

To Seek and To Save the Lost

The Parable of the Wedding Feast

Luke 14:7-11

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Scripture

With just a few months left to live, Jesus was on a journey from Galilee to Jerusalem where he would be crucified. Along the way, the religious leaders engaged him in verbal conflict. The religious leaders taught that to be a citizen of the kingdom of God one had to follow the rules of God, as interpreted by them. Jesus taught that one had to enter into a relationship with God through faith in his Son and repentance of sin. One of the necessary attributes in this relationship was humility.

Having just healed a man of dropsy on the Sabbath while having a meal at the home of a ruler of the Pharisees, Jesus then told them a parable to illustrate the necessity of humility.

Let's read the parable of the wedding feast in Luke 14:7-11:

⁷Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Luke 14:7-11)

Introduction

Here is some good news: if you are like most people, you

are way above average – at almost everything. Psychologists call this the state of “illusory superiority.” It is also called “The Lake Wobegone Effect,” from Garrison Keillor’s fictional Minnesota town where “all the children are above average.” It simply means that we tend to inflate our positive qualities and abilities, especially in comparison to other people.

Numerous research studies have revealed this tendency to overestimate ourselves. For instance, when researchers asked a million high school students how well they got along with their peers, none of the students rated themselves below average. As a matter of fact, 60 percent of students believed they were in the top 10 percent, and 25 percent rated themselves in the top one percent.

You would think college professors might have more self-insight, but they were just as biased about their abilities. Two percent rated themselves below average, 10 percent were average, and 63 percent were above average, while 25 percent rated themselves as truly exceptional.

Of course this is statistically impossible. One researcher summarized the data this way: “It’s the great contradiction: the average person believes he is a better person than the average person.” Christian psychologist Mark McMinn contends that the “Lake Wobegone Effect” reveals our pride. He writes, “One of the clearest conclusions of social science research is that we are proud. We think better of ourselves than we really are, we see our faults in faint black and white rather than in vivid color, and we assume the worst in others while assuming the best in ourselves.”¹

Most people in Jesus’ day assumed the best in themselves. They believed that they were pretty good people and that they were doing a good job following the rules that would make

¹ Matt Woodley, managing editor, *PreachingToday.com*; Sources: “Study: Self-Images Often Erroneously Inflate,” ABC News (11-09-05); Mark McMinn, *Why Sin Matters* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale, 2004), 69-71.

them citizens of the kingdom of God. That is why the religious leaders were so upset that Jesus opposed their interpretation of the rules. Jesus taught that pride – thinking of ourselves better than we really are, seeing our faults in faint black and white rather than in vivid color, and assuming the worst in others while assuming the best in ourselves – was a real stumbling block to entering the kingdom of God. Instead, Jesus insisted upon the necessity of humility to enter the kingdom of God. This is what he taught in the parable of the wedding feast.

Lesson

The analysis of humility as set forth in Luke 14:7-11 teaches us the necessity of humility.

Let's use the following outline:

1. The Prelude to the Parable (14:7)
2. The Protocol in the Parable (14:8-10)
3. The Point of the Parable (14:11)

I. **The Prelude to the Parable (14:7)**

First, look at the prelude to the parable.

One Sabbath, Jesus went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees. While there he healed a man of dropsy (Luke 14:1-6). By healing this man Jesus demonstrated compassion and asserted the lawfulness of doing works of mercy on the Sabbath.

After rebuking the people in attendance at the meal for their lack of compassion and mercy, Jesus **told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor** (14:7) at the dinner table. Commentator Darrell Bock says, "Seating custom varied from culture to culture and even within cultures. For example, later Judaism spoke of a U-shaped table with a three-person couch located on

each prong of the table. The host sat at the bottom of the U, in the middle between the two wings of the U; the most honored seat would be to the left and the next honored seat would be to the right.”² The seats of honor would diminish moving away from the host. So, the lowest place would be at the end of the table furthest away from the host, whereas the highest honor would be next to and nearest the host.

Furthermore, the least honored guests would arrive first. Presumably, they would take their seats at the end of the table furthest away from the host. The most honored guests would arrive with the host and take their seats nearest him.

So, when Jesus went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, **he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor**. He saw their pride, how they thought of themselves better than they really were, seeing their faults in faint black and white rather than in vivid color, and assuming the worst in others while assuming the best in themselves. And that is what prompted Jesus to tell them all a **parable**, which we call “the parable of the wedding feast.”

A **parable** is “a short discourse . . . in which the fictitious is employed to represent and illustrate the real.”³ Some say that Jesus’ parable is about proper seating etiquette and contains a lesson on humility. But Jesus never gives mere etiquette advice like Dear Abby or Ann Landers. Instead, as Darrell Bock says, “the passage pictures how one approaches God, as well as the call to humility.”⁴

II. The Protocol in the Parable (14:8-10)

Second, notice the protocol in the parable.

² Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 1996), 1262–1263.

³ S. T. Bloomfield, *A Greek and English Lexicon to the New Testament* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1840), 319–320.

⁴ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, 1263.

Jesus' parable is about a wedding feast, and he teaches people not to go and take the seat of honor, because a more distinguished person may have been invited to the wedding.

So, Jesus suggested a seating protocol.

A. *Jesus Said What Not to Do (14:8-9)*

First, Jesus said what not to do.

Here's how Jesus put it in verses 8-9, **"When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place."** Jesus is quite clear about not to do, isn't he? You would be terribly embarrassed if you were told to take a lower seat.

Now the people at the dinner party should have known what not to do because Solomon said so in one of his famous proverbs, "Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great, for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble" (Proverbs 25:6-7).

Some of you have heard the story of the minister, a Boy Scout, and a computer expert who were the only passengers on a small plane. The pilot came back to the cabin and said that the plane was going down but there were only three parachutes and four people. The pilot added, "I should have one of the parachutes because I have a wife and three small children." So he took one and jumped.

The computer whiz said, "I should have one of the parachutes because I am the smartest man in the world and everyone needs me." So he took one and jumped.

The minister turned to the Boy Scout and with a sad smile said, "You are young and I have lived a rich life, so you take the

remaining parachute, and I'll go down with the plane."

The Boy Scout said, "Relax, Reverend, the smartest man in the world just picked up my backpack and jumped out!"⁵

Dr. Philip Ryken says in his commentary, "Do not have too high an opinion of yourself. Do not claim your own honor or take the best seat in the house. Do not work your way into a more prominent position while pretending not to try, or even to care, because if you take a higher place than you truly deserve, you will end up getting completely humiliated."⁶

B. Jesus Said What to Do (14:10)

And second, Jesus said what to do.

Instead of taking the seat of honor, Jesus said in verse 10, **"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."**

Bock says, "Some commentators dislike this teaching, suggesting that the motive for sitting in the last place seems to be the desire for honor This looks like practical, and perhaps self-focused, wisdom speaking. But this is much ado about nothing. The main point is that it is better for others to recognize who you are than to suggest to them your 'proper' (or improper!) place. Humility is the best course in all affairs."⁷

A well-known incident in the life of General Robert E. Lee occurred while that southern gentleman was riding on a train to Richmond, VA. The general was seated at the rear, and all

⁵ Michael P. Green, ed., *Illustrations for Biblical Preaching: Over 1500 Sermon Illustrations Arranged by Topic and Indexed Exhaustively*, Revised edition of: The expositor's illustration file. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1989).

⁶ Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke*, ed. Richard D. Phillips, Philip Graham Ryken, and Daniel M. Doriani, vol. 2, Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), 69–70.

⁷ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke: 9:51–24:53*, vol. 2, 1264.

the other places were filled with officers and soldiers. An elderly woman, poorly dressed, entered the coach at one of the stations. Having no seat offered to her, she trudged down the aisle to the back of the car. Immediately, Lee stood up and gave her his place. One man after another then arose to give the general his seat.

“No, gentlemen,” he said, “If there is none for this lady, there can be none for me!”

General Lee knew that good manners and humility demand consideration for people in all walks of life, not merely for those of high social ranking like himself.⁸

That bring us to the point of the parable.

III. The Point of the Parable (14:11)

And third, let’s see the point of the parable.

Jesus said in verse 11, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** There are many qualities that characterize citizens of the kingdom of God. One of them is humility. I like the way Esther De Waal describes this kind of humility. She says:

Humility is facing the truth. It is useful to remind myself that the word itself comes from *humus*, earth, and in the end simply means that I allow myself to be earthed in the truth that lets God be God, and myself his creature. If I hold on to this it helps prevent me from putting myself at the centre, and instead allows me to put God and other people at the center.⁹

The world tells us to elevate ourselves. But Jesus says that if we exalt ourselves, God will bring us down. He will humble

⁸ Michael P. Green, *1500 Illustrations for Biblical Preaching* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 2000), 199.

⁹ Esther De Waal, “Living with Contradictions: Reflections on the Rule of St. Benedict.” *Christianity Today*, Vol. 41, no. 8.

our pride. We see God doing that from the Fall of Adam in the Garden of Eden to the Fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD. And we see God doing that throughout human history as he humbles proud individuals and nations.

