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# “DOWNWARD MOBILITY”

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TEXT: MATTHEW 23:1-12 ESV

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## I. THE STRANGENESS OF CHRIST’S CALL

I love this so much! Jesus is the strangest of the strange. Jesus' teaching is not only counter-cultural, but even contrary to our basic human nature, which is to increase our status whenever and wherever possible.

The Pharisees were Jerusalem’s cream of the crop—the religious and social elites. They were very impressed with themselves and one another. The first thing I need to say is that this is our very nature. We are hardwired to serve and increase our status.

We touched on this idea a few weeks ago when I talked about pastors being sheepdogs. I feel this is important because without a downwardly mobile model of ministry, we turn into Pharisees again and again.

*[Graphic of Catholic and Episcopal bishops]*

The call to downward mobility sits in profound tension with nearly everything our culture, our instincts, and our biology tell us. I’d like to name a few specific examples before going deeper into this mystery.

## IT’S NEUROLOGICAL

Status-seeking is not merely a cultural problem — it's baked into our neurology. Studies in social psychology consistently show that humans monitor their relative standing in groups almost automatically, and that perceived status loss triggers the same brain regions as physical pain. Jesus isn't just asking people to swim against cultural currents. He's asking them to override something that feels like survival itself.

## FROM EVOLUTIONARY PSYCHOLOGY AND PRIMATOLOGY

Frans de Waal's decades of research on chimpanzees and other primates shows that status-seeking behavior is not learned — it's inherent. Dominance hierarchies appear across virtually all social mammals, and the drive to rise within them appears to be hardwired rather than culturally constructed. What Jesus is asking isn't just counter-cultural, it's counter-evolutionary.

## FROM SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGY

***Sociometer Theory***, developed by Mark Leary, proposes that self-esteem is our internal gauge of social status and belonging. His theory predicts — and research confirms — that people will unconsciously adjust their behavior to protect or elevate their standing in a group, even without

realizing they're doing it. This happens at a level below conscious choice, which makes Jesus's call to deliberate humility all the more remarkable as a spiritual discipline.

Another man, Solomon Asch, had many famous conformity experiments, which are usually discussed in terms of peer pressure. One example is an experiment in which a panel of people responded to test questions, with all but the subject being plants—deceivers. Shown cards that had one line on the left and told to match it with the line of equal length on the right, the actual matching answers were pretty easy, but when all the other panelists answered wrongly, an amazing number of the test subjects answered the same, even though they likely knew it was the wrong answer. This reveals how people will contradict their own clearly correct perceptions rather than risk social standing. Status protection can override even our commitment to observable truth. Now, isn't that more than a little bit scary?

## FROM BEHAVIORAL ECONOMICS

Robert Frank, a Cornell economist, demonstrated that people will consistently accept lower income in exchange for higher relative income. In other words, given a choice between making \$150K a year when everyone around is making \$100K and making \$300K a year when everyone around is making \$350K, people *will* choose the lower amount with higher relative status. This means people will literally earn less money as long as it means being higher on the local status ladder. This clearly shows that status isn't just something people want alongside other goods. For many, it is **the** primary good that organizes the pursuit of everything else.

## THE PHARISEES' STATUS

The Pharisees weren't villains for wanting honor — they were doing exactly what any reasonable person in their world would do. They had invested decades in education, discipline, and religious performance. Seeking the best seats and public titles was the logical return on that investment. Jesus isn't condemning ambition *per se*; he's exposing how the love of status, when it feeds on the approval of others, becomes a kind of spiritual addiction that can corrode society, just as it had corroded 2<sup>nd</sup> Temple Jerusalem.

Jesus says, “Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted.”

We can see how this works: those who most aggressively pursue greatness tend to produce the opposite effect on the people around them—it *lowers* them. The person who needs to be seen as great makes everyone else feel smaller. But the person who *serves* makes everyone else feel more significant. One of these people is actually producing community health and wellness; the other is *consuming* it.

The social media era has turned status competition into a 24-hour sport. Jesus's words hit us today with at least as much force as they did in first-century Jerusalem, probably more.

## DOWNWARD MOBILITY IS THE BETTER WAY TO LIVE

Rather than framing this as a sacrifice, it's worth making the case that Jesus is describing something genuinely winsome — even enviable — once you see it clearly.

The person practicing downward mobility is free in a way the status-seeker never is. The downwardly mobile don't need to manage impressions, protect their reputation, or navigate who in the room is worth cultivating. People who live with that kind of freedom are genuinely rare and immediately noticeable. People are drawn to it without always knowing why.

Jesus says the one who humbles himself will be exalted — and it's worth noting this isn't just a promise about the afterlife. It describes a social dynamic that plays out in ordinary human experience. Think of the leaders, teachers, or mentors people remember most deeply. Almost universally, they are people who made others feel seen, capable, and valued — not people who impressed others with their own credentials.

One of my personal heroes was a Presbyterian Minister living in Pittsburgh. He was an oddball of the best kind and lived his life with a focus on protecting the minds and souls of children. His name was Fred Rogers.

Mister Rogers held an alternative view of humanity, with little-to-no regard for status in normal, worldly terms. When he received an Emmy for his many years of consistent quality work, his acceptance speech was—well, probably the best thing you'll ever hear at one of these inflated awards shows....

*[Video of Fred Rogers at the Emmys]*

Downward mobility is also one of the most credible forms of witness available to a Christian. In a world where even religious leaders are routinely associated with the accumulation of power, platform, and money, a community of people who genuinely and visibly move in the opposite direction is strikingly unusual. When we see it, it doesn't need to explain itself; it does something to us just by being there.

There is also a deep personal freedom in renouncing the project of self-promotion. The Stoics noticed this, the Christian contemplative traditions noticed it, and modern research on what actually produces lasting well-being confirms it: people who orient their lives around contribution rather than status consistently report higher meaning and lower anxiety.

Jesus is not asking his followers to be miserable. He's pointing them toward a way of being that, counterintuitively, produces more joy than the alternative.

The gospel offers something that reorients the self at a level deep enough to produce genuine and lasting change, whereas other interventions yield only modest, temporary shifts. The spiritual formation Jesus is describing isn't a minor moral adjustment. It's a reordering of what the self is fundamentally organized around.

Christmas, less than two months ago, is itself about downward mobility—Jesus, who is God, coming down into this world of flesh.

In fact, the entire arc of the gospel is God practicing downward mobility — and not as a *strategy*, but as the expression and revelation of his true nature.

That Jesus calls his disciples—that's you and me—to seek the lower status of slaves and servants is not an incidental or arbitrary teaching. It's an invitation to participate in the very same movement that God made in coming to us.

Downward mobility is not diminishment. It's actually what love looks like when it has no need to prove itself. This is what our witness to the world is supposed to look like. It is our path to wholeness, true community, and joy. †