

Meals with Jesus

The Parable of the Wedding Feast (Luke 14:1-11)
Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on October 3, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ **Most of us have probably cut back on air travel these days due to the pandemic, so there's one human phenomenon that we haven't been exposed to as frequently as before.** It'll be good to refresh ourselves. I'm talking about the second the plane comes to stop in front of the gate and the fasten-seat-belt sign turns off – and in those frantic few moments we witness the strange phenomenon of aircraft passengers colliding into one another, rubbing up against total strangers, jostling for position to get their carry-on luggage from the overhead compartment and squeeze into the aisle – all in order to exit the plane first.
 - Now, granted, some may have good reason. Maybe they have a tight connection and the departure gate is in a different terminal. That could be the case. **But, let's face it, most people are just being selfish.** They're only thinking about themselves. If that's your mindset, then it makes it easy to assume that *your* time, *your* schedule, and *your* needs are more valuable and important than other people's.
 - **The airplane cabin is one of those unique settings where so much is revealed about a person in just one situation.** It's a real test of character. It can expose selfishness and self-conceit. And thereby show us where we need to grow and mature in selflessness and humility.

- ❖ Well, the same could be said of a dinner party. In the Gospel of Luke, meals with Jesus – particularly dinner parties, banquets, and wedding feasts – function as unique settings where so much is revealed about the characters in just one encounter with Christ. As we've mentioned before, Luke – in arranging his Gospel account – uses meals with Jesus as a plot device. To move the storyline along and to develop characters.
 - **So far we've seen Jesus's willingness to share table fellowship with the outcasts and marginalized of society.** We've seen him gladly receive the hospitable gestures of great sinners. He welcomes the lowly and weak.
 - **But he also welcomes the high and mighty.** He accepts the dinner invitations of prominent Pharisees and other religious leaders. He is not partial towards the rich or poor, the religious or irreligious, the great or small – because he sees all of them as those who need his ministry. **All of them as sick in similar manner, and he is the Great Physician who alone can cure them all.**

- ❖ So this morning, we're looking at Luke 14:1-11. It's part of a larger chunk of chapter 14 where Jesus has accepted the dinner invitation to the home of a "*ruler of the Pharisees*". One of their chief leaders. In this one setting, three episodes occur – one involving a miraculous healing (vv1-6) and two involving the telling of parables (vv7-11; 12-24). **All of them, taken together, are a critique of the Pharisees – exposing their selfishness and self-conceit.**
 - Today, we're going to study the first two episodes in vv1-11, and we'll save the third for next week. So I've divided this message into three sections based on the actions of Jesus. (1) Jesus restores a man to health. (2) Jesus rearranges a dinner party. (3) Jesus reorders our view of greatness.

Jesus Restores a Man to Health

- ❖ Let's begin by considering vv1-6 where Jesus restores a man to health. Let me read vv1-2 again, "¹*One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ²And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy.*"
 - **We're told that this meal with Jesus took place on the Sabbath, the day of rest.** In the fourth commandment, God's people are commanded to rest from the labor – to do no work on the Sabbath (Ex 20:8-11). So in Jesus's day, every Israelite in town would spend every Sabbath together in the synagogue corporately worshipping Yahweh.
 - **And it was customary for any guest rabbi, who taught in synagogue that Sabbath, to be invited over to share a meal with the leaders of the synagogue.** A banquet would be held. Here, that banquet takes place in the home of the ruler of the Pharisees along with all the other Pharisees in town.

- ❖ Now notice how the text says that "*they were watching [Jesus] carefully.*" That sets the mood in this story. **This was not a friendly meal with a friendly audience.** No, this was a trap. We have forewarning of this earlier in Luke's Gospel. Chapter 11:53-54 says, "⁵³*As he went away from there, the scribes and the Pharisees began to press him hard and to provoke him to speak about many things, ⁵⁴lying in wait for him, to catch him in something he might say.*"
 - So that gives you a sense of what Jesus was walking into. These Pharisees were lying in wait – waiting for him to slip up in something he said or did. **They were looking for any reason they could find to accuse him before the authorities.**

- ❖ **Well, in v2 we're told that a certain man was at the banquet – a man who had dropsy.** That's an antiquated term. The medical condition is more commonly known today as edema. Where you have an excess of fluid in the body, typically in the limbs. Dropsy wasn't a disease in itself but rather a symptom of disease – usually of the heart, kidneys, or liver.
 - **Now it makes you wonder – what was he doing in the home of a prominent Pharisees filled with other Pharisees?** They would've avoided someone with that kind of physical condition out of fear of uncleanness. They were obsessed with ritual purity. That suggests that this man was likely planted at this banquet. To see how Jesus would respond. To see if he would heal again on the Sabbath.

