

Honor in the Kingdom

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[0 : 0 0] Well, we all love being honored, don't we? And honor is such a big thing in society. Those of you who went for the recent CMS Summer on the Sun conference would have heard from a speaker called Jackson Wu talking about the importance of honor in the East and how societies like China are being driven by shame and honor.

But I think that probably applies to us here in the West as well. Probably in the East, honor is more seen communally about maintaining the honor of your family or the hierarchy or organization.

I think here though in the West, honor is more tied to the individual, to what a person has done or achieved. So just take a look, for example, at all the award ceremonies we have.

The brown low for the AFL, trying to choose the best and fairest for the year. Why do we need to do that? Why do we need to pick the best for the year? Just to honor the one individual. The Academy Awards, best actor, best director.

And then on the front page of the age every year, the top performing students who get the perfect ATAR. Now there's more than one of them, of course, but we're honoring, aren't we?

[1 : 1 9] Their individual performance. And I think as individuals, we love it, don't we? If you can remember that far back, you might remember that very first time you got up at assembly and prep maybe, to receive your best student of the week award.

Such an honor. Best day of your life so far. Or some of you, maybe later on in life, imagine when you have your name put up at the front reception because you've just made partner in your law firm. Or if you're Djokovic, having your name engraved on the Australian Open trophy for the eighth time, as if one wasn't enough.

We love it, don't we? And it's part of human nature. And that's why it's no surprise, as we look today in our passage, that it was the same in Jesus' day. The important people then took pride in their honor.

But Jesus took aim at their pride. And so they didn't take too kindly to that. Hence, Jesus has been building up a list of opponents, people who opposed him.

[2 : 2 8] The synagogue ruler from last chapter, then Herod, we find out, is trying to kill him, and this week, the Pharisees. Now as the chapter opens and we look at it, Jesus finds himself invited, not just to any Pharisee's house, but a prominent one, a person of great honor.

And also we discover, yet again, that it's the Sabbath. And we find out that Jesus was being closely watched by them, these men of honor. You see, they were being threatened by him, weren't they?

Now in the house as well was a man suffering with abnormal swelling. I suspect he was being planted there because I can't see how he would have been invited otherwise. So it must have been a trap that they were trying to set for Jesus.

Would he break the law, as they saw it, and heal on the Sabbath? Well, Jesus has been here before. If you remember, again, last chapter, he had the same similar encounter with the synagogue ruler, didn't he?

Anyway, Jesus was too wise to be trapped. And so he asked them, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? Well, if they said no, that would mean they were inhumane. But if they said yes, then it would mean that they were being lax on breaking the law.

[3 : 4 5] So they were trapped. And all you can do when you're trapped is to just remain silent. But Jesus, being the Lord of the Sabbath, he does what's right. He takes hold of the man, he healed him, and then sent him on his way.

And then he asked a question, very similar to what he did with the synagogue ruler. He asked, 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 that confounds them, doesn't it? Because they said nothing. You see, Jesus was exposing their hypocrisy. It was okay for these so-called men of honor to be telling others when they were wrong.

But when it came to their own interests, and they were doing the same thing, and they were being found out, they didn't like it, did they? It kind of reminds me of some famous people today that have faced the same criticism.

So I'm sorry if you're a Prince Charles fan, but recently he was criticized for having flown 16,000 miles in the fortnight before he met Greta Thunberg.

[4 : 54] That, in case you're wondering, is 18 times what the average UK citizen omits in terms of a carbon footprint. 16,000 miles, two weeks, what people would do, well, 18 times what people would do in a year.

And all the while he was doing this, jet-setting, because he was doing it to advocate for action on climate change. A few years ago, another example, Barnaby Joyce stood up in Parliament to vigorously defend traditional family values during the marriage debate.

And all the while, he was having an affair with his parliamentary staffer and then leaving his wife. Now, I'm not trying to sound judgmental here because if you know me well enough, you'll probably find me guilty of hypocrisy as well.

But the point I'm trying to make is honor and integrity go together, don't they? We hate hypocrites because we only want to honor people that have integrity.

