

The Velvet Ladder: A Pilgrim's Exhortation on Titles, Honors, and the Quiet Worship of Self

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A Watchman and Fellow Pilgrim, A Voice Crying in the Wilderness

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Abstract. In every age, pride finds a wardrobe suitable for the season. In ours, it often dresses in honorifics, credentials, platforms, and professional symbols that promise significance without crucifixion. This exhortation considers the spiritual psychology of titles and recognition in church, marketplace, academy, workplace, and family life. With parabolic and analogical language, it argues that the modern hunger for “being known” frequently functions as a baptized form of Babel: a name-building project that competes with the name of Christ. Drawing on Scripture’s warnings about self-exaltation and the end-time drift toward image, spectacle, and self-love, this work calls the saints back to hidden obedience, ordinary faithfulness, and rapture readiness. The Bride is not prepared by applause, but by oil.

Keywords: titles and honor in the church; celebrity Christianity; academic pride; workplace ambition; spiritual formation; humility; end-time deception; rapture readiness.

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Foreword: A Gentle Question at the Door of the Heart

This reflection is offered with trembling tenderness, because the temptation it names is not “out there” in obvious villains. It lives in me, and perhaps in you, as a small craving for recognition that can hide beneath good work and even beneath sincere ministry. It is possible to love Christ and yet secretly love being perceived as useful to Christ. It is possible to defend sound doctrine and still hunger to be “*the one who knows*.” It is possible to preach the cross while quietly negotiating for a crown.

The problem is not that the Lord sometimes grants honor. Scripture acknowledges a legitimate place for esteem, office, and orderly recognition. The problem is the heart’s subtle shift from gratitude to entitlement, from stewardship to possession, from service to self-importance. The problem is not the existence of names, but the obsession with being named.

So I write as a fellow pilgrim, not as a judge. And I ask one question that may be uncomfortable precisely because it is close: If Christ chose to hide you for a season, would you still obey Him with joy? If your name were forgotten while His name was remembered, would you still be content?

The Painted Ladder: When Climbing Becomes a Religion

There was once a village where everyone carried a ladder. They woke up early, polished the rungs, measured the height, compared the brands, and discussed ladders the way the saints should discuss Scripture. Some ladders were called “*Doctor*.” Others were called “*Bishop*.” Others were called “*Director*,” “*Senior*,” “*Chief*,” “*Apostle*,” “*Prophet*,” “*His Eminency*,” “*Vision Bearer*,” or “*Most Distinguished*.” Those with taller ladders were invited to the front. Those with shorter ladders were asked to carry chairs.

One day a stranger entered the village carrying no ladder at all. He carried only a basin and a towel. The village laughed until they noticed something: wherever the stranger knelt, hearts were healed. Wherever he served, burdens became lighter. Wherever he refused applause, peace increased. When they asked him why he carried no ladder, he replied, *"I am not climbing to be seen. I am descending to love."*

The village did not know they were watching the wisdom of Christ: *"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted"* (Matthew 23:12).

In modern society the ladder is everywhere, but in the church it can become a liturgy. We may not bow to carved idols, but we can bow to social signals: titles, academic labels, church ranks, brand visibility, and public significance. The tragedy is not merely moral; it is theological. Because when title-hunger rules, Christ becomes useful as a means to an image, rather than treasured as the end of salvation.

A Biblical Diagnosis: The Pharisee's Mirror and the Disciple's Towel

Jesus spoke with unusual sharpness about religious leaders who loved status. He described those who *"do everything to be seen by people"* (Matthew 23:5), who love places of honor, public greetings, and being called impressive names (Matthew 23:6–7). He did not criticize knowledge itself, nor leadership itself. He criticized the heart that uses spiritual labor as a stage for self.

