

Status Anxiety

Philippians 3:1-11

Lethbridge Mennonite Church

By: Ryan Dueck

October 26, 2025/Twentieth Sunday after Pentecost

Last week, I talked about guilt and about how Christ can lift this burden from our shoulders.

Guilt, I said, was everywhere.

Today's sermon is about something else that is everywhere, something that I see all around every day (including in my own heart): status anxiety.

Perhaps that's not a term that you've heard before or are familiar with, so let's start with a definition.

"Status anxiety" refers to the fear or worry that people feel about how they are perceived in the social hierarchy. It is anxiety about one's status, success, or standing *compared to others* (this part is important).

It often shows up as:

- Fear of being judged as unsuccessful
- Pressure to achieve certain markers of success
- Comparing oneself to peers and feeling inadequate
- Stress about maintaining or improving one's social position

I'm sure that doesn't describe anyone *in here*, but I've heard status anxiety is fairly common out there in the world 😊.

I want to read the opening paragraph from this chapter in David Zahl's *The Big Relief*:

Here is an incomplete list of the things I've seen used—or used myself—to signify status in the last month or so: dollars, zip codes, party invitations, advanced

degrees, body mass index, golf handicaps, busyness, hair color (and length), engine horsepower, house cleanliness, soccer trophies, knowledge of current events, number of bedrooms, number of tattoos, number of children, number of page views, biceps size, audience size, waist size, mental health diagnosis, pronoun usage, literary tastes, children's school, church denomination, charitable giving, mileage run per week, passport stamps, carbon footprint, and graveyard plot location.

I added a few more of my own that I've encountered over the last while:

Pickle ball rating, disdain for Donald Trump, length of time being a Blue Jays fan (i.e., *not* a bandwagon jumper), infrequency of social media usage (I hardly ever look at Instagram), fuel economy (or electric vehicle charge duration), having sufficiently progressive opinions on social issues, having sufficiently conservative opinions on social issues, kids' sporting accomplishments, size of church one pastors, and number of kilometers walked per day on the Camino.

I'm sure you'd have your own list. 😊

Zahl goes on:

Another status symbol might be the ability to see through status symbols the quickest—or feign indifference to them. We are extraordinarily imaginative creatures when it comes to symbolizing and signaling status.¹

Yes, we certainly are. We are desperate to prove that we measure up, that we're on the winning team, that we're up to date, that we're not falling behind, that we stand out in some way. That we're acceptable.

Think about the last time you entered a social gathering where there were new people, introductions, etc. There's always this conversational dance we do where we're trying to figure out where we rank.

What do you do? How many kids do you have? What are they doing? Where have you traveled recently?

¹ David Zahl, *The Big Relief: The Urgency of Grace for a Worn-Out World* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2025), 95.

Some of this is genuine curiosity, I know. And I never want to be critical of curiosity. God knows our world could use more people who are actually curious about the lives and views of others and who are actually willing to listen.

But I think we're also kind of trying to figure out where we stand in connection to other people.

Do we make more or less than them? Are our kids doing better or worse than theirs (and what does this say about our parenting)? Are we staving off the effects of aging more or less successfully than them? Have we traveled to more or less cool parts of the world? Did we do unimpressive "touristy" things, or did we go off on our own and have unique and admirable experiences?

And of course, we do this ranking and status sorting in the church as well.

We can use the metrics of spiritual devotion, political activism, financial generosity, number of committees served on, volunteerism, service in the community, biblical knowledge, prayer life, spiritual experience, theological acumen, liturgical and music preferences...

Again, the list goes on and on and on.

I'm only a few minutes into this sermon and I'm already exhausted by the ways in which we can and do pursue status (I'm not going to admit how much of the above list was autobiographical!).

At the heart of each one of these things is an unstated plea: notice me.

There is a desperate desire to be special, to be unique, to *matter* and to be recognized as mattering. And the best way to do this, of course, is to rank ourselves based on those around us.

This is *everywhere*.

