

"FREEDOM FROM SELF"

A Sermon By

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INTRODUCTION

The name of Michael Korda is associated with books on how to be a success. He's popular and it seems like anything he writes people will buy. G. K. Chesterton wrote: "People who write books about success can't even succeed at writing books." Korda, who is a book editor himself, would probably agree with that. I don't think he's writing for literary immortality; I think he's writing for economic prosperity.

Some people think his books are spoofs, satires on "How To Do It" books. They're sure of that; he can't be all that serious, but people are desperate to succeed, to find an easy way to success and so they buy his books by the thousands. And when they do, they read his advice.

For instance, "Appearances are everything". And so he advises you on what clothes to wear. He recommends using your glasses for rhetorical flourish. If you don't wear glasses, buy some with clear lenses in them. And pay attention to telephones. The right kind and the right color and remember that the most important part of telephone, he said, is the hold button. The more people you can keep on hold, the more successful you'll appear.

What caught my attention was a diagram he had in one of his books on where to sit at office staff meetings. If the meeting is held in the office of the boss, with chairs arranged around his desk, you can assume that the boss is going to sit at his own desk. So you get there early enough to secure a straight chair and put it next to the desk. That's the position of power, and if you're sitting there you will have the appearance of having it. Never sit in a soft chair or on a sofa. That makes you lower than other people. Always pick a straight chair and remember what mother said, "Sit up straight!"

DEVELOPMENT

I thought that advice was very interesting. Get there early and always take the seat of prominence. This advice, of course, is precisely contradictory to what Jesus advised us. His advice was read earlier in the service. When you're invited by someone to a marriage feast or to a staff meeting, don't sit in the place of honor. Instead, when you are invited go and sit in the lowest seat.

In other words, the advice of Jesus is: don't push yourself. Be modest. Be humble. Be self-effacing. Elsewhere he underscores it by saying that "He who would lose his life for my sake or for the Gospels will find it". "Give of yourself and you'll receive". And that's the exact opposite of what Korda is advising. Korda is contending that humility will get you nowhere in this life.

And then we find that Paul in writing to the Philippians takes up the same theme of humility. He writes:

"Do nothing from selfishness or conceit, but in humility count others better than yourself. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but to the interests of others."
(Philippians 2: 3, 4)

Now according to Korda and his tribe, that's a description of a loser. You just won't get far in this world doing that. Korda, and those who write books on success are somewhat skeptical about this quality of which Jesus spoke. Humility.

AND ALSO And so are those who write books about mental health. They say it can be demonstrated that people who keep putting themselves down, deny themselves, are going to end up with serious problems. Either they are going to be ciphers, or they're going to get angry and suffer the consequences psychosomatically. They're going to get sick. People who, on the surface, are very kind, courteous, helpful, obedient, self-effacing, thinking of others all the time, are on the inside, filled with anger, with rage, especially toward those to whom they are supposed to be servants.

Alfred Adler, the great psychiatrist was right. He wrote that "the striving for superiority is innate in everybody". It's a part of us. I believe that. We're built that way. There is a need in each person to be superior, to assert themselves, to be somebody. Which explains the content of all of our day-dreaming and fantasizing. We're always winning in those daydreams, excelling, demonstrating our prowess in athletics or in intellectual matters, or our beauty. There's something of Walter Mitty in all of us.

I don't know about you, but I find myself called on the phone by George Steinbrenner, owner of the Yankees. He wants me to take Billy's place. We're the same age. He wants me to take the slumbering, lethargic players, make them into a team and take them to the World Series. I'm not sure I can take the time off from this job and I don't have as much experience managing as some of the men he might call. Anyway..after the 7th game of the World Series won in the bottom of the 9th inning, I take the microphone from George in the locker room and tell him "Keep your World Series ring....I don't need it. But next time, call me sooner. Don't wait 'till mid-May, George, and the team's in last place!"

Our daydreams give us away. We may be stumbling, timid, awkward, lacking in self-confidence on the outside, but on the inside we are drawn by that need to assert ourselves - to be superior, to be somebody. Some psychologists say that if you suppress that need then you're going to be sick.

BUT BACK TO PAUL Well, then, what are we supposed to do with this lesson from Paul's letter to the Philippians.

You can't ignore it. You can't skip over it like you can some of the advice that Paul gives in other letters where you know it's historically conditioned, like those troublesome words regarding the role and place of women in the Church. You know that his advice is directed to an ancient Church some 2,000 years ago. But you can't do that with this passage regarding humility.

For Paul, humility is not a peripheral matter. He says it's what the Christian faith is all about and you know that because he uses Jesus as an example of it. That's the clue. Whenever Paul backs up what he's saying by giving Jesus as an example then you can be sure it's no peripheral matter. And so he writes:

"Have this mind among yourselves which you have in Christ Jesus who, though He was in the form of God did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped or held on to, but took the form of a servant. And being found in human form He humbled Himself unto death...even death on a cross. And therefore God has highly exalted Him...."

(Philippians 2: 8, 9)

Paul is saying that humility is not an optional matter; it's the sign that you are a follower of Him who humbled Himself and took on the form of a servant for you. So there it is; we can't escape it. Only one thing...

