



GODLY AMBITION

**Unlocking the Full
Potential of Your Time,
Talent, and Treasure**

RUSLAN KD



Praise for
GODLY AMBITION

“Godly Ambition is a vital guide for a culture where people are desperate to discover their authentic self. Ruslan KD helps us strengthen our identity in Christ, address our wounds, and cultivate habits aligned with God’s purpose. His practical and biblical insights on navigating setbacks and removing distractions will give hope and help to many.”

—JOSHUA BROOME, speaker, author, and pastor

“Ambition can be a dangerous thing that shrivels our souls, and Christians sometimes avoid it. But in this inspiring book, Ruslan KD helps us understand that there is a *Godly* ambition, one that is often sorely lacking in the church. Sharing honestly from his own experiences, he shows us how to cultivate the right kind of ambition, then gives practical suggestions for how to achieve it. Do you long for your life to count? Do you want to give yourself to a noble cause? Read this book and let it guide you.”

—GAVIN ORTLUND, pastor, professor, and author of
Why God Makes Sense in a World That Doesn't

“Godly Ambition is a road map for anyone trying to navigate the tension between career and calling, hustle and holiness. Ruslan KD doesn’t just inspire—he equips you with practical steps and biblical wisdom to pursue big goals without losing your soul. If you’ve ever wrestled with starting, quitting, or wondering what’s next, this book will meet you right where you are.”

—JON ACUFF, *New York Times* bestselling author of
Soundtracks: The Surprising Solution to Overthinking

“In *Godly Ambition*, Ruslan KD speaks to the tension within every visionary. This book is a clarion call back to kingdom-centered purpose and faithfulness, which is anchored in our identity in Christ. Every follower of Jesus needs to read this book and embrace its message.”

—BENNY PEREZ, speaker, author, coach, and
lead pastor of ChurchLV

“Ruslan KD cuts through the noise with a message Christians desperately need: Your ambition can be holy. *Godly Ambition* doesn’t waste time with vague spiritual platitudes or hustle culture hype; instead, it delivers a battle-tested framework for channeling your drive in ways that glorify God. This is the rare book that will both fire you up and ground you, challenging you to steward your talents while keeping Christ at the center.”

—MIKE SIGNORELLI, lead pastor of V1 Church

“*Godly Ambition* is a wake-up call for the church today, a wake-up call for Christians to use their gifts for the kingdom rather than personal gain, and a wake-up call to define success biblically rather than by the metrics of the world. And yet this book is also practical. With transparency and wisdom, Ruslan KD offers readers a game plan for lasting impact. I loved this book and am confident you will too.”

—SEAN MCDOWELL, PhD, is a YouTuber, author, and
professor of apologetics at Talbot School of Theology

“In *Godly Ambition*, Ruslan KD offers more than insight—he offers his story, forged through pain and redeemed by purpose. This is not just a book of wisdom; it’s a testimony of how God never wastes our pain. From brokenness to bold conviction, he shows how sur-

rendering our wounds to Christ can birth a calling greater than we imagined. His transparency, humility, and practical wisdom challenge believers to live with intentionality, integrity, and faith. *Godly Ambition* is a road map for stewarding our time, talent, and treasure for eternal impact—without losing our soul in the process. I wholeheartedly recommend this book to anyone ready to pursue their God-given calling with courage and clarity.”

—JEFF BRADFORD, president of Human Coalition

“*Godly Ambition* is a wake-up call for anyone who senses there’s more to life than surviving and scrolling. Ruslan KD combines timeless wisdom with real-world grit to challenge you toward purpose, perseverance, and Christ-centered impact. This isn’t just a book—it’s a blueprint for becoming the person God designed you to be.”

—ANDREW F. CARTER, husband, dad,
pastor, and author

“In a time when ambition is either idolized or vilified, *Godly Ambition* offers a much-needed recalibration. As a semi-professional artist with creative pursuits outside of YouTube and the wife of a part-time hot air balloon pilot, I appreciate the beauty of bold, disciplined, and unique goals. Ruslan KD’s message is a refreshing reminder that when ambition is surrendered to Christ, it becomes a gift to steward, not suppress. It becomes *Godly* ambition. Through his own story, professional transparency, and biblical insight, he challenges readers to reject apathy and self-centered hustle and instead pursue a disciplined life fully surrendered to Christ. *Godly Ambition* is practical, biblical, and inspiring, showing that hard work, big dreams, and deep faith are partners in God’s kingdom work.”

—MELISSA DOUGHERTY, Christian apologist and
author of *Happy Lies*

“Talents are meant to be used in Christ’s service—in both the ambition we’re called to and its godly stewarding. Ruslan KD takes this seriously. As a brother walking this path, he has invaluable, heartfelt, and hard-won wisdom to share. Lean in. This book will do you much good.”

—GLEN SCRIVENER, director of Speak Life,
author of *The Air We Breathe*, and
presenter of online evangelism course 321

“*Godly Ambition* is a must-read for every Christian who wants to dream big while still honoring God. I wish I’d had this book when working out my calling in life. It would’ve saved me years of frustration.”

—ZACH WINDAHL, author and content creator

“Ruslan KD’s book confronts one of the most ignored dangers of our day: the idolization of ambition. Ambition, though a good thing, is often exploited for selfish reasons rather than submitted to Jesus. This book is a timely guide for anyone seeking to steward their gifts for God’s glory without falling into the traps of hustle culture or passivity. This is a must-read for anyone wanting to live out their calling with faith and integrity.”

—KB, rapper and author of *Dangerous Jesus*

“Ruslan KD’s honesty, truthfulness, and authenticity are on full display in this book. He speaks poignantly about *why* God has put us on this earth and *what* we’re called to do. The gospel is not a vitamin you can ‘try’—it’s a historically grounded, heart-changing, truth-gripping reality. Ruslan KD shows how we can live with passion, prayer, and practicality. After you read this book, read it again—there’s so much wisdom here you don’t want to miss.”

—WES HUFF, apologist and YouTuber

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**UNLOCKING THE
FULL POTENTIAL OF
YOUR TIME, TALENT,
AND TREASURE**

RUSLAN KD

FOREWORD BY
JONATHAN “JP” POKLUDA



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Foreword

I have wrestled with ambition my whole life. Maybe you have too.

How much do I strive? How much do I surrender? Do I hustle, or do I “let go and let God,” as the framed Hobby Lobby art above my parents’ toilet read?

These questions aren’t just theoretical for me—they have shaped my journey, especially in ministry. On one hand, I want to give everything I have to God’s work. I want to maximize my gifts, my time, my impact. On the other hand, I know striving apart from God’s power is not just exhausting—it’s dangerous. It leads to pride, burnout, and an identity tangled in what I do instead of who I am in Christ.

That’s why this book matters.

I met Ruslan because we did a podcast together. I drove to the middle of a neighborhood, pulled up to an unassuming house, and waited for him to appear. When he came out, we didn’t walk through the front door. Instead, we went around back to his studio—a creative command center where he “cooks,” as the cool kids say.

What I saw there left an impression on me.

Ruslan is a worker. Not just any worker. A relentless, strate-

gic, thoughtful worker. He has a team helping him produce a video podcast that would make any major news network jealous. He understands algorithms, live editing, and digital engagement at a genius level. But underneath all that, there's something even more important: a man who loves God and his Word, and cares deeply about reaching people with the truth.

Ruslan's work ethic isn't about chasing fame or clout. It's about something much deeper. It's about why he works in the first place.

That's a question all of us have to ask ourselves—what's our *why*?

What's driving us? Is it success? Status? Influence? If our ambition is fueled by a need to prove ourselves or build our own kingdom, it will eventually leave us empty. But when our *why* is anchored in something greater—when our motive is to glorify God and steward what he's entrusted to us—our ambition has eternal significance.

Ruslan understands this at a deep level. He doesn't just create content for clicks; he creates with conviction. He doesn't just chase trends; he discerns the times. I observed this firsthand as we recorded the podcast and then drove around together afterward. I was struck by how well connected and well informed he is—not just in digital media but in the subculture of hip-hop. He's an expert. He knows the history, the artists, the movements shaping culture today. He understands the beats that people move to and the deeper narratives shaping their worldview.

And yet, he isn't just immersed in culture—he's engaging it. Speaking into it. Calling people toward something higher.

I think about 1 Thessalonians 4:11: "Make it your ambition

to lead a quiet life: You should mind your own business and work with your hands, just as we told you.”

This is one of those verses we don’t talk about enough. We live in a world that celebrates hustle culture, yet Scripture calls us to a different kind of ambition—one marked by diligence, wisdom, and a life so faithful that it speaks for itself.

This book makes that come alive.

Ruslan has put words to a tension we all feel but often struggle to resolve. He shows that godly ambition isn’t about chasing success at the expense of our souls, nor is it about passively waiting for God to do all the work. It’s about walking the narrow path between faith and action, dependence and diligence, humility and hunger.

You hold in your hands a guide for that journey.

As you read these pages, I pray that you find clarity and conviction about what it means to work hard for the right reasons. That you’ll step into your calling with purpose, not pressure. That you’ll learn to strive in a way that honors God—where your ambition isn’t about building your kingdom, but his.

And when you’re finished, I hope you won’t just think differently. I hope you’ll live differently. Because godly ambition doesn’t just shape careers. It shapes legacies.

—JP Pokluda

Lead pastor of Harris Creek Baptist Church,
bestselling author, and host of the
Becoming Something podcast

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Introduction

“It was the best of times, it was the worst of times,” Charles Dickens wrote in *A Tale of Two Cities*. “It was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.”¹ If this doesn’t capture the era we currently live in, I’m not sure what does.

On one hand, the modern age is filled with opportunity. Things are looking up. Consider that your smartphone has “more computing power than all the greatest supercomputers through the turn of the 21st century.”² With a few taps of your finger, you can have anything delivered to your doorstep, including lunch, a pair of jeans, new kicks—even a car! Ancient kings and queens would marvel at the tools at our disposal.

Education is also on the rise. “In 2021, about 37.7 percent of the U.S. population who were aged 25 and above had graduated from college or another higher education institution”—a significant increase from 7.7 percent in 1960.³

And we enjoy more entertainment and leisure than previous generations. According to one report, as of 2023, there were 2,286 streaming services in the United States.⁴ No matter

where you are, you can stream your favorite show or choose from one of the six million podcast titles or one hundred million songs on Spotify.⁵

On the other hand, in Dickens's words, we're also living in "the season of darkness" and "the winter of despair." It feels like things are going down. Despite the amenities of modern life, deaths of despair—referring to deaths from "suicide, opioid overdoses and alcohol-related illnesses"—are on the rise.⁶ For as much as smartphones and social media promise to "connect" us to others, they've created an unprecedented epidemic of anxiety, depression, and loneliness.

Economically, many of us are struggling. The average person today is living paycheck to paycheck. According to Bankrate, more than one in three (36 percent) of U.S. adults had more credit card debt than money saved in an emergency savings account, and 56 percent of U.S. adults would opt to borrow money rather than "pay for an emergency expense of \$1,000 or more . . . from their savings account."⁷

Health trends are equally concerning. About 73 percent of Americans are overweight, with 42 percent of those classified as obese.⁸

It's a strange paradox, isn't it? Somehow the efficiencies of technology, which promise to make our lives easier, have left us more exhausted. Our obsession with productivity has left us feeling hopelessly behind. We should be sailing across a pleasant sea of entertaining thrills, but instead we're drowning in a bottomless abyss of content.

