

*Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church / August 16, 2020 / Pastor Jeff Harrison*  
Philippians: It's All About Jesus  
**Status Seeking** (Philippians 3:1-11)

### **Car story shows the temptation to seek status**

Good morning friends. I'm so thankful that you're investing the first part of your day on the first day of the week in worship. And to help us in-between these gatherings, let's read Philippians this week and every week of this sermon series. If you think you might forget, why not put a reminder now on your phone about reading Philippians?

Don't let all your reading this week be about the bad news in our world, read Philippians as well, and remember that it's all about Jesus. Now let's ask for His help in prayer...

A couple of years ago, I drove a 17-year-old Mitsubishi sedan that had seen better days. The flaking paint gave it the appearance of leprosy, and it had almost 200,000 miles on it, and it kept dying on the road, and eventually, its transmission died. So we decided it was time for something new.

And thanks to the incredible generosity of our church family, we were able to replace it with a 3-year-old Honda Civic. The next Monday, I picked up Grant from kindergarten. At that point Grant went to our local public school, and no apartments happen to feed into this school. And of the neighborhoods of homes, ours is the simplest, with some of the others being upper middle-class kinds of neighborhoods.

As I parked my Civic and got out for walk-up pickup that Monday, I noticed something going on internally. I was feeling more of a sense of belonging, of status among the other parents. At that school there were many cars nicer than my 3-year-old Civic, so no one was impressed seeing me get out of it. But I noticed that I was feeling a bit of relief that I no longer had one of the junkiest, lowest status cars of all the parents there.

### **Relevance: how does our status seeking impact us and those around us?**

I think we're all tempted at times to think in these kinds of ways about status. To live as if the person who can afford to drive a newer car is a more impressive, important person than the one who appears unable to afford anything nicer than a 17-year-old car with leprosy.

And even when we don't give into the temptation to think in these terms, we're still sometimes judged and treated differently by others based on what they perceive to be our status.

When I would roll up to parent pick-up in my old Mitsubishi on my day off, unshaved, in a hat, t-shirt, and basketball shorts, if at the same time another parent rolls up in a new Beamer, dressed sharply in their work clothes, who do you think the other parents are more likely to perceive as an important person, one really worth making an effort to get to know?

Because of what's inside us and others, we're all tempted at times to seek status. It could be based on our possessions and money, our job title or rank, our grades, intelligence and degrees, our appearance and fashion, our athletic ability, our social media following and virtue signaling, our kids' behavior and success, our personality and social circle, even knowing about cool underground bands.

Sometimes we even find status in things we were born with, like say our race, gender, socio-economic background. Sometimes we may even seek status with God or with His people, through things like our morality, Bible knowledge, and service here and in the community.

At school, I felt my newer car improved my status because it was nicer. Ironically, here at church I noticed in conversation that I tended to play up my Civic's practicality. Here I talked about how I hope to still be driving it into my 50's because of Civic's reliability and how I got the base model.

None of you said any judgy things like, "that's a pretty new car for a pastor." Yet I think my focus on the practicality of the purchase was on some level a subtle attempt to seek status as a good steward. If instead I was talking about my car with a fellow parent at school, I wouldn't have made it a point to mention that my Civic was the base model.

And if these thoughts around status seeking are even changing my car conversations based on who I'm talking to, then I'm thinking our status seeking is really impacting ourselves and our relationships in many ways. And if it's not for the better, than what can we do about it?

### **Orienting to God's Word**

If you've got a Bible or Bible app, I invite you to open to the New Testament book of Philippians, Chapter 3, as we look at this topic of status seeking. If not, no worries, we'll have the verses on the screen. If you're new to reading the Bible, the big numbers are chapter numbers, and the little numbers are verse numbers.

Philippians is written by an early church leader named Paul to the church he planted in Philippi. Over the past decade, Paul and the Philippian church have shared a great relationship and partnership together helping people to start life changing relationships with Jesus.

But now the Philippian church is starting to struggle. They are in Philippi, a very patriotic Roman colony, where the people do not take kindly to Christians saying “Jesus is lord”, rather than Caesar. So the Philippian Christians have a low status in their city. They even have opponents not only opposing their message, but actively seeking their harm.

And as the Philippians struggle with this, some false teachers tempt the Philippians to seek a better status. These false teachers say that the Philippians will only earn good status with God and with the larger, more established Jewish religious community by following all of the Old Testament Law.

