

A place at the table

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[0 : 00] Let me pray and ask the Lord for his help. Heavenly Father, I come now as a servant who is unworthy, because who is worthy really to bring your word?

But Father, I just pray that you would use me as your instrument and that you would say what you want to say. You would touch our hearts. You would, by your spirit, convict us where we need to be convicted.

And you would bring us again to the Lord Jesus, to see him as he really is, to worship and to honour him. We pray all this in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.

Well, Euro 2024 is just around the corner, and so one of the big things I've been interested in is this. Who will have a place in the England squad? The England manager, Gareth Southgate, can only take 26 players, but he initially called up 33 players, meaning seven people will eventually miss out. And so if you are an England football fan, then it's been interesting to debate who will have a place on the plane. Does Jack Grealish deserve a spot?

[1 : 17] Olly Watkins? Who will be left behind? Now, some of you don't care, of course, because you're not football fans, and that's perfectly fine.

In the end, it's just football, after all. But all of us should care about a much more important question. Who will have a place at the Lord's table?

You see, what is the table? It's not just a piece of furniture. The table is where you share food together, have conversations with one another, make good memories with each other.

In other words, the table is really about relationship. So who can have a relationship with the Lord and be able to eat and talk and laugh with Him?

Is it everyone? No one? Some? Last week, that was beginning to be something of a concern. Turn back a page with me for a moment to look to chapter 13, verse 23.

[2 : 28] Someone asks, Lord, are only a few people going to be saved? And Jesus, true to form, doesn't answer with a straightforward yes or no.

Instead, He simply tells us, Look, the door is narrow, so make every effort to enter. But then He adds something that catches His audience by surprise.

Actually, He says, the door is shut to some. There will be some who will say, verse 26, Jesus, I've eaten and drank with you all this while.

Won't you let me in? And He says, No, I don't know you. And to everyone's utter surprise, He then name-checks Jerusalem.

The city of God, the location of the temple, the headquarters of the religious establishment, He says, wouldn't make it. In everyone else's eyes, they are surely the first in line to get in.

[3 : 41] But Jesus says, verse 30, No, the first shall be the last. And so that brings us to Luke chapter 14.

And here is the question on everyone's mind at this point. Why isn't Jerusalem, Jerusalem, and especially those identified with Jerusalem, like the Pharisees, not going to make it?

After all, the Pharisees are probably the most respectable, moral, law-abiding people around. Now, if you have grown up in church, you probably don't quite see them that way, because we've been indoctrinated to automatically see Pharisees like the bad guys in a Saturday morning cartoon.

But perhaps today, think of someone you really respect. Maybe it's some public figure whom you think actually respects the rule of law and shows integrity, which is refreshing when so many other public figures seem to be dodgy and corrupt.

And imagine if that public figure is someone who can quote the Bible intelligently and seems committed to restoring Christian values in society.

[5 : 08] Now, that's not an obvious bad guy, is it? In fact, it's the opposite. Well, that's the Pharisee. And hopefully that helps you understand more why it is so shocking when Jesus says these guys are not going to make it.

So the question is, why? And if they can't, what about me? Well, these are the kinds of questions Jesus will now address in Luke chapter 14.

If you want to know why such people have no place in God's kingdom, and on the flip side, if you want to know who truly has a place in God's kingdom, then Jesus says, pay attention.

Listen as I explain who has or doesn't have a place at God's table. So let's dive in, and firstly, we will discover that God has no place for those who think they are the Lord's.

In verse 1, we are told that Jesus has secured an invitation to a meal with a prominent Pharisee. This is probably a synagogue leader, someone of high status.

[6 : 28] He is one of the elites, and you can be sure that his guests would be similarly worthy people of the community. After all, in verse 3, we are told that the legal experts are there too.

This is the party everyone wants to be at. It's like the local first century version of the Davos Forum, if you know what it is. And Jesus is invited.

But why is he invited? After all, if you've been following Luke's gospel with me over the year, you would know that whenever Jesus turns up for a meal, especially at a Pharisee's home, sparks tend to fly.

Do you remember a few months ago, back in chapter 11, how Jesus ended up raining down a list of woes on his host? Or further back in chapter 7, how Jesus scandalized everyone at another dinner party by allowing someone notorious to wet his feet and pour perfume over them?