It's the best of times and the worst of times.

FRUSTRATED AMBITION

Do you ever feel like life has stacked the deck against you, but you can't quite figure out why? You have dreams, goals, and ambitions. Yet while you *thought* you were running toward them, it's like someone secretly plopped you onto a treadmill, and you're starting to wonder whether you're running in place, no closer to your destination than when you started.

As if this weren't overwhelming enough, add to the mix the endless opportunities to compare ourselves to others, all of whom seem to be further along, more successful, and effortlessly gliding toward their goals. Of course, this is an illusion, but it nonetheless solidifies our sense of aimlessness and drains us of ambition.

As a content creator, I've spent thousands of hours talking with people, and I've come to believe that while all of us long to fulfill our callings, most of us aren't sure where to start. You have gifts to offer the world, but they lie dormant because you're just trying to keep your head above water. You know God's placed you on this planet for a reason, but distraction and discouragement feel like a wet blanket that's smothering your dreams. Maybe you've put in serious effort toward a goal, only to have it crash and burn. Now you'd rather play it safe than fail again. I've been there too.

MY STORY

By all accounts, the fact that I now run a seven-figure media business is a miracle. As a refugee kid who was raised by a single mom battling alcoholism and whose dad was barely around, life didn't set me up on the fast track to success. I was born in

Baku, Azerbaijan, but due to hostility toward Armenians in my home country in the 1980s and '90s, our family fled to America. We arrived in California in 1991 with hopes for a fresh start, and while there was plenty of opportunity, my childhood was fraught with dysfunction.

One day, I found a letter with lipstick marks all over it and assumed it was a love note from my mom to my dad. It wasn't. I delivered the letter to Dad, not knowing Mom had written it for her boyfriend back in Baku. This discovery pushed my parents' already teetering marriage over the edge. My dad moved out, and internally, I felt responsible.

My mom, who was unexpectedly single in a new country and had no marketable skills, did the best she could. It would take her five years to find employment, so in the meantime, we lived on welfare, which in those days was \$650 a month. Of that, \$450 went straight to rent, which left \$200 for us to live on.

Besides our economic struggles, Mom also had questionable taste in men. She cycled through boyfriends, most of them violent, until things escalated one night when one of them smashed a drinking glass into her face. Later, that same boyfriend laughed when he told me, "One day you're going to wake up and I'm going to kill your mom." Thankfully, she ended that relationship.

My dad visited me often after he first moved out, but at a certain point, he got in a fight with one of my mom's new boyfriends. She jumped into the scuffle, slashing my dad's face with her high heel. As the cops arrived, she told me to lie and say she didn't do it. After that, Dad visited only once a year. Eventually, he remarried and had a whole new family to care

for. The irony is, he lived two streets down from me. He was close in proximity, but he might as well have lived across the world.

I won't rehash the stats about how fatherlessness impacts a young man's likelihood of success, but it's not surprising that in fifth grade I was arrested for breaking into a neighbor's house.

Then there was the time in eighth grade when my mom never came to pick me up from basketball practice. Turns out, she'd gotten a DUI on the way to school and had to spend the night in jail, so I scrambled to find a way home. I don't say this to shame my mom, whom I love dearly. (In recent years, God has deepened and enriched our relationship, which I'm so thankful for.) I don't even see myself as a victim. Because as difficult as my growing-up years were, I've experienced the radical transformation of Jesus and, despite the odds, have done quite well for my family.

I tell you all this because if I can do it, *you can too*.

I truly believe that. My circumstances didn't define me, because God had greater plans for my life. So whatever is holding you back, discouraging your heart, or whispering "You'll never make it" is no match for the will of God. Everything I share in this book is meant to stoke the fire of your ambition—to remind you that no matter where you come from, you're capable of leaving a mark on this world.

If God is for you, who can be against you (Romans 8:31)?

That said, the journey is hard because the world is broken. Even as God's Spirit puts wind in your sails, the enemy stirs up stormy seas to intimidate you. Let's get you ready for those moments so you can become the person you were born to be.

WHAT THIS BOOK IS ABOUT

In this book, I'll share some of my greatest learnings, which have helped me love Jesus more, become a better father and husband, launch a record label, tour as a Christian rapper, and create a thriving YouTube channel. If your vocational interests are different from mine (let's say, for instance, you're an accountant, teacher, lawyer, chef, or stay-at-home parent), these principles will still be immensely helpful to you. I'm writing to those hungry to clarify their calling—people who want to use the time, talent, and treasure God has given them to bless others and build the kingdom.

This book is wildly practical, meant to help you chase the dreams God has put on your heart—in the *real world*, not a fantasy. I know you have responsibilities pressing on you, so I keep my advice actionable and short.

At the same time, this book is spiritual—it goes beyond self-help or life hacks to speak to God's vision for your life. Too often, Christians pay lip service to faith, but it has little bearing on their ambition. In these pages, God is not a placeholder so we can get to the “real stuff.” He's the center of my message. I want to show you how the spiritual and practical intertwine. God invites you to partner with him as you discover and live out your calling.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

In part 1, we'll define what godly ambition is and show how it's the fuel for everything you do. These first three chapters lay a crucial foundation, answering questions like these:

- Is ambition a good thing or not? And how do you know? (chapter 1)
- What does it mean to find your identity in Christ, and why does it matter? (chapter 2)
- How do you discover your calling? (chapter 3)

In part 2, I'll unpack the most valuable lessons I've learned while following Jesus, loving my family, and building profitable businesses. This is where you'll glean strategies, including these:

- How to maximize your current situation while dreaming about the future (chapter 4)
- How to cultivate a marketable, one-of-a-kind skill set (chapter 5)
- How to follow God's lead when he takes you in unexpected directions (chapter 6)
- How to defeat distraction and achieve your goals (chapter 7)
- How to collaborate effectively with others (chapter 8)
- Why your church community is essential to your ambition (chapter 9)
- How to make prayer a central part of your life (chapter 10)
- How to navigate unforeseen setbacks and build resilience (chapter 11)

I hope these outcomes excite you. If you had told six-year-old me I'd be writing a book about how to "make it" in life, I would have laughed. I was the kid who struggled to read. The

student whom teachers never expected much from. The guy statistically slated for trouble. Praise be to God that he had other plans!

If you follow the guidance laid out in this book, don't expect everything in your life to instantly improve. Progress can be slow. Nor am I implying that we should pursue God merely to gain from him. At times, following Jesus leads to *more* challenges and suffering, depending on your circumstances and context.

The goal is not to get rich or become famous but to maximize the gifts, talents, and opportunities God has given you. The goal is to identify your next step. To pray and strategize about what he's calling you to do with the resources in your hands. The goal is to get you unstuck, dreaming again, fired up.

I want you to discover the abundant life Jesus promises (John 10:10). As a child of God, you are created to do great things. You are not average, my friend. You are not called to settle.

You are made for godly ambition.

PART 1

Clarify Your Vision



Is Ambition Bad or Good?

“Can I talk to you for a second?”

I had just finished speaking at a young adults ministry, when a young man approached me. He was sharply dressed, was earnest, and looked perplexed.

He explained he was a visual artist. Curious, I took a moment to check out his work online—it was genuinely impressive.

“This is great stuff. I definitely think you have something special here. Are you pursuing art full-time?”

“No, I’m working twenty hours a week. Other than that, just kicking it.”

I took a beat. “Gotcha. Well, do you *want* to pursue your art full-time?”

“I’m not sure. I don’t want to become too successful, ya know?”

As I looked at this young man, taking his first steps as a gifted artist, I understood the tension he felt. As a “Christian influencer” (a title I’m not particularly fond of, by the way), I’ve thought *a lot* about how to wield influence as a follower of Jesus. Most days, at least one stranger recognizes me from my YouTube channel. That might sound exciting—and to be sure there are rewarding moments—but it’s also dangerous. If I’m honest,

there's a broken part of me that *wants* recognition to feel worthwhile. Validation is a drug. One hit is never enough, and before long, you need more and more to feel whole.

Perhaps you wonder something like this:

Is it wrong to want success?

How do I find my calling in life?

How do I start or run a business with integrity?

How do I keep success from corrupting me?

How do I make the most out of my life and honor God?

If you've wrestled with any of these questions, this book is for you. In the church, *ambition* sometimes feels like a dirty word. We're ashamed to admit we want things—that we're driven to create, build, and achieve. In some circles, it's fashionable to depend on God but “worldly” to hustle.

That said, this young man's response saddened me. He was *full* of potential but held back, fearing that success would corrupt his character. It's the equivalent of avoiding the gym because you don't want to get too jacked. Instead, why not hit the gym and see what happens? Chances are, you'll live a happier and healthier life.

The same principle applies to your gifts: Why not try to maximize your impact? While it's noble to prioritize character, before you worry about the trappings of success, let's get financially stable. Let's build a network of support and collaboration. Let's start a movement. Let's make some noise about what you're up to.

If you stop before you start, in this volatile economy, with all the distractions around you, you've already lost. Too much ambition can be a problem, but just as often I see people with *no*

ambition. Apathy is a silent dream killer, and it's taking way too many people down.

I'm here with good news: There is a way to pursue excellence—even success—without losing your soul. There is a way to dedicate your drive to God. To be sure, chasing ambition like Jesus does looks *very* different from chasing success like the world does. You will have to unlearn some things culture has hammered into you.

In fact, you've likely heard two lies about ambition, and they're possibly influencing you in negative ways—holding you back from the type of ambition God wants for you. Let's look at these lies now.

LIE 1: ALL AMBITION IS EVIL

In the church, many view ambition as a vice more than a virtue. It's tacky, like that Christmas sweater you pull out once a year. It fits awkwardly and makes you feel out of place. Some of my friends who are lead pastors express mixed feelings about ambition. On one hand, they deeply desire for their congregation members to be ambitious in the sense of striving toward the fullness of what God has for them—pursuing godly lives and maximizing their God-given potential. However, they also caution against the darker side of ambition, which can emerge even within church walls. This manifests when individuals start seeking additional authority and power prematurely, often without demonstrating the humility to submit to church leadership. The tension of godly versus prideful ambition illustrates why this can be such a polarizing topic in a church setting; it has the potential to either foster growth and spiritual maturity or lead to discord and power struggles.

Living in a culture that flippantly uses the word *blessing* to celebrate material success makes this topic even more complicated, as if God were a genie who exists only to grant our wishes. I don't want to spend my life taking from my Father's hand while missing his heart.

We plaster over our apathy with platitudes about staying humble. In reality, though, we're playing it safe. Or settling for less than our God-given potential.

Cue the stereotypical thirty-year-old living in his grandmother's basement. Or the person who stays in a dead-end job for decades because she's too comfortable where she is and too afraid to take a new risk. God doesn't call us to sail ahead recklessly, but he often calls us out of the boat. Some of us are a little too comfy sitting at the oars, drifting aimlessly.

