

THE ACHIEVER'S DILEMMA

Learning to Pursue Without Being Possessed by the Pursuit

By Bill Tibbetts

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- **Ambition is not the enemy of contentment.** Christian maturity allows us to pursue meaningful outcomes without requiring those outcomes to give us identity, security, or peace.
- **Achievement becomes dangerous when it moves from stewardship to emotional regulation.** The question is not simply how hard we pursue, but what we are asking success to provide.
- **Biblical fruitfulness combines rigorous human agency with radical dependence on God.** We plant and water, but growth ultimately belongs to Him.

There is a particular kind of restlessness that accompanies achievers.

Those of us who are wired to build tend to notice what is missing before we notice what is working. We can walk into an organization and see the possibilities. We hear an idea and distinctively begin thinking, “These are the steps I would take.” We finish one project and, before anyone else has finished celebrating, our thoughts have already moved to the next opportunity.

Seeing “*what could be*” is an exhilarating gift, but continually noticing “*what is missing*” is mentally and emotionally exhausting for those wired to achieve.

In the marketplace, it’s the entrepreneur who can’t stop seeing opportunities, the executive who continually elevates expectations, or the manager who has difficulty understanding why everyone else doesn’t seem to possess the same urgency.

Churches have their own version. The vocabulary changes, but the internal disposition often does not. Attendance can grow. Giving can increase. People can come to Christ. A new ministry can launch. Yet before long, the church leader is asking what comes next.

None of this is inherently unhealthy.

In fact, much of what we call achievement can be understood biblically as stewardship, cultivation, leadership, creativity, and perseverance. Achievement can also create a

reinforcing psychological cycle. The problem emerges when a God-given capacity to pursue what *could be* slowly produces an inability to receive what *already is*.

Anticipating progress activates motivation, completing a goal brings a brief sense of reward, and the mind soon adapts to the new level of success. Psychologists sometimes describe this return toward this familiar emotional baseline as hedonic adaptation. For the achiever, yesterday's breakthrough can quickly become today's expectation, making satisfaction temporary and the next gap unusually compelling.

This is where the achiever encounters a theological problem that cannot be solved with better time management.

Scripture calls Christians toward fruitfulness, perseverance, diligence, and faithful stewardship. Yet the same Scriptures describe joy and peace as fruit produced by the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:22–23), command us to stop striving anxiously over tomorrow (Matthew 6:25–34), and repeatedly locate our security in God's character rather than our present circumstances.

How, then, does an achiever remain ambitious without becoming anxious? How does a pastor pursue growth without needing growth? How does an entrepreneur build aggressively while genuinely believing that the future of the organization does not ultimately depend upon them?

I am increasingly convinced that Christian maturity does not require the achiever to extinguish ambition. It requires us to put ambition in its proper theological place.

Achievement Is Not the Problem

Ambition is treated with suspicion in many Christian circles. It may be more tolerated among believers in the marketplace, but in church leaders it is often regarded as evidence of pride, self-promotion, or spiritual compromise. Scripture, however, offers a more nuanced vision.

Human beings are introduced in Genesis as creatures commissioned to cultivate. Genesis 1:28 instructs humanity to “fill the earth and subdue it,” while Genesis 2:15 places Adam in the garden “to work it and take care of it.” The Hebrew verbs in Genesis 2:15, *abad* and *shamar*, carry the ideas of working, serving, keeping, and guarding. Significantly, this assignment occurs before Genesis 3.

Work, therefore, is not a consequence of human rebellion. Work is part of God's original intention for human beings.

The Fall does not create work; it disorders it. Genesis 3 introduces thorns, frustration, resistance, and futility into humanity's experience of cultivation. The distinction is important because Christians sometimes confuse the frustration attached to work with work itself.

These passages actually give substantial dignity to human agency. People cultivate land, construct cities, compose music, develop tools, govern communities, build businesses, shepherd churches, teach students, create art, and organize resources. Human beings make things because they bear the image of a God who makes things.

How does achievement sit within this?

Work naturally awakens ambition because it places us in a world of possibilities, responsibilities, and unfinished tasks. To work is to imagine a desired outcome, set goals, apply effort, and seek progress. The desire to achieve is therefore not merely imposed upon work by an unhealthy culture; it arises, at least in part, from the purposeful and productive nature of work itself.

Tim Keller often argued that Christian faith should not diminish our commitment to excellent work, but it should radically reorder the reason for doing it. Work becomes a means of serving God and neighbor rather than constructing an identity capable of supporting the enormous weight of our significance.

That distinction is especially important for achievers.

There is nothing particularly spiritual about mediocrity. The answer to unhealthy ambition is not apathy. The deeper question is whether achievement remains a form of stewardship or has quietly become a source of identity and peace.