### **Teaching: Status Seeking**

*False teachers encourage seeking status (1-3)* – We see Paul’s response to these false teachers who encourage seeking status with God and the “right” religious people starting in verse 1 of Philippians chapter 3. **(1-3)**

3 Further, my brothers and sisters, rejoice in the Lord! It is no trouble for me to write the same things to you again, and it is a safeguard for you.<sup>2</sup> Watch out for those dogs, those evildoers, those mutilators of the flesh.<sup>3</sup> For it is we who are the circumcision, we who serve God by his Spirit, who boast in Christ Jesus, and who put no confidence in the flesh –

Verse 2 shows Paul’s strong warning to the Philippians about these false teachers. In my NIV translation, verse 2 says “watch out” just once to smooth the language. But in the original Greek, Paul says to “watch out” three times: watch out for those dogs, watch out for those evildoers, watch out for those mutilators. This repetition and the strong language for the false teachers as “dogs”, “evildoers”, and “mutilators” shows how dangerous is the invitation to trust in your status before God and people through following all of the Old Testament Law.

So Paul urges the Philippian Christians to not listen to these “mutilators of the flesh” who want the Philippians to get physically circumcised as part of following the whole Law. For these “mutilators” are a false circumcision, and the Philippians are already the true circumcision, as verse 3 says.

So life is not at all about trying to seek status before God and people through your own effort, not even efforts to observe the Old Testament Law. Verse 3 shows that is not where we are to place our trust. Rather, as verse 3 says, we are to boast in Christ Jesus and put no confidence in our flesh. Our trust is in Jesus, not ourselves. So our service to God is not by our own power in an attempt to earn status before Him. Rather, we serve God, as verse three says, by the Spirit's power, as those who already enjoy status in Jesus. He's our only boast.

Paul excelled at status seeking (4-6) – But how was Paul able to no longer be worried about status seeking? Let's explore that starting in verse 4, where Paul says: **(4-6)**

<sup>4</sup> though I myself have reasons for such confidence. If someone else thinks they have reasons to put confidence in the flesh, I have more: <sup>5</sup> circumcised on the eighth day, of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew of Hebrews; in regard to the law, a Pharisee; <sup>6</sup> as for zeal, persecuting the church; as for righteousness based on the law, faultless.

In these verses, we see that Paul once excelled at status seeking in his Jewish religious community. And Paul placed some of his trust in his “flesh”, which had great status by pedigree and effort.

Verse 5 shows that Paul came from the right kind of godly family. They precisely followed the Old Testament Law, having Paul circumcised on his eighth day. And Paul was of Israel, God's chosen people, and from the Benjaminites tribe, which had a good status among the tribes and inherited Jerusalem. Paul is even a “Hebrew of Hebrews” which may mean both of his parents were of pure Jewish descent and strictly observed the Law.

And Paul wasn't just born into a family of status, he increased his status through effort. He became a Pharisee, who knew the Old Testament backwards and forwards and were seen as righteous religious leaders by most Jews. And as verse 6 says, Paul was so zealous for God that before Paul followed Jesus, he went around persecuting those he thought were wrong about God, and also followed the Old Testament Law so meticulously that he was outwardly faultless.

So if anyone could place their trust in their earthly qualifications to earn some status before God and the Jewish religious community, it was Paul.

Status seeking hinders what really matters (7) – But in verse 7, Paul shows that status seeking, even when you're wildly successful at it, like he was, is still the wrong game to be playing.

Verse 7: (7)

<sup>7</sup> But whatever were gains to me I now consider loss for the sake of Christ.

Paul once thought his status seeking through his godly heritage and spiritual striving were to his gain, as the false teachers still do.

But then Paul met Jesus, and Paul realized that the things he thought were his assets were actually his liabilities. For putting any trust in his spiritual striving was actually a disadvantage when it came to knowing Jesus and His ways.

For as Paul said back in verse 3, the true children of God are those who boast in Jesus and put no confidence in themselves. Paul is showing us that it doesn't matter how good you are, you're never going to be good enough to play a part in earning your status before God. There's still really messed up things that we do and think and good things that we fail to do.

And so Jesus met us in our place of helplessness, doing all the work to gift us the ultimate status, which is received by grace through faith in Jesus. Christians trust that Jesus lived a perfect life in our place, on our behalf, and then took the penalty for all our sins on the cross, and then rose from the dead, showing His victory over sin and death.

