

Humility and Exaltation

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[0 : 00] Our reading is from Luke chapter 14, and we're reading from verse 1 through to verse 24. One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

There, in front of him, was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?

But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way. Then he asked them, if one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?

And he had nothing to say. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable.

When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, give this person your seat.

[1 : 23] Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, friend, move up to a better place.

Then you will be honoured in the presence of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Then Jesus said to his host, when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back, and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

[2 : 37] Jesus replied, A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet, he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out.

Please excuse me. Still another said, I have just got married, so I can't come. The servant came back and reported this to his master.

Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

Sir, the servant said, what you ordered has been done, but there is still room. Then the master told his servant, Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.

[3 : 53] I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet. Okay. Luke chapter 14, verses 1 to 24.

Now, folks, I have been somewhat uncertain how to consider these 24 verses, particularly uncertain kind of where one idea shifts onto the next and how the different themes and sections interrelate. In the end, I think what ties these different bits together is not just the ongoing focus on the nature and expectations of salvation. That's been Luke's theme here in Jesus' teaching for some time now.

But beyond that, the link here in these verses is that, I think, of humility. Humility and exaltation. The situation here, Jesus is eating at the house of a prominent Pharisee on the Sabbath day. And again, as it has before, controversy arises. Again, Jesus takes the opportunity here in these verses to teach about the nature of God's kingdom. From verse 7, Jesus teaches quite clearly about humility.

[5 : 15] When Jesus noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable. When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor. For a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

And if so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, give this person your seat. And then humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you're invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, friend, move up to a better place. And then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted. Now, folks, those verses, on at least one level, this is kind of sensible, worldly, ordinary, everyday advice, isn't it? You can find plenty of people both then and now saying very similar things. Saying, well, better to be humble and to be raised up by others than to risk embarrassment in front of your fellow guests. And remember, this society in Jesus' day, this is a society where honor and position and status are much more precisely established and much more carefully displayed than in our own.

[6 : 27] I mean, outside of very, very formal circumstances, we don't tend to think of the place of honor at a meal, I don't think. And yet still we get the idea of what's going on because we recognize the tendency, don't we?

We recognize the inclination to claim the glory for ourselves, the inclination to make ourselves look better than we are. And implicitly in doing that, the inclination to push others down.

So on one level, at least, this is kind of sensible, practical advice for harmonious living. Even we might say this is sensible advice for how to be actually honored, to be honored by somebody raising you up rather than the kind of hollow recognition that you get when you demand that for yourself. But there's more than that here, isn't there? And indeed, the slightly backhanded motivation of wanting the better recognition, well, that's curtailed quite clearly by verse 11.

Verse 11 shows us that again, that again, Jesus isn't thinking primarily about the practical and the immediate. Jesus is focused on the greater eternal significance, focused on our standing before God, not before men.

[7 : 40] Because verse 11, clearly it is God, there in that verse, who humbles and God, who exalts. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled. By whom will they be humbled?

By God himself and vice versa. The people at that meal with Jesus, they were full of pride. They were puffed up with self-importance.

And that pride that they display, as Tom Wright puts it, that pride is the great cloud that blots out the son of God's generosity. See, if I think that I deserve to be favored by God, then not only do I, in saying that, declare that I don't need his grace and his mercy and his love, not only do I say I don't need it, I also imply that those who don't deserve it shouldn't have it.

But that same attitude that prompted these Pharisees and their guests to seek the best seats at the table, that prompted an inclination here to push themselves forwards in God's eyes to show how well they were keeping the law, how well they were keeping God's rules, how well they were maintaining their purity, that same inclination to push themselves forward is what's behind the opening incident in these verses, isn't it?

The healing of this man with the abnormal swelling. Jesus knows very well what is in the hearts of the Pharisees when Jesus asks them, verse three, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?

[9 : 13] Jesus knows their attitude. Jesus knows their inclination. And these Pharisees, they're silent. They're silent because they don't want to appear indifferent to suffering in the eyes of the onlookers.

Many people looking at these verses think that this man with the disease, that he's been kind of deliberately planted here by the Pharisees to trap Jesus into healing on the Sabbath again.

I mean, remember he's done it before, hasn't we? We've seen it not that many weeks ago. Maybe the Pharisees are trying to build their case against Jesus. But if so, it backfires, doesn't it, when Jesus asks this question.

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? See, it's one thing for the Pharisees to have rules about who can do what, when, and who can't. It's quite another to come out and say it in public, faced with that suffering man, to look him in the eyes and say, no, you are not allowed to be healed. It's another thing, isn't it? Jesus makes it very clear. These people, these Pharisees, and their ilk, they are very happy to put themselves forward as the ones who keep all of the rules, as the ones with whom, of course, God will be pleased, happy to present themselves as the ones who deserve God's favor and blessing.

