

"FOR STATUS SEEKERS"

Park Avenue Methodist Church  
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### INTRODUCTION

Three men were talking about what status means. How do you know when you have really arrived? The first man said, "I'll tell you what real status is. It's being invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President". The second man said, "No...that's not it. You know you have status when you're invited to the White House for a personal conversation with the President, and the hot line rings and he just looks at it and decides not to answer it." The third man says, "Look, you both have it wrong. Real status is when you're invited to the White House for a conversation with the President and the hot line rings and the President answers it and says, 'Here...it's for you!'".

What does it look like for you? We ought to be honest and say that everybody wants it. Yes, even preachers want it. I suppose we define it differently according to the goals we have in life, but we all want status in this life. We all want to achieve a position of respect in our particular world, whatever that world is. And I'll bet that every person here today knows what constitutes status in his or her world. You know what it is and you want it. That's just human nature and there's nothing wrong with that. It's healthy and good.

### THE DISCIPLES AND STATUS

We all want status. We're like the disciples, walking down the road with Jesus. He's talking to them about His career and what lies ahead. The grim prophecy now comes from Him.

"The Son of Man will be delivered into the hands of men and be killed. On the third day He will rise..."

But the disciples didn't understand what He was saying. That's what Mark said. And he said, "They were afraid to ask" which probably means that they did understand what He meant.

Well, that evening they came to Capernaum. Jesus goes into a house along with the disciples to spend the night. He asks them, "What were you discussing on the road after I said, 'The Son of Man will be betrayed and killed, and the third day arise?'. And they were all silent again, Mark says, because on the way they had discussed which one of them was the greatest. They were talking about their status. And there's nothing wrong with that, except here, in this context, we sense there is something wrong with it.

He was talking about the Son of Man having to die. They knew what He was talking about. They knew that the Son of Man was a title that the Jews in that day used for the Messiah. It was a title given to the Messiah to describe His coming again on a cloud and establishing the Kingdom. They knew that. So when Jesus said, "The Son of Man is going to be betrayed and killed and will rise again" - they had a pretty good idea of what He meant.

They probably thought, "This is it". The showdown is about to come. The Son of Man is about to appear, which means that Jesus is going to come out of hiding, put aside His disguise, as it were, and appear as the Son of Man. And when that happens - look out. For the Kingdom will be here. And when the Kingdom is here, then it will be as it was prophesied that all those who were on His team will sit at banquet with Him in the Kingdom, at the great Messianic banquet. That's what they were talking about, and specifically, the places of honor at the table.

They said,

"Jesus will be there....at the head table in the middle.  
We, His disciples, will be there, too. But which one of us  
will be on His right? And which one will be on His left?"

That's what they were talking about on the road - their status in the Kingdom of God. So when He asked them about it, they were silent. They didn't say anything, out of shame. Because there are times when you just don't talk about your status. There are times when it's not appropriate. There are times, in fact, when good manners, not to mention Christian compassion, leads you to forget yourself for a moment and to think of somebody else. That's why Jesus said,

"If any of you would be first in the Kingdom, he  
must be last of all, and servant of all."

There are, in other words, those times when the situation demands that you stop thinking about yourself and your status - what this means for you and your future...stop trying to be Number One and be a servant. That's our text.

#### MORE ON THE TEXT

Jesus has poured out His heart to His friends. He has told them that His career is at an end. "I am going to Jerusalem" He said...."And I'll be betrayed there and killed."

Has anybody ever told you something like that? Has anybody ever said to you, "I've lost my job". Or, "My marriage is over". "My husband has died..." "The report is bad news. It looks like cancer...time is limited". That's a time when you need some friends who will understand, and you need friends who, in their understanding, will be loyal to you, and who will stick with you clear to the end, who will forget themselves for a moment and think of you.

And the disciples, driven by ambition, can think only of themselves. Like ravenous relatives at the reading of the will, they hear only what it means for them. "Which one of us is going to be greatest in the Kingdom of God?" "What were you talking about on the way?" They were silent, out of shame.

#### AMBITION

Now there's nothing wrong with ambition. In fact, some of us need more of it. But if you are Christian, ambition cannot blind you to another person's need. That's why Jesus said, look....even if you want to be first by the Kingdom's standards then think of other people first. Even be their servant. And then He took a little child and put him in the midst of them, and then He picked up the child, held him in His arms and said,

"Whoever receives one of these in my name receives me"

That is to say, He chose the least of all, the smallest of all, a small child, the helpless in this world, the one without rights, the one that was completely dependent on the charity of other people, and said, if you would be great then don't forget these. "If you would serve Me - serve them!"

We live in an age in which ambition has been raised to the highest virtue and all other things are sacrificed to it. People like Michael Korda can write books on how to be a success that read like manuals for waging guerrilla warfare.

He says moral considerations are not only indifferent, but they get in the way. Get rid of them. He says that people are dispensable. He says that associates - the people you work with - should be seen as potential enemies. We have to live in that kind of world. We have to survive in that kind of world. How do we do it?

Well, there are those who have pointed out the folly of it all. Blind ambition is the stuff of tragedy - from Shakespeare's Macbeth and King Lear to Theodore Dreiser's American Tragedy, to Miller's Death of a Salesman. And most recently the confessional books coming out of the Watergate crisis, Charles Colson and John Dean, whose book, you may remember, was entitled Blind Ambition.