But at the same time, we hate it when we're exposed as well, aren't we? Our respectable mask is stripped away only to reveal our ugly side.

[6 : 06] We lose face. Here, let me plug City Bible Forum's conference, Unmasked. You get to talk a bit more about that when you go to that conference.

But we do crave honor, don't we? Whether it's big or small. Because when we're honored, we feel like we're somebody. It gives us a sense of worth.

And sometimes this honor is well-deserved. Like the soldier who gives his life to serve his country. Or at Australia Day, when people are honored for a lifetime of service to the community.

That's when we see honor and integrity go hand in hand. And that's fitting. So I think to seek honor isn't a bad thing. Nothing wrong in wanting to have worth and integrity and to be recognized for it.

The question though is, where do you seek this honor from? Where do you find your honor? Well, in our passage today, Jesus cautions against seeking it the wrong way in two ways.

[7 : 10] And then he shows us the right way at the end. So look with me at verse 7. Jesus now notices at this banquet how the guests pick the places of honor at the table. And so seeing this, he tells them a 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. If so, the host who invited both of you will come to you and say, give this person your seat.

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 honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted. Nowadays, of course, we assign seating to get over this embarrassment, don't we?

But things I think were a bit more casual in Jesus' day. And I think it's just so typical of us as humans, isn't it? We've turned such a simple task of just finding a place to sit and we've turned it into something that's of such great significance.

[8 : 19] How you sit, where you sit, indicates how important you are. Well, given that's how everyone saw it, Jesus warns them, again, seeking honor through self-promotion.

If choosing a seat shows how important you are, then don't use it to tell others how important you think you are. Instead, be humble. And then perhaps someone, the host, might honor you instead. And then there'll be no risk of humiliation. Now, I think Jesus, of course, is asking us to be truly humble, not pretend to take the lower seat and then look around and hope and wish someone asks you to move up.

No, he's asking you to be truly humble. But Jesus isn't just talking about seating arrangements, is he? It's really just a metaphor for other situations in life as well.

Jesus is warning against big-noting ourselves, constantly drawing attention to our importance, talking ourselves up to advance our position.

[9 : 23] He's talking about being proud and thinking we're better than others and showing it. Now, that seems, I think, to be at odds with our culture today, doesn't it?

Because we're told today all the time that we need to sell ourselves. We need to market ourselves, tell others how good we are, build our brand, curate our social media profile, whatever that means. So, I guess the question is, where do we draw the line? Is it right for us to go forward, put ourselves forward for promotion, let's say, or to compete for leadership roles at a school?

It's tricky, isn't it? But I think it really comes down to our motives, which we ourselves only know, and God, I guess. And the question is, are we motivated by pride, which seeks recognition for its own sake, or are we putting ourselves forward because actually we want to do the work that we're putting ourselves forward for?

So, as an example, when we go for a promotion, is it because we actually won the challenge of it, or to make a positive impact on the company, or are we simply doing it for the CV, or because it comes with more money and perks?

[10 : 47] That's the sort of question we need to ask ourselves when we do these things. And I guess the answer is actually not easy, is it? Because our hearts are deceptive.

And more than that, I think we often think more highly of ourselves than we really are. That's why I think Jesus says, take the lowly position, that is, be circumspect about how good you are.

Because pride invariably comes before a fall. And then instead of honor, which we seek, what we get is humiliation. Well next, Jesus also cautions against seeking honor by favoring only those who can return that favor.

You see, I think Jesus was probably looking around in the house and realizing that only the most important people were invited. And they were only invited because they could return the favor.

Or because their presence boosted the honor of the host. So imagine, for example, inviting Prince William and Kate to your party here in Melbourne.

[11 : 54] They'll have to fly all the way from London. That's okay. And they actually accept it. And all of a sudden, what happens? You've suddenly become the most popular person in town, haven't you?

And your party has just become the party of the year. Their presence has boosted your honor, hasn't it? Well, I think that's what Jesus is saying here. And so he says to the host in verse 12, instead, when you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbors.