Yet when we look at Jesus's teachings, we see that he doesn't rebuke our desire for greatness. He doesn't dismiss ambition or tell his disciples to settle down and chill. If anything, he stirs up *more* ambition in their hearts. He radically redefines what it means to be great.

More on that in a moment, but first, let's expose another aspect of this first lie: Some say ambition is narcissistic. A few years ago, an up-and-coming pastor started making waves online. In a sermon clip that went viral, he declared that all ambition is evil—even calling it “demonic.” He referenced James 3:14, which states, “If you harbor bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not boast about it or deny the truth.” As I watched, the irony was impossible to ignore: a sharply dressed pastor, standing on a professionally lit stage with top-notch audio quality, preaching against ambition. Really? Why else would he pay his team to select, edit, and post that sermon clip if not to gain attention and notoriety? It illustrates how a per-

son can effortlessly slander ambition without realizing that we all have desires—many of them good—that we’re driven to fulfill. Instead of denying it with false piety, let’s be real about it.

In this pastor’s defense, his core message wasn’t entirely off the mark. He was trying to highlight how people often make life choices—such as dating, relocating to a new city, and so on—without consulting God, only to ask for his blessings afterward. The essence of his message was good. However, there’s a huge difference between examining the motives of your ambition and demonizing *all* ambition. If you look more closely at that passage in James, it’s *selfish* ambition he calls out. That’s where the problem is.

GAZELLE INTENSITY

At times, ambition is *exactly* what’s needed to honor God and love your neighbor. There will be seasons in which you need to forge ahead at all costs—when you have to push yourself, when extreme action is necessary, when the so-called work-life balance, though a noble goal, needs to be temporarily set aside. Let me give you an example.

In Proverbs, Solomon gives this advice:

My son, if you have put up security for your neighbor,
if you have shaken hands in pledge for a stranger,
you have been trapped by what you said,
ensnared by the words of your mouth.
So do this, my son, to free yourself,
since you have fallen into your neighbor’s hands:
Go—to the point of exhaustion—
and give your neighbor no rest!

Allow no sleep to your eyes,
no slumber to your eyelids.
Free yourself, like a gazelle from the hand of the hunter,
like a bird from the snare of the fowler. (6:1–5)

In this passage, he describes someone trapped by debt. For the person under this crushing weight, Solomon's advice is to make it right as quickly as possible: Better to struggle now and be free than to live perpetually in anxiety. This principle is what Dave Ramsey calls "gazelle intensity,"¹ and it applies to more areas of life than debt. Just as a gazelle flees a lion with life-or-death urgency, sometimes our survival—financial or otherwise—requires intense focus.

It's trendy nowadays to criticize "hustle culture," and I get it. But sometimes godly ambition pushes you to the limit—not because you're irresponsible or self-centered but because you're faithful. Paul expresses his willingness to expend all his energy for the gospel: "Even if I am being poured out like a drink offering on the sacrifice and service coming from your faith, I am glad and rejoice with all of you" (Philippians 2:17). Similarly, he writes to the Corinthians:

Do you not know that in a race all the runners run,
but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to
get the prize. Everyone who competes in the games
goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown
that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that
will last forever. Therefore I do not run like some-
one running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer
beating the air. No, I strike a blow to my body and
make it my slave so that after I have preached

to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize. (1 Corinthians 9:24–27)

Within the Christian life, there are seasons of gazelle intensity. People will tell you to chill, to slow down, to make less noise. Don't listen. Keep running.

TO BE RICH, OR NOT TO BE RICH?

Confronting the lie that “all ambition is evil” raises a vital question: *Is it wrong for followers of Jesus to be wealthy?* This is a tricky issue because in America, where I live, we're *all* rich by global standards. We tend to think it's the other person who's rich—the one who makes more money or has a nicer car or a bigger house. However, from a global perspective, if you have a roof over your head, clean water to drink, food to eat, and a few luxuries to enjoy, you've been dealt a gracious hand. If you're curious how your income compares with the rest of the world, just enter “How rich am I?” in a search engine and you'll find several fascinating resources to explore.²

One of the most famous New Testament stories about wealth is that of the rich young ruler, which appears in three of the Gospels (Matthew 19:16–22; Mark 10:17–22; Luke 18:18–23). It begins with a wealthy young man who approaches Jesus to inquire about what he must do to inherit eternal life. Jesus answers by listing some of the Ten Commandments. “If you want to enter life, keep the commandments,” Jesus says (Matthew 19:17).

So far, the young man is on board. He knows he's kept them, so he asks, “What do I still lack?” (verse 20).

And here's where Jesus drops a bomb. “If you want to be

perfect, go, sell your possessions and give to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me” (verse 21).

The young man leaves dejected, because he is very wealthy.

Then Jesus says, “Truly I tell you, it is hard for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of heaven. Again I tell you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God” (verses 23–24).

Let that sink in for a moment. Rather than skirting around Jesus’s words, let’s face them head-on. According to him, wealth can be a spiritual hazard, a hindrance to heaven. We don’t talk about this very much in modern-day America, but as followers of Jesus, let’s take our cues from him, not our culture. Our wallets reveal our worship. We like to imagine that we’re untethered from our stuff—that if Jesus asked us to give everything away, we’d gladly obey. But speaking for myself, I’m not sure I’d want to hear that instruction. Would you?

LIVING IN THE TENSION

Jesus’s message is not that wealthy individuals cannot be saved. Scripture records that people of means were among his disciples, financially supporting his ministry and showing hospitality. Church history overflows with examples of well-off patrons who used their resources to train pastors, fund missionaries, and feed the poor.

Additionally, it’s important to remember that the rich young ruler was wealthy *before* he approached Jesus. The text does not specify how he acquired his wealth—whether through hard work, inheritance, or questionable practices. We’re not told the

backstory, which leaves us in the tension. I think that's exactly where God intends us to be.

Consider two different scriptural directives. On one hand, Jesus said,

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moths and vermin destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moths and vermin do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. (Matthew 6:19–21)

Seems pretty straightforward, right? Don't hoard what you have. Prioritize the kingdom, not your bank account. Live for eternal rewards, not material ones.

But on the other hand, there are verses like "A good person leaves an inheritance for their children's children, but a sinner's wealth is stored up for the righteous" (Proverbs 13:22). Scripture affirms that it's wise to save. It's a blessing to the next generations. I resonate with this, as someone who grew up under a Soviet communist regime. Poverty was a crushing reality, and there was little agency to change your situation. Now living in America, I know it's a privilege to provide for my family through hard work. I've committed to living below my means, avoiding debt, and saving diligently. I believe these decisions please God.

We're called to live in the tension of discerning how to live wisely on earth—managing resources and planning for the future—while also ensuring our focus remains on God's eter-

nal kingdom. If money is crowding out the kingdom in your heart, Jesus says to get rid of it. If you seek first the kingdom, you'll be surprised by how your needs are provided for.

As P. T. Barnum once wrote, money "is a very excellent servant but a terrible master."³ Or as my friend Jason Mayfield insightfully puts it, "Money is a tool. Don't let it master you. Don't you become the tool."

THE ANTIDOTE: GENEROSITY

If you're sensing that money has a grip on your heart, God *may* prompt you to give away the majority of your assets. He reserves that right. Yet I think he invites most of us to practice consistent generosity instead. There's something about drip-feeding generosity into our lives that shapes our souls over time. It pries our hands off those glittery things we're tempted to chase.

The moment you're comfortable with your income or level of giving, it's probably time to rethink it. The antidote to greed is generosity, and true generosity never slips into mindless autopilot. It stretches you to give more than you thought you could. There's always more to give—whether it's time, talent, or treasure. (For those who just got excited that it's okay to give things other than money, it might be a sign that you should *start* with giving money.)

I don't believe there's a dichotomy between financial success and faithful living. There are individuals at all financial levels who love Jesus and those at all levels who do not. But take Jesus's warning about the deadliness and deceitfulness of wealth seriously, and regularly submit your resources to God. The sting of sacrificial, faith-filled giving leads to joy, not regret.

While the Lord *does* love a “cheerful giver” (2 Corinthians 9:7), in the end, *we* are the ones who end up blessed when we part with our stuff to build God’s kingdom.

Let’s look now at the second lie about ambition.

LIE 2: AMBITION IS EVERYTHING

“Bro, are you okay?”

My heart pounded as I swerved out of the way, barely missing oncoming traffic. If not for my friend’s urgent shout and the panicked honking from the other cars barreling toward us, that might have been the end.

Bleary-eyed, I pulled into a McDonald’s for breakfast, thankful to be alive. As the sun crept over the horizon, I felt a tiredness in my soul that I could no longer ignore.

This monthlong tour across the country, hitting colleges and churches to promote my latest musical release, was grueling. Previously, my tours had been brief, allowing me to fly home every few days. This time, the razor-thin margins left no room for such luxuries. It was the longest I’d ever been away from my wife and four-year-old son. The tension in my marriage was growing, and my distance only made it worse.

I was drained in every conceivable way: spiritually, emotionally, relationally, and financially. Still, I felt touring was my only option. I wanted so badly to make it that I was willing to push myself to the point of a mental breakdown, and in my exhausted state, I had put my friend in danger. Something needed to change.

For more than fifteen years, I’d faithfully walked with Jesus. I attended church every Sunday and belonged to a men’s small group. Together, we read through the Bible annually multiple

times, supported each other, and built a genuine brotherhood. I believed the gospel. Yet despite doing all the “right” things, dysfunction plagued my life—mostly through unhealthy eating habits, a desire for status, and an ongoing struggle with lust.

I was caught in a cycle of frustration and self-destruction. I stayed up every night until around two or three in the morning “working on music,” hopped-up on exorbitant amounts of caffeine, sugar, and distractions. I was “busy” but unproductive. Living paycheck to paycheck, I grew depressed, fatigued, and isolated, with no real direction for my career as a rapper in my early thirties.

I knew that this cycle wasn’t working, but I didn’t know what to do about it. I was certain of God’s love, but I also knew he desired more for me—not in a materialistic sense but in a spiritual one, a deeper faithfulness in all aspects of life. Although I had built my faith on the Rock, my daily life felt like sinking sand.

Ambition had become my everything—my North Star. And it was destroying me. As a Christian rapper, I felt I had to hustle to be seen and heard. Those of us who live in America are also conditioned to prioritize our desires and preferences over everything (and everyone) else.

The “ambition is everything” mindset is alive and well in the church. Since their work is done “for God,” some people think other divine priorities can take a back seat. This is evident among some Christian rappers I’ve known and even pastors who chase their ministry goals so fervently that they neglect their own spiritual intimacy with God, their families, and their health—sacrificing these essential elements on the altar of service. Such blurring of lines between doing things *for* God versus doing things *with* God can lead to a perilous trap, subtly

distorting one's ministry into something self-serving rather than God-serving.

This reminds me of the biblical principle that “to obey is better than sacrifice” (1 Samuel 15:22). This scripture emphasizes that true adherence to God's will is more crucial than any personal sacrifices we make in his name—especially those he never mandated. At times, I found myself overworking, burning the midnight oil for the sake of ministry, which regrettably came at the cost of valuable family time, robust community engagement, and my own closeness with God. Such scenarios underscore the necessity to balance our ambitions with the overarching command to live according to God's will, ensuring that our efforts in ministry and other pursuits do not overshadow our foundational commitments to faith, family, and personal well-being.