[10:33] And yet the truth is, it's a front, isn't it? They're inconsistent. Verse 5, if their own child, even their own animal, were to fall into a well on a Sabbath, they would pull it out.

One rule for you and another for me. Thank you very much. And verse 6 makes it clear that actually, well, now they recognize their inconsistency. They see their pride.

They see how they've twisted God's laws to their own benefits. They had nothing to say. Once again, in these verses, Jesus is profoundly unimpressed by those who present themselves as worthy and meanwhile oppress others and prevent others from knowing God's salvation blessings. And this focus on oneself, this idea of what can I get out of a situation, how can I enjoy life, that focus continues in the next couple of verses.

Jesus said to his host, when you give a luncheon or dinner, don't invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, your rich neighbors. If you do, they may invite you back and you'll be repaid.

[11:42] But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. I wrote this a few days ago.

It says, don't worry, you don't have to cancel your Christmas plans with your families if you're taking advantage of the bubble system. Linguists assure me that in the Semitic idiom of Jesus' day, saying, not X, but Y, means in modern English, something like, not so much X as rather Y. In other words, the not isn't being categorically excluded. Rather, we're encouraged to shift our focus to think more about the latter rather than the former.

And in this case, whilst there isn't a problem with inviting your friends to eat with you, Jesus did so with his friends, didn't he, the last supper, if nothing else. Rather, the point here is, the point is to prefer, to prioritize, to at the very least include, those who are not quite so immediately close to you, those who have nothing to offer in return, those who aren't going to be the sparkling dinner party guest for the Instagram-worthy occasion, but rather to focus on those who will most benefit.

To think, not what can I get, but what can I give? What can I offer? On at least some level, this really does feel like a particularly cruel command to be hearing this morning, doesn't it?

[13:14] Most of us just want to see someone, anyone, please. And the idea of a grand dinner party feels like a distant memory, doesn't it? The prospect of inviting anyone into our homes, whether friends, relatives, or the poor, and the crippled, and the lame, and the blind, feels remote, doesn't it?

But still, let's look and say, well, how does this apply to the situation that we are in? How does this principle prompt us to behave now?

And we may not be throwing banquets right now, but maybe it's worth thinking now, well, who will we prioritize inviting when we do? That maybe we first invite the loneliest members of our communities, even before our own families, and maybe this applies more broadly too, doesn't it? See, if we're tempted to buy great presents for the people who we think are going to buy us something lovely in response next year, are we being generous in our giving? Are we being humble in our attitudes?

When we think, who will I write a carefully worded card to and spend time over it? When we think, who will I ring up this week?

[14:29] Do we ring only the people who we're going to have a lovely chat with and feel better at the end of it? Or do we ring the poor and the blind and the crippled and the lame? It's not quite the same on the phone, is it?

But you get the idea. the question, no, sorry, Jesus says, verse 14, he says, those who focus on their rewards now, that those rewards now will be all they receive.

But those who serve humbly will know God's blessing, will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Friends, God is no man's debtor. And then this question of who attends the banquet, well, this theme continues into the last section of this morning's passage.

And the focus shifts not so much to, shifts away from who one might invite, the focus now shifts to how do you respond when you are invited?

And I suspect, verse 15 through 24, I suspect this is a more familiar account to many of us. But again, some of the cultural norms are different to our expectations, aren't they?

[15:37] Perhaps for many of us, this double invitation seems a little bit odd, though as save the date wedding invites preceding the proper invite, as they become increasingly common, well, maybe we're not a million miles away from this kind of an idea.

Though there, when we send a save the date, the date is the first information you have, isn't it? But here, it's the last information you have. So some time ago, the invite has gone out to a great banquet.

The event has been proclaimed. It's coming. People have been told to expect it, but they don't know exactly when. And with our modern-day Western obsession with calendars and precise times and so on, this seems pretty alien and somewhat obtuse, doesn't it, to invite somebody and not tell them when to come.

But this really is the normal way that things were done. You invite people and then once everything's ready, then you send out the summons, the second invitation and say, come now. Now is the time. The feast is on the table. Come and enjoy it. And on this occasion, at least, as Jesus recounts this parable, on this occasion, despite the fact that the people knew the event was coming, despite the fact that they had already been invited, when summoned to attend, they demur. [16:58] Verse 18, they all alike began to make excuses. And let's be clear, excuses is what they are, reasons they most certainly are not.

To inspect your field only after you've already bought it is unlikely at best. And certainly, if one had, well, the field wouldn't be any different for a day's delay in inspection now, would it?

And the same goes for the oxen. And the newly married man, he has an even weaker excuse.

