

SERMON: Downward Mobility: Standing Together In Christ

The latest trends in status symbols in the US ... were recently published in Boston Magazine...

Turn to the person next to you and discuss just for a minute what you think one of those status symbols is today...something that really indicates that you are WITH it... that you have got it all together...(PEOPLE TALK)

Now I am going to tell you what the latest trends in status symbols are...Some of them were surprising to me...here are a few:

A couple of these are old ones you might have guessed:

What kind of car you drive continues to be a status symbol..that has always been around...how you get from here to there matters in terms of your status...a little more complicated to day the article says because of the going green movement – do you get a car that's eco-friendly, or a luxury gas guzzler – what status you have based upon the car you drive depends upon which group you hang with...

Your zip code...and what school you go to continues to mean status... people are still lining up to get their tiny tots into the best preschools

(NEWER EMERGING STATUS SYMBOLS)

Going on exotic Vacations though is a newer status symbol...where no one you know has ever gone before and letting people know about it...a status symbol that is more and more prevalent

PPO vs. HMO in healthcare (more people talk about healthcare now and if you have the luxury of a PPO that somehow spells status)

How many fitness classes you are in...I guess you need one for every muscle group...and it all ultimately boils down to how toned and “fit” are you? If you are toned and fit...you have status today

And I guess **Rhodesian Ridgebacks** right now are the dogs to have if you want status. And if they have a liver colored nose...all the better...

Another recent article talked about **keeping up with the latest technology** as another status symbol. I got to admit when I got that thin little apple MacBook Air I felt pretty good about myself...opening it up in Starbucks next to someone who had an old TOSHIBA....I felt better than that person...I really did...I felt more “with it”

James Anthos, program director for [Information Technology](#) at South University, [Columbia](#), notes that..

(keeping up with the latest technology) has become such an important status symbol to many consumers that some will spend hundreds of dollars on cell phones each month, when they cannot afford to eat well or purchase necessary medications.

So who ran out and bought the new Apple iPhone 5 or pre ordered it? Confession is good for the soul...hope you still have a few bucks to buy lunch this afternoon...

Every age and culture has status symbols... Well in the ancient world you didn't have technology, and you didn't have cars and healthcare... but...you never got more status conscious than in Roman Culture. **"Rome was the most hierarchical status conscious culture EVER"** writes one historian...

In order to understand the book of Philippians you have to understand this, and you have to understand the kind of place Philippi was People in Philippi lived and breathed what rung of the ladder you were on...

So let me briefly give you a little history – many years prior to Paul's writing the letter to the Philippians there was this guy who ruled in Macedonia.

At that time Philippi didn't even exist...This ruler's name was named Philip of Macedonia....(so guess who Philippi is named after, right?) ...and Philip was so rich that he created a city in Macedonia – which was the city of Philippi - in which to keep all of his gold... *Can you imagine being that rich that you need a whole city to contain your gold? That's a status symbol for you!*

So you can imagine...this town of Philippi was a very rich elite town... Two centuries later...

Caesar Augustus comes to power and defeats Casius and Brutus at Philippi

And historians will tell you that..

The battle at Philippi was the beginning of the Roman Empire

"Caesar Augustus is a Saviour for us...," says one writer,

"Caesar is Lord" the people would declare..."That is the good news."

Philippi is where emperor worship started...where Caesar became Lord of all...

Polycarp...one of the early church fathers...at 86 years old was burned at the stake because he said this “**For 86 years I have followed Christ and he has never failed me...I will not say Caesar is Lord...for how can I betray Jesus who is Lord?**” so they burned him... at the stake

The elite people in Philippi were Roman Citizens. Philippi was where Rome began and the culture had its roots...

And what was Roman culture like?

Roman culture was vertical, and hierarchical; all about climbing up ladders

Philippi was extremely preoccupied with Status, recognition and power....aren't you glad we don't live in a culture that is that way today?

In Rome there was a social system that was just like this ladder...

People were divided quite rigidly into classes.

There was the **Roman Senate** at the very top – which were about 600 people who had power in the government...

And then just under that, was the **Equestrian class**. These were people of great wealth

and power too. You belonged to this class if you were prominent enough to receive a horse out of public funds.

Beneath that was the **Decurion class**. These people were still wealthy, but not as wealthy as

the Equestrians; however, they had some power in local government as a wekk.

Beneath that were the **Citizens**. They had less wealth, but had some rights as Romans like owning their own property.