Consider what Scripture calls “selfish ambition.” In Greek, it's the term *eritheia*, and it refers to those who snatch what they want by unfair means.⁴ It's cutting in line, steamrolling others, and letting jealousy fuel one's actions.

Sometimes Christians try to do big things for the kingdom but in the process become prideful, domineering, and boastful. Cue the narcissistic CEO who neglects his kids and treats people like doormats. Or the pastor who pushes for a new building campaign, even though it will cripple the church's finances and exhaust the staff. It's baptizing our agenda with God's name.

Even Jesus's closest friends struggled with selfish ambition. Right in the middle of the Last Supper, they began arguing about who was the greatest (Luke 22:24). Talk about bad timing. Jesus had just exemplified the greatest act of service by washing their feet, which was normally the job of a slave or “the lowliest of servants.”⁵ Yet here they were, sparring over who

was the best. How easily the attitude of the world seeps into our hearts—even with Jesus close by.

It's easier than we think to approach Jesus with wrong motivation or misguided expectations, even if our aim isn't to chase power or position at others' expense. Like the disciples, I've had many moments when I chased status and success in ways that were destructive. I've tried to further God's kingdom by playing by the world's rules. It never works.

In the mid-2010s, I connected with an influential entrepreneur known for his robust presence in the digital marketing sphere and his relentless pursuit of business success. He was particularly prominent at the time, and having my music featured in his vlogs was a significant achievement. He even followed me on Instagram and would give me a shout-out during his live streams and in the comments section.

Caught up in the whirlwind of social media buzz, I dove headfirst into the hustle culture this entrepreneur championed. I became obsessed with growing my Instagram following. Back then, it was all about crafting the perfect photo and diving deep into analytics—likes, comments, and engagement rates. My efforts seemed to pay off when I got my account verified early on, thanks to a publicist friend with connections. I grew my profile to around fifteen thousand followers.

However, my focus on Instagram “fame” began to overshadow the reason I was on the platform in the first place: my music. In 2017, I launched a project called *The Weekly's*, where I challenged myself to write, record, and perform a new song in one take every week. While this generated a lot of online attention, it didn't translate into substantial musical progress. I was creating a perception of success that didn't reflect reality. In-

stead of working to become the kind of artist capable of creating better music, I was chasing the algorithm.

This path led me to profound burnout. The dryness in my soul intensified as I realized that I was chasing status and success at the expense of my art and well-being. Thank God for his mercies, which helped me see that while striving for visibility is valuable, it should never come at the cost of neglecting the real work required to grow and improve as an artist.

In everything you do, there's usually a shortcut available. An easy way that compromises your soul. A type of ambition that puts your own self before others (and God). It's a temptation that promises to deliver everything you want, but it leaves you empty. There's a better way.

A COUNTERCULTURAL AMBITION

The answer is something *between* these two lies—what I call “godly ambition.” As a follower of Jesus, you don't have to run from success. Nor should you serve it as an idol. Too many Christians feel ashamed for wanting to accomplish things and rise to the tops of their industries. Or they get caught up in the rat race, forgetting that God's kingdom defines success counterculturally.

Throughout the rest of this book, whenever I use the word *ambition* by itself, I'll be referring to godly ambition. I want you to catch the vision for this.

In the New Testament, the Greek word *philotimeomai* means “to strive earnestly, to aspire, to be ambitious.”⁶ It shows up three times: In Romans 15:20, Paul talks about his “ambition to preach the gospel where Christ was not known” so he wouldn't

be stepping on someone else's turf. The same word is used in 2 Corinthians 5:9 in the context of pleasing God. And in 1 Thesalonians 4:11, the emphasis is on making it our ambition "to lead a quiet life."

A heart for the gospel. A desire to please God. Living a humble life. In a nutshell, that's godly ambition. If I could encapsulate what this type of ambition looks like in a single word, it would be *stewardship*.

AMBITION AS STEWARDSHIP

The problem with worldly ambition is that it leads to entitlement and pride. The "self-made" man, upon achieving his goals, feels he earned them and therefore has no obligation to answer to anyone else. In Scripture, we see a different posture.

Ambition starts with acknowledging that nothing actually belongs to you. Everything is a gift, entrusted to you by God—the creator and owner of all things. "The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it" (Psalm 24:1). Similarly, David prays, "Who am I, and who are my people, that we should be able to give as generously as this? Everything comes from you, and we have given you only what comes from your hand" (1 Chronicles 29:14).

Developing ambition means cultivating a fierce desire to handle those things responsibly—not solely for your benefit but for the Lord's purposes. If a friend asked you to take care of their luxurious mansion while they went on a trip, they'd expect you to maintain their home by not having wild parties, by keeping it tidy, and by bringing in the mail. In much the same way, God expects us to manage the resources he puts in our care.

This responsibility is paradoxical: Our lives are not entirely our own, yet we bear personal responsibility. It's about doing our best with what we've been given, trusting God to guide and teach us along the way. Imagine a gardener nurturing their garden to yield fruit; they must tend to the soil, remove weeds, and protect the plants from pests. However, while the gardener plants and waters, it is ultimately God who brings the harvest.

In the aftermath of my last tour in 2018, I began to reflect on my musical abilities, pondering whether they served a purpose beyond personal gain and provision for my family. I had viewed my music as a tool for sharing my testimony and faith, but a new idea was beginning to take shape—one that would eventually ignite my migration to YouTube. As my fan base grew, a common request among my followers was for feedback on their music. Often, the tracks were rough, and the artists weren't seriously pursuing careers; they were seeking guidance. Inspired by this, I wondered if I could use my experience as a full-time independent musician to offer constructive feedback and career advice. This led to the launch of "Fan Love Fridays," a weekly live stream where I reviewed music submitted by fans. Initially, the reviews were free, but as interest grew, I transitioned the service to my burgeoning Patreon community. For a modest fee of five dollars a month, fans could submit their music for my reaction to it on a live stream. Eventually I enhanced the interaction by allowing them to call in via Zoom for live feedback and advice.

This arrangement proved incredibly beneficial. Not only did it prioritize the needs and growth of my community, but it also encouraged them to take their craft more seriously. Over the years, I witnessed remarkable improvements in the quality of music from these artists, with some even going on to forge suc-

cessful careers. Many of the artists I met through this stream remain close friends to this day.

This experience profoundly shifted my perspective: I came to see every gift I possess as not merely a means for personal success but also an opportunity to serve others. This is the crux of godly ambition—viewing our talents as tools for stewardship, dedicated to uplifting and aiding others in their own journeys. It’s about transforming what we are given into what we can give, making our work not just a career but a calling.

REDEFINING GREATNESS

When you embrace ambition as stewardship, it changes your motivation. Instead of buckling under the pressure to build *your* brand, you become an ambassador for God’s kingdom. Your gifts point others to him.

At its core, dominance is a symptom of selfishness and insecurity. Power is a way to prop ourselves up. But as those already loved, redeemed, and adopted into God’s family, our acceptance isn’t contingent on our success. We’re free from the pressure to be the best, even as we give our best.

Let’s look again at the scene during the Last Supper when Jesus’s disciples are duking it out over status, even as Jesus is moments away from betrayal and crucifixion. Jesus, patient and wise, tells his disciples in response, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it

not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves" (Luke 22:25–27).

Jesus doesn't rebuke their desires for greatness; he redefines greatness and redirects them toward *service*. He contrasts the worldly model of leadership, which often involves exerting power over others, with the kingdom model, which is rooted in service and humility. He positions himself as the prime example of this servant leadership, underscoring that true greatness in his kingdom is not about being elevated or having authority over others but about being a servant to all.

In 1 Thessalonians 4:11–12, as part of his emphasis on the importance of leading quiet lives, Paul encourages us to work diligently with our own hands, maintain independence, and demonstrate a life worthy of respect. He posits that it is not merely our words but also the consistent testimony of our lives that draws others to Christ. The apostle Peter echoes this idea: "Live such good lives among the pagans that, though they accuse you of doing wrong, they may see your good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us" (1 Peter 2:12).

Both Paul and Peter converge on the idea that authentic living—marked by good deeds and a non-dependent lifestyle—does not just earn respect but actively engages the watching world. Through our actions, we embody the church's mission to redeem and reconcile, persuading even skeptics of the genuine nature of our faith. By living exemplary lives, we fulfill our roles within the church as well as extend an invitation to outsiders to witness and eventually glorify God through their own transformations.

Whatever gifts you have are a way to serve others. They're a way to bless the world. You have this pent-up energy and desire

for greatness—fantastic! Now channel that into serving others not just where you want to but also where you're needed. Would a friend starting a business benefit from your skills or knowledge? Does a ministry at your church need volunteers? Do you have a dream that would make your neighborhood or city a better place? Could you be the hands and feet of Jesus to someone whom you know is struggling? Look for those sparks—those places God is stirring your heart toward something or someone. Stoke the fire of your ambition.

If nothing comes to mind, that's okay too. This book is designed to help you identify where God might be calling you into action. Stick with me.

GOD'S PIT CREW

It's amazing to see godly ambition in action. For instance, take the story of God's Pit Crew, a Virginia-based nonprofit that began with a simple yet profound vision: to provide disaster relief services to communities in need. In 1999, NASCAR enthusiasts and founders Randy and Terri Johnson saw a parallel between the efficiency of a pit crew during a race and the potential for rapid, organized response to natural disasters. Motivated by their Christian faith, they envisioned a "pit crew for God"—ready at a moment's notice to repair, rebuild, and restore lives affected by disaster.

Volunteers from diverse backgrounds—carpenters, electricians, doctors, and counselors—bring their specific skills, and the organization trains them in disaster response and emotional support, stacking these talents to create a team poised to tackle complex challenges. They exemplify how ambition can transform personal abilities into instruments of divine pur-

pose. Their work not only rebuilds physical structures but also uplifts spirits, helping people see the tangible love of God in action. Through this group's efforts, we witness the true essence of living a life that honors God and embodies the values of his kingdom, serving as a beacon of hope and a testament to the power of faith-driven ambition.

A PRAYER FOR GODLY AMBITION

Ambition that's surrendered to God's will can change the world. What dreams is God stirring in your heart? As you read this book, let's fan those sparks into a blazing fire. Let's catapult you forward for God's glory. There are things he has put you on earth to do, people he's placed you near to love, and new ventures he's planted in your mind to build.

Before we move on, let's pause and ask God to teach us the difference between selfish ambition and godly ambition. Truth be told, it's easy to mix them up. Even with good intentions, we pursue the right things for the wrong reasons.

Here's a simple prayer as we start this journey together—a way to dedicate your ambition to God:

Lord, thank you for creating me with drive, desire, and determination. These are gifts from you to steward. Everything I have, including my time, talent, and treasure, is for your glory. You have gifted me to bless others, so help me live out that high calling.

Lord, I know I'm prone to build my own kingdom and promote my own name. I'm hungry for the approval of others. At times I'm addicted to affirmation. Forgive me for the ways I make it about me instead of

you. Remind me that I was created for your glory. Help me delight in proclaiming your goodness to the world.

