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Mark 8:31-38

## DOWNWARDLY MOBILE

Ask any parent what they wish for their children and most parents will say they want their children to be happy and successful. And that is what often propels parents to push their kids to achieve whether it is in sports or academics or other extra-curricular activities. They need to be successful so they can attend a good school which, in turn, will help them be successful. “Success” is indeed what propels the marketing strategies of many colleges and universities. Their efforts to promote their school’s study abroad programs, their student-faculty ratio, their internship opportunities, their excellent lab facilities, their job placement and graduate school acceptance numbers are a way of telling potential students that they can find success at that school.

The drive to succeed is all around us in our society. And success in our society is typically defined as having a good job, making a good living, having an abundance of material possessions, and the security that comes through strong financial investments. Success is generally understood as being “upwardly mobile”—as rising up the ladder of social status and economic security.

Jesus had a different understanding of “success.” Jesus’ idea of success could be defined as “downwardly mobile.” And he taught this idea of downward mobility to his disciples. Jesus teaches his disciples “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.” As you might imagine, the idea of downward mobility was not an easy message for Jesus’ disciples to swallow—and it still

isn't for us today. And they especially didn't like it when Jesus spoke about his own path of downward mobility. When Jesus tells his disciples that the Messiah would undergo suffering, the Messiah would be rejected by the elders and the chief priests, that the Messiah would be killed, and then rise after three days, Peter had heard enough. And he pulls Jesus aside and tells him to quit talking like that! Suffering, rejection, death were not what Peter expected for the Messiah. And he told Jesus just that.

Let's get into Peter's mindset for a moment. Peter and the other disciples had personally witnessed Jesus' power to energize and excite people. They had witnessed his powerful charisma and his powerful teaching abilities. They had witnessed Jesus' miraculous powers to heal people of diseases and disabilities, to feed multitudes, to calm stormy seas. They knew Jesus was a man of God. And they had pinned all their hopes on Jesus for a better future for themselves and their families and their people. Jesus was their ticket to greatness and to success.

Remember, these are poor men, hardworking men. In Jesus they saw great possibilities for themselves. After all, being part of his inner circle would no doubt bring personal benefits. And they all envisioned the great things Jesus could do for their community. Their hard life under Roman rule, the cruelty they endured, the poverty and suffering and fear—these would all come to an end now that the Messiah had arrived. Israel would be great again, full of power and prominence. No longer would they be subservient dogs to their Roman oppressors. Upward mobility had arrived at last.

But then Jesus starts up with this downwardly mobile talk of suffering, and being rejected, and being killed. And it was too much for Peter. And he tells Jesus in so many words to just shut up.

And that is when Jesus delivers that rather harsh rebuke of Peter: “Get behind me, Satan!” We hear that word “Satan” and we think of a personality of pure evil. But biblical word used here for “Satan” literally means “adversary.” Adversary. An adversary is someone or something with whom you must contend, an opponent you must resist. Peter was presenting Jesus with an adversarial idea of who he, Jesus, should be. Peter was tempting Jesus with the world’s understanding of success, with the world’s understanding of upward mobility.

And it was tempting for sure. It was tempting. And that is why Jesus so forcefully tells this Adversary to be gone! Because Jesus understood that the only genuine way up is down. The only genuine way up is down: down into a life of service and humility, down into people’s pain, down into the lives of the overlooked and the disregarded, down into the suffering and needs of other people. The only way up is down.

And Jesus taught his followers, you and me, that the success we desire in life is found by following him on that path down. “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and the sake of the gospel, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?” What will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? Jesus calls us to voluntarily let go of all our efforts at grasping for the world’s idea of success and to deny ourselves for the sake of the gospel and to take up our crosses and follow him into the center of the world’s pain and need.

It is important that we understand what Jesus means when he tells us to “take up our crosses” and follow him. Unfortunately, that phrase has been misused and misunderstood by some Christians as a message to people that they should accept suffering or abuse. People will say, “Well, that’s her cross to bear.” But Jesus is not telling people to accept suffering or abuse. Instead, Jesus is teaching those who willingly choose to follow him, that the journey will be

downwardly mobile. Discipleship means walking a path that is not easy, or comfortable, or successful in the eyes of the world. Loving enemies. Speaking for the voiceless. Including outcasts. Forgiving those who have injured you. Living humbly and simply. Offering radical generosity. Standing up for justice. Such a life brings with it burdens, crosses if you will, crosses of hardship, crosses of rejection and criticism, and certainly inner crosses that demand from us emotional strength to walk that path with Jesus.

What most parents want for their children is for them to be happy and successful. Jesus promised us neither happiness nor success—at least not how we understand those concepts. Instead, he taught us a paradox: that the only genuine way up is down. The only genuine way to the abundant life God offers us is to let go of what we *think* will bring us happiness—to let go of our idea of success, to deny ourselves and all our striving for the self, and to follow Jesus *down* the path that leads *up* to God.