



## When should I lean into ambition and when should I lean out? TRANSCRIPT

**Caroline:** What do you think about ambition? Does the word ambition raise any concerns for you? When should you lean into your ambition and when should you lean out?

**Victoria:** I think one challenge for me and perhaps others, is seeing when I'm being selfish as opposed to selfless. In my ambition, it's easy to deceive ourselves as to our motives to justify something we want for selfish reasons. For instance, in my work, I could take on too many cases at once and justify that decision on the basis that I can help more people that way. But my deep-down motive, which I might have even hidden from myself, could be that I want to feel busy and in demand, because that's what feeds my ego.

**Caroline:** Hello again. Welcome to an episode of The Her work Podcast. I'm Caroline Spencer, and it's great to have you with us. Our tagline is reframed by Jesus. We want to have conversations about work and what it means as workers to work well in God's world. This podcast is brought to you by City Bible forum, where I'm a trainer and mentor. Sitting across from me, my conversation partner for today is Victoria. Victoria is a barrister, a wife and a mother of two, a teenager and a tween. Welcome, Victoria.

**Victoria:** Thanks, Caroline, wonderful to be here.

**Caroline:** Well for our conversation today, what question would you like us to explore?

**Victoria:** A question I've been thinking about is thinking about various situations at work, but also in other aspects of life, when should I lean into ambition? And when should I lean out, so to speak, and what I mean when I say leaning into ambition is thinking about pursuing particular goals and opportunities rather than just going with the flow of what comes my way.

**Caroline:** That's a great question. What prompted you to ask it?

**Victoria:** A couple of reasons come to mind. I think I have a tendency, probably, like many other people, to want to do as much as possible with the time that I have and really make the most of every opportunity that comes my way. That can result in me juggling too many balls and I end up dropping some, which isn't ultimately helpful to me or other people, as it causes me stress and lets other people down. So that's the first reason - feeling like I need to make good choices.

The second reason for this question is that I'm wary of ambition being a vehicle or a cover for selfishness, rather than doing things motivated by wanting to seek the good of others. For instance, I could say to you and even to myself that I want to take on a particular opportunity to help others, but really, in my heart of hearts, I could be wanting



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to advance my own reputation, or my motives. Could even be a mix of the two. So, when should I lean into ambition, and how should I do this with less selfish ambition?

**Caroline:** Victoria, I am really glad you mentioned selfishness, because in some contexts, it feels like the word ambition is a bit of a dirty word. Is that your experience?

**Victoria:** Yeah, I think it can be. And as you said, I think it really depends on the context. I'm sure we've all either been in situations where we've seen or heard this, or even seen it on a TV show, where people in an office might be talking about someone and say, Oh, she's ambitious. And in that context, it's certainly not seen as a good thing, the sort of caricature of a person who's really gunning for the top job and the idea of get out of her way, she'll come for you.

And I think even the adjective ambitious seems to have negative connotations, in a way that synonyms like goal oriented don't. So, if I had a reputation for being overly ambitious at work, I would find that quite distressing. I want to be seen as being competent at my work and being good to work with, but I don't want people to see me as the sort of person who wants to clamber over others to get to the top, or as a bad witness for Jesus.

**Caroline:** How does the word track do you think in other contexts?

**Victoria:** Well, my sense is that in some ways, it's more socially acceptable, both within a Christian community and outside it, to declare personal ambitions rather than work related ones. For example, I run marathons and ultra marathons, and I think it's a bit more socially acceptable to tell people that I'm aiming for a particular time in my next marathon, even though some might say that my ambitions in that regard are far too modest, because I'm very much a back of the pack runner. But I could be entirely selfish in the way that I go about training for a marathon by just spending way too much time on it, neglecting other responsibilities in favour of training.

But then I also think that the word ambition can be seen positively, because if we talk about people who have no ambition, that's seen as a negative in that they have absolutely no drive to do anything at all, which could be selfish if it means that they become a burden on others. So, we need a certain amount of ambition just to get out of bed in the morning and go off to work. So, I think it really does depend on the context of the ambition and to what it's directed.

**Caroline:** It's interesting that you mentioned marathons, because my flatmate wants to run the London Marathon so I'm having a bit of FOMO as far as marathons go. But yeah, if I pick up on that last point, I do think having some ambition is part of what it means to



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be human. And I'm thinking about a verse in Proverbs 21 (which I have written down) *the plans of the diligent lead to profit as surely as haste leads to poverty*. So, I take it that there's something good and right about having plans and achieving goals in life

**Victoria:** That's really interesting. And how do you think Jesus makes a difference to that?

**Caroline:** Yeah, I think he gives a radical new shape to ambition. I'm thinking about the incident where his disciples, James and John, ask him for the top jobs in the kingdom. So that's Mark 10. And when you think about it, they're highly ambitious, but Jesus doesn't condemn them for asking. Jesus just says the way with worldly ambition is that others serve you. The way of Kingdom living is you serving others. Because that's how it is with Jesus.