Paul Was Apparently Comfortable With Tension

Perhaps one of the most helpful biblical examples for the achiever appears in Philippians because Paul refuses to resolve a tension that we often assume must be resolved.

In Philippians 3:12, Paul writes, “I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.” Two verses later, he describes himself as pressing “toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus.”

The verb translated “press on” is the Greek *diōkō*. Depending upon its context, the word can mean to pursue, chase, or even persecute. There is an intensity embedded in Paul's language. He's not describing a passive spirituality in which faithfulness means sitting still and waiting for God to accomplish everything.

Paul is pursuing something. Aggressively.

Yet, only a chapter later, Paul writes, “I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances” (Philippians 4:11).

We should reflect on these two passages together.

Paul possesses both a profound sense of pursuit and a learned capacity for contentment. His contentment has not made him passive, and his ambition has not made him chronically dissatisfied.

The key may be found in the object of each.

Paul's pursuit is directed toward Christ, while his contentment is grounded in Christ. Consequently, he does not need accomplishment to provide what Christ has already provided.

This helps clarify the difference between healthy Christian ambition and the kind of achievement that slowly consumes us. Christian contentment does not mean that I stop wanting tomorrow to be different. It means I do not require tomorrow to be different in order for my soul to be at rest today.

That is, in my opinion, a much more demanding definition of contentment.

When Achievement Becomes Emotional Regulation

I believe psychology provides language that helps explain why this becomes so difficult.

Research on perfectionism commonly distinguishes between perfectionistic strivings and perfectionistic concerns. The distinction is important because high standards and vigorous pursuit of excellence are not necessarily psychologically destructive. The more problematic dimension involves excessive concern over mistakes, fear of negative evaluation, self-criticism, and the perception that personal worth is somehow contingent upon performance.

This distinction parallels something many achievers experience intuitively and frequently.

There is a difference between wanting something to succeed and *needing* it to succeed.

When I want something to succeed, I can plan carefully, work intensely, respond intelligently to problems, and experience disappointment when the outcome is poor.

When I need it to succeed, something else is happening. The outcome is now regulating my internal world.

Growth produces relief. Stagnation produces anxiety. Recognition produces confidence. Criticism destabilizes me. Progress creates peace, while delay creates agitation.

At that point, achievement has moved beyond stewardship. It has become emotional regulation.

This is particularly difficult to identify in Christian leadership because our goals are often genuinely good. A pastor wants more people to hear the gospel. A nonprofit leader wants to raise more money for mission. A business leader wants to create jobs, develop employees, and build something that serves customers well.

Few things are harder to recognize than unhealthy drive dressed in sincere godly intentions. For the achiever, the line between holy discontent and simply never being content can become dangerously thin.

Augustine's understanding of *ordo amoris*, rightly ordered love, is useful here. The Christian problem is not simply that we love bad things. We can also love good things incorrectly by assigning them a place in our lives they were never designed to occupy.

Achievement can become one of those disordered loves.

We may still be building something for God while quietly asking that thing to tell us who we are.

Jesus Offers a Different Model of Fruitfulness

For achievers, I suggest few passages more than John 15.

Jesus tells His disciples, “I am the vine; you are the branches” (John 15:5). The agricultural metaphor, a familiar image for His Audience, establishes an important relationship between dependence and productivity.

What should interests us is that Jesus is not suspicious of fruitfulness, at all. He actually expects it. In John 15:8, He says, “This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit.”

Much fruit.

For the achiever, that matters. Jesus is not advocating an unproductive life disguised as spiritual contentment. Fruitfulness glorifies God. The theological correction comes in Jesus' explanation of how fruit is produced: “Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself” (John 15:4).

The Greek verb *menō*, translated “remain” or “abide,” communicates continuing, dwelling, staying, or remaining in relationship. The branch possesses no independent capacity for fruitfulness. Its productivity is entirely derivative.

This radically challenges the achiever's instinct toward self-sufficiency, a trait often mistaken for stewardship.

We are accustomed to identifying resources, developing strategies, solving problems, and creating momentum. These capacities are useful, but they can gradually train us to function as though dependence upon God were a theological conviction rather than an operational necessity.

We believe in dependence while behaving independently.

Jesus does not describe spiritual fruitfulness as Jesus assisting a particularly competent branch. The branch has no independent life from which to produce anything.

This is why I have increasingly returned to the conviction that intimacy fuels obedience. The Christian life is not fundamentally an achievement system supplemented by prayer. Fruitfulness emerges from communion with Christ.

For an achiever, the important question therefore becomes not simply, “Am I producing fruit?” but “What is sourcing the fruit I am producing?”

Those are not the same questions.

The Fruit of the Spirit Is Also a Leadership Diagnostic

Galatians 5 adds another uncomfortable dimension.