And in the age of the internet and social media, it is ever before us.

How does the gospel offer relief for the treadmill of trying to attain and secure and advertise our own status?

Well, the first thing it does is simply point us to the person of Jesus.

Jesus, we believe, was both fully God and fully human. He was the one true human – the one who embodied God’s creational intent in making human beings. He demonstrated what a life oriented properly toward God and neighbour looks like, what a flourishing, good and true human life looks like.

And Jesus did not care one bit about status.

Wealth? Jesus described the love of it as the root of all evil. He had few possessions, accumulated next to nothing, lived a nomadic life, and called the poor blessed.

Professional accomplishments? Jesus didn’t write a book or have a podcast or YouTube channel. Or a blog 😊. He started a movement, certainly, but during his lifetime he was often misunderstood and mistreated. He was viewed with reverence by some and deep suspicion by others. He spoke in riddles and stories which didn’t always land. He could be inspiring, but also confusing and divisive. His CV would have made for odd reading (it still does).

Social circle? Jesus’ closes associates were drawn from the ranks of fishermen and tax-collectors. He hung out with sinners. He was as comfortable debating theology with learned scribes as he was having dinner with the riffraff.

Scope of influence? Jesus had a three-year ministry and spent it in a geographic region about a quarter the size of southern Alberta. He would have been a failure by today’s influencers standards. He didn’t do enough to promote his brand or maximize his impact. He didn’t stroke anyone’s ego or ingratiate himself to the cultural gatekeepers.

Pedigree? Jesus came from Nazareth, a rural backwater. *Can anything good come from Nazareth?* The implication is that impressive people don’t come from places like the one Jesus came from.

Family? Jesus was born in scandalous circumstances and questionable parentage. He was an adopted kid and lived a relatively normal, unimpressive life for most of his first three decades.

Power? Jesus had power, certainly. But he did not pursue it, at least not earthly power. Indeed, he redefined it. *You know how the Gentiles lord it over each other*, he said. *Not so among you. The one who wants to be great must be a servant* (Matthew 20:26).

Jesus' approach to the status games that human beings play was complete indifference. Indeed, he played a different game entirely.

Not just in his life, obviously. Also, in his death.

Death by crucifixion was an anti-status symbol. In fact, it conferred the lowest possible status. It was reserved for slaves, rebels, non-citizens, political agitators.

This is the death Jesus died.

This is the inversion of status that Paul celebrates in his famous Christ hymn from Philippians 2.

Let the same mind be in you that was in Christ Jesus,
⁶who, though he existed in the form of God,
did not regard equality with God
as something to be grasped,
⁷but emptied himself,
taking the form of a slave,
assuming human likeness.
And being found in appearance as a human,
⁸ he humbled himself
and became obedient to the point of death—
even death on a cross.

Jesus' rejection of status, his emptying of himself, and humbling himself to the point of death redefined everything.

Our main text this morning also comes from Philippians.

Paul, who encountered the risen Christ on the road to Damascus—the risen Christ who changed the rules about status seeking and so much more—is writing about status and identity and where it is to be found.

Paul can check off a list of his credentials, his claims to status:

- Circumcised on the eighth day, as all good Jewish boys are
- Member of the tribe of Benjamin—Jacob’s youngest and most-cherished son
- A Hebrew of Hebrews—pure blood!
- A Pharisee, and of the most serious sort, emphasizing obedience to the books of Moses and ritual purity
- Persecutor of the church (commitment to Torah)
- Righteous—Paul not only understood the law but also followed it scrupulously!

Paul had an impressive list of credentials, an airtight case for belonging to the people and purposes of God. As far as status markers go, Paul would have had an impressive case to make in his context.

Yet in verse 7, he says that he has come to regard all of this as loss. Why?

“Because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ my Lord.”

He goes so far as to say that everything to which he previously attached value, everything that defined and gave meaning to his life, everything in which his identity was located he now regarded as rubbish, in order that he may gain Christ!

These are strong words.

