

ESTEEM OTHERS BETTER THAN YOURSELF!

Today's Text: Phil. 2: 1-30

Extracts:

Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others. Let this mind be in you which was in Christ Jesus, who, being in the form of God, did not consider it robbery to be equal with God, but made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bondservant, and coming in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross. Therefore God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of those in heaven, and of those on earth, and of those under the earth, and that every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father [Phil. 2: 3-11].

Leonard R. Sayles (1926-) is Professor Emeritus of Business Administration of Columbia University's Graduate School of Business, New York, USA.¹ His students know him best for his uncanny ability to explain complex human behaviour in organizations through the simple concept of status. He defined status as the ratio of the number of people who defer to you to the number you defer to. A ratio of 0:1 suggests that nobody defers to you but you defer to everybody else. Nobody wants such a low status. A ratio of 1:1 means as many people defer to you as you defer to. Again, nobody would want to be just anybody! Instead, most of us want to be at 1:0; everybody defers to us but we defer to nobody. That makes us tin gods! So, as we struggle to esteem ourselves better than others, we step on one another's toes! That in the main explains conflicts in the family, church, office, business or politics.

In today's Bible verses, Paul teaches otherwise: believers should esteem others better than themselves and look out for the interest of others as they look out for theirs. That is the only way that they can be in good standing with God. That flies in the face of our understanding of status battles in human organisations. How can we enhance our status by deferring to others? Let us find out from today's eye-opening study.

¹ For a full bibliography of his numerous classical works, see http://www.openisbn.com/author/Leonard_R._Sayles/38344/1

For an in-depth review of one of his most famous books, read, James G. (Jerry) Hunt, "Introduction: Sayles' Managerial Behavior," *Leadership Quarterly*, Spring 99 Vol. 10 issue 1, March 1999; <http://www.worldcat.org/identities/lccn-n79-18918/>

1. Background: Jesus as the case study on status relationships

There was once a dispute among the disciples of Jesus as to which of them should be considered the greatest. He cautioned them against such an attitude, saying, “He who is greatest among you, let him be as the younger, and he who governs as he who serves.” *Even though He was their Lord and Master, He was among them as the One who served* [Lk 22: 24-27].

In that simple encounter, we see a demonstration of status but not according to human expectations. As we look around us in an increasingly wicked world, we can notice arrogance on parade. For example, people in power, especially in the developing world, look down on their subjects- except, perhaps, just before elections. Some people who have left office still carry on as if their offices have not left them. Some parents refuse to accept that their children have grown up even when they have married and started raising their own children! Some people who are rich (by hook or crook) carry on as if poor people ought to be removed from the face of the earth. You visit some offices, especially in government, and people at the reception desk let you know how important they are! At meetings, some people may disagree with your excellent views if accepting them will reduce their status in the organisation.

Interestingly, *a majority of those we relate with happen to be those we can hardly punish or reward; yet, we need their resources and/or cooperation for our own success. What will it take for us to earn their respect, cooperation and collaboration? How can we enhance our status by esteeming others better than ourselves? Those questions and more are what we shall attempt to answer in today’s study.*

Writing to the Philippian church, Paul said, “Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others” [Phil. 2: 3-4]. He added, “Let this mind be in you which was also in Christ Jesus” [v.5]. In other words, *the mind of Jesus on humility is a good case study on how God expects us to relate with people that we consider superior to or inferior to us.* Let us pay attention to Paul’s analysis as follows:

a) *By right, Jesus was equal with God*

Being in the form of God, Christ Jesus did not consider it robbery to be equal with God [v.6]. His divinity was never in doubt. He is the Word of God; all things were made through Him and without Him was nothing made that was made [Jn 1: 1-3]. He and His Father are one [Jn 10: 30]. Therefore, *by all definitions, Jesus was entitled to all the adulations and honour due to God.* His status, according to Professor Sayles’ definition, should be 1:0. Everybody should defer to Him but He should defer to

nobody! But did Jesus ever relate to His Father or humans from such a height? Never!

b) But He chose to take the form of a bond servant

In obedience to His Father's will, Jesus "made Himself of no reputation, taking the form of a bond servant, and coming in the form of men" [**Phil. 2: 7**]. He chose a status that made Him lower than the angels [**Ps. 104: 4**; **Heb. 2: 5-8**].

