

Who exalts himself will be humbled

Luke 14.1, 7-14

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Food is important for most of us, is it not?

I am very jealous of people who can eat and drink as much as they like, and it does not influence their shape.

I love eating and drinking, but sadly it does impact badly on the circumference of my abdominal parts. So I must always be careful...

In the Bible, again and again we read of Jesus eating with people - with friends and foes - and He used those times for teaching about the Kingdom of God.

And he used the dinner party we read about today, for underlining an important principle:

All who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

1. Jesus at diner

Jesus was at a dinner party of a prominent Pharisee. That man belonged to that rigidly legalistic group of theologians. And they were people who exalted themselves. They thought very highly of themselves. 'God must be so happy with us.'

At this meal Jesus harshly rebuked both the host who invited him, and also the guests, mainly for their lack of humility.



Jesus was not polite – but it was not a time for politeness. He was on his last trip to Jerusalem, and murder was in the air. His murder.

Shortly before our story, in Luke 13, Jesus said:

I must go on my way [to Jerusalem] for it cannot be that a prophet should perish away from Jerusalem.

O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, the city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!

How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood under her wings, and you would not!

Behold, your house [that is, the temple] is forsaken. (Luke 13.33-35)

Jesus knew what was to come for him - death- and because of that, death was also in store for Jerusalem and its leaders and the temple. That came in the year 70AD.

All this did not create a jolly atmosphere for this diner party.

At this particular diner, Jesus was not invited because the religious leaders of Israel enjoyed his company, but He was invited in order for them to find fault in him.

They wanted to tackle him. To get rid of him. Luke says that Jesus was being 'carefully watched.' His enemies were doing their utmost to find reasons to get him out of the way.

The atmosphere must have been electric and very difficult for Jesus. He knew many hated him, and that he was only there because his enemies wanted to trick him into words and deeds for which he could later be punished.

Just imagine that you are at a party, and everyone is looking at you the whole time, whether you make mistakes; whether you behave well; whether you use knife and fork well; whether what you say or do is acceptable.

Well, Jesus did something unacceptable in the eyes of the Pharisees. He healed a sick person during this diner party - on the Sabbath. Just as he did on previous Sabbaths.

Jesus did it again - he healed a man – on the Sabbath, even though the Pharisees considered this taboo. It was illegal in Israel to heal on the Sabbath.

Jesus tells them off for caring more about their animals than about human beings. Such hypocrites they were.

And then Jesus comments on how the guests had picked their places at the diner table. They had scrambled for the best places.

In those days people would be seated on couches that were arranged in a U shape. In the center of the U- shape was the food on low tables.

The host would be seated in the curve of the U. The next most honorable places would be left and right of him. The least honorable places would be the seats farthest away.



2. Lessons in humility

What did the guests at the party do? As soon as the time for being seated had come, they scrambled to get the best seats, closest to the host.

If you have ever been involved in organizing a dinner party, for instance at a wedding, than you know how complicated it is to arrange all people well.

We honor people by having them at the table of the host, and we can spend much time deciding who sits exactly where.

You cannot put people together at one table if they are not on speaking terms. Table-seatings can be a tremendous headache ...

But the guests at this party where Jesus was, did not care a bit and they scrambled for the best, honorable, places.

The host, this leading Pharisee, must actually have felt quite upset about their rude behavior. Or did he enjoy it maybe, as it showed that people valued sitting close to him?

It is much better, Jesus says, to take a more humble seat, and then be invited by the host: come please, and sit at my table! A humble attitude pays off!

The people at the party with Jesus were probably mostly other Pharisees, and it is very surprising that these religious people had to be taught this lesson by Jesus.

They all knew the wise advice of Proverbs 25.6-7

Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence or stand in the place of the great; for it is better to be told, "Come up here," than to be put lower in the presence of the prince.

The key statement of Jesus is verse 11. He explains why their behavior is so appalling.

For all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

This is his critique of those Pharisees trying to get the best places, and thinking of themselves only. And it is his critique of the Pharisees caring more for their animals than for a sick person who needs healing.

Think of other people and their needs first. Put yourself last.

People who exalt themselves usually do that at the expense of others – like at the dinner party Jesus attended. 'I want the better seat, let the other guys sit at the lower seats. I am entitled to good treatment. I have my rights. I am important. I do not allow others to walk all over me...'

