

# DOWNWARD MOBILITY

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*The Way of Selfless Ambition*



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# DOWNWARD MOBILITY

## *The Way of Selfless Ambition*

*"The great paradox which Scripture reveals to us is that real and total freedom is only found through downward mobility. The Word of God came down to us and lived among us as a slave. The divine way is indeed the downward way."*

– Henri Nouwen, *The Selfless Way of Christ*

When we come to know Jesus, we approach him with our questions, our expectations, and our needs. But we can't begin to *follow* Jesus until we are ready to obey him. In fact, Jesus says our obedience to him is the fruit of our love for him (John 14:23). The obedience Jesus calls for has love at its root. Throughout Scripture, there is an expectation that those who love God do what he says out of devotion, not duty. We can't walk with Jesus and go our own way. If we follow Jesus, we go where he leads.

On the surface, this can look very positive! After all, God is wise! He loves us! His ways are good for us! Obeying God can make us safer and healthier. Our relationships, finances, and even our bodies benefit from following what God says is good. We want that good stuff. But here is the problem: God achieves these good things in and through us with methods that are often *entirely backwards* from how the world works. When we give our lives to Jesus, it doesn't take long before following him means going against the tide of the world, other people's expectations, and especially our own natural desires.

Jesus says if we want to gain life, we'll need to lose our life (Matt. 16:25). He says the path to freedom is to find the one thing in the world we hold most dear, and let it go (see Luke 18:18-29). The key to tapping in to eternity here and now is to align ourselves with *selfless ambition*. To lay down our own pursuits and desires and take up the things Jesus says matter most.

Jesus himself perfectly embodies that life. When Paul describes how we should relate to one another and the world, he tells us to think and act like Jesus, who lived out the life of a humble servant, obedient even to death (Phil. 2:5-8). If we are following Jesus closely, humility, sacrifice, and obedience will become a part of our nature, too. We will begin to do things, love things, and create things that will baffle the world, but will reveal the Kingdom of God right here and now. God is at work where you are, and we need to resist the pull of self, the enemy, and the world to join him.

Henri Nouwen often explained that in the world, we seek three things above all else: to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful. In other words, we want to be essential to the people and things around us. We want to be very relevant; to matter and be missed if we're gone. We want to be needed and wanted. We want to be spectacular; we want to be incredibly good at many things, and enjoy the spotlight because of it. And we want to be powerful. We want to be the masters of our own universe; to call the shots, to hold things together in the way we want

them to be. We want to be in *control*. None of these pursuits bring us peace, because all three attempt to stand us up in a place that only God can occupy. We strive and strive and cannot ever get enough relevance, ability, or power, because *we are not God*.

Look at the culture around you. Voices everywhere say move *yourself* up, up, up. Get another degree. Get a better car. Have a better job five years from now than you have today. Have the house you want now, not when you can afford it. Think about how our culture works: success means doing bigger and better things every year, getting more possessions, and securing the right relationships. If we aren't moving up in the world, we're failing.

Jesus says we're successful when we actively love our enemies, share our homes with strangers, and forgive people who don't deserve it. That's the good life. Rooted, risky, unglamorous, full life. Life in the Kingdom of God operates downward; we lay down our lives, we surrender and drop our hold on achievement, performance, and control, and we choose to serve without getting credit. We give costly gifts, choose community growth over individual gain, and place what others need above what we want right now. We become so secure in Jesus we begin to forget that anyone else's opinion ever had power over us. In the Kingdom of God, we don't compete. We rest in our identity in Christ, and out of that identity, we pursue costly obedience in love. The rewards are rich, but mysterious, and often entirely confusing to the world.

### **FOR DISCUSSION:**

1. When we come to know Jesus, we approach him with our questions, our expectations, and our needs. But we can't begin to *follow* Jesus until we are ready to obey him.

How did your life with Jesus begin? What part did obedience to Jesus play? How has that evolved over time?

2. God achieves these good things in and through us with methods that are often *entirely backwards* from how the world works. When we give our lives to Jesus, it doesn't take long before following him means going against the tide of the world, other people's expectations, and especially our own natural desires.

Have you observed this in your own life? How?

3. How would you define "selfless ambition"? How does this compare to what's "normal" in the world around you? How would pursuing more selfless ambitions change your own life?

4. Henri Nouwen often explained that in the world, we seek three things above all else: to be relevant, to be spectacular, and to be powerful. In other words, we want to be essential to the people and things around us. We want to be very relevant; to matter and be missed if we're gone. We want to be spectacular; we want to be incredibly good at many things, and enjoy the spotlight because of it. And we want to be powerful. We want to be the masters of our own universe; to call the shots, to hold things together in the way we want them to be. We want to be in *control*.

In his book, *In the Name of Jesus*, Henri Nouwen offers practices we can engage in with Jesus that essentially act as "antidotes" to the pull of "upward mobility". Here they are:

**Temptation to Be Relevant:** To be really important to others and defined by what you do. *Practice:* Contemplative Prayer (essentially just sitting with Jesus, being together, remembering who he is and who you are).

**Temptation to Be Spectacular:** To be really good at everything you do; be impressive. *Practice:* Confession and Forgiveness.

**Temptation to Be Powerful:** To be in control and able to control others. *Practice:* Theological Reflection (learn as much as you can about God through Scripture and study).

What do these disciplines do to refine you or help you grow, and how do they specifically combat these three temptations?

Which practice do you need right now?