

Best Seat in the House

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- [0 : 0 0] Good morning, everybody. I hope you can hear me okay. My voice might be a bit gravelly.! We were away recently and I managed to come back with something from foreign! I don't know what it is, but it made its way through customs.
- As someone who spent 32 years in the police before God called me into the ministry, I know what it's like to watch people.
- As a detective, one of my roles was surveillance, which meant a lot of time spent following people, recording their movements, building up a picture of what they were doing, all of which might be used as part of a prosecution. Sometimes it could also be used to protect vulnerable people as well. But the people who he followed had no idea we were there, or whatever else we might have been up to. Otherwise, their actions, understandably, would have been very, very different. Let's face it, you're unlikely to commit a crime if you know a police surveillance team are watching and recording your every move.
- Rewind 2,000 years or so, and the passage we've just read finds Jesus under surveillance.
- He's being watched by the Pharisees, and they want nothing more than to catch him out, breaking the religious rules that they are sworn to protect. But Jesus, he's well aware of what they're up to. That's not going to stop him committing what they would see as a crime. And not only is he not going to stop, but he's going to make sure they know what he's doing and exactly why he's doing it.
- [2 : 0 4] Not for the first time, we find Jesus having a meal with the Pharisees and the legal experts.
- He's in the home of this prominent Pharisee, who has, as would have been the norm, invited those from his own class circle. As that would have been seen as improper to invite people from a lower social class.
- That immediately begs the question then, why was Jesus even there? He would have been seen as, in their eyes, little more than an itinerant preacher, well below them on the social scale.
- And then of course we have this clearly unwell man, who's suffering with an abnormal swelling of his body. His presence threatens the ritual purity of the meal itself.
- Just as his deceased state threatens the honour of this gathering of, if you like, the elite, this elite class of socially powerful and privileged people.
- [3 : 1 9] What is he doing there? It's highly unlikely he would have been invited. But the customs of the day did allow people to just come to things uninvited.
- A bit like a gate crusher. They could have told him to leave. But for those intent on catching Jesus out, this man could in a sense be seen as bait.
- After all, the man is right in front of Jesus. Jesus can hardly miss him. His plight would have been obvious for everybody who could see this man. And the Pharisees, they will know enough about Jesus to realise that he would want to help this man.

But there, it's the Sabbath. And their laws would prevent him doing from what they would see as work. Even the meal they would be about to share would have been prepared the day before.

So then, what would Jesus do? All in all, it's pretty clear that the motive for inviting Jesus has got little to do with hospitality.

[4 : 39] It has all the hallmarks of a well-orchestrated trap. And this was, after all, all part of their plan, all part of the grand design.

The last time Jesus had eaten with them, he'd taken them to task on the subject of their behaviour. And he hadn't pulled any punches at all when describing their collective shortcomings.

And at the end of that meal, we're told that they angrily confronted Jesus. And they barraged him with questions. Again, wanting to catch him out.

And now here in the room, or the home, rather, this influential leader, they provide themselves provided with a gift-wrapped opportunity.

Little wonder he was carefully being watched. But despite their devious motives, for Jesus, it's an opportunity.

[5 : 44] It's an opportunity to show his fellow diners what the Sabbath is really for. To challenge the social world that they operate in.

And point them to the kingdom of God. But their scheming is laid bare by one simple question.

Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? How would they answer? If they said it was lawful, then it would raise questions and give them a problem concerning how they interpreted the laws they protected.

But if they then said it was unlawful, why had they invited if they had this man? And why, if that was the case, had they let him remain?

They ran the real risk of their motives being laid bare for everyone to see. And this wouldn't be the first time that Jesus had asked such a question.

[6 : 56] When on another Sabbath, he had healed the man with the shriveled hand. He had asked the Pharisees if it was lawful to do good on the Sabbath.

He got no answer to his question then. He gets no answer this time. Why? We're not told.

We're left to ponder and just wonder what their reasons might have been. But their lack of response, their silence is going to make no difference to what Jesus will do.