And then Jesus shows his utterly selfless ambition by going to the cross and dying for us. And in Hebrews 12, it says, *For the joy that was set before Him, He Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of God*.

**Victoria:** The Apostle Paul has something to say about ambition

**Caroline:** The Apostle Paul strikes me as highly ambitious, and when he meets the risen Jesus, it changes everything for him. Paul says, in 2 Corinthians 5, *we make it our goal to please Him [Jesus], whether we are at home, in the body or away from it*. And that little word goal there is the word for ambition. So, we make it our ambition to please Jesus. And he makes it his life ambition because he knows he will need to give King Jesus an account.

And it's not surprising that he tells the Philippian church, *Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, rather in humility, value others above yourselves*. Philippians 2. So, I take it that ambition isn't the problem. It's selfish ambition, that's the problem, and the antidote is humility.

I hope I haven't overloaded you with too many Bible passages there, but putting all the pieces together, my take on this is when our ambition is reframed by Jesus, it'll shape what we're ambitious for, and it will shape how we exercise our ambition. And I take it that's whatever sphere of life we're talking about, and that's what it means to fulfill Jesus's command love God and love your neighbour, Matthew 22.

So when should I lean into ambition? When should I lean out in a particular situation? Then we need to think about the relational context of that situation. It's not about thinking about that question in isolation from the people that God has put in our orbit.



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**Victoria:** I think that's really helpful. I think one challenge for me and perhaps others, is seeing when I'm being selfish as opposed to selfless. In my ambition, it's easy to deceive ourselves as to our motives to justify something we want for selfish reasons. For instance, in my work, I could take on too many cases at once and justify that decision on the basis that I can help more people that way. But in reality, my deep-down motive, which I might have even hidden from myself, could be that I want to feel busy and in demand, because that's what feeds my ego, and then because I've taken on too much, I might not have enough time to prepare properly for each case, and thereby ultimately let those clients down, or let my family down by not having enough time available for them.

**Caroline:** Well, this question might help work out where I am a bit blind to my ambition and help to identify selfishness on our part. The question is to ask ourselves, who benefits from my ambition? Who loses? Who is being sacrificed? And we can think about all the people in our orbit, whether that's work colleagues, teammates, partners, children, wider family, friends, church family, neighbours.

And I found this question was really helpful with a situation that I've just had. It actually had to do with this podcast. I asked someone to help me with it. They were a very part time resource of a work colleague of mine. I thought, well, the volunteer is interested in this podcast. They have the time to help. They're a grown up. I can ask them, and they can say no. I didn't ask or inform my work colleague. The colleague did find out, though, and they raised it with me. And later, as I was thinking, who wins, who loses, who is being sacrificed in this situation, I thought, well, I win, and I thought, actually, my colleague loses out because that volunteer resource now has less time for them.

And I do think there's something ironic that in my ambition to do a podcast on ambition, it turns out to be the perfect example of selfish ambition.

**Victoria:** Does that mean, in that scenario, thinking about those questions, the volunteer was the person being sacrificed? Were they the pawn for your ambition?

**Caroline:** Yeah, that's, that's a really good question. As I think about it off the top of my head, and looking back when I thought about approaching the volunteer, I did think carefully - do they have the time? Do they have the interest? And when I asked them, I did give them a way out. So, I don't think I completely sacrificed them, but it is something that would be worth me pondering a bit further. But it's very clear that I sacrificed my work colleague's interests.

**Victoria:** If you had your time again with that scenario, what would you do differently?



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**Caroline:** I think I would still lean into the ambition but ask the work colleague first. They might say yes, well that's great. They might say no, and in that case, I just need to trust that God will provide.

I do know that God will provide, but I've also worked out now that I think about it, I'm more likely to sacrifice someone else's interests when I'm stressed out and I can't think as clearly.

**Victoria:** That's a really helpful thing to identify for the future. Can you share with us how the scenario panned out in the end? What was the outcome?

**Caroline:** Yeah, it was really interesting conversation with my colleague, and I apologized for not asking them first, and then they had this dilemma of, if I had asked them, could they say no? Was that being selfish?

And that got me thinking about the verse in Philippians 2 *let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others*. So, I do think we naturally look after our own interests, and the challenge is to give the interests of others the same kind of consideration.

**Victoria:** I think that's a really helpful framework that you've identified Caro, the question of who wins, who loses, who's being sacrificed. What this conversation has helped me think about is the next time a scenario comes up that causes me to hesitate on whether to lean in or lean out, I'm going to try and think about those questions of who wins who loses, and whether anyone's being sacrificed.