There is something missing here. Paul forgot the caveat. He should have said, "This is not for everybody". If you're still trying to save yourself, you can't do this. If you think that your life is going to be worthwhile only if you reach the goals that you have set for yourself in this life, then this isn't for you. If you're still trying to prove to yourself and to others that you're important, then this isn't for you. You can't do it.

PAUL ADDRESSES THIS Paul is addressing this instruction to those who have experienced the grace of Christ and who therefore know that they are loved. It's to those people who understand what it means to say, "Christ died for me." They know that means "I am somebody. I am important. I have dignity and worth as a human being. He 'emptied' Himself for me." And until you understand that you really can't do what Paul is asking you to do. There's no way you can do it. You can't humble yourself if you think it's going to humiliate you. You can't give yourself to others if you don't think you're worth very much. (You can't consider others better than yourself when you fear they just may be better than you.)

But if you have dignity then you don't mind humbling yourself. If you know you have received a great treasure in this life, then you want to give to others. If you know who you are then you won't feel threatened in those situations when you are called upon to forget yourself. Only those who understand what Christ has done for us can do what Christ did - humble Himself, take on the form of a servant.

There's a story about a little girl named Susannah, who lived near where Oliver Wendell Holmes had his Summer house. One day when Holmes was out for a walk the little girl joined him. When the time came for her to go home, her distinguished companion said, "When your mother asks you where you have been, tell her that you were out walking with Oliver Wendell Holmes." And the little girl say, "And when your mother asks you where you've been, tell her you were out walking with Susannah Brown!"

Now that's dignity. Jesus said the Kingdom of God is like that. It's where children and the least among us and the poor of the world and those who are considered worthless and outcasts of society have rare dignity because they know they have been loved. And when you know that and have the fruit of that love, the dignity of being important, of being somebody, then you can humble yourself and at the same time recognize the dignity of others.

THE DIGNITY OF OTHERS Have you ever noticed that in social groups, wherever you go, people always immediately arrange themselves in rank of importance? It always happens. I've seen it happen in Churches, I'm sorry to say. It's terrible, but it happens. In so many situations we tend to rank ourselves according to appearances, or degrees, or wealth, according to those things that the world says is important and what's not important.

Jesus came to do away with this. Remember how He took the towel and basin and washed the feet of His own disciples? He said, "Now as I have done for you so you do for one another." In other words, be a servant to one another. Treat the other person as if they were better than you. Give everybody the royal

treatment. Respect their God-given dignity and rejoice in their success in life. Treat them royally. This is what Paul is saying. Thinking of yourself in humility, you can then do this.

A man worked late one night with two of his colleagues in their lab and when they finished, in order to show his thanks to them, he invited them to come to his house for a cup of coffee. The conversation moved from their work to art. The host remembered that he had just purchased a book on Greek architecture and so he went to his study and pulled the book down from a shelf and showed it to the more advanced of his two guests. That man examined it, and then handed it back.

As the host stood up and placed the book back on the shelf, he happened to notice out of the corner of his eye the out-stretched hand of the other man waiting to receive it. He ignored it, put the book back on the shelf. After awhile the other two men left and the host went to bed. Lying in bed, the image of the out-stretched hand waiting to receive the book that was never offered came back to him. It was emblazoned on his mind - the outstretched hand waiting to receive the book that was never offered. He realized that at that moment he had made the judgement that that man, because he was less educated, would not appreciate great art. So he resolved that he would never again ignore another person's need for recognition.

The other man was probably inferior to the man with the book when it came to the knowledge of art, but that doesn't matter. It never matters. Those things don't count. Count him better than yourself. Yes, treat him royally. And learn to rejoice in the success of other people, no matter what.

There's a beautiful illustration of this out of the life of the great cellist, Gregor Piatagorsky, probably the best cellist of his generation. He took a student who had outstanding promise. He decided that the student could profit best by his example, so Piatagorsky began to play day by day as best he could. He said,

"From lesson to lesson I played better and better. In fact I played better for that student than I did at concerts. But I began to hear him play worse and worse; I was trying so hard to make him become what I wanted him to be. One night I decided that that was the reason. Maybe he started to feel, 'what's the use? I can never play like that!'"

So Piatagorsky said,

"Using the same method I gradually began to play worse and worse. He became a flower. Blossomed. When that student graduated, with honors, other Piatagorsky students were furious. They said this student was going around telling everybody that Piatagorsky was a good teacher but a lousy cellist. They were furious. But Piatagorsky said, 'It was the greatest success that I ever had.'"

If you can rejoice in somebody else's success while being overlooked, or even put down, then you begin to come close to understanding what Paul meant

when he wrote that humility is at the heart of the Christian life. Giving of yourself to other people. It's not for everyone. It's only for those who understand that that is what Jesus has done for you, who,

"Though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to hold onto, but emptied Himself, took on the form of a servant, and being found in human form humbled Himself unto death, even death on the cross".

And Paul goes on to say that the only response to that is, "Have this mind in you which you have in Christ Jesus".

PRAYER Teach us, O God, through the wonderful example of Jesus, to learn to wash one another's feet and never to put stones into one another's shoes. In the spirit of Christ, our Lord, Master and Saviour, we pray. Amen