But we will see God do this most clearly at the Final Judgment. When Jesus told the parable of the wedding feast, he was not merely giving good advice about how to behave well at a wedding feast. Instead, he was preparing people for the great reversal that will take place at the Final Judgment, when the proud will be humbled and the humble will be exalted. Commentator Kent Hughes expressed it like this:

But there is more here than social wisdom. Our Lord was not concerned that his hearers merely learn to take the lower seat so they would avoid embarrassment and then achieve high human honor when they were ostentatiously ushered from the lowest seat to the highest. Neither was he teaching the Pharisees and scribes to put on a staged humility, so they would be greatly honored above their peers. Jesus hated the pride that pretends to be humble. Rather, he was imparting an eternal spiritual principle that will be evident in the end when everything is made right.¹⁰

Jesus' point is that people who exalt themselves – who think that they are good enough to stand before God based on their own merits – the Final Judgment will be a total humiliation. They will not get what they *think* they deserve; they will get what *God* says they deserve. Norval Geldenhuys comments, “Just as at a wedding feast the occupying of seats of honor does not depend on a person’s self-assertive attitude but on the discretion of the host, so also a place of honor in the kingdom of heaven does not depend on self-assertiveness or on a man’s

¹⁰ R. Kent Hughes, *Luke: That You May Know the Truth*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1998), 112.

opinion of himself but on the righteous judgment of God.”¹¹

What righteous judgment will God deliver to those who believe that they deserve to be seated at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb? God will disgrace them for their self-exaltation and ungodly pride. As Michael Wilcock explains, “To claim God’s approval as a right, on the grounds of one’s position in the church, or one’s reputation in the community, or even one’s good opinion of oneself, is a positive disqualification. There is no entry through the narrow door for the one who is laden with status symbols and a sense of his own importance.”¹²

St. Augustine simply put it this way, “There are humble religious, and there are proud religious. The proud ones should not promise themselves the kingdom of God.”¹³

The seats of honor at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb are assigned by the host – God himself. He assigns them seats by his grace. Only those who come to God in humility, bowing before him, knowing that they are unworthy sinners justly deserving his displeasure, and who therefore put their complete faith in the person and work of Jesus Christ and repent of their sins, will discover that they are assigned seats at the Wedding Feast of the Lamb.

Conclusion

Therefore, having analyzed humility as set forth in Luke 14:7-11, we should humble ourselves so that we may be exalted.

There is a Persian story, which illustrates the two principles of self-exaltation and humility. According to this story,

¹¹ Norval Geldenhuys, *The Gospel of Luke*, New International Commentary on the New Testament (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1951), 389–90.

¹² Michael Wilcock, *The Message of Luke*, The Bible Speaks Today (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1979), 145.

¹³ Augustine, “Sermon 354.8,” in *Luke*, ed. Arthur A. Just, Jr., Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture, NT 3 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 236.

Jesus, while on earth, was once entertained in the cell of a monk of eminent reputation for sanctity. In the same city dwelt a youth, sunk in every sin He, appearing before the cell of the monk, as smitten by the very presence of the Divine Prophet, began to lament deeply the wickedness of his past life; and shedding abundant tears, to implore pardon and grace. The monk indignantly interrupted him, demanding how he dared to appear in his presence, and in that of God's holy prophet; assured him that, for him, it was in vain to seek forgiveness. And, in proof of how he (the monk) considered the sinner's lot was inexorably fixed for hell, he exclaimed, "My God, grant me but one thing, that I may stand far from this man on the judgment-day." On this Jesus spoke: "It shall be even so; the prayer of each is granted. The sinner has sought mercy and grace, and has not sought them in vain; his sins are forgiven; his place shall be in heaven, at the last day. But this monk has prayed that he may never stand near this sinner; his prayer, too, is granted; hell shall be his place, for there this sinner shall never come."¹⁴

No proud, self-exalting persons who trust in their own merit shall ever enter the kingdom of God.

Only, humble, self-abasing persons who trust in the merit of Jesus Christ shall enter the kingdom of God.

I often ask people what they would say to God if he said to them, "Why should I let you into my heaven?"

Here are some wrong answers, "I deserve to be here," "I live a good life," "I try to obey your law," "I go to church," and so on.

The right answer is, "Only by grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone."

I pray that is your answer today. Amen.

¹⁴ Edward Craig Mitchell, *The Parables of the New Testament Spiritually Unfolded*, Second Edition. (Philadelphia: William H. Alden, 1900), 513–514.

Mission Statement

The Mission Statement of the Tampa Bay Presbyterian Church is:

*To bring people to Jesus Christ
and membership in his church family,
develop them to Christlike maturity,
equip them for their ministry in the church
and life mission in the world,
in order to magnify God's name.*

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PRAYER:

Our Father, I thank you for the parable of the wedding feast. Jesus taught this parable to help us understand that **everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.**”

O Father, I pray that no one here today will find himself or herself humbled at the Final Judgment.

Instead, dear Father, grant faith and repentance to each one of us so that we may find ourselves exalted on that Day.

And for this I pray in your name. Amen.

BENEDICTION:

May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all, now and always. Amen.

CHARGE:

Now, brothers and sisters, go and serve God wholeheartedly!