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.

Now here, I don't think Jesus is saying never invite your relatives. Imagine what my parents would think if that were true. Rather, he's saying invite those as well who have nothing to give you back in return.

And again, Jesus is not just talking about dinner invites. He's talking about all kinds of generous acts. Like giving time to someone who's lonely and giving their attention.

[13 : 08] Or including in your social circle someone that might be shy or awkward. Why? Because the true test of your generosity comes when you know that you can't personally gain from it.

Just think about it. True generosity is really only tested when you give and you know that you're not going to get anything back in return. Because otherwise, it's not really generosity, is it?

I would call it a calculated investment. Now, Jesus actually goes further in the Sermon on the Mount. He tells us to be generous in secret. Remember how he says, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing?

And again, that's true, isn't it? Because if you're generous in public, you do stand to benefit from it, don't you? You get people saying, oh, this Mark, how generous of him. He's done this and that for this other person.

Sometimes we see celebrities do that, don't we? Again, I don't want to be cynical, but you see them tweet about a cause they've just supported. And you sometimes wonder, are they doing it because they really believe in the cause?

[14 : 15] Yeah, maybe. Or is it really helping them to build their brand as well? No, when we give and we know that there's nothing in it for us, not even the honor of others seeing us do it, then there's really only one person left that knows, isn't it?

And that person is God. God alone then is the only one that can honor you for your good generosity. But I think that's what Jesus is getting to here.

God's honor is really all that we should seek. And he says that we can trust God to do what's right, to repay us. Maybe not now, we have to be patient, but at the resurrection of the righteous, that is when Jesus returns.

So friends, is God's honor the one that we really want, the only one that we seek? Is it better to us than our self-promotion?

Is it better than the fickle validation of others in this world? It is, isn't it? And we should seek that ahead of all the other honor that we may get in life.

[15 : 31] Which brings us, I think, to the second and final parable. So we've seen the two wrong ways, and Jesus now comes and explains how God does bestow his honor, or more precisely, on whom he does.

Now I was going to read the passage again. This didn't work in the morning, but I've been told that the video works. And so we're going to play this song. Some of you old enough might know this song, and it captures the, I think it captures the spirit of the text perfectly.

I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now. I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.

They owe me excuse, I cannot come. A certain man held a feast on his finest age in town. He laid a festive table and wore a wedding gown.

He sent invitations to his neighbors far and wide, but when the meal was ready, each of them replied, I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now.

[16 : 41] I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum. Pray hold me excuse, I cannot come.

The master rose up in anger, called his servants, my name said, go into the town, fetch the blind and the late bench, the peasant and the pauper, for this I have will.

My banquet must be crowded and my table must be filled. I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum.

Pray hold me excuse, I cannot come. When all the poor had assembled, there was still room to spare, so the master demanded, go search everywhere, to the highways and the byways, and force them to come in.

My table must be filled before the banquet can begin. I cannot come. I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and commitments that cost a pretty sum, pray hold me excuse, I cannot come.

[17 : 55] Now God has written a lesson for the rest of mankind, if we're slow in responding, he may leave us behind, he's preparing a banquet for that great and glorious day, when the Lord and master calls us, be certain not to say, I cannot come, I cannot come, I cannot come to the banquet, don't trouble me now, I have married a wife, I have bought me a cow, I have fields and to get bits that cost a pretty sum, pray hold me excuse, I cannot come.

Who knew this song before today? Come on, own up, well done. 1965, during the height of the hippie movement. I cannot come.

Okay, let's look at the parable instead. Verse 15, what's going on? Well, it's been prompted by a guest's comment, hasn't it? Jesus has been talking about a banquet and resurrection, and I think it reminds him of this verse in Isaiah 25, verse 6, where God promises at the end of time that when all are raised, a feast of rich food of all peoples, for all peoples, a banquet of the finest food and wine will be served.

And so he says to Jesus, having recalled this verse, blessed is the one who eat at the feast, I think he's thinking of this feast, in the kingdom of God. Well, Jesus goes, good on you, but now let me tell you, give you a heads up, on who will actually eat at this feast.