I commit to serving others with the gifts you've given me. I have been blessed to be a blessing. I submit to you, Jesus, even when you call me to places and positions I'm reluctant to embrace. I will follow your lead, one step at a time, this day and forever.

Please pour out favor on the work of my hands. Increase my skill and knowledge so I can become excellent in everything I do. Where I lack ambition or am tempted to settle into apathy, stir me to action. Light a fire in my heart to maximize every opportunity, gift, and task for your glory and the good of the world.

Lord, I give all my ambition to you. My life is yours. In Jesus's name, amen.

Identity: Know Who You Are

It could have been the best night of my musical career. Instead, it was a train wreck.

In January 2013, I took the stage at the historic House of Blues, where legends like Tupac Shakur—one of my greatest inspirations—had performed. I had just left the rap group the-BREAX to establish my solo career and launch a new label. My ambition was sky-high: to emerge as “the guy” in the solo rap scene. To make it happen, I took on multiple roles—artist, manager, and promoter—juggling full-time work and church responsibilities. Amid this whirlwind of activity, I managed to sell around 400 tickets, and by the time I took the stage, over 650 people were crammed into the venue.

The night began with promise. The opening acts electrified the audience, setting the stage for what should have been the climax of the evening. However, as I took the stage to debut my solo album *Carry On*, the atmosphere shifted. The album was rushed; the songs, unfamiliar to both me and the audience, failed to connect. Although I was backed by a full band and background singers, our performance lacked cohesion—this was our first live rendition of the album, and it showed. By the time my hour-long set ended, I couldn’t wait to get off the stage.

With the help of my pastor, I processed what had gone wrong. I was so determined to become a front man that I stopped caring about how my decisions impacted others. In my ambition, I lost myself. What was meant to be a launchpad for my solo career turned into a stark lesson in humility and leadership. From this broken place, I wrote the lyrics to my song “Do for One”: “I lost sight of what’s in front of me. . . . My ulterior motives got the best of me. . . . Trying to reach thousands, but ignoring my community . . . self-preservation began fueling me.”¹

All of us have moments like this, when ambition shifts from godliness to greed. When we seek our identities apart from Jesus. We’re prone to take good gifts—our time, talent, and treasure—and use them to glorify ourselves. We start out with good intentions, but over time, the lure of achievement or glory or pleasure subtly pulls us down a destructive course. By the time we recognize it, the damage has been done.

Throughout my life, I’ve often found myself ensnared by the lure of my own ambitions. My House of Blues experience didn’t instantly cure me of selfish ambition, but it was a pivotal moment that led me to anchor my identity in Christ, not my achievements. Failure was the wake-up call I needed. Although the change didn’t happen overnight, that concert marked the beginning of a journey to understand true ambition through the lens of faith.

“There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death” (Proverbs 14:12, ESV). A person may believe they should attain as much wealth and status as possible, purely for the sake of it. This belief might even lead the person to make some smart decisions to acquire marketable skills. However, if

the ultimate goal is merely to accumulate wealth, it often comes at the expense of other important aspects of life, such as interpersonal relationships or health.

This mindset is prevalent in the hustle culture that dominates many YouTube channels, characterized by a relentless focus on doing more, grinding, and sacrificing sleep. It's epitomized by entrepreneurs who advocate working "your face off" for up to eighteen hours a day."² While this approach has led to material success for some, it's also caused family breakdowns and divorce, not to mention anxiety and fatigue.

In retrospect, one must consider whether the pursuit of more money is worth the potential moral and personal fallout. This is reflected in the words of Jesus, "What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul?" (Matthew 16:26). His question challenges us to weigh the long-term consequences of our beliefs and the true cost of material success.

For the record, I'm not suggesting that if you manage your time, talent, and treasure according to God's ways, fueled by godly ambition, you'll avoid divorce or difficulty. We can't always control others' actions. Marriage, careers, entrepreneurship, and creativity are already challenging, but we shouldn't make them harder than they need to be. Instead, we want to do everything possible to tip the scales in our favor and reduce the risk of moral failure and fallout in the most crucial areas of our lives, specifically marriage and family.

This leads to the Christian perspective that identity is received, not achieved, and is framed by the truths of Scripture rather than the shifting sands of personal or cultural expectations. A Christian's identity is anchored in being a child of God,

defined by divine love and purpose instead of societal roles or personal achievements. This foundational identity provides a stable base on which all other aspects of life are built, guiding our actions and choices toward eternal values, not temporal successes.

WHY IDENTITY MATTERS

Who you think you are changes everything. Craig Groeschel once wrote, “What you believe—about who you are and who God is—determines how you behave.”³ In other words, your beliefs about yourself and God shape how you live.

Christians adhere to many truths about God, but faith is not merely about accepting a list of facts—it’s about being moved to action. For example, if I firmly believe that increasing physical activity and reducing caloric intake will maintain my health and keep me lean, this belief will influence my behavior. Similarly, if I hold the conviction that living below my means, avoiding debt, and saving diligently will secure my financial freedom, I will naturally align my actions with these beliefs. Belief drives action.

Without a clear sense of your identity in Christ, no amount of success will satisfy you. On the contrary, you’ll be tempted to define yourself by what you do, good or bad, rather than looking to who *God* says you are. That’s why, right here, at the start of this book, I’m devoting a whole chapter to identity. My hope is to help you anchor your sense of self in Jesus.

The world is happy to offer you a pseudo-identity based on your appearance, income level, or some other external metric. To throw you onto the endless treadmill of performance, al-

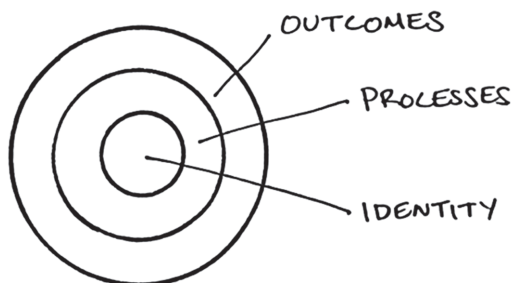
ways demanding more, never satisfied with who you are. It's tough out there, and many well-meaning Christians have lost themselves despite good intentions. As Scripture says, we must be as gentle as doves but as shrewd as serpents (Matthew 10:16). To that end, it's crucial to anchor your identity in Christ because the winds of life will certainly try to knock you down.

Thankfully, we live in an age that recognizes the importance of identity (even though many may not recognize Christ as the foundation). Modern psychologists and habit-formation experts are now acknowledging what Scripture has long taught us: The beliefs we hold about ourselves and God fundamentally shape our behaviors and life paths.

Atomic Habits by James Clear highlights a pivotal principle: A change in habits and ultimately in life begins with a change in identity. The author argues that people who successfully quit smoking are those who no longer identify as smokers. In other words, to break a habit, you need a new identity. This may sound extreme, but part of the reason we struggle to become the people God calls us to be is that we deal with habit formation on a surface level—a behavioral level—instead of seeking the deep work necessary to change.⁴

THREE ASPECTS OF BEHAVIOR CHANGE

Clear's framework for change consists of three layers: outcomes, processes, and identity.⁵ The outer layer, outcomes, is where we typically focus—pursuing desirable goals like losing weight, earning a living, or eating more healthily. The problem is, good intentions aren't enough to achieve these noble goals. Outcomes don't just fall into our laps.



The second layer is processes. Clear insightfully points out that it's *systems* that determine our success much more than the goals themselves.⁶ While everyone aspires to win championships or achieve high levels of success, it's those who develop robust systems and processes, grounded in their well-formed identities, who actually succeed. The key to victory isn't desire alone; it's little daily disciplines that compound to bring big results.

The "third and deepest layer" is identity.⁷ Clear rightly says that true change begins *internally*, beginning with how we perceive ourselves. This mirrors the biblical call to see ourselves as new creations in Christ, transformed and called to live out this new identity.

As an athlete, I've applied these principles to my daily routines and choices. For instance, having prepared meals delivered each week from Meal Prep Sunday helps me monitor my diet and get the nutrients I need. Constructing a gym in my backyard has made it easy to exercise consistently. These processes have certainly led to desired outcomes. And I'd encourage you to examine *your* daily rhythms and habits to see if your processes are taking you toward your goals.

I also agree with Clear's framework—that identity is the core of all behavior. However, as a Christian, I wonder, *Where*

does identity originate? Clear suggests that identity can be shaped and reshaped through our actions and choices—a concept that holds truth but lacks a foundational anchor from a Christian perspective. As Jesus followers, we don't invent or establish identity through repeated actions; rather, we receive it from God through Jesus Christ. Our Christian identity is rooted in being children of God, redeemed and restored through Christ's sacrifice. We cannot earn or achieve it through our actions; it is a divine gift, immutable and grounded in something far greater than ourselves.

This distinction is crucial because it shifts the basis of identity from our changeable, often unreliable patterns to the unchanging truth of God's Word. Our daily practices and routines, while important, are a *response* to the identity each of us has *already received*, not a means to create it. While Clear's approach empowers individuals to foster change through behavior modification, the Christian approach provides an identity that is both a starting point and a continuous source of inspiration.

If you *really* desire to cultivate godly ambition and make a difference in the world, it all starts with making Christ the foundation of your identity. You must see yourself as God's child before you see yourself as a CEO, creator, teacher, politician, influencer, or [insert your vocation of choice here]. As I shared through my own story of hustling in the music scene at the expense of my soul, it's challenging to anchor one's identity in Christ—especially when the world offers attractive alternatives. To be clear, the alternatives always leave us exhausted, insecure, and empty, but in the real world it's difficult to keep our wits about us. Navigating the complex terrain of identity formation in our overstimulated modern world is no small feat.

So the key question is, *How do we strengthen our identities in*

Christ? How do we suit up and go after our goals without losing ourselves along the way? How do we keep our identities from drifting from Christ into dangerous territory?

Scripture's answer is the principle of replacement.

THE PRINCIPLE OF REPLACEMENT

When trying to reinforce their God-given identities, a lot of Christians fall into the trap of focusing only on defeating sin. The logic goes like this: *If I can just stop doing A, B, and C, I'll become a better person. Just stop sinning!* Naturally, this is a necessary part of following Jesus. Sanctification, the lifelong process of becoming more like Jesus through the power of his Spirit, involves killing sin in our lives.

However, the problem with only targeting sin is that there's a second, equally important side of the equation: *loving God*. To root our identities in God, we can't focus on just what we don't want to do, as if the sum total of Christianity is based on behavior. We're called not only to turn from darkness but also to run toward the light. To swap sin for worship. Avoidance for pursuit. Death for life.

So if you want to strengthen your identity in Christ, run *from* sin and *toward* God at the same time. The apostle Paul mentions both actions: "Throw off your old sinful nature and your former way of life, which is corrupted by lust and deception. Instead, let the Spirit renew your thoughts and attitudes" (Ephesians 4:22–23, NLT). This language of throwing off and putting on has been called the "principle of replacement."⁸

Picture yourself in a dirty old T-shirt, right after a long jog in the summer heat. You're about to head out for a nice dinner, so after removing the smelly shirt and taking a quick shower, you

put on a fresh, clean T-shirt. This process of removing what's soiled and putting on what's new is what God desires to do in our lives every day. It is the process of sanctification. One step at a time, he strips off the old and gives us the new.