What Christ did when He took human form is like the US President giving up living in the palatial White House to stay as a destitute in a rundown downtown neighbourhood. Remember Jesus was born in a manger! When a certain scribe once offered to follow Jesus wherever He went, He replied him, "Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay His head" [**Matt. 8: 19-20**]. ***Jesus was humble enough to bring Himself to the level of humans that He came to save from eternal damnation.*** That is self-denial.

c) And He even died on the cross

Paul wrote, "And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross" [**Phil. 2: 8**]. To both Jews and Romans, death by crucifixion was a most ignoble form of death, meant for the cursed or non-citizens. Yet, as Jesus agonized at Gethsemane on the eve of His crucifixion, ***He willingly gave up His own privileges for the benefit of others.*** That is self-sacrifice and "greater love has no one than ... to lay down one's life for his friends" [**Jn 15:13**].

d) And God exalted Him above all

For humbling Himself so that others can be exalted, God has also highly exalted Jesus and given Him a name that is above every name, "that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow ... and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father" [**Phil. 2: 9-11**]. In other words, Jesus received back from His Father much more than He had lost by willingly giving up His own privileges for the sake of others. ***By esteeming others above Himself and caring about their welfare even at His inconvenience, His status was enhanced, not diminished.***

From the foregoing case study, we can learn a good number of lessons that may help us to enhance our status so that we may "become blameless and harmless children of God without fault in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation" among whom we can "shine as lights in the world" [**v. 15**].

2. Lessons for believers

Here are some important lessons that we can learn, among others:

a) *Your ladder to success actually comes from God!*

Some mentor may have warned you along the way not to throw away the ladder with which you have climbed up because you may need it on your way down. That is good advice because your ladder to success actually comes from God, not from man.

You may recall the story of Jacob when his parents sent him to his maternal uncle in Padan Aram to avoid the wrath of his twin-brother, Esau, whose birthright he had appropriated. At Bethel, he lay down to sleep, using a stone as his pillow. As he slept, he dreamt of a ladder, and this is how it was described [**Gen. 28: 12-13**]:

Then he dreamed, and behold, a ladder was set up on the earth, and its top reached to heaven; and there the angels of God were ascending and descending on it, and behold, the LORD stood above it...

Pay serious attention to the underlined parts of that extract. On the surface, the ladder stretched from the earth to heaven. We know that the angels of God came from heaven, not from the earth. So, if they were ascending and descending, it suggests that they were the ones that first stretched the ladder down from heaven to the earth before they started ascending and descending on it! The LORD God stood on the ladder, suggesting that He was the one that commanded the angels to stretch the ladder to where Jacob was. In like manner, that ladder with which you are climbing to fame and fortune is from God, not from man!

That was why Moses warned the children of Israel as they were about to enter the Promised Land not to say in their hearts that their power and the might of their hand made them wealthy. Rather, they should remember that it was God that gave them power to get wealth for His purpose, namely, to establish His covenant which He had sworn to their fathers [**Deut. 8: 17-18**]. So, *wherever you find yourself in the ladder of life, always remember that it is controlled by your Father in heaven, not by your earthly whims and caprices.*

b) *Therefore, you should also be God's ladder to others*

Paul enjoined the Philippians to look out not only for their own interests but also for the interests of others [**Phil. 2: 4**]. In other words, you should also be God's ladder to others. God uses human beings to achieve His

earthly purposes. For example, even though Cyrus the Persian king did not know Him, God stirred up Cyrus' spirit to rebuild Jerusalem and the foundation of the temple at the end of the Jewish Babylonian exile [**2 Chron. 36: 22; Is. 44: 28; Is. 45: 1-4**]. Therefore, you may be God's ladder that others can climb to their own success in life. In the process, you may find your progress faster, stronger and better.