Unfortunately, I don't always have the luxury of time when making decisions about accepting work or not, because I normally need to decide the same day the request comes in and often immediately or it'll go somewhere else. But I think having those questions in mind will help me determine the cost of saying yes or no, not just to my own time and energy, but other people's, for example, other clients, my husband's, my children.

I think in the past, I've often been very excited by the opportunity being offered, and said yes to it, even where I thought it might tip me over the edge in terms of my capacity to do it. But I've normally just thought, Oh, she'll be right, and normally regretted the decision within a few days, because I've realized that I just can't do it to the extent that I want to, alongside my other commitments and responsibilities, but it's often too late to back out at that point. So, then it's become a question of which ball I drop, which is not an ideal situation to be in.



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I think I also find it difficult with various opportunities, and this is probably similar for other people, because I don't always know how long they will take when I'm asked about new matters, they don't come wrapped in neat little packages saying they'll need six hours work a week or no work for two weeks and then full time work for the next two weeks. You can have an idea of how they're looking, but not with any precision, but that helps me reflect on the fact that I can only really work with the data I have. So, I think this is a framework that provides some useful guidance, but ultimately has to be held loosely and flexibly and with forgiveness to myself, I think if I get it wrong,

**Caroline:** So it sounds like there's a lot of pressure there with time to make decisions quickly. And there's pressure with just not knowing the scope of the work. What will you consider when it comes to the impact on relationships as you think about whether to take that work matter on or not?

**Victoria:** Well, I guess I think I'll think primarily about my immediate family, so my husband and children, but also my church community, which I'll come to.

First, my husband works in a pretty flexible job, but he does have a few weeks a year that he's just not available, for example, when he's away on conferences. So, to all extents possible, if I can avoid a clash with those weeks, then that's very helpful, because I'm solo parenting throughout that period. But even when he is around, I'm conscious that if I'm overloaded with work, then more of the household burden will fall on him. So even though he's very understanding about the impacts of my work, I think I need to reflect on the fact that I'm not the only one who loses out. If I take on too much, I might win in the sense that I get to do all the work I want to do, but also lose in the sense that I'm stressed and my husband might also lose and he and the kids might be the ones being sacrificed because they're missing out on time with me,

**Caroline:** Thanks Victoria. You also mentioned you had some thoughts about your church community?

**Victoria:** Attending church on Sundays and a weekly Bible study small group are really non-negotiable commitments in my mind to all extents possible. Of course, there'll be times when I'm traveling for work or holidays or be sick or have a sick child, which means I can't be there. But outside those scenarios and any emergencies, I try to never miss them and really put them in my diary and treat them as if they're work commitments, rather than this space that can be occupied if the rest of my life overflow demands it. I need to stress that I don't always do this perfectly. There are times when I'm overwhelmed with work or there's something genuinely urgent that needs to be dealt



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with, and that will mean that I'll need to skip my small group, but I try to make those times as rare as possible.

So, these commitments are the things that I think about in terms of the impact on my time and energy when considering work commitments. But I need to say I'm not perfect. I stuffed this up only this week by agreeing to a hairdresser appointment one and a half hours before Church, which I knew was going to be tricky, time wise, but it was the only time my hairdresser had. And then on the day, she ended up running 25 minutes late, and I arrived at church just as the service was ending, so I ended up going to a later service at my church that day. So, I'm not perfect, but I do try to all extents possible to make those commitments non-negotiable.

**Caroline:** And who misses out when you don't make church on a kind of regular basis?

**Victoria:** Well, I think the other people at church do. I know for myself, I am always really encouraged by everyone I see there, and I think it's easy for us to think, "Oh, it doesn't really matter. No one's really going to notice if I'm not there". But people do, and we're made to be there for each other and encourage each other. So yeah, I think the rest of the church community loses out.

**Caroline:** Victoria as we wrap up this conversation, I thought a good note to end on is the ambition we should always be leaning into and never leaning out from. 2 Corinthians 5 we make it our ambition to please Jesus. If we are going to put the interests of others first – it's not the easy road – it's not popular road – we may miss out - sacrifice hurts. But to please Jesus, that's what really matters. To please the one who sacrificed himself for us and with whom we will one day be in glory.

**Caroline:** Well, thanks, Victoria. I've really enjoyed this conversation with you today. So, thank you.

**Victoria:** Thanks, Caroline.

**Caroline:** Victoria will be back with another ambition related question sometime in the future. In the meantime, there'll be other conversations on different work-related challenges.

The episodes will drop twice a month, and you can find them wherever you listen to podcasts.

If you'd like to get in touch, feel free to email me at [caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org](mailto:caroline.spencer@citybibleforum.org)



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On the City Bible Forum landing page, you'll find the Bible passages referred to in this episode. You'll also find some reflection questions designed so that you and a friend can listen to the episode as a springboard for a discussion around your own particular challenges.

Until next time.