Paul writes that “the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control” (Galatians 5:22–23). Grammatically, Paul uses the singular *karpos*, “fruit,” rather than presenting these characteristics merely as an assortment of optional or independent virtues.

This creates a problem for leaders who excuse impatience, anxiety, or relational harshness as the unavoidable cost of being driven.

I have heard some version of this logic many times, and I have definitely used it myself: *I'm just wired differently. I move fast. I expect a lot. That's why we accomplish so much.*

There may be truth in the description, but temperament cannot become an exemption from sanctification. My personality may explain why patience is difficult for me. It cannot make patience unnecessary.

In fact, one of the most reliable indicators that achievement has escaped its proper boundaries is what our ambition does to the people around us. A pace that feels energizing to the leader may be exhausting to everyone else. People gradually become functions rather than beloved neighbors. Interruptions become inconveniences. Slower processors become frustrating. Rest begins to look suspiciously like a lack of commitment.

I've found that the Christian marketplace leader and the pastor are equally susceptible to this.

We can become so committed to accomplishing the mission that we mistreat the people with whom God intended us to accomplish it.

Learning to Recognize Disordered Achievement

The difficulty is that unhealthy achievement rarely announces itself as unhealthy. It usually sounds responsible.

Someone has to make sure this gets done.

God has given me this opportunity.

People are depending on me.

We need to steward this well.

Every one of those statements may be true. The better diagnostic questions examine what is occurring underneath them.

- Can I receive an accomplishment without immediately moving the goalpost?
- Can I rest without mentally defending my rest?
- Can I tolerate a season in which obedience does not produce visible momentum?
- Can I allow another person to approach a problem differently without assuming that different means inferior?
- Can I receive criticism without allowing it to redefine my sense of worth?
- Can I celebrate someone else's success when it exceeds mine?
- Can I distinguish between something God has asked me to carry and something I have simply decided must happen?

Perhaps most revealingly...

- If God chooses to accomplish His purposes more slowly than I would prefer, do I still trust Him?

That question exposes the difference between urgency and sovereignty, the place where trust sits.

Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain."

Notice that the psalm does not eliminate builders. There are still people laboring on the house. It simply refuses to confuse their labor with God's sovereignty.

Redefining Success Around Faithfulness

Paul provides another framework in 1 Corinthians 3:6: “I planted the seed, Apollos watered it, but God has been making it grow.”

There is human agency everywhere in Paul's theology. Someone plants. Someone waters. Paul is not advocating passivity. But notice the division of responsibility.

- Planting belongs to Paul.
- Watering belongs to Apollos.
- Growth belongs to God.

Achievers tend to assume responsibility for all three, “in the name of Jesus” of course.

We plant, water, analyze, optimize, reorganize, strategize, and then lie awake wondering why growth has not occurred according to our projections.

Paul's framework permits rigorous evaluation of faithfulness while refusing the illusion that we can manufacture outcomes that ultimately belong to God. This does not mean metrics are irrelevant. Churches should evaluate effectiveness. Businesses should measure performance. Nonprofits should demonstrate impact. Leaders should examine whether strategies are actually working. But metrics are servants. They are terrible masters.

The Christian leader must eventually become comfortable saying, “I did what faithfulness required of me, and I cannot control what happens next.”

The Goal Is Not Less Ambition

I have no desire to convince achievers to stop achieving. Doing so demonizes a very Godly trait.

The Church needs builders. Organizations need leaders who see possibilities before everyone else sees them. Communities need entrepreneurs, creators, pastors, missionaries, executives, and innovators who are willing to assume responsibility and move ideas into reality.

What we do not need are leaders whose identities require those things to succeed. There is a profound difference.

The mature Christian achiever is not someone who has stopped caring about results. Maturity looks more like learning to care deeply about results without demanding that those results provide identity, security, or peace. Paul could press toward the goal because he had learned contentment. Jesus could pursue extraordinary fruitfulness because His life

remained completely dependent upon the Father. Sabbath can interrupt our work because God never surrendered sovereignty to us in the first place.

Perhaps the central discipline for the achiever, then, is not learning to become less ambitious. It is learning to hold ambition with an open hand.

We can plan carefully, work diligently, pursue excellence, lead courageously, and build aggressively while still acknowledging that God retains the right to interrupt the plan, change the timeline, redirect the assignment, close the door, or produce an outcome we did not anticipate.

That kind of surrender does not weaken achievement. It puts achievement back in its proper place.

And somewhere in that distinction, I think the achiever begins to understand how Paul could write both sentences without contradiction:

“I press on toward the goal.”

And:

“I have learned to be content.”

The goal is not choosing between the two. The goal is becoming the kind of person who can truthfully say both.

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