He is prepared to be weak for you, where He is prepared to look like a failure for you, where He is prepared to look like the most in need for you, and as you cling to that cross and you recognize His death for you, you'll receive His life. Is there anybody here who believes that?

Okay. Well here's the thing: If you're one of those kinds of people who rely on your own strength, then today is a day for you to bow the knee and say, "Jesus, I'll embrace my weakness and Your cross to receive Your strength."

If you're one of those kinds of people who rely upon the approval of others to get the success you need, today is the day when you embrace your failure because we all have it, and you cling to the cross, and you receive His capacity to be successful. If you're one of those kinds of people who are defined by your need to satisfy yourself and the appetites you have, then today you recognize your need.

I'd like to pray with you, and I'd like to encourage you that after we've prayed that there are places around this building where you can go and have more prayer. Buddy will give you some indications as to how you might respond, but I'm going to give you the opportunity right now as to how this message has spoken to you this morning. I'm going to give you an opportunity right now for you to receive what it is God wants to give you.

If you're one of those people who are defined by ambition and know the temptation is to stand in your own strength, I want to pray with you right now first. So you stand up, and I'll pray with you. It's not going to be a long wait, so just stand up. Let's go. Okay, let me pray with you. If you're sitting on the edge of your seat thinking, *I don't know*, well you'd probably ought to stand up too. Just as you stand, I'd encourage you to just open your heart. Maybe even your body language would help you if you'd just open your hands, and as you stand I'd encourage you to open your heart and embrace your weakness before God. Take it captive and lift it up to Him and say, "Lord, I so need You today."

Father, I pray for these dear sisters and brothers. Lord, You say Your strength is made perfect in our weakness, and so, Lord, I pray for Your strength, I pray for Your power, I pray, Lord, for Your capacity to come upon each of these believers now, and I ask You, Lord, that the resurrected life would be the life others see in them. In Jesus' name, amen.

If it's approval that's your issue today the Lord's been speaking to you about, you just stand up right away. Stand up right away. Again, if there's a beating of your heart and you're wondering about it, then just take the chance and stand up, and again I encourage you, open your heart to the Lord. Use your body language just to say, "Lord, I'm just open. I'm ready." This morning as we recognize our need to be approved of that we might be successful, let's embrace our failure because we know it's there, and let's take it captive and offer it to Jesus.

Jesus, we stand before You in need, Lord, of You taking our failure and turning it into success. Lord, we so need You today, and today, Lord, we look to You and we see Your smile upon us, and today, Lord, we choose to receive Your approval before all others. We thank You, Father, that You say today we are Your child and You're proud of us, and, Lord, may this day be the day we walk in that approval, and may this day be the day when as we embrace our failure before You, You take it from our hands and give us Your success in its place, and we pray it in Jesus' name, amen.

If you're defined by appetite and the need to satisfy those needs in your life, you just stand up. You know the drill by now. If you're just there on the edge of your seat wondering, then you stand up. Let's open our hearts to Him. Use your body to tell Him you're open.

Lord, Lord, we present to You our needs. We present to You, Lord, our hunger. We present to You, Lord, our need of You above all others. You say, Lord, You will fill our desires with good things, and so, Lord, we ask You this morning that You would come to us and fill the empty place of our need with the overflowing presence of the Holy Spirit, and we pray it in Jesus' name (and all God's people said), amen.