“I want to know Christ.” Not, “I want to know about Christ.” “I want to know Christ.”

I think at the very core, Paul is saying that his identity, his worth, his status is now located with Jesus Christ and his purposes.

Not with his ethnicity. Not with his religious knowledge. Not with his moral performance. Not with anything but the reality that he is a creation of the living God, chosen, loved, and redeemed by the work of Jesus Christ.

What about us?

Are we willing to set aside the things are so easy to take pride in, the things that give us status and meaning, the things that bolster our identity to, like Paul, “gain Christ?”

Can we, like Paul, regard all of this as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Jesus Christ?

Jesus did more than reject the status games in his life and in his death. He rose victorious from the grave, defeating sin, death, and the enemy.

He doesn’t just give us a good example. As we saw last week, he atones for our sins, removes our guilt, *and his righteousness becomes our own*.

Last week, I called it a terrible trade for God but a great one for us. God, in Christ takes our sin upon himself and his righteousness becomes our own.

The fancy theological word for this is imputation. Here’s how Zahl describes it.

Imputation... announces that God reconciles sinners to himself by declaring them to be righteous on account of Christ. This is to say, God does not judge you or me on the basis of our own actions or identities—our spiritual or moral resumes, as it were—but on the basis of Christ’s, which through his death and resurrection, have been imputed [*ascribed, assigned, credited*] to us by faith. Our account has been settled. God does not have to do this; he does it for no other reason than that he loves us.²

An imputed righteousness saves us from the never-ending pursuit of status and all the anxiety that comes with it. Our status is not found in anything we can accomplish, or any way that we can find to stand out on our own.

It comes from the finished work of God in Christ. It comes from being loved as a child of God.

² Zahl, 105.

I spent part of Friday afternoon at the bedside of a man who is dying.

Death is the great equalizer of course. Death obliterates any status that we think we may have attained for ourselves in this life.

There is nothing marketable about death. No power to be gained, no advantage to be secured, no popularity to attain. Nobody goes viral on their deathbed.

Death reduces all our status games to nothing. In death, we are all vulnerable, all dependent upon others to care for us, all casting ourselves upon the mercy of God.

I have sat with enough dying people at this stage of my life to confirm what we all know in our hearts but spend a good chunk of our lives ignoring anyway.

We all know that most of us won't arrive at death's door wishing we had made a bit more money or had a bit more power and influence or written a few more sermons or articles that went viral or piled up a bit more stuff or visited a few more places that looked good on Instagram.

I rarely see any of this.

What I do see often is people regretting they hadn't been a better husband or father or sister or brother or friend or daughter or son. What I do see is people wishing they had devoted more of their time and energy to what matters most.

What good are our status games, what good is all that the world could ever offer if the people closest to us cannot say, "He was kind... She was good to me... he kept his word... she smiled when she said hello... he forgave freely... she was a picture of grace... he loved me?"

"And now these three remain," Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians. "Faith, hope, and love. But the greatest of these is love" (1 Cor. 13:13).

Friday's deathbed visit was not an overly sad occasion. There were some tears, yes, but mostly there was joy. Joy for a life well-lived, a race well-run. Joy for a man of deep faith who loved well and was loved by others.

It was nice to be at a bedside where I could think, “This is how it should be.” Believe me, this is not always the case (I doubt this comes as a surprise to you). I have been in other contexts that are soaked in pain and regret and deep sadness.

I don’t typically use death as a preaching tool. At least not explicitly. I have seen it weaponized in all kinds of ugly ways at funerals over the years to produce fear or to try to engineer some profession of faith or whatever.

But if we are paying attention to life, we should learn from death.

We should learn what to prioritize and how. We should learn where to anchor our hope. We should reevaluate and reorient, if necessary.

In the end, the only status that really matter is what God thinks of us, what God declares to be true of us.

And this has been settled once and for all on a cross and in an empty tomb.

May God help us let go of our status anxiety, to stop chasing, chasing, chasing, and rest secure in what has been done for us.

Amen