The kingdom pattern runs the opposite direction. *"Do nothing out of selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility consider others as more important than yourselves"* (Philippians 2:3). The center of Christian ethics is not merely "be nice." It is a cruciform logic: Christ *"emptied himself... and humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death"* (Philippians 2:7–8). The disciple is not called to polish his image but to participate in that pattern.

The reason title-idolatry is so dangerous is that it imitates the ancient rebellion of the devil: the will to ascend, to be above, to be praised, to be central. The language of "promotion" can become a spiritual perfume sprayed over a hunger that has never died. Scripture's warning is plain: God *"resists the proud but gives grace to the humble"* (James 4:6). Pride is not just a personality flaw; it is an

anti-grace posture. It places the soul in opposition to the flow of God.

Church Life: When Offices Become Ornaments and Callings Become Costumes

The New Testament does not despise order. It names gifts and functions, and it recognizes elders and shepherds. But it treats the office as weight, not jewelry. When a title becomes a crown, it stops being a tool and starts being a throne.

In many places today, ministry is quietly shaped by marketing logic. Leaders are branded more prominently than the Lord they claim to serve. Faces, slogans, and honorifics become the main advertisement, and Christ can become the background music. This drift has been observed in the modern landscape where some ministers use grand titles and impressive names to convey authority and prestige, sometimes overshadowing the central figure of the faith.

The danger is not merely external. It works inside the heart like yeast. A person begins by serving sincerely. People compliment the gift. The person enjoys the compliment. Soon the gift becomes an identity. Identity becomes entitlement. Entitlement becomes control. Control demands a title. And the title demands protection. At that point, correction is experienced as persecution, and accountability is reframed as "touching the anointed." The servant becomes a sovereign, and the church becomes a kingdom-within-the-kingdom.

A sober warning appears in Diotrephes, who *"loves to have first place among them"* (3 John 1:9). It is a terrifying line because it shows that one can be near the church and still crave supremacy. One can host orthodoxy in the mouth while hosting ambition in the heart.

Even spiritual gifts can be recruited into this thirst. When "prophetic" activity becomes a performance aimed at applause, it mutates into spectacle. The sanctuary can resemble a marketplace where spiritual experiences are traded and prestige is purchased. The more the crowd loves the performer, the easier it becomes to forget that true prophecy does not enthrone the speaker; it magnifies the testimony of Jesus (Revelation 19:10).

The simplest test is quietly revealing: Does a title make you more humble or more important in your own eyes? If the title increases your need to be served, it is not functioning as biblical stewardship.

The Academy and the Credentialed Ego: When Knowledge Becomes a Tower

Education is a gift. Study can be worship. But credentials can also become a refined form of self-salvation: “I am secure because my name carries letters.” Here the soul performs a polished version of the old human project: to build a name that cannot be threatened by weakness.

Scripture does not tell us to hate learning; it tells us to fear the illusion that learning can replace holiness. *“Knowledge inflates with pride, but love builds up”* (1 Corinthians 8:1). The danger is not that scholars know things; it is that scholars can begin to believe they are worth more because they know things.

Parable: A man carried a library on his back and called it identity. The books were heavy, but he would not put them down, because without them he feared he would disappear. When he finally collapsed, a child offered him water. The man refused because the child had no citations. He died surrounded by knowledge and deprived of mercy.

In Christian circles this shows up when degrees become spiritual rank. The one with the highest credential is treated as the closest to God, even if the fruit of the Spirit is absent. But Scripture measures maturity differently: *“The Lord’s servant must not quarrel, but must be gentle to everyone”* (2 Timothy 2:24), and the truly wise show wisdom *“by good conduct with humility”* (James 3:13). A theological argument without humility may be accurate and still be un-Christlike.

Workplace and Marketplace: The Gospel of Promotion at All Costs

Outside church walls, the hunger for recognition is openly rewarded. Organizations run on status signals. That is not surprising. What is spiritually alarming is when Christians baptize the same hunger and call it “favor,” while neglecting the cross-shaped discipline of contentment and integrity.