There's ample evidence that blind ambition ruins lives. I was going to talk about that. I was going to try to prove there are ways of being successful in this life without being ruthless. But I'm not going to do it, because the text doesn't do that. And Jesus never did it. He did not come to show us how to be successes. We can figure out how to do that. He came to show us that there are some things that must **not** be sacrificed to success.

BEING CHRISTIAN AND BEING SUCCESSFUL

Contrary to some preaching you hear now-a-days, being Christian does not guarantee that you're going to be a success in this life. He said there are times in this life when you may have to choose between being a Christian and being successful. You may end up first being a Christian, but you may end up being first by denying Christ. It depends, I suppose, on how you get there. That's what Jesus was talking about to the disciples. Yes, they were ambitious, which is all right, but it blinded them - which is wrong.

Early on they tried to prevent people from getting in the way of their careers...getting to close to Jesus...especially unimportant people. You remember all those scenes where the disciples turned people away and Jesus said, "Let them come unto me". They were always turning people away, for it didn't seem to them that paying attention to people who could do nothing for you was the best way to spend your time. It was not unlike those who chose friends and associates on the basis of what they can do for me. Their charity was prudential and calculating to serve themselves. And in this scene they show not only that they could not see strangers in need, they could not even see Jesus in His need. Or, they saw His need and pretended that they didn't, because of what it would require. And that's when He sat them down and talked turkey to them.

It's near the end now, you know, and He's still teaching them. He sat them down again and said, "If you would be my disciples then there are times when you must put aside your passion to be first and become last, and be a servant. And if you would serve Me, serve the least of these - these little ones, the poorest, the most helpless in the world, who need us. Serve them and you serve Me." Others may be able to pass them by on the way to the top, but Christians can't. "Whoever receives one of them receives Me."

ILLUSTRATION

Some years ago now Jim Murray wrote an article about the Special Olympics. He wrote these words:

"You learn very quickly what is special about the Special Olympics. Nobody was trying to win. Every athlete per-

performed as if he were alone on the track. They ran with a kind of beatific joy. And there were no tears from losers because there were no losers.

Then Murray told some beautiful stories of individual efforts - children, for instance, who lost a 300 yard race by 200 yards, but who were cheered all the way along by their friends standing alongside the track. And when they got to the end of the race, they collapsed into the arms of their competitors who congratulated them, cheered for them. And there were stories of the times that a winning runner knew that a companion had fallen and so he turned around and picked him up, and they ran the rest of the race together.

"Did you hear that?" Murray wrote. "And your mind flashes back to an auto race where a driver sped past a burning car that had his brother in it, and you ask yourself, 'Who is retarded?'"

And he told of a boy who ran on crutches, and a girl who long-jumped on an artificial leg, and a blind boy who followed the voice of his coach around the track, and a basketball game in which there was not an intentional foul.

He closed the article with these words,

"Matched on that yardstick, the athletes in the real Olympics will be an inferior lot. It is no trick to win the long jump when you've got two legs and neither one is metal. It's no achievement to win a mile when you can see which way to go. It is no honor to win the 440 when a fellow athlete stumbles and falls and you don't stop to pick him up."

CLOSING

There is nothing wrong with ambition - but if it blinds you to someone who has fallen, or to one who is on the road to suffering and a cross, then there is something wrong with it.

No matter the fame or the success, there's something wrong. Amen.

PRAYER

As we try to understand ourselves, O God, bring us into closer and closer contact with Your Son, Jesus Christ - our Lord and Master....that we - like Him - may be so secure in You that we may fear no enemy, and may be delivered from all false pride and ambition, and may go forward on our way through life - deeply sensitive to other people....their feelings and their rights, not looking for the things that the world prizes, but finally finding the things that are real and true and good.

We ask all of this in the name of Jesus, Our Lord. Amen.

PASTORAL PRAYER: November 17, 1985

Lord, there are times when all that keeps our faith afloat is a sense of gratitude toward Thee.

The headlines of the day beat us down, and temptation within us and wrong-doing around us lay us open to paralyzing doubt. Then we recall Thy gifts of nature and of grace, and in that recalling, we find the power and perspective to go on.

We thank thee for reason and affection; for our unity with everything that lives and breathes; for friendships of long standing that multiply our joys and temper our disappointments.

We thank Thee most that we live in dialogue with Thee; that we have proved prayer real and known the strength of supporting love in our own private seasons of doubt and discouragement.

It is good that men should praise Thy name, O Lord, and we would do it now. Move us to speak the thanks we feel, and forgive us our much complaining.

Hear us now, O Lord, as we pray for this city and its many needs and its many peoples - pray for it, not from without, as though its dust and noise and pain were somehow beneath us or beyond us, but from within, as those who know all too well its hardness, its cruelty, its frustrations, its squeeze and take to heart its fading hopes as well as its great potential.

Grant that fences that keep potential friends apart may be fashioned into bridges so that the hurts of any may be the concerns of all.

Help us to look for thee and to find thee in the life we live and the work we do as we go about our way.

Our prayers are faint, O God, because our faith is weak. Strengthen us in the same lest our religion be in word and form alone, and not in power and inner peace.

Let that mind be in which was in our Saviour, Jesus, that relationships may matter more to us than possessions, and the Kingdom of God count for more than the kingdoms of this world.

Give us sight to see our sins, the grace to confess them; the will to forsake them, and the wisdom to learn from them....that we may grow into the likeness of Christ.

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