He is not exactly the most uncontroversial guest. So why is he on this Pharisee's guest list?

[7 : 51] Well, the clue seems to be at the end of verse 1. Jesus, we're told, is being carefully watched. You see, as the saying goes, sometimes it is good to keep your friends close and your enemies closer, isn't it?

Especially if you can catch them slipping up. So it appears as if the Pharisees have some ulterior motives for inviting Jesus. In verse 2, Jesus comes face to face with a guy suffering from dropsy, as some of the older translations puts it.

Now, what is that? The medical term is edema. But the NIV 2011 helpfully assumes that most of us are not doctors, and so they simply say he has an abnormal swelling of the body.

That is basically what it is. And if your body is bloating up crazily, this isn't a condition you can hide. It's obvious to everyone.

So, what is this man doing here? After all, it is Sabbath time, and you can expect the Pharisees to be extra vigilant on such a day to ensure no one like this man is here.

[9 : 21] Because, you see, this man is probably not the most ritually clean, and besides, edema at that time was associated with greed and lust.

That is exactly the kind of person the Pharisees normally wouldn't want anywhere near them. So, why does he happen to show up at the same time Jesus shows up?

It's very suspicious. And basically, the text is hinting to us that the Pharisees have set a trap. They know Jesus' trap record.

They know Jesus isn't afraid of healing on the Sabbath. He's done it as recently as chapter 13. So, they are pretty certain that if they put a man with edema in front of Jesus, he would do it again.

They have their rules, no healing on the Sabbath. They believe very much that their rules are the right ones, and they fully expect Jesus to break their rules.

[10 : 35] And when he does so, then they can say to the others, see, here goes Jesus breaking all the laws again. What a bad guy he really is.

Why go his way? It's ironic, isn't it? Here are the Pharisees, so precious about their man-made rules, guarding against defilement, and yet acting with such defiled motives.

But Jesus, of course, knows all this. He's not dumb. So he says, all right, let me play your game. Since you invited me to be a guest, let me play the role of polite guest.

Let me ask permission from my host, verse 3. My worthy host, he asks, is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?

Yes or no? And with that question, Jesus lays a trap of his own. Say yes, and they would be saying that their rules are wrong after all.

[11 : 51] And that would defeat the purpose of their own trap. But what if they say no? That's what they think, but say it out loud, and they wouldn't come out looking so good in front of the public, would they?

So what can they do? All they can do is be silent at this point. That way they don't have to admit defeat. But Jesus isn't about to let them go.

Seeing their silence, verse 4, he goes ahead and heals the man as he always intended to. In other words, he knows they want to trap him, but he takes the bait anyway.

Why? Because he wants to expose the state of their hearts. Having healed the man, he now asks, verse 5, 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?

You see, here's the picture. A couple of years ago, there was a toddler in Spain who had wandered away from his family and fell into a narrow, illegally dug well.

[13 : 18] And that well was more than 100 metres deep. For a couple of weeks, rescue teams frantically tried all sorts of ways to get to him, using special equipment to tunnel through and so on.

But the story has a sad ending. The boy died. And Jesus is saying, I have absolutely no doubt that should any of you have a young son who drops into a well, Sabbath or not, you will move heaven and earth to get him out because otherwise he will die.

When it's your family or your finances at stake, you will definitely disregard your own rules. You won't be sitting around the dinner table saying, oh well, it's the Sabbath, so I'll just leave the kid in the well.

No way. Even if it's just an ox rather than a child, that is still a significant investment.

And you will be jumping straight away to rescue that ox. And by the way, God's word says that's perfectly okay. Deuteronomy 22 verse 4 gives you permission.

[14 : 49] It is only the Pharisees' own man-made rules that say otherwise. And so Jesus exposes their double standards.

Their continued silence confirms that. If they were truly consistent in applying their own rules, they will be exposed as law breakers themselves.

Christians will do not do this. But actually, what Jesus is showing us is that in the end, these Pharisees aren't actually that interested in the law breaking.

What they are actually interested in is the law making. What they're actually interested in is staying in charge.

What they want above all is to make the rules themselves, to be able to say when and where their rules apply or don't apply, who it applies to or who it doesn't apply to.

[16 : 06] They want to dictate the terms. In short, they're interested in remaining the Lord of their lives. And they will fiercely resist anyone who challenges them on that front, like Jesus.