(Paul, as you may remember, was a Roman Citizen.)

Below that were those who were called “**Free people**.” These were people who had been Slaves, but somewhere along the line had acquired enough resources to buy their freedom. They were still not Citizens.

Slaves occupied the lowest rung on the ladder.

Everything in their society reinforced this kind of caste system. Clothes showed what class you were in too.

In ancient Rome, only Citizens were allowed to wear a togas. Togas were drafty, and uncomfortable because you had to wear one hand in and one hand out...but people wore them any way just to show their status...

The **Decurions and Equestrians** could wear **stripes on their togas** to show their status.

If you were a **slave**, you wore a **tunic**—you didn't get to wear a toga—just as a reminder that this was your class.

In addition, much of Roman life was arranged around Guilds that had wealthy patrons from the Equestrian class. The guilds frequently held festivals. If you went to a meal at a festival, you were seated acc'd to your status. If you were to the right of the host...you were first...Left you were second the Equestrian class was served first, and after that, the Decurion class.

Of course, the best food went first. Next the Citizens would be fed, and then Free people would be fed. If you were a Slave, and if there were anything left, you would get the dregs.

Seating at public events was arranged by status also... It wasn't about how expensive your ticket was. No...public arenas had areas marked off for your status... this lower group goes to this section and this higher group to a better section...and you better not get your sections mixed up

It was so bad that even
When people were buried in Philippi... they had their titles on their
tombstones

That's the way that it worked in Phillipi. That was life.
But there was a new community – the early church - and they said to
themselves:
Jesus didn't really deal with people like that. Jesus said that He, the Son of
Man:

Came not to be served but to serve and to give His life a ransom for all.
(Mark 10:45)

So, you're a Slave, and you go into a house where the church gathers, and
an Equestrian kneels down and serves you food.

What do you do with that? You start to cry. You're a Slave. You've never
been served your whole life long, and now you're being served by an
Equestrian!

You're getting the best
food.

You look in his eyes, and you're weeping; and he's weeping, because he's
never experienced the bond of common humanity or the joy of serving
someone before. There's never been a community like this!

This is a Jesus community...

All of this in the context of Roman culture
Where the goal was to get to the top of the ladder in your particular
class

Going down the ladder...like the early Christians did?

This was not OK

It was to be

Avoided at all cost

And...

The idea of anyone humbling themselves did not exist

The goal of Roman life was to climb up this ladder

So here comes Paul

And he begins...to preach

Jesus is Lord

It means Caesar is NOT Lord

Very dangerous....thing to do

And guess who

Most of the early church was made up of? It was made up of the people down here...on the bottom of the ladder...the people nobody cared about

How could Paul describe to these people...down here...that God loved them?

In this status conscious area, where your worth was dependent on what rung you were on...how could Paul get across to them that they had value and worth

that they were still God's children..and didn't matter what rung of the ladder they were on....huge challenge

Let's read the Philippians passage in unison...which we read before but now we read understanding a little bit more about the context...and we can see ...what God in Christ is willing to do for us...

³Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. ⁴Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others.

Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus:

⁵Who, being in very nature^[a] God, did not consider equality with God something to be grasped,

⁷but made himself nothing, taking the very nature^[b] of a servant, being made in human likeness.

⁸And being found in appearance as a man, he humbled himself and became obedient to death— even death on a cross! *(leave up a moment)*

Jesus starts way up here...no higher could he be on the cosmic ladder...

he was in very nature God

And then Jesus starts to come down the ladder

Lower and lower....Still lower

Takes off his toga

Remember...No one humbled themselves in Philippi...no one did that

Then it says Jesus became obedient...to death...that obedience thing was
slave language...

And then...what?

Even death on a cross....gone as low as you can go

Cause death on a cross was

Particularly reserved for slaves...to make it as excruciated and shameful
as possible...

Citizens were not to be crucified

Jesus could go....No lower than this....

Jesus went

As low as the lowest person who ever lived had ever gone

Bc Jesus did this thing

God exalted him....Let's read it together...

**Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
¹⁰that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
¹¹and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.**

Your benefactor, in Roman culture, if you had one

Could honor you and lift you up out of one status category

And put you way up at the top

If Caesar was your benefactor it was a great thing cause you'd be exalted
very high....

But this was God...who was higher than Caesar...and Jesus was exalted to
the highest place

No one higher than this

That at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow

In heaven....and earth and under the earth...and every tongue confess
that Jesus is Lord

Jesus is Lord

Jesus is Lord...not a CEO...Not president of US

Not a rock star...movie star...not Caesar

Jesus alone is Lord

Because Jesus alone reveals to us

Who God is...