Jesus doing all this for us so that He can gift us with status before God as forgiven, beloved children, who have exchanged our sinful brokenness for Jesus' perfect righteousness.

And so any boasting before God or people is not about any status we were born with or have earned in our striving. No, it's about boasting in what Jesus has done for us.

When we seek status, whether that's in the car we drive, or in the right social circle, or in living very morally, if we fail at our status game, we lose. Our failures can lead to an ugly view of ourselves, jealousy of others, and even despair.

Or it can instead lead to obsessively trying harder to gain that status, which is just another way to lose, as we sacrifice more important things. Like say a parent striving so hard for career status that they work so many hours that they sacrifice their health, and lose their spouse, and discover their grown children are very unimpressed by their being such a good provider that they never were there to provide relationship.

And even if we win in our status seeking game, as Paul did, we still lose. Not only does it make it more likely for us to put more confidence in ourselves and not realize our need for

Jesus, as we already talked about, but also notice back in verse 6 that Paul used to persecute the church. Back then, Paul viewed himself as better than others. He was the guy who had things right, and who was justified even in getting others imprisoned and killed who disagreed with him.

And so today, anyone winning in their status seeking game can be tempted to think they're better than the people who don't share their status. That you're a smarter, harder working, better person than the people of that social class, or that you're a wiser, better person than the people who follow that political party, or that you're a more valuable, better person than the people who look like that. And if you're thinking of someone else who does this, you probably also just thought that you're better than that person.

It hopefully won't be as dramatic as Paul persecuting the church, but once anyone decides that they and the people of their status are better than those so called "lower status" people, it's easy to start ignoring them, and speaking ill of them on social media, and growing indifferent to the injustice they face, and even actively mistreating them, as Paul once did the church.

So if our status seeking, however it turns out, ends up as a loss, ultimately harming ourselves, our relationships, and others, then what are we to pursue instead?

*Life is all about knowing Jesus (8-11)* – Starting in verse 8, Paul shows us that it's not about seeking status, it's all about knowing Jesus. Verse 8: **(8)**

<sup>8</sup>What is more, I consider everything a loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them garbage, that I may gain Christ

In the Greek language, verse 8 starts with an unusual number of particles<sup>1</sup> that don't translate well literally into English, but emphasize. So it's like Paul is crying out at the beginning of verse 8. "What is more, I consider everything a loss!" Why? "Because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord!"

Paul empathically shares that life is not about status seeking, it's all about knowing Jesus. The thing of surpassing worth is experiencing a growing relationship with Jesus, and anything that gets in the way of knowing Jesus more is a loss.

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<sup>1</sup> *Alla, men, oun, ge, kai.* Hawthorne, Gerald, *Word Biblical Commentary: Philippians.*

And Paul's not sitting safely in his study in an ivory tower as he makes this claim. Paul lost his status among his Jewish religious community when he followed Jesus. And not just that, Paul says that for Jesus' sake he willingly loses all things, which is backed up by the public beatings, spiritual attacks, shipwrecks, and multiple imprisonments he has endured as he has ministered in Jesus' name.

Paul goes so far in verse 8 to say that all that good stuff he might be tempted to place his trust in rather than in Jesus, like his community and high status and health and safety and freedom are all garbage relative to knowing Jesus. The Greek word for "garbage" here in verse 8 is *skubalon* (σκύβαλον). Many scholars say "garbage" is too soft of a translation here, that "crap"<sup>2</sup> better captures the meaning of the term in verse 8. Hopefully I'm not in any *skubalon* for saying that word. ☺

This emphatic language in verse 8 emphasizes Paul's point that life's not about seeking status, it's all about knowing Jesus. And when status seeking, or trusting in anything else, get in the way of knowing Jesus more, Paul says lose it, because it's crap compared to knowing Jesus.

In modern terms we could say your degrees from Harvard and Oxford, your Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony awards, your Olympic Gold medals, your stunning celebrity spouse, your billions from your tech startup, your millions of social media followers and celebrity friends, your two terms as president, whatever, it's all *skubalon* compared to the surpassing worth of knowing Jesus more. Paul has found that Jesus is worth everything, and in verse 9, he begins to share why. (9)

<sup>9</sup> and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God on the basis of faith.