But here's the thing, there is no place in God's kingdom for those who think they are the Lord's.

Because in God's kingdom, there can only be one Lord and it can't be us.

It is a narrow door. God has no place for those who tell Jesus that he can come to dinner, but he's got to play by their rules.

He has no place for those who say to Jesus, oh, Jesus, I love to have you in my life, but as long as you remember, I remain number one.

pride. Perhaps that's why in the Christian tradition, there is a long history of identifying pride as the sin behind all sins.

[17 : 23] As C.S. Lewis once wrote in his famous book, Mere Christianity, also on the screen, as long as you are proud, you cannot know God. A proud man is always looking down on things and people, and of course, as long as you are looking down, you cannot see something that is above you.

So here's a question for us. Are we a secret Pharisee? In other words, do we look pretty good on the outside?

We look like we care about God and his laws and his reputation, temptation, but actually, on the inside, we refuse to let him direct our lives.

Maybe we don't think of ourselves as being proud at all, but whenever we decide we know better than God, whenever we decide to privilege our own judgment and will above God's, rest, we are being proud.

So when Jesus says, for example, forgive as you've been forgiven, and we say, what does Jesus know?

[18 : 48] Does he know how much I've been hurt by that person? We are in effect telling him, I know better than you. Or when Jesus says, come to me and I will give you rest.

And we say, well, thanks Jesus, but I'm pretty sure I can find rest in my work or my relationships or my social life or whatever. We are in effect telling him, I know better than you.

I'm the Lord of my life. And that is pride. And God has no place for such people.

pride can be an ugly thing causing us to look down on and dehumanize others.

Come back to our passage and notice, what is this man to the Pharisees? He's just bait. He's just someone to be used for their agenda.

[19 : 58] To be honest, they probably care more about their ox than him. To them, he's certainly not someone made in the image of God. When we are proud, we end up doing ugly things to others.

But how different is Jesus? He clearly has compassion on this man. He wants to do good to him to set him free. And really, Jesus' attitude to this man is the same attitude he has towards us.

Though he is someone in an exalted position, when he looks at us, he doesn't look down on us. No, when he looks at us, he knows we are truly in a pitiful state, and he wants to bring us up to his position.

That's not a proud person, is it? Jesus isn't proud at all, and so no wonder his kingdom has no place for the proud. And actually, that brings us to the second thing we discovered this morning.

Secondly, God has a place for those who know they are the least. It turns out that Jesus isn't done yet with the Pharisees.

[21 : 25] He started exposing their hearts, and he continues on exposing their hearts. Now, think about dinner parties in general.

When you go, some of you were at one last night, what do you notice? Probably who is there? who they are sitting and hanging out with, that kind of thing.

Even today, dinner parties are often places for networking, and also places where you establish your place in society, your status, your sphere of influence.

It was even more true in Jesus' day. And in verse 7, Jesus has been observing how the guests pick the places of honour.

Basically, the closer you get to the host, the more honourable you are. That's how it works. And at this party, there was plenty of social manoeuvring happening.

[22 : 33] You can just imagine the scene, can't you? You know, someone discreetly swapping seats where no one is looking, someone else quickly putting their back on a much desired spot to claim it.

And so Jesus sees this happening and as always, he cuts to the heart of what's going on by telling a parable, verse 8. 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. Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

So here is the idea. Last night we had a wedding reception. And at wedding receptions, they are usually reserved seats for the family.

But imagine if you walked in and you decided to go for the top table and you parked yourself at the seat next to the bride.

[23 : 47] But just at the moment when the emcee gets up, announces the arrival of the bride and the groom's family, and everyone is standing up and clapping, suddenly the emcee spots you and quickly mouths to you, hey, you, you've got to move.

That's the seat for the mother-in-law. And so in full view of everyone, you have to get up and walk to table 55 so that the mother of the bride can take her rightful seat.

It is a humiliating experience and it would be even more so in an honor-shame culture like those in Jesus' day.

But what is the point of this parable? Jesus isn't merely offering a lesson on dinner etiquette or where you should sit at wedding receptions.

He is certainly not offering a lesson on how to be even more cunning and manipulative to scheme your way to the seats of honor, you know, pretend to be humble or something like that.

[25 : 03] No, the key lesson is this. Don't assume your position before God. Don't assume you are entitled to the place of honor.