In the marketplace, titles can become instruments of domination, not service. One may chase a promotion not to

carry more responsibility faithfully, but to silence insecurity, to impress family, to prove worth, or to gain power over others. At that point, the career becomes confessional and the boss becomes a priest of self-esteem.

The true danger is what we are willing to trade for the title. Integrity becomes negotiable. Truth becomes flexible. Relationships become expendable. Sabbath becomes laziness. Family becomes an interruption. Prayer becomes inefficient. One begins to live as if the next rung will finally give rest. But rest is not at the top of a corporate ladder. Rest is in Christ.

The modern age also provides shortcuts. One may seek undeserved promotion through flattery, manipulation, spiritualized networking, or public piety aimed at visibility. But Scripture asks a better question: *“What does it benefit someone to gain the whole world and yet lose his soul?”* (Mark 8:36).

Parable: A man bought a crown from a thief. It glittered, but it burned his head. When he complained, the thief said, *“Crowns forged in darkness always come with fire.”*

Family Life: The Title Hunger That Wears Domestic Clothing

Recognition-seeking does not only live on stages. It can live in living rooms.

A father may demand honor not as a steward of love but as an insecure king. A mother may require praise not as encouragement but as payment. A spouse may compete, not serve. Children may become trophies for parental identity. Even in extended families, people can chase status through marriage choices, weddings, possessions, and public signals: “My child married this kind of person,” or “Our family is known for this.”

Yet the kingdom does not build households by image but by sacrificial love. The call is not merely to “maintain respect,” but to embody Christ’s humility in the ordinary routines where no audience applauds. *“Whatever you do, do it from the heart, as something done for the Lord and not for people”* (Colossians 3:23). The truest spirituality is often invisible: changing diapers, forgiving quickly, refusing gossip, working honestly, praying quietly, listening patiently.

If the modern world has produced celebrity culture, many homes now quietly imitate it. Some families are not led by Scripture but by appearance management. But the Spirit does not ask, “How impressive is your family story?” He asks, “How faithful are you in love?”

Digital Platforms: The New Temple of Applause

We live in an age where visibility feels like existence. A post without engagement can feel like a life without value. And Christians are not immune. The temptation is subtle: we begin to measure fruit by metrics, calling attention “impact,” and calling admiration “anointing.”

Yet Jesus taught a different logic: “*Be careful not to practice your righteousness in front of others to be seen by them*” (Matthew 6:1). He even warns that some rewards are exhausted in public applause (Matthew 6:2). This does not forbid public ministry; it forbids public righteousness as a strategy for being noticed.

The tragedy is that social platforms can train the soul to need constant affirmation. A Christian may begin posting Scripture not to exalt Christ but to secure identity as “spiritual.” The heart becomes addicted to being perceived as faithful rather than simply being faithful.

A sobering insight emerges in reflections on ministers seeking recognition over Christ: when branding becomes central, followers can become more enamored with the leader than with God. This is not only a leadership problem; it is a discipleship crisis. If congregations reward charisma over Christlikeness, they help create the very idols they later lament.

The Deeper Root: Babel’s Logic and the Fear of Being Small

Why do titles charm us so strongly? Because fallen humans fear smallness. We fear being ordinary, hidden, overlooked, weak, uncelebrated. Titles promise salvation from obscurity. They whisper, “If you are called ‘Doctor’ or ‘Apostle’ or ‘Director,’ then you are safe. You matter. You cannot be ignored.”

This is the ancient logic of Babel: “*Let’s make a name for ourselves*” (Genesis 11:4). Babel is not merely an ancient tower; it is a perennial project of self-justification. Modern culture paints Babel beautifully and calls it progress. But

when the church participates in the name-building obsession, she is not being “relevant.” She is rehearsing an old rebellion with new aesthetics.