The Christian life starts with faith in Jesus, which Paul mentions twice here in verse 9. When we put our faith in Jesus, we discover that we're found in Him.

Once our status was God's enemy, guilty of treason, but now we have a totally new status before God: being found in Jesus. And not because of our efforts at law keeping, but because He lets us share in His perfect righteousness. For Jesus lived a perfect life in our place, on our behalf, and then paid the penalty for all our sins on the cross, so that He could gift us the only

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<sup>2</sup> *BDAG* says general meaning is refuse, garbage (in various senses that include excrement, manure, garbage, kitchen scraps). About Phil 3:8, it says, "garbage/crud in Phil 3:8... 'to convey the crudity of the Greek...: It's all crap'."

status that matters, righteousness before God. Children of God so beloved that even when the full force of hell itself was coming down on Jesus on the cross, He choose to stay for us.

And because our status is based solely on what Jesus did for us, I shouldn't feel superior to anyone, no matter what society says about their status, because Jesus did everything to save me. And we don't have to feel like we're "less than" those driving way nicer cars, or compare or compete with anyone in any way, because our immeasurably high status in Jesus is secure. And so we are now free to join Jesus in serving others in love. We're empowered to love even the person who disagrees with us or mistreats us because we follow the One who loved even His enemies.

And as Paul goes on to describe in verse 10, He's worth knowing to the full. **(10-11)**

<sup>10</sup>I want to know Christ—yes, to know the power of his resurrection and participation in his sufferings, becoming like him in his death, <sup>11</sup> and so, somehow, attaining to the resurrection from the dead.

Paul is not at all satisfied with just being found in Christ, he wants to experience as deep of a relationship with glorious Jesus as he possibly can. And thankfully, the same Spirit Who rose Jesus from the dead is now in Paul, and in every follower of Jesus today, to help us to know Him.

And Paul has grown so intimate with God that he wants in verse 10 not only to experience Jesus' power at work in and through him, but even to grow in intimacy with Jesus as He experiences suffering for Jesus' sake. Paul's even ready to share with Jesus in his unjust death.

For Paul, it's all about Jesus. The heart of life is about knowing God relationally in Jesus. So much so that participating with Jesus in His way of sacrificial love in service to God and people, while in intimate relationship with God, became Paul's way. And he's staying with it even if it leads to death.

And Paul does not face his current imprisonment and possible death as a grumpy victim. Remember, back in verse 1 Paul started today's passage with the invitation to rejoice in the Lord. Even while unjustly imprisoned, faced with the possibility of death, Paul can rejoice. For Paul knows God, deeply personally, in Christ Jesus. And if Paul dies for Jesus before the end times, then, as verse 11 says, that just means that he gets to participate in the resurrection from among the dead (and also be graciously rewarded by Jesus for his faithfulness even in death).

## Next Step

This morning we've seen that we're all tempted to seek status, and that status seeking is the wrong game. One that harms ourselves and others. And so in life, it's not about seeking status, it's all about knowing Jesus.

Paul insists in these verses that there is so much more in a life that's about knowing Jesus. But it's going to require us to stop seeking status, and also to give up some lesser things along the way.

We aren't first century Jewish Pharisees now called to be Apostles, as Paul was, so we won't be giving up the exact same things that Paul did. But the question before us is "what do we need to give up to know Jesus more?"

I'm going to pause for a few seconds here as we invite God's Spirit to answer that question for each of us. What do we need to give up to know Jesus more?

Hopefully you're ready to take that next step with Jesus. To give us a final encouragement in that, the best way I've heard these ideas illustrated<sup>3</sup> is with the sky.

Before my grandfather passed away from cancer, he took some of the men of the family on this epic fishing trip in remote Canada. On the clear nights, as you're looking over the lake, and up into the sky, it's just stunning, so many stars shining so bright and beautiful. Maybe you've had a similar experience, and can picture it now in your mind's eye.

Those stars are so beautiful and alluring, as are the things we seek status with: achievements, money, popularity, power, romance, which also shine so beautifully in our eyes.

But when the sun rises, it shines so much brighter that the stars just disappear from the sky. And Paul is telling us that Someone has come Who is so gloriously brilliant, that those once alluring stars just disappear, as life becomes all about knowing this Son of such surpassing worth. Let's pray...

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<sup>33</sup> By Pastor Tim Keller.