

Introduction

Many years ago, I took my two year-old sons Moses and Aaron to their Christian pediatrician, who asked me this question as we talked, **"Who do you think, after Jesus, is the greatest person who ever lived?"** I quickly replied, **"The real Moses,"** by which I meant the Moses of the Bible not my son. I believed that 34 years ago and still do for two reasons, both of which are found in Numbers 12:1-8. First, according to verses 6-8, God related to Moses as He did to no one else who ever lived, except Jesus. He routinely appeared to him in a **"form"** and spoke to him **"mouth to mouth,"** audibly. Second, according to verse 3, Moses was the most downwardly mobile person of his day and that, being downwardly mobile, is what I'm going to preach about today.

Upwardly Mobile

Verses 1 and 2 mention Miriam and Aaron. If my wife and I had had a daughter, we would have named her Miriam. Miriam was Moses' sister and Aaron was his brother. Anyway, verses 1 and 2 record what Miriam and Aaron did. They spoke out publicly against Moses to the Israelites. Their stated complaint was that he had married a Cushite woman. Cushites were Africans noted for the blackness of their skin.

Notice I said that was their **"stated"** complaint. Verse 2 reveals the **"true"** complaint that motivated what they did. It took the form of two questions: **"Has God spoken only through Moses?"** and **"Has He not spoken through us as well?"** Those questions imply what the basic problem was. Miriam and Aaron were jealous of Moses. They resented being **"under"** his authority and wanted to **"move up"** to the same leadership position God had given him.

We use a term today that accurately describes Miriam and Aaron. They were **"upwardly mobile."** The dictionary defines upwardly mobile this way, **"Moving or aspiring to move to a higher social class or to a position of increased status or power."** That's what Miriam and

did. They both had positions of status and power, as prophetess and priest, but desired and strove to have higher ones. They were upwardly mobile and so are the vast majority of Americans today.

Upward mobility began in 13th century Europe when a dramatic change occurred. An agrarian society based on barter increasingly became an urban society based on money. That change allowed people to do what they had never been able to, seek higher social and economic standing, and that's exactly what they did. Serfs sought to become free peasants. Free peasants sought to become part of the emerging middle class. And the middle class sought to become part of the increasing and powerful noble class. The populace, in other words, began striving relentlessly to move up. People became upwardly mobile.

And so are almost all Americans today. Upward mobility is one of the dominant values of our culture. We're obsessed with trying to achieve higher and higher political, social, economic, and/or professional standing. I'd quickly say there isn't necessarily anything wrong with that. It can be a good thing in fact for the right reasons – to glorify God and benefit man. But practically speaking, it's almost always for the wrong reason - to impose our will on others.

Think of it in terms of what we call the pecking order, which is what Miriam and Aaron, according to verse 2, were concerned about. Every context - home, workplace, church, neighborhood, and so on - has one. And we desire and strive to be as high in it as we can be. Why? It's because the higher we are in the pecking order the more people there are upon whom we can impose our will. That in turn enables us to do or have what we want.

Downwardly Mobile

That kind of upward mobility is the way of the world, but it isn't the way of those who love God and His kingdom – like Moses. Look at 11:29, which stands in stark contrast to 12:2. In 12:2, Miriam and Aaron wanted the position Moses had because it was exclusive. In 11:29, Moses, who

had the exclusive position, wanted it to be inclusive. He wanted literally everyone, all Israelites, to hear from God the way he did. That helps explain the editorial comment in verse 3, **"Moses was very humble, more than any man who was on the face of the earth."** How many people who have an exclusive position want everyone else to have it as well? The answer is **"almost none."** It's clear. Moses was downwardly mobile and we should be too.

John Michael Talbot accurately defines what downward mobility is. It's **"littleness, submission, obedience, and service."** Don't misunderstand what that means. We should try to improve ourselves. We should try to move up economically and professionally. But we absolutely must be little, submissive, obedient, and serving as we do.

After Jesus, Moses is our best model for this, but so is Francis of Assisi. Francis was one of the most downwardly mobile people who ever lived. Examples abound.

Consider the name that he gave to the order of friars that developed around him. Did you ever notice how so many televangelists today name their ministries after themselves? Francis would never have done that. He lived in the 13th century Europe that I described a few minutes ago. Remember that upward mobility was one of the watchwords of that day, which is why he named his order what he did, **"The Order of Friars Minor."** Notice that I emphasized the word **"minor,"** which meant **"of lesser importance."** Francis insisted that his followers and he should be of lesser importance, as Moses was in 11:29. He instructed them in that regard, **"We should be guileless, lowly, and pure."**

Francis himself was just that in every way. He placed himself, for instance, under the authority of a series of spiritual brothers. These were brothers who *had joined him* and who were *much younger in years and faith* than he was. Most of us resent being instructed or rebuked by anyone, let alone those who are younger and less experienced than we are. Francis, however, welcomed it.