If you do, then just like in verse 9, you might find yourself discovering that seat was never for you in the first place.

Rather, take the lowest place and let the host, God himself, decide your seating instead, as is his right.

That's the situation in verse 10. For, here's the principle, verse 11, all those who exult themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exulted.

you see, once again, Jesus is saying, God has no place in his kingdom for those who think they are the Lord's. The door is narrow, and it has no place for those who think they are entitled to God's favor.

[26 : 17] It has no place for people who cannot recognize that actually, any invitation to God's table is pure gift.

but it does have a place for those who know they are the least. It has a place for people who recognize that actually, they are like the man with edema.

They're not meant to be there. They're unclean. They're sinful. It has a place for those who recognize that actually, they are like the boy or the ox in the well.

They're at the bottom. they're helpless. They can't save themselves. And if that is our basic attitude towards God, then God will exalt us because that is what God actually wants to do.

He does want us in the seats of honor. He wants us to be as close to him, the host, as much as possible. people. You see, all throughout Luke chapter 14, Jesus isn't just exposing the Pharisees' hearts.

[27 : 33] He's also exposing his own heart. And what is his heart like? It is full of love and mercy and compassion.

Think about it. Jesus doesn't have to heal the man there and then, does he? This abnormal swelling wasn't life-threatening.

He could have waited a day, come back when it wasn't Sabbath, heal the man quietly and keep everyone happy. But Jesus isn't content to do that because he wants to expose his heart.

And his heart is for this man. after all, is he not the Lord of the Sabbath? And what is Sabbath all about?

It is about restful relationship with God. And that is what Jesus has come to do, to restore that restful relationship with God.

[28 : 44] He has come to restore Sabbath to its original intention. He has come to save, not to kill, to do good, not to do harm.

And to show his heart, he heals there and then on this Sabbath day. And this, my friends, is Jesus. He is not a rigid, arbitrary, rule maker. healer. No, he is a compassionate healer and saviour. Even the Pharisees know this.

Notice, what do the Pharisees have to assume in order for their trap to work? They simply assume that Jesus will heal this man, even if it's Sabbath and against their rules.

Why do they assume this? because they've seen Jesus do this time and time and time again. In other words, they simply assume Jesus will be compassionate.

[29 : 58] They simply assume Jesus will want to heal. So, not once do these Pharisees deny Jesus can heal. They accept it.

and not once do they deny that Jesus will want to heal. They are very trapped. Depends on it. But even though they know what Jesus is like, they cannot bring themselves to bow down in humility and let him be the Lord of their lives.

They are not ignorant, but they refuse to be humble, to acknowledge they are the least. And don't you think that is so, so tragic?

Because really, Jesus is the best Lord anyone can have, even better than ourselves.

but we can make a different choice. We can humble ourselves before Jesus. How?

[31 : 12] Well, let me let C.S. Lewis in *Near Christianity* give us wise advice again. He says on the screen, if anyone would like to acquire humility, I can, I think, tell you the first step.

The first step is to realize that one is proud. And he's right, I think. It is a hard step to take. Most of us probably don't think we are proud.

We don't go around boasting about our education or our wealth or anything like that, we say. But are we willing to admit what God says about us is true?

That often we are more selfish more self-seeking, more self-interested, more self-regarding than we would like to admit.

If we don't wish to admit that, that is pride lurking in us. But the moment we are willing to admit to God and to ourselves, oh, that is what I am really like.

[32 : 32] We have humbled ourselves. As the 12th century monk and theologian Bernard of Clairvaux says, humility is when we exercise true knowledge, or better sorry, true self-knowledge, selfishly especially regarding one's faults, errors, and neediness.

But let me tell you the good news. You know, if we just admit our sin and our helplessness and then we just left it like that, we won't just be humbled, we'll be crushed, we'll be in despair.

But the gospel doesn't leave us crushed or despairing, because the gospel tells us that verse 11 is exactly what Jesus did.

The one who individually made every atom in this universe and every cell in our body and watched as the created beings that he made rebelled against him, humbled himself, first of all to become one of us, and then he humbled himself to eat with us, a good person breaking bread with bad people, and then he humbled himself even more to die on the cross, a godly person dying for the ungodly.