- ❖ **So far in Luke's Gospel, Jesus has already healed three times on the Sabbath.** It was an intentional effort to expose the callousness and religious hypocrisy of the Pharisees. There was nothing in Mosaic Law prohibiting you from healing on the Sabbath. But over time, within rabbinic tradition, the Pharisees developed an entire system of rules and regulations with the idea of helping people keep God's law. In this case, giving you a practical idea of what it looks like to keep Sabbath – to do no work on the Sabbath.
 - **So the Pharisees had a whole catalogue of activities that were permitted or prohibited.** And a healing was considered work (Lk 13:14). They would've argued that you can wait until tomorrow to get healed.

- ❖ So since he already dismissed their rules three times, they were trying to trap Jesus to violate it once more. This time in front of a ruler of the Pharisees. **But the question Jesus poses to them in v3 sets a trap for them over a question about the Law.** *“And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?””*
 - They were now in a bind. Because however they answer, they’re not going to like the implications. If they answered yes, then what are they complaining about? And that would imply that their traditions contradict God’s Law.
 - But if they answered no – if it’s not lawful to heal on the Sabbath – then that exposes their callousness to human suffering and probably exposes their trap. So not liking either answer, they gave none at all. V4 says, *“But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away.”*

- ❖ And then in v5, Jesus presents a hypothetical scenario with which everyone could relate and which everyone would answer similarly. *“⁵And he said to them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?”⁶And they could not reply to these things.”*
 - The reason why they couldn’t reply is not because they didn’t know how they would answer. **No, they knew their answer. They just didn’t want to admit it.** They didn’t want to say it out loud because their answer would expose their selfishness.

- ❖ They know that when matters get personal – like if their son or ox fell into a well and are at the risk of drowning – they would, without hesitation, respond with compassion. They would rescue their son or their ox.
 - But if matters don’t affect them personally – when we’re dealing with someone else’s problems – then compassion goes out the window and all they care about was being right. **That kind of hypocrisy reveals a fundamental selfishness – where you treat your people and your possessions as more important and valuable than someone else’s.** That kind of selfishness is what Jesus exposes at this dinner party by simply restoring a man to health.
 - The Pharisees were so fixed on whether or not Jesus kept the Law (as they understood it) – they were so stuck in the world of principles and abstractions – that they lost sight of the reality in front of them. A fellow human being was healed of his suffering and made whole. They missed that aspect of the story.

- ❖ Friends, let’s learn from the Pharisees and their negative example. **When it came to keeping the Sabbath, they were so concerned with being right in their own eyes, that they grew blind to human suffering and the needs of those around them.** Beware of this outcome.
 - Look, we should care about God’s Law. To live according to it and to help each other do the same. But you can be so fixed on doing the right thing and being right in your own eyes, that you grow blind to the needs of those around you. **We can be so focused on ideas in the world of principles and abstractions – and totally miss the suffering person stranding right in front of us.**

- ❖ For example, **you can be passionately pro-life** and be able to articulate convincing arguments – but be blind to the scared woman in front of you with an unplanned pregnancy. **You can be ardently anti-racist** and be eloquent in arguing for greater inclusion – but be blind to the actual person in your group or at church who feels excluded because they don't fit the mold. **You can be a committed Calvinist** and strongly believe in God's sovereign grace – but overlook actual lost people around you who need to hear about that grace.
 - **My point is that we, like the Pharisees, can become experts in biblical interpretations and right theologies but fail to live it out because we fail to see the real needs of real people around us.** Keep your eyes on actual people and their suffering – lest you lose compassion and grow calloused like the Pharisees.