Take the case of David, after Ziklag had been burnt down by the enemy who carried away his and his troops' families. When he cried to God, he received assurance that he would recover all but he was not told how. So, David went with his six hundred men in search of their families but without any sense of direction. That was how they found a dying Egyptian in the field that was brought to David. An average "big man" with a pressing problem would not have time for an unknown sick and dying man but not David, the man after God's own heart. He gave the man bread and water and he revived. It turned out that the Egyptian was a servant of one of the Amalekites, the people that had raided and razed Ziklag. They had abandoned him three days earlier when he fell sick. It was through that Egyptian that David got the information on how to reach the Amalekites. He routed them and recovered all, as the Lord had told him [**1 Sam. 30: 1-19**]. Soon after that, Saul and his sons were killed in a battle with the Philistines [**1 Sam. 31: 1-7**] and David was crowned king of Judah at the age of thirty, something that had eluded him from his teenage years [**2 Sam. 2: 1-4; 2 Sam. 5: 4**]. By helping a lonely Egyptian servant to regain his health, David obtained his elusive crown.

That some people are in front of you does not necessarily mean that they are ahead of you. They may have missed their way! That you are going in the same direction with some people does not mean that you are going to the same destination! Therefore, you are actually *always* in the centre of the world: some people are in front of you, some are behind you and others are walking along side with you on your right side and on the left!

c) *Always acknowledge help from and commend others*

Paul paid special tributes to two of his associates in his ministry- Timothy and Epaphroditus. He commended Timothy as follows: "I have no one ***like-minded***, who will sincerely care for your state." He praised and recommended Epaphroditus to the Philippians as his ***brother, fellow worker and fellow soldier***, their messenger and the one who ministered to Paul's needs. For the work of Christ, Epaphroditus came close to death. Yet, he was ready to supply what was lacking in their service toward Paul [**Phil. 2: 25-30**].

How many people of high status will acknowledge the help and support that faceless associates are rendering to sustain their success? Instead, you

hear such people being paraded as “self-made.” Really? People who cannot thank others can hardly thank God for the privileges they enjoy. Learn to say, “Thank you!” to all- even to those who have worked to obstruct your progress. Who knows? Such obstructions could be part of God’s plan to give you His expected end on the matter [**Jer. 29:11**].

d) *Always act on the basis of authority not power*

That you have the power to do something (by virtue of position) does not mean that you have the authority to do so. ***Power is arbitrary but authority is based on laws, rules and regulations. Once you know that, your relationships with subordinates, superiors and colleagues will be well understood and ordered. Mutual respect will prevail over impunity and arrogance.***

That is one major lesson to learn from the triune God. For example, all authority has been given to Jesus in heaven and on earth [**Matt. 28: 18**], and He will judge the world [**Jn 5: 22**]. Yet, only the Father knows the day and hour of Christ’s return [**Matt. 24: 36**]. No one can call Jesus Lord except by the Holy Spirit [**1 Cor. 12:3**]. In like manner, we should learn to know the limits of our power and how to defer to other people’s authority and control.

In sum, only God can determine your status. It has nothing to do with your manipulative abilities or political clout. It has nothing to do with self-awarded importance. It has to do with your humility, love of God and of your neighbours. ***It has to do with always esteeming others better than yourself. It has to do with looking after others’ interests as you pursue yours. When you enable and empower others, they can only but reciprocate. That way, God will look after your own interests and give you a status that no human can give or take away. That is Paul’s message in today’s study.***

3. Conclusion: Your status is measured by your standing with Jesus!

Jesus has said that we shall be known by our fruits. On His return to judge the world, many will come and boast about their exploits for God but Jesus will declare to them, “I never knew you; depart from Me, you who practise lawlessness” [**Matt. 7: 21-23**]. The pursuit of an earthly status of 1:0 is empty pride in the sight of God and a show of lawlessness. Therefore, ***your standing with God on the day of your death will be measured by the extent to which you have esteemed others better than yourself; the extent to which you had the mind of Christ.***

So, go for 0:1 and God will exalt you above measure. *Bon voyage!*