The gospel offers a severe mercy here. It does not merely inform us; it dethrones us. It tells us we are not saved by building a name, but by receiving a Name. “*God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name*” (Philippians 2:9). And our identity is hidden “*with Christ in God*” (Colossians 3:3). Hiddenness is not a curse for the Christian; it is often a protection.

Parable: A seed begged God for a spotlight. God gave it soil. The seed complained until it became a tree. Then it understood that hidden seasons are where real strength is formed.

A Pastoral Call: Recovering Holy Smallness

What then shall we do, practically, without turning this exhortation into mere moralism?

First, we must repent, not theatrically, but accurately. Repentance is not self-hatred; it is truth-telling before God. We should ask the Lord to expose where we have used titles to compensate for insecurity, where we have pursued honor more than holiness, where we have desired to be seen rather than to be faithful.

Second, we must re-learn the beauty of anonymity. There is a unique freedom in doing good without needing to be known for it. Jesus’ counsel to give in secret (Matthew 6:3–4) is not anti-public service; it is anti-self-worship.

Third, we must restore the church’s value system. Scripture honors elders of proven character, not celebrities of engineered visibility. It esteems the quiet worker, the faithful mother, the honest employee, the intercessor in the hidden place, the teacher who does not boast, the leader who trembles at the Word. We must learn again that “*the eye is not the hand*” (1 Corinthians 12:14–20), and that gifts are for service, not for hierarchy.

Fourth, we must treat titles as tools, not identities. If a title helps order responsibility, fine. But when a title becomes the soul’s foundation, it becomes an idol. The Christian foundation is Christ alone (1 Corinthians 3:11).

Finally, we must remember that the Lord sometimes withholds honor as mercy. If God delays your promotion, it may not be rejection; it may be rescued. Some platforms are not gifts but temptations. Some visibility is not favorable but testing. And the Lord is more committed to your holiness than to your public success.

The Watchman's Closing: Rapture Readiness in an Age of Applause

Pilgrim, the hour is late. The age is loud, and it rewards performance. It trains souls to live for visibility. It makes the image feel like existence. But Scripture warned us that in the last days people would be “*lovers of self*” (2 Timothy 3:2), and that many would gather teachers to satisfy cravings rather than truth (2 Timothy 4:3–4). In such a climate, the pursuit of titles is not a neutral habit. It can be one strand in a wider end-time net: a system that seduces hearts away from the simplicity of devotion to Christ.

When the Bridegroom comes, He will not ask for your résumé. He will not ask how many people recognized you, or what you were called, or how large your platform became. He will ask whether you knew Him, whether you kept your lamp burning, whether you loved His appearance, whether you obeyed in the hidden place.

The parable of the wise and foolish virgins still stands like a quiet lighthouse for a distracted generation (Matthew 25:1–13). Oil cannot be borrowed at midnight. A borrowed reputation will not substitute for an owned relationship with Christ. The Bride must have inward readiness, not external decoration.

And what is our blessed hope? Not promotion in this age, but the appearing of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ (Titus 2:13). Not earthly crowns, but the voice of the archangel and the trumpet of God, when the dead in Christ rise and we who remain are caught up to meet the Lord (1

Thessalonians 4:16–17). The church is not rehearsing for a conference; she is preparing for a wedding.

So let us loosen our grip on titles. Let us hold offices with fear and trembling, degrees with humility, promotions with gratitude, and recognition with suspicion. Let us be willing to be unseen if Christ is seen. Let us practice obedience that does not require witnesses. Let us refuse the modern liturgy of applause and return to the old altar of surrender.

Parable: Two servants waited for their master. One polished his nameplate. The other filled the lamp. When midnight came, the nameplate shone, but the house was dark. The master entered the lit room.

May the Lord purify His church from the quiet idolatry of being “somebody,” and teach us the holy joy of being His. And may the Spirit awaken the Bride to watchfulness, because the footsteps are nearer than many think.

Amen. Come, Lord Jesus.

Recommended Further Readings

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