Jesus Rearranges a Dinner Party

- ❖ If we continue on in our text, in v7, Jesus is at the same dinner party, and he tells the guests a parable after watching how they chose the places of honor at the banquet table. Now it appears as if we're changing topics. **But there is a likely connection between this parable of the wedding feast and the prior healing of a man with dropsy.**
 - In antiquity, there was a proverb that said: “Nothing is as dry as a person with dropsy,” which is a way of saying that those who crave something are never satisfied. **It was believed that the excessive accumulation of water in the body was indication of an insatiable thirst.** So dropsy was used figuratively to describe the greedy or the gluttonous. **And if you think about it, dropsy is a fitting image to describe the Pharisees – who had an insatiable thirst for praise and recognition.**
- ❖ **So the healing of this man with dropsy was both an indictment and an invitation.** The Pharisees had a disorder no less harmful than this man. They craved attention. They thirsted for praise and recognition. But by the way they pursued it, they would never be satisfied.
 - That leads to v7 where the tables have turned. Now Jesus is doing the watching. Seeing how the guests try to find a seat at the banquet table. And what he sees in their behavior is troubling. **Their pride and self-conceit is exposed by their jostling for the best seats in the house.**
- ❖ Ancient records describe these banquets as having a U-shaped table with three-person couches lined up next to each other. **The host would sit at the bottom of the U and the seats to his left and right (on the same couch) were considered the seats of greatest honor.** And after that, the next set of couches would be the next best seats and so on and so forth. And it would be your rank or status in society that determines where you sat.
 - So Jesus starts by telling them what not to do. **When you arrive at a wedding feast, do not choose a place of honor – the best seats available.** Why? Because a more distinguished, honored guest may arrive after you, and the host will ask you to move. And you'll probably end up in the last seats at the tips of the U-shaped banquet table because all the other seats will have been filled. And, as Jesus warns, *“you will begin with shame to take the lowest place.”* (v9) You'll have to get up in front of everyone and move seats. That would be shameful.

- ❖ **The point is that having an overinflated view of your own importance can lead to public shame and disgrace.** So what should you do when you arrive at a wedding feast? Jesus explains in v10, *“But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you.”*
 - So if you humble yourself and take the lower seat, the host may ask you to move up higher and closer to him. **Moving up a seat in honor is being contrasted with giving up your seat in shame.** This teaching is not unique to Jesus. He’s drawing from ancient wisdom literature. In **Proverbs 25:6-7**, it says, *“⁶Do not put yourself forward in the king’s presence or stand in the place of the great, ⁷for it is better to be told, ‘Come up here,’ than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.”*

- ❖ What’s the point? What’s the principle? It’s this: **Honor is not to be grabbed; it is to be given.** You don’t seek to exalt yourself; you wait to be exalted. Jesus is saying that that attitude should guide your behavior at a dinner party.
 - Now don’t misinterpret him. **He’s not advocating for a false humility.** Where you say, “Oh, I’m so bad. I’m so lowly. I’ll just take this lowest seat.” But internally, you think you deserve far better, and you’re just waiting for someone else to agree. Someone who will agree by disagreeing with your stated assessment of yourself. “Oh, no, you’re so good. You’re so great. Come on, take this better seat.”
 - If that’s what’s motivating you, that’s false humility. I’ve heard it said before that: **Humility is not thinking less of yourself; it’s thinking of yourself less.** You don’t need to put on false humility – telling everyone how lowly you are when you actually think you’re pretty great.

- ❖ No, humility is thinking of yourself less often. **In Jesus’s parable, that would mean entering a wedding feast and being more concerned about other guests.** Thinking of them more. Making sure *they* get a good seat. If that’s your mindset – if that’s what’s motivating you – then you’ll probably choose the lowest seat.
 - Not out of false humility – not because you’re trying to game the system to get moved up higher – but because you truly do care about others. That’s true humility. Jesus says, “If that’s your position, then get ready to be exalted. I know you’re not asking for it, but get ready to be moved up.” Honor is not to be grabbed; it is to be given.

- ❖ **Friends, nothing encourages me more in our church than to see members demonstrate true humility.** Not jostling for status or recognition. But humbly thinking of themselves less and serving others more. What you may not realize is we have members in our church who have served as high-level executives of publicly-traded companies worth hundreds of millions of dollars and some worth multiple billions. But on a Sunday morning you’ll find them in the back office counting coins out of offering bags and entering data onto spreadsheets. Some of the most prominent physicians in Houston worship here. But most of us have no idea how acclaimed they are in their profession, as we sit next to them in a Sunday School class learning together.

- ❖ To me that's a beautiful picture of humility. **That's how we can choose the lowest seat in the life of our church.** We can seek to outdo one another in showing honor – not in grabbing or jostling for it (Rom 12:10). **We can humbly serve each another with the attitude that no act of service is too lowly for me.** If my Lord could wash feet, then there is nothing too undignified for me to do. I think that's what Jesus was teaching in this parable.