You may be thinking, *Wait, I thought God made me new when I came to faith in Christ. Am I somehow not fully saved?* Let me be clear: The moment you trusted in Jesus, God instantly saved you, securing your place in his kingdom. However, it takes a lifetime to adjust to this new reality. God, in his kindness, welcomes us in our messy state, and he's patient enough to refine us for the duration of our lives. As he renews us piece by piece, we start to look and sound more like him. We could never do this transforming work on our own. We need the Holy Spirit, whom God has graciously given to all who believe in him.

In Christ, you are a new creation who is renewed every day. This is possible because he's made his home in you. When God moves in, positive change happens. He transforms us from the inside out.

For a moment, let's zoom in on the two aspects of putting off sin and putting on holiness. Both are essential if you want to strengthen your identity in Christ and go about doing his good work in the world.

PUTTING OFF SIN, PUTTING ON HOLINESS

One of the hardest parts of following Christ is defeating sin habits—especially those that have existed for years. As you pursue godly ambition and steward your gifts well to make an impact, nothing will derail you faster than unaddressed sin habits.

When I first encountered Jesus's teachings on relationships,

marriage, and lust, I was challenged. Initially, I started going to church only to spend summers with a Christian girl I was dating, thinking, *Why not?* However, as I continued attending, my heart slowly shifted toward the gospel, and I became more open to following God. But then I faced God's standards for relationships—specifically, no sex outside of marriage—which was a massive shift from what I wanted and expected. I also learned that from a Christian worldview anchored in Scripture, the unborn have value. This meant that if my girlfriend and I were to slip up and she became pregnant, abortion was not an option.

Things became even more challenging when I discovered that consuming pornography was not permissible either. I had figured that since I couldn't have sex with my girlfriend outside of marriage, I would just consume porn to hold myself over. However, Jesus's teaching that "anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart" hit me hard (Matthew 5:28). Consuming explicit material, even while being celibate, was not an option. This revelation forced me to confront and rethink my entire approach to managing sexual desire under God's guidance.

The paradigm shift from sin to holiness wasn't easy for me. I grappled with God's design for sexuality, wondering why it had to be restricted, much like a child might question why they can't have ice cream every night. My previous belief was that true freedom meant no restraints, allowing for the pursuit of whatever felt good. But as I delved deeper into Scripture, my understanding of freedom evolved—it meant not just erasing constraints but also recognizing that self-control would bring a new joy and peace I'd never known. I began to see that although God's standards for sexuality felt stringent to a young man full

of hormones, they were far from unreasonable. The more I considered the potential impact of adopting God's sexual ethics—avoiding pornography and waiting until marriage for sex—the more I saw their benefits for me and for others. Slowly, one step at a time, I was putting off sin.

Here's another example. Before I was a Christian, I thought that I could do whatever I wanted with my money and that maybe if I had a little left over, I would save some for a rainy day. The objective was to get the nicest things, even if that meant living above my means by committing to a car payment that I couldn't afford or financing expensive tennis shoes with a credit card that I didn't really need (real examples, I regret to say). I figured it would all work out later. I didn't understand that God had entrusted me with worldly wealth to bless others and bring him glory by living below my means, saving, giving generously, and being faithful with what I'd been given.

Much like God's sexual standards, these financial principles initially felt counterintuitive. I questioned why God placed such importance on how I managed my finances. Yet considering the broader implications, I pondered, *What if everyone lived within their means, saved diligently, and gave generously? How might the world transform?* These principles, though countercultural, began to transform me.

Trusting and applying Jesus's teachings about money and other areas of my life have deepened my faith and confirmed the trustworthiness of God's wisdom. Because my foundation was strong, I could build more of my life on it. In other words, I was putting on holiness. That's not to say I am perfect—*far* from it. But the more I give myself to God's Word and put it into practice, the more my identity is anchored in him. And it's the same for you.

REHEARSE YOUR IDENTITY

The enemy wants to distort your identity. To tempt you to define yourself by your appearance, your accomplishments, or even your failures. In my experience, one of Satan's favorite tactics is to get you to abuse ambition—to lose yourself in the pursuit of great things and life's distractions. He even uses things you're doing "for God." Our status in Christ doesn't change; our *perception* does. Like Peter walking toward Jesus across the water's surface, we lose sight of Jesus and, in the process, lose ourselves.

One of the best ways I've found to rehearse my identity in Christ—to remind myself that I belong to him alone—is to read scriptures that proclaim this truth. Scripture is a gift: It offers a panoramic view of our status as God's beloved children. God's will is found in God's ways, and God's ways are found in God's Word.

To grow in Christ, we must listen to the Word more than the world. We must cling to what the Scriptures say about our identities. The Bible is *filled* with declarations about who we are in Christ. Soak in these truths. Write them on note cards, and carry them with you. Write them on sticky notes, and post them on your bathroom mirror, dashboard, or fridge. Memorize them with a friend or your family. Meditate on them "day and night" (Psalm 1:2). As Moses instructed in Deuteronomy, "These commandments that I give you today are to be on your hearts. Impress them on your children. Talk about them when you sit at home and when you walk along the road, when you lie down and when you get up. Tie them as symbols on your hands and bind them on your foreheads. Write them on the doorframes of your houses and on your gates" (6:6–9). In my prayer

journal, I pick a new memory verse every week or two. I write it down every day while saying it out loud. It's a practice that anchors my soul, reminding me that I am who *God* says I am.

This habit may seem basic, but don't underestimate the power of surrounding yourself with God's Word. The Bible is a massive book, I know, so if you're looking for a simple way to start, here's an excerpt from a list of verses compiled by author Neil T. Anderson that declare aspects of your Christ-given identity. As you read through the list, start with the words *God says* . . .

I Am Accepted

John 1:12—I am God's child.

John 15:15—I am Christ's friend.

Romans 5:1—I have been justified.

1 Corinthians 6:17—I am united with the Lord, and I am one spirit with Him.

1 Corinthians 6:20—I have been bought with a price. I belong to God.

1 Corinthians 12:27—I am a member of Christ's Body.

Ephesians 1:1—I am a saint.

Ephesians 1:5—I have been adopted as God's child.

I Am Secure

Romans 8:1–2—I am free from condemnation.

Romans 8:28—I am assured all things work together for good.

Romans 8:31–34—I am free from any condemning charges against me.

Romans 8:35–39—I cannot be separated from the love of God.

2 Corinthians 1:21–22—I have been established, anointed and sealed by God.

Philippians 1:6—I am confident that the good work God has begun in me will be perfected.

Philippians 3:20—I am a citizen of heaven.

I Am Significant

Matthew 5:13–14—I am the salt and light of the earth.

John 15:1, 5—I am a branch of the true vine [Jesus], a channel of His life.

John 15:16—I have been chosen and appointed to bear fruit.

Acts 1:8—I am a personal [Spirit-empowered] witness of Christ.

1 Corinthians 3:16—I am God's temple.

2 Corinthians 5:17–21—I am a minister of reconciliation for God.

2 Corinthians 6:1—I am God's co-worker (see 1 Corinthians 3:9).⁹

I encourage you to read through this list once a day. Or write out one of these verses each day, then read it several times as you go through your routine. Remind yourself, again and again, how God sees you. You will need these reminders as you step out, take risks, and use your gifts for the kingdom. As you pursue godly ambition, don't let the enemy twist your goals or whisper lies about who you are. If you've trusted in Jesus, you are his. End of story.

Not only are we made with extraordinary care and purpose; we are also equipped and destined to glorify God in unique ways. Knowing this can empower and motivate us to seek out

and fulfill those purposes, understanding our lives as intricately woven parts of God's greater plan.

Once you know *who* you are in Christ, figuring out *what* you're here to do is a lot easier. God has placed you on this earth for a reason, so let's find out what that reason is.

Calling: Know Why You're Here

The pressure to find your calling can feel overwhelming. No question has higher stakes than *Why do I exist?* We often think about a calling like it's a secret blueprint God has laid out for each of us. One wrong decision, and the whole thing collapses. But God isn't playing games with you. He's not leaving clues, expecting you to put them together or else. His plan for you isn't ruined by layoffs, dead-end jobs, sudden career shifts, or health challenges.

Think of calling not as a prediction of the future but as a *process*—something God reveals and confirms over time. Isn't that relieving? You don't have to figure it out all at once. God, in his kindness, reveals our paths one step at a time, in ways and timing we can handle. Settle in for the journey, knowing he's in control.

Calling is often equated with God's will for our lives. Again, God's will is found in God's ways, which are found in God's Word. When you think about your calling, instead of focusing on the destination, focus on aligning yourself with God's ways and asking how you're doing on the journey. Why are you on the journey? What if the *how* and *why* matter more than the *what*?

Still, the question remains: Where do we start to discern his

specific callings for our lives? Some of you need a first step. A sense of direction. Or maybe you're weighing a bunch of options, looking for God's guidance on which one to go all-in on.

As a high school senior, I gave a presentation (worth a huge portion of my English grade) about a career path I wanted to pursue. Though unconventional, my hypothetical career was to run an independent record label. My teachers were half-puzzled, half-impressed by my choice. Here's the crazy thing: A few years after high school, I actually started that label, eventually building it into a full-time job. Turns out, some high school assignments actually shape your future. I encourage every young person to dream about the future—to think deeply about how God has wired them. Plans change, naturally. But it's wise to continually seek the Lord's direction, asking him to reveal our next steps.

Fast-forward to today. I'm still involved in the music industry, but it's no longer my main focus. Life throws curveballs. Like mine, your journey will have unexpected shifts, setbacks, and surprises. Whether you've always known what you want to do for a living or you're a late bloomer like me, God often reveals our paths one step at a time.

This is a good thing. It means you have freedom to explore, fail, try new things, and discern where God is leading you. So, the pressure's off. You can breathe.

The process of finding your calling can be complex and confusing, so let's start by defining some terms.

YOUR PURPOSE

To start, I want to explore three words that will be helpful as you discern God's call on your life: *purpose*, *assignment*, and *call*-

ing. These words are used synonymously in popular Christian vocabulary, but since that gets messy, let's unravel them.

We'll begin with *purpose*. In America, where we process life more as individuals than as a collective group, it's common to focus on "my purpose." However, part of following Christ is belonging to a family. As in any family, we don't have the right to operate however we want as individuals; instead, we contribute to the good of the whole. Additionally, life is not primarily about *me*; it's about *us*. Scripture says that *all* of God's people have the same ultimate purpose: to know God and make him known.

This should excite you. You're part of a narrative far grander than any individual story. Realizing that your purpose is to know God and make him known isn't about diminishing your role but about embracing a mission that expands into eternity. For most of us, it's a paradigm shift to realize life is about God, not us. Even as Christians, it's easy to forget this in a world that endlessly appeals to our self-centeredness through marketing and media.