It will surprise you, is what he's saying. Now this parable is similar to the one that we had in the last chapter, remember when the owner closes the door on those who are knocking and they're horrified, surprised that they can't get in?

[19 : 42] Well, Jesus is making a very similar point here as well. In the last one in here, he's taking aim at the prominent Jews, because they thought they're Jewish, in the last one, they thought their Jewish heritage was what secured them their place in the kingdom.

Here, however, this time, Jesus is taking aim at their pride in their social standing. You see, the Pharisees looked down on the other Jews as well, because they weren't experts in the law, they didn't keep the law, they didn't have the same status or power as they did.

And in the parable, the excuses the people make, be it their wives or cows or fields, belie what they truly thought about the invitation.

They are thinking that this invitation is not that important, that actually all the other things that they have in life are more important to attend to, and so they couldn't be bothered to turn up.

But of course, the way Jesus tells the story, that is actually what you're meant to read it and go, that's absurd. Because this banquet is a great banquet. It's meant to be the greatest thing that's happening in town.

[20 : 54] It's like scoring VIP tickets to the grand final or having front row seats for a Michael Buble concert, if that's your thing. And you get invited and you decide you don't want to go.

No, you drop everything, wouldn't you, to go. And yet, what do we read here? That people are turning it down because they have to go and try out. There are cows.

I don't know, milk them or something, the oxen or something. Harvest their fields. Now, a new wife, I can understand, perhaps, you wanted to miss that. But even so, it's not like they can't do these things at another time, is it?

These are routine things. Whereas this banquet is a once for all, once in a lifetime, which you'd give up anything, you postpone stuff, to go, wouldn't you? And so we're meant to be thinking as we read, who in their right mind would pass up such an opportunity.

Well, that's the sort of reaction that we should have when it comes to God's kingdom as well. God's kingdom ought to be the most important thing to us than anything else in the world.

[22 : 01] And to think the Jews here in this story, who should know better of all people, are going to pass up on it. It was unimaginable.

And yet, that's what they were doing. Now, I know that sometimes we apply this parable by saying, that just means that when we apply this, we need to give enough time to turn up to church, you know, for the things of God or whatever, instead of going to work or playing sports.

Yeah, that may be one application of it, but do you notice that actually the parable is aimed at religious people, isn't it? It's aimed at the Pharisees who made a lot of time for church, who were religious, who tried to keep the law as best as they can.

If anything, they thought they were already in the feast. And yet, Jesus warns them that they are at risk of not doing it. Why? Because the problem, their problem, wasn't about church attendance or religion.

I'm not saying church attendance is bad, it's good actually, but it's not about that. Rather, it was the manner in which they rejected God's invitation. They rejected Jesus, God's chosen Messiah, which was the only means by which they would get into the banquet.

[23 : 21] So what matters is the manner in which we respond to Jesus. That's the lesson from this parable. And yes, part of responding to Jesus is obeying Him and obeying God and what He says for us in the Word.

But it's first and foremost to respond to who Jesus is. And you see, when those who turn down the invitation in the parable, what happens next is that the master gets angry.

And notice what He turns to next. He instructs His servants to go out into the highways and the byways and bring the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame in.

In other words, the humble and the lowly. It's not like He opens the gates and says, look, I'm open, whoever wants to come in, just come in. No, the instruction is for Him to go out and bring them in. Because these people, these lame, the blind, the crippled, they can't come in by themselves. The servant has to go and search them out and carry them in. And that's how desperate God is, if I might put it this way, for people to be in His kingdom.

[24 : 30] It's not that there are limited spaces either, because even when the servant thinks He's done, the master then says, no, you're not done yet, head out to the country roads, to the lanes, and compel them in.

I'm not full yet, I want more in. There's always room for more, is what Jesus is saying. And yet the irony is, in the very last verse, I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of the banquet, my banquet.

