

The Upside Of Downward Mobility
Matthew 23:1-15
Preached by Rev Dr. Harry Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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The Protestant work ethic gets the bulk of credit for the tremendous success of the American experiment. Northern Europeans primarily children of the Reformation, came to the New World looking for opportunities heretofore unavailable. They worked hard twelve hours a day, six days a week, believing God blessed their efforts with untold prosperity. Immediately their standard of living outpaced their European cousins', tempting even more Europeans to come over to live the American Dream.

From the dawn of time, human society has promoted upward mobility getting from where you are today to where you can be tomorrow. Obviously the drive to succeed is encoded in our DNA; otherwise we'd still be hunter-gatherers living in caves. That's why a strong case can be made for climbing up the ladder of success. There'd be no human progress without ambition and competition driving us forward.

But, there's a dark side to Upward Mobility. It's one thing to put in an honest day's work so you can in John Wesley's words "make all you can, save all you can and give all you can." That should be what the Protestant work ethic is all about. But the ideal has been corrupted by something named eons before someone coined the phrase "Protestant work ethic": that name is sin. You can trace the corruption of all that's good back to the fall of man in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve's sin was turning against the divine plan and from that point on the human experiment was knocked off kilter.

Jesus' denunciation of the scribes and Pharisees warns against the excesses of upward mobility. Initially it seems Jesus denounced the Pharisees for their beliefs. He didn't. Theologically Jesus and the Pharisees were on the same page. And don't assume Jesus attacked their total commitment to the Law of Moses. There's enough evidence to prove Jesus endorsed their basic instincts. So why did Jesus throw the book at them?

Let's carefully review his indictment. "They tie up heavy burdens hard to bear and lay them on the shoulders of others but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger to move them. They do all their deeds to be seen... They love to have the place of honor at banquets, the best seats in the synagogues and to be greeted with respect in the market place and to have people call them rabbi." (Matthew 23:4-7)

These accusations don't attack their religion. There's not one charge denouncing their interpretation of scripture. In fact Jesus precedes his denunciations with an affirmation. "The scribes and Pharisees sit on Moses' seat, therefore do whatever they teach you and follow it." (Matthew 23:2-3)

So, the Pharisees brand of religion didn't offend Jesus, it was the abuse of their authority. Several years ago a commercial's mantra for a credit card company was, "Rank has its privileges." The inference: when you get out in the arena to compete and work hard you'll be rewarded. Nothing wrong with that if you do an honest day's work, unless you pull rank demand privileges at the expense of others.

Here's where the Pharisees went wrong, in Jesus' own words. "The scribes and Pharisees sit at Moses' seat, therefore do whatever they teach and follow it, but do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they teach." (Matthew 23:2)

They didn't practice what they preached. What was missing? Any hints of humility and servant hood, a recurring theme throughout their scriptures. So where did they go wrong?

Reading between the lines of Jesus' denunciations you can discern how the Pharisees abused their authority. And be aware, this pitfall traps everybody.

It's so easy to delude ourselves into thinking it's OK to pull rank. How many of us can remember bosses who put heavy burdens on our backs and did nothing to carry the load? (Can you remember being that boss?) How many of us remember co-workers or neighbors who could artfully steal the limelight even though they didn't deserve it. (Maybe you did too.) What about bosses who consistently disrespect you yet demand your respect? (Could we be guilty of doing likewise?)

When the public perceives their elected officials do these things they vote them out of office. When people perceive their religious leaders do these things they ignore them. When your neighbor or coworker perceives you do these things, and you're a Christian, they disdain you.

"Woe to you scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you lock people out of the Kingdom of God. For you do not go in yourselves and when others are going in you stop them!" (Matthew 23:13-14)

Now we get to the crux of Jesus' anger. Pulling rank and demanding privilege and treating people under you unfairly just might be teaching them Christianity=Hypocrisy. You turn them off.

Give them their due. The Pharisees' strong work ethic kept them studying scripture and keeping the Law. They were good men trying to live good lives. But as Lord Acton cautioned, "Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

This is the chink in the armour of both the Pharisees' and the Protestant's work ethic. When we have power or influence we worked hard to achieve, it's terribly tempting to pull rank and demand privileges we don't deserve or really don't need.

The world encourages upward mobility but Jesus demands downward mobility. Basically, isn't that what the incarnation is all about? Jesus climbed down from heaven to be with us. Once here, he never pulled rank demanding his disciples serve him. Instead he served them. "The Son of Man came not to be served, but to serve and to surrender his life as a ransom for many."

It's not in our best interest to dismiss the Pharisees and make them scapegoats. Instead it's helpful to remember Pharisee and Presbyterian both start with the letter "P." We are them and they are us. We share common ground whenever we con ourselves into believing since we have the right doctrines and work hard being "good" somehow we're superior. It's also so tempting to abuse authority you've been given and pull rank over family members, coworkers and even people in church. That's why Jesus warns we are, by nature, Pharisees under the skin, so be alert and resist the temptation.

The sermon title "The Upside of Downward Mobility," infers there are benefits in surrendering your personal authority and sharing it with others; for one, the full abundant life Jesus promised. You are now free from the emotional drain that comes from impulsively pushing yourself to the top and now free to experience the joy of servant hood. Now you can watch others grow into their potential, because you let go and helped them you also realize it's not professional suicide to share the credit with others who

contributed to any good work. What's more, you give God good reason to smile, because you are becoming a servant leader, a serious disciple of Christ.

During the liturgy of the Lord's Supper let me suggest an image to enhance your meditations: Jesus surrendering his authority to you, so you can become strong enough to give yourself away. Focus on his ministry and especially remember his crucifixion, for his life and death began a chain reaction meant to continue through you. In Paul's words, "Offer up yourselves as living sacrifice which is your spiritual worship."

There is an upside to downward mobility, Jesus called it eternal life which is the best life because it's founded on love. Let his love encourage and empower you to be your very best as you deny yourself, shoulder your cross and follow Jesus into the Kingdom. And don't be surprised when you turn around and look back. You just might discover you're bringing others along with you. Me, bringing others to Christ? You can. We all can. If we ask him to show us how. So let's pray for just that.