

# The Path of Downward Mobility

“...among the Gentiles, those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them.” Mark 10:42

*Mark 10:35-45 Nehemiah 5:14-15*  
*College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa*

*Rev. Todd B. Freeman*  
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Think back to the kind of leadership positions you currently hold, or have held within your lifetime. That includes when you were in school, at jobs you have had, your role at home, at volunteer organizations, at church. **What kind of a leader are you?** How would you describe your leadership style?

In 1997, Dee Hock, the founder and former CEO of VISA credit card company wrote the following concerning the topic of leadership:

Control is not leadership; management is not leadership; leadership is leadership. If you seek to lead, invest at least 50 percent of your time leading yourself - your own purpose, ethics, principles, motivations, conduct.

Invest at least 20 percent leading those with authority over you and 15 percent leading your peers. If you don't understand that you work for your mislabeled subordinates, then you know nothing of leadership. You know only tyranny.

With that, then, I ask you this morning: **Is exercising authority the same thing as being authoritarian?**

Back when I was in seminary, as a pastor-in-training, we were cautioned not to shy away from the authority that comes with the position of being a pastor and preacher. Being a very egalitarian, non-hierarchical kind of seminary, most of us were confused what that meant. It was explained that being an ordained pastor brings with the position an *inherent* authority, one that we best be prepared to accept and exercise in fulfilling our responsibilities as a church leader.

The same can be said and applied to positions of authority in the corporate business world, and certainly to those in elected government positions. But perhaps those of you who are parents can best understand this relationship between exercising authority and being authoritarian best. The role of a parent also comes with an inherent authority, which if not exercised will most likely lead to any number of problems with that child. Yet, while setting boundaries and exercising discipline remains an important part of parenting, the key is to not become authoritarian. In other words, **not turning your rightly-given authority into a weapon of power and control**, even to the point of domination, over your child.

The same is true for anyone in a position of authority, including pastors. And not only pastors, but elders and other church leaders as well. It was helpful, therefore, for me to **look** at the leadership patterns within this congregation when I first arrived just over 1 ½ years ago.

Since there is such a big difference between exercising authority and being authoritarian, let's look a little closer at this. This distinction is nicely explained in a book entitled, *Saving Jesus From Those Who Are Right*. The author, feminist theologian **Carter Heyward**, is a recently-retired professor of Theology at the Episcopal Divinity School in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She writes:

Authority, the 'power to authorize' or the 'ability to empower,' can be held and bestowed in just and unjust ways. Authority is a morally neutral concept, neither good nor evil in itself...

By contrast, 'authoritarianism,' the hoarding of authority as power over others, is always spiritually problematic.

The biblical phrase used for this hierarchical, authoritarian style of leadership, which we heard about in both of today's scripture passages, is "**lording it over**" others. Let's look briefly at these.

The Old Testament passage from the book of **Nehemiah** reveals that he, as governor of the Israelites, refused to "lord it over" the people like the previous governors did, who laid heavy burdens upon the people, taking from them food and wine and money. We're told that even the servants of these governors "lorded it over" the people.

Examples of this kind of governing can be found in many countries today, especially in countries led by authoritarian dictators. North Korea is perhaps the most obvious example in the news recently. Authoritarian governing is also exercised in an increasing number of democracies where one political party in the majority attempts (and sometimes succeeds) in lording it over those in the other parties. In case we think we are immune from this, accusations of being authoritarian were made by Democrats during the Bush administration, and Republicans are returning the favor now in the Obama administration.

Without getting too political, I can't emphasize enough the importance of checks and balances within any government – and that includes within church government. For accusation of lording it over others are also rightly-leveled at religious organizations. I'm sure you can think of examples of religious leaders who "lord it over" the faith of those in their congregations. This can happen, to a certain extent, within entire denominations as well. This is most commonly expressed in the mentality of "this is what you must believe before we will let you join us."