Sometimes, we struggle with the idea of glorifying God with our lives because we've embraced Christian platitudes and slogans that misconstrue God as a genie who exists merely to fulfill our whims. We're wired to think that the universe revolves around us, that we're unique snowflakes at the center of the narrative. Fighting this impulse is a full-time job. If we're honest, it feels like a loss to give up the spotlight, even to God. Now add in ambition—the desire to make a difference in the world by pursuing excellence with our skills—and the potential for misunderstanding our purpose grows exponentially.

We misquote passages like Psalm 37:4, claiming that God "will give you the desires of your heart" without connecting it

to the stipulation in the first part of the verse: “Take delight in the LORD.” And we forget (or intentionally leave out) the next verse, “Commit your way to the LORD; trust in him, and he will act” (verse 5, ESV). Thus, the promise of God granting us the desires of our hearts is contingent on our trust in him, our delight in him, and our commitment to letting him lead.

While many of us struggle with some degree of “main character syndrome,”¹ Scripture declares that *God* is the main character in the story of the universe. The more we accept this and *delight* in it, the more our sense of purpose grows. Why would our souls delight in life being more about God than about us? Because we are wired to glory in something greater than ourselves. To stand in awe of ultimate greatness. We were made to worship the Lord of heaven and earth.

Here are a few passages that express our collective calling to know God and make him known:

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,
the world, and all who live in it. (Psalm 24:1)

You are worthy, our Lord and God,
to receive glory and honor and power,
for you created all things,
and by your will they were created
and have their being. (Revelation 4:11)

Whether you eat or drink or whatever you do, do it
all for the glory of God. (1 Corinthians 10:31)

From him and through him and for him are all things.
To him be the glory forever! Amen. (Romans 11:36)

When you produce much fruit, you are my true disciples. This brings great glory to my Father. (John 15:8, NLT)

Don't you realize that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit, who lives in you and was given to you by God? You do not belong to yourself, for God bought you with a high price. So you must honor God with your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19–20, NLT)

YOUR ASSIGNMENT

A less-used but equally important word is *assignment*. And no, I'm not talking about the homework you received in middle school. While all believers have a shared purpose, every disciple has a unique job to do, here and now. This is your assignment, where God currently has you. It can include your job—what you do to pay the bills. Or it could be parenting little ones. Your assignment is what you spend the majority of your time doing, whether or not it brings a paycheck. Unlike your purpose (which never changes), your assignment can shift with the seasons of life. For instance, you might be called to give most of your time to nursing babies and wrangling toddlers right now, but with time, this season will end. God will then give you a new assignment. Or perhaps your current assignment is your job. You might work in that role for the next few years but then find God transitioning you to a new assignment after that. The key is to accept your assignment in this season and give yourself fully to it. It requires openhandedness and trust, knowing that God switches our focus according to his timing and wisdom.

I want to tell you about my friend Willie. As I was growing up in San Diego, my dad wasn't in my life, which led to me getting into a lot of trouble. I got arrested at the age of eleven and had to do some community service. Thankfully, my next-door neighbors were two gentlemen, Charles and Willie, who went to a local church where I ended up doing a lot of my community service hours. Willie became like a father to me. He'd pick me up in his semi, take me on short trips, and share the gospel with me. Although his assignment in those days was to drive trucks for a living, it didn't define everything in his life. Willie knew that his purpose was so much greater than his day job—it involved exemplifying the gospel with his actions, including being a father figure to me when I really needed one.

The lesson is this: While your assignment in this season is a gift from God, there are many other ways to live out your purpose. He's put people in your life to disciple and given you the means to serve your neighbor.

PURPOSE VS. ASSIGNMENT

I've had lots of jobs in my life—at Pizza Hut, where my culinary “skills” were put to the test; as a church janitor, where I learned the humility of doing unrecognized work; at the YMCA, where I became an expert at navigating noisy teens; and as an aide to adults with disabilities, where I learned the value of patience and compassion. Through all these assignments, my purpose remained constant: *to know God, love him, and share his love with others*. The assignments varied, but my purpose did not.

One pitfall of focusing too much on your assignment is that it can lead to a sense of disillusionment or dissatisfaction when your role changes or when things don't go as planned. By con-

trast, understanding your purpose, which remains constant, allows you to navigate these changes with a sense of peace and confidence. “We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose” (Romans 8:28). It’s so freeing to realize you can’t outmaneuver God’s wisdom. Transitions and setbacks happen, but no matter what comes, there’s *always* an opportunity to live out your purpose and give glory to him.

Now that we understand purpose and assignment, let’s unpack the third term: *calling*. What is your calling, and how do you discover it?

HOW TO FIND YOUR CALLING

Early in my Christian walk, I viewed God’s will for my life as a destination, involving a sort of scavenger hunt to find the secret location that held the keys to my future. Unfortunately, I think many Christians also think this way. Each obsesses over their “calling” like it’s a map they must follow step-by-step or else life goes sideways. To them, only the faithful find their callings, while everyone else stumbles around in the dark, banging their heads against the wall and hitting endless dead ends. Meanwhile, supposedly God sits back and enjoys the show, shaking his head in disapproval. Friends, this is not the heart of God. He’s kind. He *wants* you to find your way; in fact, he’s your Good Shepherd who delights to guide you. God isn’t playing games with your destiny—that’s not his nature.

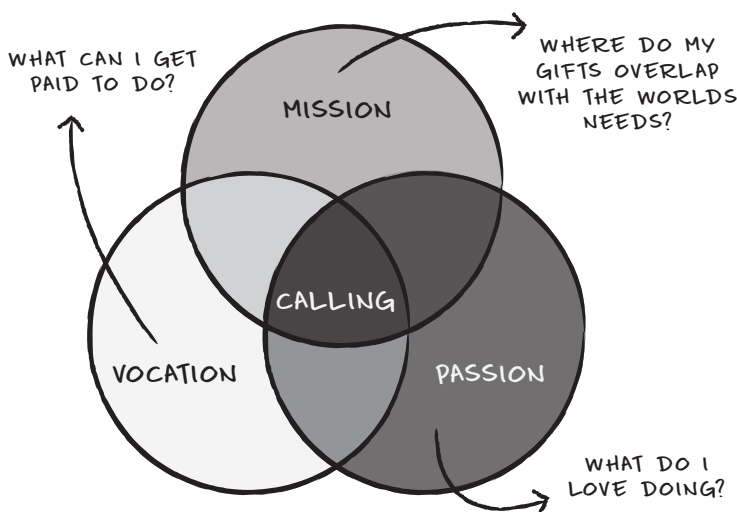
God’s calling is not one secret path to discover; it’s the culmination of everything God has placed in your life, including your desires. Like your purpose, your calling is bigger than one role or vocation. And like your assignment, it’s related to your

gifts and opportunities. In a way, your calling is where purpose (to glorify God) and assignment (specific roles) overlap.

It's taken me years to learn this, and I want to save you that heartache. If you feel confused about your calling and unsure where to start, take heart! You're not alone. The process of discerning your calling can take a long time—even decades. However, it's not something to stress about; it's something to thoughtfully pray through as you recognize patterns in your life. I recommend asking three key questions to discern your calling:

1. What do I love doing? (passion)
2. How do my gifts meet the world's needs? (mission)
3. What can I get paid to do? (vocation)

Let's walk through these three questions one at a time.



PASSION: WHAT DO YOU LOVE DOING?

Too often we follow the mantra that happiness is based on finding something we love so much that we'd do it for free. Many public figures, celebrities, influencers, and CEOs encourage us to follow our passions.

Jocko Willink says, "I definitely think the best thing to do is work at a job that you're passionate about and make a lot of money."²

Steve Jobs seems to echo this viewpoint: "You have to have a lot of passion for what you're doing. . . . The reason is because it's so hard that if you don't, any rational person would give up."³

But the truth is, it doesn't always work that way. Sometimes people achieve their goals and still feel empty. Not to mention the millions of people who don't get the luxury of choosing their jobs—they're just trying to survive. It feels unfair to say that only those with the freedom to choose their vocations can find their true callings.

Also, the reality is that being passionate about something doesn't mean you have a shot at doing it. Mike Rowe, former host of *Dirty Jobs*, gives the example of someone who is passionate about becoming an astronaut. They might even start pursuing it, but Rowe warns:

Statistically, you're not going to make it. You know why? Because there are only like a hundred astronauts. Tough! It's a tough thing to do. I think when you put passion first, you erect a giant wall. If you can get over it and get down to the other side, then you get to write the biography and tell the world

about how you identified your wish. . . . In my view, that's simply not how most success works. . . . Never follow your passion, but always bring it with you.⁴

Instead of directing us to choose between a life driven by passion and a life bound by practicality, Scripture encourages us to hold these two things in tension. Unlike the “do whatever makes you happy” philosophy of modern America, the Bible denies that passion is everything. Passion matters, as we'll see in a moment, but it's not the be-all and end-all of the Christian life. For starters, Jesus is abundantly clear that hard times will befall his friends:

Whoever wants to be my disciple must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For whoever wants to save their life will lose it, but whoever loses their life for me will find it. What good will it be for someone to gain the whole world, yet forfeit their soul? Or what can anyone give in exchange for their soul? (Matthew 16:24–26)

Sometimes following Jesus means carrying your cross and crucifying your passions. It requires dying to your hopes and dreams, only to have them replaced by even greater ones. To follow him requires total surrender. Going places we would never go on our own. Choosing obedience over preference.

Another pushback to the idea that “passion is everything” is that we can't always trust our own desires or judgments. “The heart is deceitful above all things and beyond cure. Who can

understand it?" (Jeremiah 17:9). Jesus says, "What comes out of a person is what defiles them. For it is from within, out of a person's heart, that evil thoughts come. . . . All these evils come from inside and defile a person" (Mark 7:20–23).

"Many are the plans in a person's heart, but it is the LORD's purpose that prevails" (Proverbs 19:21). When I came to faith, I was already making music, so my goal was to become a rap star for Jesus. I was certain this would be my career path. I was passionate about it. I was willing to suffer for it. I was willing to do everything I could to hone my skills. I don't think anyone was more devoted to sharing the gospel as a rapper, *and yet* my career has taken me in an entirely different direction. I still love music, write songs, and produce for other artists when I can, but it's more of a side hustle now.

While there are good reasons to keep your passions in perspective, you should also pay attention to them. God has wired you to love, excel at, and long for certain things. He's prepared good works in advance for you to do as someone created in his image. And he's given you *desires* for those good works. In some Christian circles, feelings are demonized, as if obedience never aligns with what we actually want. That's not true. If the Spirit who raised Christ Jesus lives in you, of course he's stirring up your heart, nudging you to use your gifts.

What captures your imagination? What stirs your spirit? Maybe you're passionate about feeding the poor, collecting vintage comic books, playing basketball, sewing, creating apps, writing poetry, solving financial problems, or ministering to the elderly. Nothing is too small to make a difference in God's kingdom. My advice is to pay attention to those things you feel born to do. Your interests are no coincidence; they've been placed within you by your Creator.

Passion and Pain

What if I told you there's a different definition of *passion*—that it's more congruent with what the Scriptures teach us about life, purpose, meaning, and our assignment on this side of eternity?