With his comments, Jesus takes the behavior at the dinner, a temporary issue, to the height of eternal matters: He gives us a precious Kingdom rule:

God rewards humility and a servant attitude – maybe not in this life, but certainly in the life to come. ‘Blessed are the meek for they shall inherit the earth...’

Humility and serving others is not that you allow others to walk over you, and it is also not the same as feeling that you are a worm. It is not feeling bad about yourself, or having a low opinion of yourself, or thinking of yourself as inferior to others.

But humility means that you do not mind to help other people, because you do not have your own interests in front of you all the time.

Humility frees us to be ourselves and to focus on the well-being of others, to love them and to serve them selflessly, for their sake, rather than for our own benefit.

This attitude of humble servanthood liberates us from being preoccupied all day with ourselves and our own goals.



Be who you are. A forgiven sinner. God accepts you as you are. And have the interests of others more in mind than your own.

People with such an attitude in life are often really loved by others, so this sort of humility is often rewarded, even in this life. So, do not scramble for the best seats at the expense of others.

The second important lesson from Jesus was directed at the host of the party. Jesus also criticizes him: He criticizes him for the types of guests he had invited.

He told him, ‘Do not only organize parties for your friends who may invite you in return. Think of the poor, the paupers, the lame, the crippled. People who do not have money to throw parties and who can not invite you back.’

The host maybe thought that his guests were rude for only thinking about themselves, scrambling for the best seats – but Jesus tells the man that his own attitude is similar.

By only inviting his wealthy friends, he makes sure he will be invited in return. His selfinterest was the basis for his guest list.

If you do things to work yourself up and to get things in return, you do it because of your own desire, for your own sake, for your own benefit. This is selfish.

People like this are often unpleasant people. Always a selfish motive. ‘What can I get out of other people.’

3. Jesus himself

But doing things for the sake of others, without expecting payback, that is truly humble. That is a Kingdom attitude. That is the attitude that belongs to the people of Jesus.

Jesus came to save the lost so He gave himself for others. The people at that party were only thinking of their own interests. As we also often tend to do.

Jesus himself was the prime example of true humility and servanthood. Voluntarily he became the servant of mankind.

This is an important moral lesson for us. But I think Jesus had another reason to say that

all who exalt themselves will be humbled,
and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

The Pharisees knew their Holy Scriptures. I think they heard in the words of Jesus an echo from the book of Ezekiel, from chapter 21. That chapter begins with these words: “Son of Man, set your face toward Jerusalem, and preach against the sanctuaries.”

That is what Jesus was doing. He was on the way, and he was announcing God’s judgment over the city and its leaders. And in that same chapter in Ezekiel, we read

This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Take off the turban, remove the crown. It will not be as it was: The lowly will be exalted and the exalted will be brought low. (Ezekiel 21.26)

Jesus is reminding the Jewish leaders of the prophetic words against Jerusalem and its leaders in their own Holy Scriptures.

With his words Jesus does not just tell us to be humble in our personal life. He is actually also reminding the Pharisees who try to get rid of him, that in the end, the losers will win, and the winners will lose.

Jesus will win; his followers will win. And the Pharisees will lose.

A few months after this dinner party, Jesus died on the cross, as the humble servant of us all.

He gave His life to invite us to become part of his new Kingdom—communion around the table in church.

He gives to us freely - himself, love, forgiveness, access to the Kingdom of God. And we have nothing to give back to him, but we have become his followers.

Jesus seemed a loser on the cross, humiliated. But God exalted him. And those who judged him, those who sent him to the cross, they were the ultimate losers. The city of Jerusalem was destroyed, the Temple was razed.

Conclusion

In the Kingdom of God, actions based on the desire to serve oneself, and to promote oneself in life, are not the actions that await rewards from God. They mean nothing in Gods Kingdom.

The life and the events surrounding the life of Jesus are our example that humility is the way. Our Lord Jesus served others, and that is our ultimate reason for us to serve others and for not making ourselves number 1.

Servanthood and being generous to others, this demands a measure of Christ-like self-sacrifice. That may be costly, sometimes painful, but it doesn't impoverish us. It rather enriches the soul of the giver.

Often humble people are appreciated by others. So a serving attitude does in a way 'pay off'. But ultimately, our reward is not in this life. Jesus was rewarded for his life of servitude - by his resurrection.

And we who follow Jesus in the same attitude of servitude - we wait for the resurrection. When God will exalt the humble.

+Amen