And so he was exalted, and now as the exalted host, he seats us with him. As Ephesians 2 verse 6 makes clear, we have a seat with him, exalted in the heavenly places.

[34 : 30] And when we realize that it is those who are the least whom God has a place for in his kingdom, it actually frees us from being calculative the way the world is.

It actually frees us to offer a place to others out of love. That really is the basic point of verses 12 to 14. Jesus says, consider how so many relationships in our world work.

It is usually quid pro quo, isn't it? In other words, I scratch your back, you scratch mine. I look out for you, so you better look out for me.

That's how the Pharisees work. They would only invite people who could repay them. Their relationships were merely based on earning credit, which you can use to bank in later for favors and so on.

But Jesus says, if you are part of my kingdom, then you will realize I operate differently, not by credit, but by grace.

[35 : 43] And that is why verse 12, you don't just go and give yourself to those who can pay you back, your family and your friends, for example. Instead, verse 13, you will deliberately give of yourselves even to those who can't pay you back.

Indeed, who you give yourselves to in your relationships will say something about whether you are truly living for the kingdom of God or not.

who you give yourselves to in your relationships will say something about whether you are truly living for the kingdom of God or not.

It will show if you truly understand how our Lord Jesus works or not. And so here is a challenge for us. are we willing to extend ourselves to those outside our safe relational circles?

To those who might not be able to give us back what we give? It is easy, of course, for us to hang out with the friends we enjoy. But God says don't use our social life purely for gaining status or hoarding joy.

[37 : 02] Instead, open our hearts even to the wounded and to the broken, even if at this moment they are just not capable of giving back to equally.

Give not just to charity but give of yourselves. Take a step towards people who might not naturally fit within your friendship circles.

Now that probably feels risky for most of us but Jesus says we do it because that is the mark of the kingdom. And really that is the mark that you are driven by eternity.

You see, the Pharisees, they say that they believe in God and his kingdom but really they are living for the here and now. They don't really seem to believe that there is such a thing as eternal rewards because, as you can see, that's why they are so interested in gaining earthly honour and making sure people follow their rules.

There is no other reward to pursue for them. But it's different for us. Look at verse 14. If you live the kingdom way, Jesus says, you will be blessed.

[38 : 21] Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. Jesus is saying, let eternity determine your relationships now.

So let's wrap up. Earlier in the service, you heard about the NextGen conference and how we try to help people to read the Bible better. And one of the things that the participants will learn to ask is to ask, what is the aim of this passage?

Why did Luke, in this case, choose to tell us this story at this point? One possibility is to prevent presumption, and perhaps the way that I've applied it so far has been more along these lines. But remember, what is the overall aim of Luke's gospel? I haven't reminded us of this in a long time, but let me just restate it.

It's all the way back in Luke 1 verse 4. Luke says he is writing this, his whole book, so that we might be certain of gospel truth.

[39 : 43] And we mustn't forget that. You see, most of the first readers of Luke's gospel probably were not like the Pharisees. They genuinely did love Jesus.

They were trying to follow him. And some of them probably were feeling a little uncertain, wondering why so many of the religious establishment were trying to persecute them. Were they on the wrong side?

And so, Luke tells this story actually to say, no, if that is you, don't be unsettled. you might look like the least now, but you do have a place at the Lord's table.

And that is still true. I'm sure today that there are many genuine lovers of Jesus here as well. And maybe you've come today feeling a little unsettled, wondering if you do have a place, because maybe you're struggling with feeling like a nobody, or you're struggling with some sin, or you're struggling because it sure feels like those who don't follow Jesus have it better.

But God's word says if you humble yourselves before Jesus, and if you let him rescue you and be the Lord of your life, you do have a place in God's kingdom.

[41 : 13] So be certain of that, and go freely to love others out of that certainty. Let's pray.

Father, your word is living and active, and I pray that it has spoken to us this morning. And so Father, please help us to indeed take the central truth of this passage. Help us to remember verse 11, that all those who exult themselves will be humble, and those who humble themselves will be exulted.

And so Father, we pray that you help us to truly crucify our pride, help us to come to you admitting our sin, admitting our weakness, admitting our neediness, but help us also to find true joy because the Lord Jesus is the most compassionate Lord we could ever have, and it is a joy for him to rescue us.

And so we come to you remembering that this morning. We pray all this in the name of Jesus. Amen.