

Pride of Place

Introduction

The Text

¹ One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ² And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. ³ And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" ⁴ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. ⁵ And he said 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?" ⁶ And they could not reply to these things.

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:1–11)

Gospel Centrality & Gospel Humility

- A. You can ask any official leader in this church—any Elder or Deacon who has gone through formal training and installation and things with me. After an initial time of Evaluation and discernment, when once a person is on course to be raised up for leadership, we begin what we call Orientation.
 - 1. And regardless of what the leader's role will eventually be—whether they will be Elders or Home Group Leaders or staff members in some capacity—if we are going to install them as official, formal leadership in this church, there are two things I'm going to talk about with them before we talk about anything else, two things that I am more passionate about seeing protected and promoted in this church than anything else: (1) Gospel Centrality; and (2) Gospel Humility.
- B. By Gospel Centrality I mean that everything we do has the good news of Jesus Christ at the center of it. Taking a few lines from one of the leader manuals: "At Mercy Hill our mission is to restore us to God, neighbor, and city through the good news of Jesus Christ. The gospel—this good news of what Christ has done for us in His life, death, and resurrection—is everything. The gospel is not merely the starting line of a much longer race. It's more like the hub of a wheel. Without the gospel always at the center, nothing in the Christian life turns. Everything stalls out. You go nowhere." And then I just quote verse after verse to support this idea.
- C. But, Gospel Centrality must be coupled with Gospel Humility. A person must not only understand what Jesus did there for us on the cross, he/she must be personally crushed by it, broken by it, re-shaped by it. "Even though I was the chief of sinners, He did that for me!" There is no swagger at the foot of the cross.

1. Who cares if your doctrine is right, if your heart is all wrong. So you know how to talk about the cross, does your life actually look like the cross?! That is what a leader must have. We do not lead from on high. We lead from down low.
 - a. Gospel Centrality and Gospel Humility. If we can just get these two things embedded into the leadership of this church, it will start to spread out into the members and overall culture of this church, and we will be well on our way to health.
- D. Now I bring this up here at the beginning because it is this idea of Gospel Humility that is particularly foregrounded in our text this morning.
1. I should say that, for the sake of time, I have to just skip right over [vv. 1-6](#). I hate to do it, and the only reason I'm willing is because it's virtually an identical scene to what we just saw even last week in [Luke 13:10-17](#). There are some observations I could make regarding it, but I thought it best to move straightaway to the parable Jesus gives us in [vv. 7-11](#).
 - a. I'm going to organize my thoughts under just two headings: (1) The Place of Honor; and (2) The Heart of the Matter.

(1) The Place of Honor

The Context

- A. So there's this "[ruler of the Pharisees](#)" ([v. 1](#))—a title that, no doubt, points to the man's importance there in Israel—and he invites Jesus and some others into his home for a Sabbath day meal, presumably after worshipping in the synagogue together earlier that morning.
 1. And in [v. 7](#) we're told that Jesus notices all the other guests, as they're coming in to sit down, how they're vying for the places of honor around the table.
- B. Now, before we can go any further on this, we do need to at least get a basic sense of the context in ancient Israel at the time. It seems that a person's social status would actually play into where they would sit around the dinner table. And the more important you were the closer you would sit to the host. These are the "[places of honor](#)" that our text is talking about.
 1. Perhaps a direct corollary to this in our culture today might be something like what we still do in our wedding celebrations, right? You have the bride and groom, and then the best man and the maid of honor sit on either side in closest proximity to them.
- C. But there are many other ways that this idea of a place of honor carries over into our context. The example that came immediately to my mind is the way we do seating on airplanes—with coach and then first class.
 1. I've only flown first class once, and it was just by accident. It was so long ago now, I can't even remember how it happened. Maybe they messed something up in my itinerary or they

just had a bunch open and they pulled my number. I don't remember. All I do remember is I had no idea what to do up there. I got this sense I didn't belong. I was especially confused when they brought by that warm moist washcloth thing. I'm thinking, I don't need a napkin. The flight's just taking off and I haven't eaten yet. I haven't made a mess. I don't need to clean anything up. So I'm kind of looking out of the corner of my eye at the guy next to me, trying not to appear suspicious or ignorant, trying to see what's he going to do with this thing? And I see him, clearly a first-class aficionado, he picks it up and starts dabbing his face. And then he takes it down, kind of rubs his hands in it for a moment or something and hands it back to the stewardess. It's like this whole ritual going on up here with the rich and the famous that the rest of the plane knows nothing about.

- a. There's this feeling of separation and of being in the place of honor, or not, right? And then, as if to kind of seal the deal, they've got that curtain that they close, right before the plane's about to take off—as if the common folk in coach aren't even worthy of breathing the same air as those up in first class. It's our way of drawing that line: Here's the place of honor—some are in it, and some are not.
- D. So in our text, it's like these guys are all fighting for first class, fighting to get behind that curtain, to get in the place of honor.