Before moving on, it's important to clarify that having a passion for something doesn't always mean it will be fun or easy. Passion isn't about doing whatever you want. It's about what you're willing to suffer for. If you really want to know what you care about, consider what you're willing to sacrifice for. In an interview, Jerry Seinfeld said, "Your blessing in life is when you find the torture you're comfortable with."⁵

Choosing your vocation is not about finding something you love to do so much that you'd do it for free and if you can make money from it, whoop-de-do. No, find something you're so passionate about that you're willing to sacrifice yourself for it. To lay down your life for it. To endure agony. It's not about "never working a day in your life"; it's about finding so much meaning in your work that you allow the work to transform you. "If you do what is easy, your life will be hard. But if you do what is hard, your life will be easy."⁶ Passion allows us to choose the hard things in life so that over the long haul, life will become easier. Don't separate passion from pain. If you honor your passions, expect the road to be rewarding but not easy.

If you're trying to discern your assignment in this season, ask yourself, *What am I willing to sacrifice for? What am I willing to lay down in the short term to accomplish in the long term?*

Some of us want to go out and change the world and help usher in the kingdom of heaven on this side of eternity. But

perhaps we're lacking some of the practical skills required to do what we're supposed to do. Transitioning from a rapper to a YouTuber meant I needed to make up for a skill deficit—there were new software, hard skills, and things about cameras and lighting to learn. Because I had a deep passion, I was willing to sacrifice in the short term to make a long-term impact.

If passion involves embracing suffering and agony, don't be surprised or discouraged when you start something new and it's hard. How do you fight discouragement? You have to sacrifice pleasure, the things that feel good in the short term. Jesus endured the agony of crucifixion because he had a more powerful long-term vision: "For the joy set before him he endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God. Consider him who endured such opposition from sinners, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart" (Hebrews 12:2–3).

None of us will ever experience the depths of pain Jesus felt on the cross; however, his example shows us the importance of laying aside temporary comfort for a greater purpose. It's no accident that if you look up the word *passion* in the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, the second definition refers to "the suffering and death of Jesus."⁷ He shows us that passion and pain intermingle for the most beautiful life imaginable. Again, I'm not putting our work on the same level as Jesus's. But as his disciples, we should follow his example by accepting pain as a natural part of doing great things for the kingdom. When you're tempted to abandon your passions because the road gets tough, look to Jesus and keep going. Don't lose heart.

MISSION: HOW DO YOUR GIFTS OVERLAP WITH THE WORLD'S NEEDS?

The second thing to consider when discerning your calling is this: *How do my gifts overlap with the world's needs?*

I first met my friend Trizzle, a former orthopedic surgeon, through our shared love for music. Once, when I asked how he ended up going into medicine, he responded, "It was a desire for security. When I was younger, during the 2008 recession, my family did really well at first. But then, we got everything stripped from us. We lost our house, my dad lost his job, and my parents got divorced. So, my entire upbringing was taken from me."

After becoming a surgeon, even while working sixty to seventy hours a week, Trizzle couldn't shake his passion for fitness. "Even though I was working in the ICU, I still worked out five times a week. People in the hospital were like, 'How are you getting these workouts in?'" On top of that, he had begun his own business training fifty to sixty people at the gym.

He managed to juggle this packed schedule for a time, but one day he had a panic attack while on a run. "I had so much pressure and so much demand. . . . Eventually, I just didn't have the energy for my wife or at home," he explained.

His wife gave him an ultimatum: "You have to make this decision. You can't hold on to both things."

When he realized he had to choose between his vocation and his passion, he experienced a breakthrough. "I made my two-month salary in one week with my business while working full-time at my job," he said. "That's when I knew fitness was where I needed to be."

Making this leap wasn't easy. Trizzle shared, "My parents

questioned my decision, saying, 'You went to school for eight years. You took out \$250,000 in student loans, and you're gonna give that up for this?' But my wife saw what I was going through and supported me in making the change." Even though it was risky, Trizzle knew this was the right path.

Now Trizzle serves as a father to the fatherless, fostering children through his church. He told me, "My church is really passionate about foster care. We've had about three or four foster children. Our goal is to have over twenty-five foster families in our church." This resonates with Matthew 25, where Jesus teaches about serving the "least of these." Trizzle's story shows that when we align our ambitions with God's purpose, we find more fulfillment than we ever imagined. Trizzle's purpose remained the same in Christ, but his assignment changed.

I love how his story showcases the collision of passion and mission. As an avid athlete, he maintained his workout regimen despite a demanding career as a surgeon. God gifted him physically, and the more he nurtured that gift, the more he realized he could meet the needs of others looking to get in better shape.

As you seek out your calling, consider how God has gifted you. Where do you excel? What skills have you worked hard to cultivate? What abilities come naturally to you? Pay attention to those areas, and look for ways to serve others with those abilities. In the overlap of your gifts and the world's need, you will find your calling.

VOCATION: WHAT CAN YOU GET PAID TO DO?

The third and final thing to consider when discerning your calling is, *What can I get paid to do?* Your vocation may not be a paid

role (stay-at-home parents, I'm looking at you). But it often is. Be practical: What opportunities are actually presenting themselves to you right now?

The tension lies in the thought, *But what if I'm stuck in a job I hate, where I have zero passion?* I hear you. We don't always get to choose our jobs. Still, God calls us to be faithful. Without the lessons you're learning now, you won't be ready for what's next. Be patient. Trust God.

In the early stages of my career, navigating the balance between passion, mission, and vocation was hard. I realized you can't always have all three in a job, so you must choose what best suits your needs and goals at any given time. During this phase, I chose to work with adults with developmental disabilities. It was incredibly fulfilling and easy in terms of workload. It allowed me to be fully present with my clients, assisting them with daily activities like going to appointments, the gym, and school. The work provided a stable and predictable schedule, which was a huge plus.

The trade-off, however, was the pay—it wasn't great. But this was a strategic choice for me. The job's low demands and stable hours freed up my afternoons and evenings, giving me the precious time from three to six to pursue music and other passions. This setup was ideal for cultivating new skills and bridging gaps in areas I was passionate about, which I believed were important in the world.

Jonathan Pageau, a Christian iconographer, artist, and author, follows this reasoning as well. In a conversation I had with him, he discussed the necessity for creatives to embrace a simpler, more frugal lifestyle to pursue their artistic passions fully. Jonathan's approach involves living below his means so he can devote himself entirely to his art. This lifestyle choice, though

humble, is actually about prioritizing long-term fulfillment and creative freedom over immediate financial gain. Such choices underscore the importance of distinguishing our self-worth from our income, recognizing that our value extends far beyond our professional roles.

Embracing a season of earning less to focus on personal growth and development is a challenging decision, especially in a culture where so much of one's identity is tied to income. However, what you do for work does not define who you are. It's merely one way you contribute to the world. Choosing to take a step back financially to enhance personal and creative skills can be a profound investment in your future. Perhaps God is calling you to stay in a low-paying job because that's exactly where he wants you to serve. It's easy nowadays to assume there's something better around the corner—an opportunity that will make you rich or remove the stress from your life. This may be the case, but there's also a good chance God wants you to be faithful over the long haul. To use your gifts in humble ways. This might sound disappointing to the world, but for those walking with Christ, nothing is more fulfilling than feeling God's pleasure and seeing lives changed.

WOUNDS AND WORK

In a broken world, one of the greatest temptations we face is to work *for* love rather than *from* love. Friend, don't try to curate your calling to fill the void in your soul. Many people enter fields like music, media, or sports looking for attention and validation. They need success to feel complete. This is a dangerous game.

If your sense of calling stems from a place of brokenness

rather than godly ambition, you'll run yourself into the ground. Indeed, there are fates worse than failing to achieve success. What good is it to gain the world but forfeit your soul? To stockpile earthly goods but miss out on heaven? To achieve glory for yourself while missing out on the thrill of glorifying the One who made you? If you have unresolved hurt or trauma, don't glaze over it. Beyond growing up without a dad and getting into trouble with the law, I was sexually assaulted by some neighbors as a boy. This experience left a horrible hole in my soul, and it's taken years of prayer, counseling, and support to heal. Some days, I still feel like I'm healing. The point is, though your past doesn't define you, it *does* impact how you see the world. Be mindful that your wounds need proper care. Medicating through achievement never works.

As you discern your calling, I encourage you to search your soul. Sift your motives. Pay attention to those pain points that will hijack your ambition. As followers of Jesus, our greatest hope—and what keeps our ambition in check—is the love and grace of Jesus. In him, we are accepted, adopted, forgiven, and being renewed. God accepts you on the basis of Christ's sacrifice, so breathe easy. You no longer have to chase recognition, fame, or success. You don't have to impress God; you just have to *receive* him.

One of my favorite descriptions of God's love comes from Deuteronomy 7, where God expresses his unconditional love for Israel:

The LORD did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and

kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt. Know therefore that the LORD your God is God; he is the faithful God, keeping his covenant of love to a thousand generations of those who love him and keep his commandments. (verses 7–9)

God is love, so he needs no special reason to set his affection on you. In the New Testament, he expresses his love for you using the same terminology he used to dote on Israel: “You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

As you seek clarity on your calling, start here: *You are loved by Jesus*. Let that truth sink deep into your bones. Let it inspire you to surrender control, slow down to heal, embrace challenges, live below your means (if necessary), and lead a quiet life.

CONSIDER YOUR CALLING

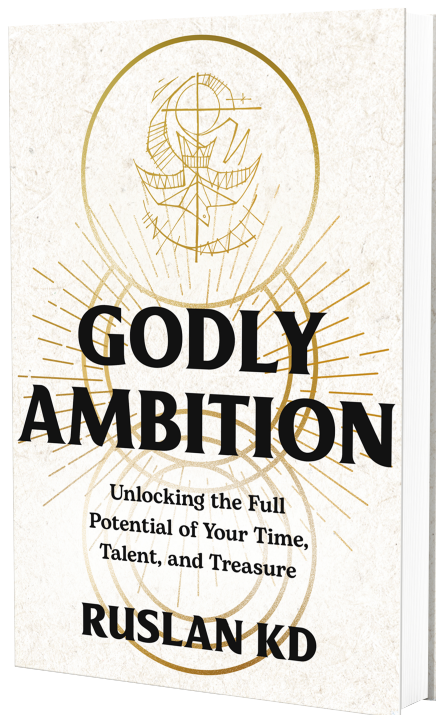
I know this is a lot to take in, so let’s hit pause. Right now, I want you to take a deep breath and give yourself space to reflect on these three questions:

1. What do I love doing? (passion)
2. Where do my gifts overlap with the world’s needs? (mission)
3. What can I get paid to do? (vocation)

Use a journal or digital document to record your thoughts. As you do, bring your ideas, hopes, and questions to God in prayer. I've found it's also important to bring others into this conversation about calling, whether it be your spouse, mentor, friend, or small group. It can be so illuminating to process life with others—to ask them what gifts and opportunities they see in you. This type of community is God's gift to you (more on that in chapter 10).

As we continue this journey together, I pray your calling becomes clearer. I've written every chapter to help you listen for God's voice, take practical steps forward, and move further into God's plan for you.

In the next chapter, I want to help you make sense of the season you're in. If you're currently feeling unsure about the future or stagnant in your current role, there are important lessons God wants you to learn. So, let's dive in.



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