However, ambition is bad—and even evil—if it drives one in primarily selfish purpose, especially if it results in the destruction of others for little other reason than one’s own gain. Lying, cheating, stealing, and the like are condemned not only by Christianity but by virtually all religions seeking the good of mankind. We are reminded of the selfishly ambitious: “The dogs have a mighty appetite; they never have enough. But they are shepherds who have no understanding: they have all turned to their own way, each to his own gain, one and all.” (Isaiah 56:11), and “They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! Forsaking the right way, they have gone astray. They have followed the way of Balaam … who loved gain from wrongdoing.” (2 Peter 2:16) And, of course, few Christians cannot quote Jesus: “For what will it profit a man, if he gains the whole world and forfeits his life?” (Matthew 16:26) Morally achieving any goal must be accomplished through virtue—hard work, mutual assistance, dependability, integrity, and seeking to advance the good.

Now, of course, not all ambition is bad. For instance, parents, in particular, don’t want their kids to be couch potatoes living in the basement but rather hope they’ll excel in work ethic and intellect—academic or otherwise—and be successful (and self-supporting!) in whatever vocation they choose to pursue. A desire to achieve fairly and through virtuous hard work and effort is always commendable.

But even scriptures are rife with examples of the pitfalls of ambition, even from the very first chapters. Eve begins well but is seduced by the serpent’s lie that the forbidden fruit would make her and Adam “like God.” (Genesis 3:5). Cain slays his brother Abel due to ambitious jealousy, even after God had corrected and encouraged Cain: “If you do well, will you not be accepted? And if you do not do well, sin is couching at the door; its desire is for you, but its desire is for you, but you must master it.” (Genesis 4:7) Solomon’s son Rehoboam’s ambitious greed breaks apart the Golden Age nation of Israel (1 Kings 12). And, most nefariously, Judas’ betrayal of Jesus was for a paltry handful of silver. (Matthew 26:14-16)

Morality of ambition is inextricably entwined with intent. Ambition to do well in order to support the family, be charitable and help others in the larger community, if not the world, is nothing but laudable when accompanied by humility and generosity. So, in the midst of material success, the good and wise person might remember St. Paul: “As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty, nor to set their hopes on uncertain riches but on God … They are to do good, to be rich in good deeds, liberal and generous, thus laying up for themselves a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life which is life indeed.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19) Perhaps even more generally and yet more directly to the point, the prophet Jeremiah: “Thus says the Lord: ‘Let not the wise man boast in his wisdom, let not the mighty man boast in his might, let not the rich man boast in his riches, but let him who boasts boast in this, that he understands and knows me, that I am the Lord who practices steadfast love, justice, and righteousness in the earth. For in these things I delight, declares the Lord.’” (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

The only intentions worth doing are good intentions—not “good for me” necessarily, but good for a wider orbit of possible recipients; the Christian necessarily “fact-checking” the goal of his intentions with the Word of God to make sure he is not misdirecting his efforts due to cultural standards which may be opposed to that Word. One cannot rob a bank, for instance, so to give a donation to a charity.

The measure of any action and intention is in how in accord it is with those two great commandments of love God with whole heart, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. Even if we find ourselves having to harm someone, let it be in the view of “tough love” his ultimate benefit in mind, such as refusing to enable bad or destructive behavior simply for good relations. In such things, we can be like a surgeon who causes pain to excise a deadly tumor. Parents especially should note this, as they are often reluctant to punish a wayward child for fear of alienating him. But punishment should be done for the child’s ultimate good, knowing that constant indulgence of either adult or child can ruin morals when never held to account, reminding us of Proverbs, “He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him is diligent to discipline him …” (Proverbs 13:24). We may not use a literal rod, but the principle always holds.

So let us examine the intent of our action and always seek to aid those around us with our efforts. As Jesus came to serve, so should His disciples, keeping in mind also Paul’s exhortation when considering our ambitions and intents: “See that no one repays anyone evil for evil, but always seek to do good to one another and to everyone.” (1 Thessalonians 5:15)