Okay, yes, there's provision in the Old Testament that says the newly married man is exempt from military service.

But an invitation to a party is not the same as a summons to war. Even if we grant that the wife was for some reason unwelcome to come to, it is still a very flimsy excuse to reject a pre-existing obligation.

And so, from all three, their excuses are a grave discourtesy to the master of the banquet. Again, Jesus here in this parable speaks against those who permit a love of possessions, fields and oxen and so on, or a love of family ties for that matter to stand in the way of discipleship.

[18:12] Jesus speaks against that twisted sense of priorities. And priorities is what it's about. And these here aren't even reasonable priorities.

Now, ultimately, nothing can be allowed to take precedence over God, but at least it's more understandable when it's something of genuine significance that's being prioritized. But here, they just have their personal preoccupations.

And the consequence of that, verse 24, is none of them will get a taste of the master's banquet. We sang or listened to a couple of weeks ago.

No, we did sing. We were still online. We sang a couple of weeks ago. We will feast in the house of Zion. Well, not these guys. This idea of the heavenly feast, the heavenly banquet, feasting with God, this is a common picture in God's word and they have chosen not to participate.

I said earlier they had an obligation to attend having accepted the invitation. It's hardly an onerous obligation, is it, to go to a party. And again, there's a warning in these verses not to prioritize anything above our devotion to God, not to permit anything to get in the way of true discipleship.

[19:34] There's a warning in these verses, a warning, but again, also hope. And if anything, the hope is where the emphasis lies. See, verse 21, the servant came back and reported this to his master, reported the excuses.

And the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. And sir, the servant said, what you ordered has been done, but there's still room and the master told his servant go out into the roads and the country lanes and compel them to come in so that my house will be full.

Friends, there is hope in these verses. There is hope for the poor and the crippled and the blind and the lame. Hope for those filling the roads and the country lanes, the highways and the hedges.

Hope for those who perhaps think themselves unworthy of a banquet and yet are invited to feast. There is hope for the humble. Hope because they will be exalted to the position of honour at the heavenly dinner party. Where those too self-absorbed to attend are excluded, others are welcome. Others who know they have no inherent right to attend are beckoned in. There is an inclusiveness to these verses, a welcome for everyone, a summons to come to the banquet in whatever condition you might find yourself.

[20 : 52] Maybe you think yourself unworthy this morning. Maybe you know yourself to be the worst of sinners, the most malodorous of beggars, the vilest of offenders, the lamest, the most unable to bring yourself in.

Maybe you know that's who you are and yet this summons is for you. And there's an indication here that a certain degree of reticence, reluctance is to be expected.

The expected response is perhaps an assertion of unworthiness. Do you see verse 23? The servant is to compel them to come in. Now this is not a suggestion to use force, to force those who are set against attendance.

This is not a mandate for a crusade, by the way. to compel, to urge these people is to say, is to say, don't just take no for an answer.

Because the first response is likely to be bafflement, isn't it? If you, if you as the servant of a great house go up to a beggar on the street and you say, come to my master's banquet, well you expect that beggar to have a certain amount of suspicion, don't you?

[22 : 02] You expect accusations of a cruel jest. The blind and the lame certainly in that context do not expect to be invited into the homes of the great and the good.

And so you will need to do some urging. You will need to compel them to come in. My friends, my friends, you who know Jesus yourselves, I suggest, I suggest that too often you and I, we give up too quickly.

Because aren't we in this parable, aren't we in the role of the servant who's sent out to gather others? We're given this charge to compel them to come in, aren't we? And so the question is, do we show the kind of passionate commitment to fulfilling our master's command that's expected here?

Do you compel them to come in? When somebody responds to your invitation saying, God wouldn't want somebody like me, when somebody responds that way, do you leave it there?

Or do you urge them to respond? Or are you just taking no for an answer? Friends, we can't claim to love our neighbors if we will not do everything in our power to compel them to come in.

[23 : 19] If we will not pray diligently, if we will not urge them, if we will not continue to ask, we cannot say that we love them. Do you think when the servant invited a particular beggar on his outward journey and was rebuffed by that beggar, do you think that when he'd gone on and then came back, do you think he failed to ask again as he returned?

No, compel them to come in. Surely he pleaded earnestly with each one in order that his master's house might be filled. Our closing song this morning, our closing song picks up that urging, picks up that great desire to compel others to come in, as well as reminding us that we too come on the same terms, that we come as sinners, poor and needy, weak and wounded, sick and sore.

Friends, hear this call yourselves as Ruth sings to us and embrace this as your call to others. Come ye sinners. then ■z What will you understand about triteches puttin back over the bottom of the tuvifica ■ Eine ■■'s cip Tjä End Hand