As with the man with the shriveled hand, Jesus heals this bloated dinner guest. And then he goes on the offensive. At the same time, defending what he's just done.

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?

[8 : 05] At the heart of that statement, and indeed his healing of the man, was a simple appeal to an act of compassion and rescue.

This is what should govern human relationships, even on God's day of rest. Their answer to Jesus' rhetorical question should have been quite simple.

Of course we'd step in and help. But their silence just reveals how inconsistent they are when it comes to interpreting and applying the laws that they so jealously protect.

This miracle of healing becomes a rebuke and a call for them to repent. But their silence throughout reveals that they had no suitable response.

And as leaders, they stand condemned. Up until this point, Jesus has frequently taken the religious leaders to task for their poor leadership of the people.

[9 : 23] But now he wants them to understand what living in the kingdom of God is really about. What it means to follow him.

They think they know what it means to follow God. But by rejecting Jesus and rejecting his teaching, they show how wrong they are.

But now, if they care to listen, they have a chance. They have a chance to learn a different way.

If their way of following God is not what God wants, how then should they follow him? What is the Jesus way?

The answer is simple. To be a disciple, to model discipleship, is to be humble.

[10 : 26] But how is Jesus to get that message across? Well, not for the first time. It's time for a parable. Having told the assembled leaders of their obligation to be compassionate on the Sabbath, he now, in this story, turns to another problem that he's seen.

The problem of pride. Now the tables are well and truly turned. They started off watching him, hoping to catch him out.

But Jesus has been watching them. And now, they're the ones who are in the spotlight. As the various guests have been arriving, he's noticed how they all make a beeline for the best seats in the house.

Now seating customs varied from culture to culture, and even within the culture. But what we see here are the various guests choosing to sit in the places that they think will give them the most amount of honour.

Now, I won't go into it too deeply, but some theologians question whether the main theme is humility, or is it how we should relate to God?

[11 : 58] But perhaps the best answer is to see it as a lesson that speaks of both. Jesus wants his listeners to relate to people from all backgrounds, which in turn pictures a basic approach to God.

The attitude that we ourselves have towards God can be revealed in the way that we treat others.

The example of self-advancement that Jesus sees playing out in front of him is not the example that the religious leaders of the day should be following.

It's a very simple parable. What not to do? Jesus tells you, if you're invited to a wedding meal or some similar function, don't take the seat of honour.

If you do that, someone more important may turn up and you might be told to move. That would be really embarrassing. But when we bear in mind that honoured guests were often last to arrive, that would leave them having to take whatever seat might be left.

[13 : 23] And so Jesus is telling them, it's better not to overestimate their importance, as this could put them at the risk of public disgrace.

something that the Pharisees would really, really not enjoy. But just as simply, what to do?

When you arrive, take the last seat, not the best one. This way the host may invite you to take a better seat. And then rather than being shamed, you'll be honoured in front of all those who are present.

Now again, we have a difference of opinion here about some of the commentators. Some commentators don't actually like this teaching. They feel that it suggests that the motive to taking a lowly place is purely to be promoted.

But that, in a sense, misses the point, which is quite simply that it's better for others to recognise who we are than for us to just self-promote.

[14 : 37] The importance of humility is reinforced when Jesus tells them, those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The Pharisees, they want to be honoured in the eyes of society. But they have forgotten, they've lost sight of how God will treat both the proud and the humble.

The 17th century poet and Anglican cleric Robert Herrick stressed the importance of humility in a single line of prose.

Humble we must be if to heaven we will go. High is the roof there but the gate is low. So where does that leave us?

The Sabbath issues that Jesus faced are no longer with us but the importance of compassion that most definitely is. Jesus presents us with a model of ministry that is ready to respond to need at any time.

[15 : 59] Now we could come up with all manner of reasons for failing to show compassion even sometimes supposedly spiritual ones but they will not hold water as far as Jesus is concerned.

Time and time again he demonstrated the importance of compassion. His teaching also brought into stark reality how the power of sin blinds people to the needs of others.