The Parable

- A. But what does Jesus have to say about all this? Well, He goes on to share a parable. Let's look at it again now: ⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” (Luke 14:7-11).
- B. With this parable, Jesus is here speaking against pride and presumption, competition and comparison, self-exertion and self-promotion.
1. I love how the ESV Study Bible sums it up: “It is better to be humble than humiliated.” It is better to lower yourself and be asked to step up, than to put yourself on top and be told to step down.
- C. Can I just say: What a word for Silicon Valley, am I right? Where the whole ethos of this place, the economy, the industry, it all seems to run on self-promotion and putting yourself forward and vying for pride of place. If you take the bottom seat, in this dog-eat-dog culture, you're out! Someone else is already baring their teeth and ready to pounce on that seat if you don't.
1. So Jesus' words here are going to rub a bit. This is going to test us a bit.
- D. And, of course, we know ultimately, what Jesus is talking about here isn't just how to act at dinner parties or in the office or something. He's talking about how things will go in the end, before God—

how those who think they're awesome will be exposed for what they really are, and how those who have been humbled by the cross, will be lifted up and glorified in the Son.

1. So there's a lot on the line here.

Where Are You?

A. But before we move on, let me just ask a few questions to get you thinking about where you're at in all of this:

1. How do you feel when others are recognized for their accomplishments but not you?
2. Does another person's success cause you to celebrate with them or to secretly seethe with jealousy or even bitterness?
3. Are there certain tasks you feel are beneath you—for someone else, but not for you?
4. Does praise from others inflate you and fill you with joy and energy but criticism deflate you into depression and despair?
5. Do you find yourself tossing and turning in bed at night, worrying about what people are thinking of you—how you've been perceived, how you'll be perceived?
6. Do you always have to get a word in, or are you okay sitting back listening and sharing if and when the time seems appropriate?
7. Do you always have to be right, win the argument? When's the last time you truly said: "I'm sorry"?
8. Do you roll your eyes at others? Maybe you wouldn't say it with your words, but your actions are quite eloquent: "How foolish are you? And how wise am I?"

B. All of these questions are just to help us see, maybe we are trying make a run on that place of honor, putting ourselves over and against other people, rather than under and for them. Maybe we are craving the praise of man, and someone to notice us and validate us.

1. Maybe we're just like these guests Jesus is addressing here. Maybe we have a lot to learn.

C. It's funny. I often go running on sermon prep days to just clear my head and pray and try to see the text from a different angle. And this last week, when I was running, and thinking about these very things, God put me in a situation that gave me a window into how this same junk plays out in my own heart.

1. As I'm thinking and praying on these things, and running, a guy comes running up behind me . . . and he passes me. Listen, that doesn't happen to me. There's something about being passed that just doesn't sit well. So this guy just blows by me and then up in my heart, here it all comes—[Luke 14:7-11](#) junk.
 - a. The first thing I do is look around to see if anyone noticed. I just got put to shame. Did anyone see this? No? Okay, good.
 - b. Then, all of a sudden I notice my feet moving a little faster, my arms swinging a little harder. I'm picking up the pace. I'm not going to be made the fool.
 - c. Then I notice, I'm starting to make these excuses, like I'm telling them to myself?! I'm just warming up. I just got started. He's probably one of those long-distance guys. He's been going for a while. I'm not trying yet.

- d. Then I started cutting him down in my mind. I just start criticizing to make myself feel better. “Look at those shorts. Running shorts on dudes, it’s embarrassing. You can see the whole thigh. That isn’t right. That form is off. Look at what he’s doing with his hands there.
 - i. I wish I were joking. But it’s like God just shone a spotlight on my heart in those moments and was saying: “Nick, you’re with those guests at the table.” And I imagine some of you are there with me too.

(2) The Heart of the Matter

- A. So let’s talk about the heart of the matter now. Why are we so desperate to sit in that place of honor in the first place? Why are we scrambling and elbowing with others for it? What’s that all about?
 - 1. I’ve got three reasons for us to consider, and as we talk about these we’ll also discuss how we begin to break free.