Jesus Reorders our View of Greatness

- ❖ I also think Jesus anticipated that some might assume he was simply teaching his disciples proper social etiquette. But he had something broader in mind. **That's why he sums up his parable in v11 with a theological principle that's not just applicable at dinner parties.** This is a principle for all of life. Jesus is not just rearranging our approach to a banquet. **He's reordering our approach to life – specifically our pursuit of honor and greatness.** This is the third thing Jesus does in our text – he reorders our view of greatness.
 - Listen to v11. **Here Jesus converts the point of the parable into a proverb.** *“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”* Notice how this inversion was illustrated in this parable. Those who exalted themselves (who grabbed after honor) were humbled. And those who humbled themselves were eventually given honor. They were exalted.
- ❖ **Now notice how Jesus is not saying it's wrong to be exalted.** There's nothing wrong with being honored. There *are* places of honor at the table after all, and someone will be seated in them. Now talking about seats of honor at the right hand and the left of the host has me thinking about that place in Mark's Gospel where James and John asked to be given those very seats in the kingdom come. Listen to **Mark 10:37**, *“And they said to him, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.””*
- ❖ **What's fascinating is that Jesus didn't contest the idea of there being seats of honor in heaven.** He didn't say, “What are you guys talking about? There are no special seats in heaven. Don't think like that. Everyone is getting the same seat.”
 - That's not how Jesus replied to James and John. He said, *“to sit at my right hand or at my left is not mine to grant, but it is for those for whom it has been prepared.”* (Mk 10:40) He says that the granting of this honor is the Father's prerogative. Not his.
- ❖ **But while he can't promise James and John that they'll be sitting in those seats – the staggering truth is that somebody will be.** The Father has prepared that right and left seat next to Jesus for two particular saints, and we'll have to get there to find out who they are. And we can assume, when we get there, we'll be so conformed to the likeness of Christ that it won't bother us if it turns out that that's not our seat.
 - **But the fact that such seats of honor do exist affirms that that desire we all have for glory and honor is not necessarily a bad thing.** In its purest form, it can be a good thing. Because it's God-given. It's part of the image of God in us. He made us with a longing for greatness.

- ❖ But the question is: How are you trying to attain it? Are you grabbing for greatness? Or are you patiently waiting to receive it? **In Romans 2, Paul says that those who seek for glory and honor will be rewarded (2:7).** But then he immediately says in the next verse that those who are “*self-seeking*” will face wrath and fury (2:8).
 - There's a way to seek for glory and honor that is commendable – a way that wouldn't be self-seeking. **There is a difference between seeking glory and seeking to glorify yourself.** It's the same difference between being given honor and grabbing for it.

- ❖ **The way of greatness, according to Jesus, is to patiently wait to receive glory and honor from the Lord.** Wait for him to seat you at the banquet table. Those who exalt themselves – who think they're good enough to stand before God on the day of judgment; who think they deserve the best seats at that Great Banquet in the kingdom come – those who are self-seeking and self-conceited will be humiliated.
 - Because where you end up sitting at that Great Banquet doesn't depend on your high opinion of yourself. It depends on the opinion of your Host. **It depends on how he views you. How does God view you and your status?** That's the important question.

- ❖ It all comes down to your relationship with his Son. Are you strangers to him? Are you mere acquaintances? Or is he your Lord and you're his disciple? Are you one with him? **Are you in Christ – in a saving union with him? If so, then all that is true of Christ is true of you.**
 - All that he accomplished is counted as yours. He humbled himself in his Incarnation. He chose the lowest place, the lowest position, by taking the form of a servant. He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name above every name. His life, death, and resurrection embodied the proverb, “*he who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

- ❖ So now, think about what this means. **If you are in a saving union with Christ, then his highly exalted status is your status.** You have been raised with Christ – seated at the right hand of God (Col 3:1). If you're a Christian, that's how the Host of heaven views you. **He sees you as he sees his Son.** You are holy, chosen, and dearly loved.

- ❖ Keep thinking about the implications. If your highly exalted status in the eyes of the Host of heaven is secure in Christ – since Christ never changes and stays the same, your status stays the same – **if that's true then you no longer have to imitate the patterns of this world.** Jostling for position. Competing over rank. Grabbing after power, position, or praise.
 - **You can think about yourself and your status less.** And think more about others and their needs, about how to alleviate their suffering. That's how the gospel humbles you and makes you more like Christ.

- ❖ Don't feel bad if you want to be great. Don't be ashamed to seek for honor. Just be careful to adopt the right approach. **Greatness and honor must not be grabbed. It must be given.** And the good news is that God graciously gives it in Christ to those who humble themselves.