Something when we look in our world today we don't have to look very far to see. but to understand what compassion means to God we need to listen to him and open our minds to seeing things the way that he sees things.

But at the same time Christian character is defined by a proper understanding of humility which leads to sacrificial or a giving attitude towards others.

We are to give rather than to look as to how we might receive. But for the society we live in that's hugely counter-cultural.

[17 : 24] Our culture tells us to go for what we think is ours as if it's ours by right. And we love society to cater for the rich the famous the powerful the movers and shakers.

time and time again we see these people being held up as examples for us to aspire to. And there could even be a desire to minister to people in those if you like elitist circles.

And in a sense that's not inherently wrong. But if so we need to do it in a way that reflects God. The God who does not show favoritism.

Rich and poor master and slave are all alike in his eyes. The Pharisees they behaved in the way they did because they were legalistic and they had fixed expectations of God's rules and how he operated.

And it blinded them to the need for compassion and to how God was working among them. They couldn't see it. They reduced the Sabbath to a day of exclusion that gave precious little room for compassion.

[18 : 51] And they failed to see that through Jesus God was showing them that he desired compassion even on his day.

they didn't want to be surprised by God. They wanted to define the limits of how he might work. And sometimes we can run the risk of missing of what God is doing in our midst because we already think we know how he will operate.

But if we really want to see God at work we have to avoid putting him in a box. He acts as he wills. And just because he's revealed aspects of that will to us that doesn't mean that he can't sovereignly choose to manifest his grace in new ways.

Ways that perhaps even yet he has not revealed. We pray don't we to the God who can do immeasurably more than we can ask or imagine.

That being the case then why would we ever perhaps put limits on where that imagination may go. God will accomplish his plan and we can be sure that that may happen in surprising ways.

[20 : 21] But just as they were blind to the need for compassion they were blind to the need to be humble. That Luke's words here are a call to model humility goes without saying.

And I'm sure that none of us who are here today would argue with any of that. But actually developing a humble spirit and living by it isn't necessarily so easy.

It's part of human nature to want affirmation to want to be recognized. It can be hard not to seek advancements or plaudits and instead take more of a back seat and let others bring credit to what we're doing.

It's easy to serve when we know we might get something back. But what about those times when what we do remains firmly under the radar?

But hard as that sometimes might feel that's the way it should be. The comedian Frank Skinner who if you don't know is a Catholic.

[21 : 45] In his book A Comedian's Prayer Book he comments on this in one of his prayers. Jesus you say in Luke's gospel that when we do charitable works we should do them in secret not sounding a trumpet about our generosity so that we might reap the glory of men.

God will know and that should be enough. This advice makes complete sense but it is nevertheless almost certainly cost me an MBE.

That's not to say that there aren't times when it's appropriate to receive glory from others and indeed from God. But that glory should come spontaneously and naturally.

For Jesus compassion and humility are inextricably linked. Throughout his ministry he demonstrated these characteristics and of course they're the essence of who he is.

Jesus Christ the King of Kings came into our world not to be served but to serve. The one who has all authority in heaven and earth humbled himself by becoming a man and dying on the cross as the servant king.

[23 : 25] As his people we are called to follow his example in our dealings with one another and the society in which we sit.

as churches our ministries need to model his teaching. They need to be open and accessible to all.

Sometimes it's all too easy to focus on the life and the well-being of the church and lose the importance of being outward facing and the need for us as God's people to point our communities to the kingdom of God.

Jesus said, I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. Jesus didn't call us to maintain his church.

He called us to go and make disciples and teach them to follow his ways. whatever else we may feel called to do along the way, that's our primary purpose.

[24 : 41] And we are most effective when we do that with compassion and humility. As Peter himself said, always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.

But do this with gentleness and respect. As his people, let's choose to sit on the wobbly stool rather than the big, comfy recliner.

That's the example that Jesus has set us. That's the example that we are called to follow. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray. Let's pray.