Why? Because there's no room for the proud. There's no room for those who thumb their nose at the invite. But there's always room for those who are crippled and lame and blind.

It's funny, isn't it? Because they don't even get a taste. That is, the crumbs from the table is not even good enough for them, for these people who are invited.

But the beggars, the crippled, and probably the man with the abnormal swelling earlier in the chapter, can you see the mirror thing? Jesus is doing exactly what this man in the banquet is doing.

[25 : 40] They get the most important seats at the table. And so I think we ought to turn the question onto ourselves then. Who do we think we are in relation to God's banquet?

Do we think we deserve a seat at the table? Have we thumbed our noses at God's invite through Jesus because we are seeking honour from people in the world instead?

The fields and oxen of their day may no longer be the status symbols for us today. But I guess the question is, what are the status symbols that we have today?

Do we want that job title in order to put it on our business cards so that we can hand it around at networking functions? Are we seeking positions at uni or at the school, leadership positions so that we get that badge or that crest and then we can walk around and puff out our chest because we are somebody?

Now don't get me wrong, again, these are not bad things to aspire to in and of themselves. But if we are chasing them in and of themselves just to make people think that we are important, then we are doing exactly what Jesus warns against, isn't it?

[27 : 02] There are other examples I could go into. Property and assets. Some of you might be thinking, the more I have, the more important I am. Some people name drop, you know, so people know that we have got important friends.

You know, you think about it, it is endless, isn't it? The human mind has just taught up endless ways of seeking to puff up our own sense of importance.

But if we bother to stop and honestly look at ourselves, then I hope what we realize is that actually, we are like the crippled and the poor. We don't have it all together.

Our pride, our hypocrisy, our craving for approval of others, and then being insecure when others don't give it. These are all indications that actually we are broken inside.

We are lame, maybe not physically, but spiritually. And what we need is Jesus because He's the one that gets us into the banquet or the feast.

[28 : 08] And you know what? I think when we realize that, that's actually a good thing. It may be humbling to realize that we're broken, but it's actually a good thing because as I said, it gets us that seat that we won at God's table.

In fact, that's the only way we will get a seat at God's table, through Jesus, because of what He's done for us on the cross. David says in Psalm 51 and verse 17, My sacrifice, O God, is a broken spirit, a broken and contrite heart you, God, will not despise.

David knew, didn't he, what was acceptable to God. It was a broken and contrite heart, a person who was humble before God. And the good news of Psalm 51 is that God promises not to despise or reject such a person.

Rather, He welcomes them with open arms. So if you're here today and you've never done this before God, repented and come before Him humbly, then again, let me encourage you to do that. That's the only way to find acceptance before God. And we'll get a chance later on during our time of confession to pray this Psalm, Psalm 51. And I invite you then to take that opportunity to make that prayer your own and to then accept Jesus, accept the invitation through Jesus into God's kingdom.

[29 : 33] It may be tempting for you to think, you know what, I'll get to that later on. There might be other priorities I have first in life, but actually, as we read the parable, we shouldn't be giving excuses, should we?

No, the time to answer that question is now. And if you have further questions you want to ask of me, then please come and talk to me. I'd love for you to know the invitation and accept that invitation into God's kingdom.

But as for the rest of us, well, it's been a good reminder, isn't it? It's been happening over the last few weeks, but it's been a good reminder that we need to be humble. We need to realize that our

true honor lies with God at the feast of his kingdom.

And when we understand that, that should also transform the way we treat other people, right? That we show and honor the lowly of this world. Because we're just like them.

And even though we may not receive anything in return, God has promised that he will repay us at the resurrection of the righteous. So let's stay focused on being humble and allow God to honor us in his time.

[30 : 45] Let's pray. Father, thank you for inviting us to the great feast of your kingdom. We do not deserve it. We are there only through your son, Jesus.

We admit that at times the validation and acceptance of this world seems so important to us.

Father, please forgive us. Help us to see the futility of this.

Help us to see that it is only through humility before you that we will find the greatest honor in our lives. Commendation and validation by you in Christ. In his name we pray.

Amen.