

**Good Shepherd Lutheran Church
Watertown, WI**

“Jesus at the House of the Ruler of the Pharisees”

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Luke 14:1-11

Interesting enough, we never see Jesus refusing an invitation to dinner. He never lets an opportunity like that pass by, even when the invitation is from the ruler of the Pharisees. They seem to have made up their minds about Jesus, but Jesus still hopes to bring new life to them. One thing is sure: we will never turn our enemies into friends if we refuse to meet with them and to talk with them. So, Jesus accepts the invitation. The motives of the Pharisees, however, are not so pure. “They were watching him carefully” Luke says. When under constant and critical scrutiny, most people eventually lose their nerve and their temper and say or do things that get them in greater trouble. This is probably the goal of these Pharisees.

Verse 2, “And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy.” We might call it edema, where excess fluids collect often in the lower legs and feet. It can make the skin appear shiny and stretched. It can be much more serious when the fluids gather around the heart causing congestive heart failure.

This is the man that appears before Jesus. There’s a chance he’s been “planted” by the Pharisees. If so, we know why. It’s the Sabbath. Jesus keeps healing on the Sabbath when no man is supposed to work. All these Sabbath-day healings are convincing the Pharisees that Jesus is a dangerous and irreligious lawbreaker who must, at all costs, be stopped.

Knowing their thoughts, Jesus asks them, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” He leaves a period of silence to see if anyone would take Him on. “They remained silent” Luke says. Next sentence, “Jesus healed him and sent him away.” Luke, the doctor, makes it sound as if healing the man was the easiest thing in the world for Jesus, hardly qualifying as work on the Sabbath.

Then Jesus says 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?” Pulling an ox out of an open well? That sounds like a whole lot of exertion from a whole lot of people. If it’s ok for them to help a beast on the Sabbath, how can it be wrong for Jesus to have healed this man with dropsy? Verse 6, “The Pharisees could not reply to these things.” Now *they* are starting to feel like the ones being scrutinized.

Indeed, Jesus *has* been watching them. He noticed how they chose the places of honor at the home of the ruler of the Pharisees. At the time, the customary low couches for a festive dinner were often arranged in the shape of a U around a low table, and in that culture, there were well defined rules about where the seats of honor were. The bottom of the U was for the host. The person to his left was sitting in the most highly honored position, while the person to his right was sitting in the second highest position. Those were often reserved for esteemed guests. The lowest positions of honor at the table were those farthest from the host.

Dinner is announced. The men make their way to the room, and of course, everyone is angling to sit next to the ruler of the Pharisees, who has status and wealth and prestige. To be sure, it’s not a mad dash. There’s an art to this. They make it look casual. Maybe one slowly ambled his way over and set his drink down next to the host so he could use both his hands for gesturing. It’s a smooth, easy move, but it’s as good as planting his flag on a hard-fought hill.

Jesus notices their game, how determined these Pharisees are for securing every little advantage in life. Their talent might be lapped by their ambition. Jesus warns them about this. Someone more important to the host may be in attendance in which case they would be asked to pick up and move on down to sit among the steerage, and how embarrassing that walk of shame would be!

It’s so much better to be humble, for then the host just might call you up to a higher seat! The meaning is clear enough. What is surprising is that the Pharisees needed to be reminded of it. Way back in Proverbs 25 it says, “Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman” (6-7). Jesus isn’t saying anything new. A quick survey of Old Testament history and theology will show the high premium placed on humility, rather than pride and ambition. Their own national hero, Moses, gave up the luxury and prestige of Egypt’s royal palace, to identify himself with the enslaved and mistreated.

Psalm 138, “The Lord regards the lowly, but the haughty he knows from afar” (v. 6).

Then Jesus zeros in on the ruler of the Pharisees. He says to him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” Jesus does not forbid a normal social life. Birds of a feather will indeed flock together. But be deliberate about including also those who are poor or disabled or lonely, for that’s within the spirit of the Gospel.

All this isn’t just about hospitality and table manners. It’s about walking humbly with the Lord and with one another. Humility is to be a way of life, a habit of the heart. 1 Peter 5:5, “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility. . . because ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’” Philippians 2, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves” (v. 3). It’s not that everyone else is superior or more talented, but that Christian love sees others as worthy of preferential treatment. Romans 12, “*Honor* one another above yourselves” (v. 10). Galatians 5, “*Serve* one another in love” (v. 13). Ephesians 5, “*Submit* to one another” (v. 21). Humility is not a choice we make every now and then; it’s a way of life.

If we are not walking humbly with one another, my guess is we are not walking humbly with our God. The stakes are high. In verse 11 Jesus says, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Suddenly, this is about more than choosing the seats of honor. This is about salvation, and it is the consistent teaching of Scripture. James 4, “God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble . . . Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you” (6ff).

The Bible’s teaching on humility harmonizes beautifully with the doctrine of salvation, for we are saved by grace alone. Salvation by grace is always preceded by complete humility, a total emptying of oneself, an acknowledgment that we bring nothing to the exchange but sin and death. Yet he gives us forgiveness and life! “Where then is boasting?” asks Paul. “It is excluded” (Rom. 3:27).

The Lord exalts the humble. Consider His ancient people. Deuteronomy 7, “The Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples. But it was because the LORD loved you and kept the oath he swore to your forefathers that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery” (vv. 7ff).

The Lord exalts the humble. Consider His early New Testament people, “Brothers, remember what you were when you were called. Not many of you were wise by human standards; not many were influential; not many were of noble birth. But God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong. He chose the lowly things of the world and the despised things – and the things that are not – to nullify the things that are, so that no one may boast before him. . . Let him who boasts, boast in the Lord.”

Consider Mary, the Mother of Jesus who said, “He has exalted those of humble estate” (Lk. 1).

The Lord exalts the humble. Consider Paul. “Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners – of whom I am the worst.”

God exalts the humble. Consider the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. That Pharisee was so proud, thanking God that he was not like other men. Meanwhile, the tax collector stood at a distance and would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God, have mercy on me, a sinner.’” Jesus tells us, it was the tax collector that went home justified before God (Lk. 18:9ff).

God exalts the humble. When you were baptized, most of you were infants. You had no strength. You had no wealth. You had no wisdom. You had no cache of good works to point to. You had only the sin and pending death passed down to you from your parents. And yet see how the Lord exalted you and made you His own children in Baptism. Some of you slept through the whole thing; you didn’t lift a finger. Some of you loudly protested through the whole thing. But it wasn’t about what you were doing. It was about what God was doing, for you, washing you clean of sin, and adopting you as His own, promising you salvation by grace.

God exalts the humble. That happens every time we celebrate the Lord’s Supper. The host, Jesus, comes and invites *you* to be at the highest place. He honors you in His presence. He receives you like the Father received his Prodigal son and gives you the finest food in the Father’s house. He forgives and restores and loves you in the presence of all the others.

God exalts the humble. What is humbler than dry bones and dust? Yet in our flesh we shall see God! (Job. 19) because God exalts the humble. “We shall be changed. In a flash, in the twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. For the trumpet will sound, and the dead will be raised imperishable. . . and the mortal will put on immortality” (1 Cor. 15).

2000 years ago, Jesus warned a group of highly ambitious Pharisees, “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled.” But in the same breath, He made a promise, a promise to them and to you and me. “He who humbles himself will be exalted” . . . through the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.