

Immanuel: Teaching Us What Humility Means

Isaiah prophesied of the coming Christ child and named him Immanuel – God with us. Captured in this announcement is the humility of God. This attribute is knit into the character of God, and by his example at Christmas, we learn what humility means and are taught how to humble ourselves.

Upward mobility refers to the movement of an individual or group of people to a higher social status. This term is used by sociologists and economists to measure the opportunity for advancement among people in a society. The possibility for upward mobility lies at the heart of what we understand the “American Dream” to be. The dream that expresses the opportunity for success and advancement for anyone who wishes to pursue it. Upward mobility, in many ways, is understood to be the hope for humankind.

Jesus demonstrates something entirely different. And it is at Christmas time when we celebrate it directly. We celebrate Immanuel – God with us. Jesus underwent downward mobility. Paul puts it this way.

Who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: But made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Phil. 2:6-8

At every level, Christ demoted himself. He went from Heaven’s splendor to earth’s toil. He rejected his right to rule to accept his role to serve. He put aside his infinite form to put on a finite form. He let go his of immortality to become mortal. The apostle Paul calls us to adopt this same mind (*Phil. 2:5*). The willingness to humble oneself by way of downward mobility.

The Scriptures call us to humble ourselves. But how do we do this? Most often we think humbling ourselves includes seeing ourselves in light of our weaknesses and failure. Such exposure is characterized by humiliation and embarrassment. Indeed, this is one type of humbling. However, by paying close attention to the humility of Christ, we learn a very useful lesson in humility. Christ demonstrates for us a humility of a second type. Christ was not humbled because of any weaknesses on his part. Quite the contrary, Christ humbled himself by yielding his strengths.

Consider these two types of humbling side by side.

Type I: Humiliation Humbling	Type II: Downward Mobility Humbling
Seeing myself as inferior.	Placing myself in an inferior position.
Activated by confessing my need.	Activated by yielding my rights.
Plays on my inabilities, weaknesses & faults.	Plays on my abilities, strengths & gifts.
Looks like esteeming others higher than myself.	Looks like esteeming others higher than myself by showing deference and practicing modesty, gravity, or submission.

What could this downward mobility look like in the life of a believer? It begins with introspection – where has God blessed you with strengths or gifts? Then prayerfully consider how God might ask you to humble yourself in one of these areas. Here are a few examples. Perhaps you are a leader. Try taking a serving role in some area of your life. Perhaps you are a teacher. Sit under the teaching of another. Perhaps you have time. Consider volunteering. Perhaps you are good at engaging people in friendship. Be friendly with someone who has very few friends. In all these examples, the motivation of your heart is key. Are you willing to yield of your rights, esteem others better than yourself, and follow the example of Christ?

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Both Peter and James tell us if we humble ourselves, the Lord will raise us up. We powerfully see this in Christ's example. Because of His downward mobility to the point of the cross, he is raised far above all things (*Phil. 2:9*). Celebrate Christmas this season by following this pattern of humility: willingly humble yourself after the pattern of Immanuel, the one whose downward mobility was the hope of humankind.