Moses and Francis demonstrate God's call. They were downwardly

mobile and we should be too. We should desire and strive to serve not be served, to esteem not be esteemed, to submit not be submitted to, and to promote not be promoted. Paul sums it up well in Philippians 2:3-4. We should regard others as being more important than we are and act accordingly. We're downwardly mobile when we do.

Practice Humility

Now, being downwardly mobile, requires something of us – humility. Notice the link between 11:29 and 12:3. 12:3 was the cause and 11:29 the effect. The lesson is this. Upward mobility, as I defined it, is the natural and prevailing expression of pride. Downward mobility, in contrast, is the natural and prevailing expression of humility. To be downwardly mobile, therefore, we must be humble.

Humility is a matter of grace. It's a condition like love, peace, and joy that the Holy Spirit produces in us. We're humble only if He makes us so. But, at the same time, it's also a matter of practice. William Law articulates it well in his classic book *A Serious Call to a Devout and Holy Life*. Humility, he writes, "**can be obtained only by daily and constant practice.**" This is part of what Paul calls "**walking by the Spirit.**" You and I can become humble enough to be downwardly mobile but only if we daily and constantly practice humility.

Four Practices

So, let's practice it by doing four things.

First, redeem the humiliations of life. I once told the congregation to "**bow your eyes and close your heads.**" A Sunday school teacher at Barberton Friends explained Ephesians 6:16 and the "**fiery darts**" of Satan, inadvertently interchanging the "**f**" and "**d**". A law school classmate of mine flunked the bar exam. A businessman I know filed bankruptcy. And on it goes. We do things or things happen that embarrass us. Those are the humiliations of life and we all have them.

But we don't let them defeat us. We practice humility by

redeeming them instead. First, we welcome them as revelations of our flawed nature. Second, we reflect on our inner and outer responses to them and what that says about us. Third, we recall in detail the humiliation of Jesus as Philippians 2 and the gospels describe it. Fourth, we relate our humiliation to that of Jesus and see in it an opportunity to share in His. And fifth, we determine how Jesus would respond to our humiliation if He were us, and try to respond that way.

That's the first thing we do to practice humility. We redeem the humiliations of life. We do three more things each of which is part of Dallas Willard's "**fail-safe recipe for humility.**"

One is that we refrain from pretending that we are what we know we are not. Most of us do that far more than we realize. We say and do things to adjust how we appear to people – to make them think we aren't as bad as we are or that we're better than we are. Why do we do that? It's pride of course. Consequently, making and carrying out the decision not to do that is a good way to practice humility.

Someone introduced me to his out of town brother-in-law and told him that I'm a "**Bible scholar.**" But I'm not. Derek Kidner is a Bible scholar and I'm no Derek Kidner. Years ago, I would have let that introduction stand, actually wanting the brother-in-law to think that of me. But knowing what I'm telling you now, I didn't. I told him the truth instead: "**I'm a serious student of the Bible but certainly no scholar.**" I refrained from pretending that I am what I know I am not.

We practice humility by doing a third thing. We refrain from presuming a favorable position for ourselves in any respect. Almost all people routinely do that. They think and act as if their preferences, opinions, and rights take precedence over everyone else's. That is in fact the way that pride most frequently and practically expresses itself. Refraining from doing that, therefore, is perhaps the most powerful of all practices in humility. In our interactions with others, we purposely give their preferences, opinions, and rights priority over our own.

Take something as simple as this. You get to the only close parking

space on a cold day just before another driver does. You prefer to take the space. He prefers to take the space. You have the right to take it. He doesn't. But you practice humility by letting him take it anyway. You give his preference priority over your own.

We do a fourth thing to practice humility. We refrain from **"pushing"** the will of others. That is one of our greatest temptations. We want people to be, do, or have something that they don't want. So we say and do things that force or trick them to be, do, or have it. That is the apex of pride and here's why. It's because we're doing something that God Himself won't do – taking away the leadership of their lives by overriding their wills. Consequently, we don't do that. We do inform and request, but, with exceptions here and there, don't push. We respect the freedom to make decisions God has given people by letting them think and act for themselves.

A Christian's 20 year-old daughter began dating a young man of whom he strongly disapproved. He wanted her to break up with him and was tempted to force her to. He was on the verge of banning the young man from his house and giving his daughter the silent treatment, but decided not to. He practiced humility instead. He sat down with her, calmly and clearly explained his objections, asked her to break up with him, and then dropped it. He let her think and act for herself.

Conclusion

I leave you in closing with the words, once again, of William Law: **"Now in order to begin in the practice of humility, you must take it for granted that you are proud. You should believe also that pride is your greatest weakness."** Those are strong words but we need to hear them. The fact is that almost all of us here this morning, including me, are proud. So, let's practice humility. Redeem the humiliations of life and refrain from pretending, presuming, and pushing. The Holy Spirit will transform us if we do so that we become what Moses and Francis were – downwardly mobile.