And we find that as we look at Jesus
In this tremendous act of downward mobility
That it is the nature of our God to serve and sacrifice himself for us...
And that...like it or not...this is who we are called to be like...who we are
called to follow

Paul writes to Philippi and says...c'mon...Give up on spending your life
exalting yourself

As I mentioned before in another talk I gave recently,
Paul starts this letter to the Philippians differently than most of his
letter...usually he writes at the beginning Paul an apostle of JC...here he
writes

Paul and Timothy...servants/ slaves of Christ Jesus

He is identifying fully with the nature and purpose of Jesus

Elsewhere Paul writes that we are
Citizens of heaven....and he says live in a manner worthy of a citizen of
heaven
He uses this term because it was real important to be a citizen in Rome...
You had special privileges, you were among the elite
But Paul is saying...
Jesus is Lord...not Caesar and when you are a citizen of heaven you
know that we're all in the same boat
Those with the togas...who are tempted to climb
And the Slaves...who are nobody...
That's the way it is when you're a citizen of heaven

And Paul says, “**act like citizens of heaven where the playing field is
all level**”

No one is superior to anyone else...and

Citizens of heaven know that there is
No task too humble for them to do..cause they aren't even thinking about
themselves anyway and their status...they are thinking of others
Rick Warren always puts things in pithy ways and he says this:

This is true humility: **not thinking less of ourselves but thinking
of ourselves less. ...It's only when we forget ourselves that we
do the things that deserve to be remembered.**

—Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2002), 265-266.

Jesus emptied himself for us...and we remember him for it
Went all the way down the ladder...accommodated to our condition...so
that we could experience his love...and grace...and forgiveness

There is a surgeon named
Richard Selzer, and he writes about an unforgettable moment. He had to do
surgery on a lovely young
woman. He did the best he could.
She had a tumor that had to be removed.
In the course of surgery, he
had to sever a tiny twig of a facial nerve.
It was the one to the muscles of her mouth. It left her mouth
twisted in palsy.

Her once lovely face would have this disfigurement the rest of her life. She
had that kind of face that would sometimes cause people to just stop and
look at it because it was so lovely.

No one would ever do that again. If they stopped to look at her face from
that day on, it would be for
another reason.

Her young husband is in the room when she wakes up from surgery. She
asks for a mirror, and she looks
into it. She asks the surgeon Selzer, "Will my face always look like this?"
"Yes," he says. "Yes, it will because the
nerve was cut."

She is silent, but the young man smiles. "I love you," he says. "It is ok"
It is a

scene of such unbearably tender love that Selzer lowers his gaze.

Then the husband bends down low to kiss her
crooked mouth, and Selzer writes, "I am so close I can see how he twists his
own lips to accommodate to
hers to show her their kiss still works. To show her that he can make his lips
like hers to prove his love.

Jesus made himself like us to prove his love

He descended down the ladder to accommodate to us; to love us in our
twisted broken condition – he made himself like us –

Martin Luther's prayer puts Jesus' downward mobility this way....

**Lord Jesus,
You are my righteousness,
I am Your sin;
You have taken upon Yourself what was mine.
You have set upon me what was Yours.
You have become what You were not
That I might become what I was not**

I am sure that today wherever you work
Or go to school, or train, there are ladders to climb
We even climb ladders in church and decide in subtle ways who is in,
who is out, who is a better Christian...who has more power in the
church...who gets what they want and who doesn't

In this congregation there are a lot of gifts
You've got intelligence, resources, you are networked in
But if you use what you've got to ladder climb for your own gain
It won't work out for you in the end
You'll become obsessed and preoccupied...you'll be a citizen of this
world
Citizens of heaven do the opposite
they go down down, down;
until they
Find someone who is suffering and they accommodate to that person,
lift their burdens in Jesus name...When we do this....our own hearts are
lifted up...

That's what this community here at WVPC is all about...our symbol,
our focus is the cross....the excruciating cross way down at the base of
this ladder..
It reminds us that we follow a God who will go all the way down to save
us...a God who is not afraid to be hurt for our sake
Not afraid to be vulnerable...not afraid to become like us in our broken
condition....
And a God who says to us "citizens of heaven...who are not of this
world.....servants/slaves of the most high God...go and do likewise.
AMEN "