An excellent example of exercising authority vs. being authoritarian occurred a few years ago when the Southern Baptist Convention reiterated its belief that wives should graciously subject themselves to their husbands. You may recall that as a result, former President of the United States, Jimmy Carter, renounced his life-long affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention. He had had enough with people in positions of authority, using that authority in an authoritarian kind of way to control others, especially women. Jimmy Carter, and others, finally said, 'enough is enough.'

Those of us on the progressive end of the theological spectrum have had to say the same, from time to time, on the floor of presbytery meetings when faced with what we have considered to be authoritarian agendas of power and control.

In today's gospel lesson from the book of Mark, Jesus makes the reference to "lording it over" others in relation to how the Gentiles govern their people. Jesus

immediately follows this statement by declaring to the disciples, "But it shall not be so among you."

It seems that brothers James and John had authoritarian issues of power and control of their own. They had the gall to ask Jesus to grant them anything they asked. But like a wise parent responding to a child, before he said "okay," Jesus first asks, "What do you want me to do for you?" Oh, nothing less than to let us, James and John, sit at your right and left hand in your glory. Talk about an ego-trip.

In a sermon entitled, *The Call to Downward Mobility* by Kenneth Carder, a bishop in the United Methodist church in Nashville, TN, he begins by stating, "Everybody wants to be somebody. Since the dawn of history, human beings have been trying to move up the scale of importance."

**Henri Nouwen**, a former Harvard professor and a Catholic priest (and my favorite author on spirituality), comments that people have always been tempted to replace love with power. And he includes the church. "The long painful history of the church," he writes, "is the history of people ever and again tempted to choose power over love, control over the cross, being a leader over being led." And as Bishop Carder writes, "Religion is fertile soil in which the seeds of ambition subtly grow."

With this mindset, some church leaders have forgotten the core of Jesus' ministry: to serve, not to be served. **Jesus' own declaration that he came not to be served but to serve reflects a downward mobility.** Pillars of the faith, like Mother Teresa, exemplified this. Not only did she work among the least in India, she considered herself the least of the least. This, by the way, is not the same thing as poor self-esteem.

Bishop Carder adds, "The world's image of greatness is hierarchical, with the greatest at the pinnacle of the pyramid and God hovering over the top... Success, upward mobility and being served are signs of faithfulness to a hierarchical god." That's god with a small 'g'. The way of Jesus leads us in another direction, however, turning that pyramid upside-down. **Nouwen writes, "The way of the Christian leader is not the way of upward mobility in which the world has invested so much, but the way of downward mobility ending on the cross."** In other words, discipleship, including church leadership, is costly.

I'll close now with another statement about leadership. It comes from a book that is part of the *Congregational Leadership Series*. Under a subsection entitled "Leadership" it begins:

**What does the word leadership really mean? Think of it as having three dimensions: character, knowledge, and action.**

Character permeates all [aspects of congregational leadership]. Leaders have principles and try to live them out... leaders are honest, trustworthy, dedicated, caring, disciplined, and faithful to the core principles – and have many more virtues as well. Although everyone sins and fails, be clear that improvement is expected from all leaders.

It is not only character that counts. Leaders must also know things and do things. *Knowledge* and *action* can be developed. They can be learned in books and classes or from working with people who have expertise. Things we know from one part of our experience can be applied to other parts of our lives.

I think that this statement, along with both of today's biblical texts, are appropriate to reflect upon before we elect new elders to the Session next Sunday during our Congregational Meeting. For we believe that **elders** are called by God, and then confirmed by the Nominating Committee and you, the congregation, not only to represent you, but to **lead and serve this congregation**.

And also, reflect this week upon your leadership and the authority you have in your life: in your home, work, school, church, relationships, wherever. **See if there are any areas where you may have crossed the line from exercising authority to being authoritarian.** It is a spiritual discipline I find important as I reflect upon my own leadership as a pastor. Then, let us ask God to show us ways to become more effective leaders.

And as you recall Jesus' words that we are to serve, not be served, remember Carter Heyward's definition of **authority as the "ability to empower" others**.

Amen.