(1) We Are Insecure and Think It Will Justify Us

- A. The first reason place of honor means so much to us I think, is that we are insecure and think it will justify us. We feel like something is off with us at a fundamental level, something is not right deep in here.
 - 1. And so we spend all this time and energy trying to prove to others, and prove to ourselves, and maybe even prove to God that we are okay, that we are alright, that we are justified. And we feel like if we can just secure that place of honor for ourselves, well then we’ll know that we are okay.
- B. But that’s not how it works. All this sort of thing leads to is uneasiness, an anxiety, a backbiting and competing, condemning and criticizing.
 - 1. We may secure that seat at this dinner party, but what about the next? And what if someone higher up the ladder joins, and they know more than me, or they’re more beautiful than me, or they have more money than me, how will I be justified then? How will I get honor for myself then?
- C. Tim Keller clued me into an interview from a while back with Madonna in Vanity Fair and, looking through it for myself, it was quite fascinating to see some of what was going on in the heart of this superstar, at least at that time.
 - 1. Back in her heyday, we would be prone to think that, at least by the world’s standards, here is a person who is sitting in that seat—she’s on the throne, she’s got the honor. But in this little interview, we see another side to things. We see the insecurity, the drive to prove that you are okay, right, justified.
- D. Here’s what she says: “[N]obody works the way I work. . . . I have an iron will. . . . And all of my will has always been to conquer some horrible feeling of inadequacy. I’m always struggling with that

fear. I push past one spell of it and discover myself as a special human being and then I get to another stage and think I'm mediocre and uninteresting. And I find a way to get myself out of that. Again and again. My drive in life is from this horrible fear of being mediocre. And that's always pushing me, pushing me. Because even though I've become Somebody. I still have to prove that Somebody. My struggle has never ended and it probably never will" (Vanity Fair, 1991).

1. Clawing your way to the place of honor in an attempt to justify yourself is exhausting. She said these things in 1991, back when she was a big name. But now, she's gotten older. She's inevitably sliding into irrelevance. She can't get the same attention and praise she once did. She's being replaced by others like Beyoncé, Lady Gaga, or whoever. She's living proof of the futility of this sort of thing.
 - a. And here's what we must see: Even when she had it, she was miserable, because she knew she couldn't hold onto it forever.
- E. Contrary to this endless working to justify and this wrestling for the praise of man is the finished work of Jesus on the cross, where His righteousness counts for me.
 1. The only thing required to receive it is what our text says here: that we humble ourselves. "I feel wrong because I am wrong. I feel broken and sinful because I am and no amount of people's praise is going to fix that. But You can. You have."
- F. Jesus actually connects the very same principle He lays out here in v. 11 of our text with this idea of justification in particular when He tells yet another parable in Luke 18. Let me just read it to you: "⁹ He . . . told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous, and treated others with contempt: ¹⁰ 'Two men went up into the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. ¹¹ The Pharisee, standing by himself, prayed thus: 'God, I thank you that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. ¹² I fast twice a week; I give tithes of all that I get.' ¹³ But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even lift up his eyes to heaven, but beat his breast, saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' ¹⁴ I tell you, this man went down to his house justified, rather than the other. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted" (vv. 9–14).
 1. It is not the one who attempts to justify himself that is justified. Such self-orientation only makes him worse. This Pharisee becomes an arrogant, self-promoting, critical, callous sort of person.
 - a. No! It is the one who wouldn't dare take the place of honor—the tax collector hiding in the back, beating his chest in view of his own sins, calling out for mercy—he is the one who is justified who shall be elevated in God's economy of things.
- G. When you find your righteousness, your security in Jesus Christ, you don't need anyone else to see you or praise you. You don't need to prove yourself anymore. You're free to take the lower seat and give your life away in service of others.

(2) We Are Empty and Think It Will Satisfy Us

- A. The second reason we vie for the place of honor, I think, is because we are empty and think it will satisfy us. I am dissatisfied at a fundamental level and I feel like somehow getting that honor and praise and prestige will fill me—it will add to me what I’ve been lacking. But it won’t.
- B. One of the things I tell people when they’re interested in leadership in the church (what we might understand as a place of honor, I suppose) is this: You know you’re ready to be a leader when you no longer need to be one.
 - 1. Did you catch that? If you need to be a leader because you’ve got some hole you think it’s going to fill, and you think sitting in that seat is somehow going to fill it, then you are not ready. Listen, leadership in the church is not going to fill you, it’s going to test you and try you. It’s a lot less like sitting down on a throne and a whole lot more like taking up your cross and, as Paul would say: bearing in your body “the marks of Christ” (Gal 6:17).
 - a. If you are not already satisfied in Jesus, you will never be satisfied in leadership or any other “place of honor”.
- C. This is why whenever God is getting a person ready for the place of honor, a place of leadership or something like this, He always first gets them to the place of fullness in Him. Before they are ready to stand before people and lead them well, He must first get them to where they no longer need it. They are satisfied, full in Him. They know Him. That is enough. Being obedient to Him, whatever the call, however big or small, that is fine.
 - 1. And the way God does this, really, is by taking them out into the wilderness. Out in the wilderness you have nothing but God, and you learn that He is enough.
 - a. It was this way with Moses. 40 years tending to sheep. Then he’s ready to tend to God’s people.
 - b. It was this way with David. When Samuel had come to anoint one of Jesse’s boys as king, where is David? He’s out in the wilderness, tending sheep.
 - c. When Jesus shows up to Paul and says, “I’m going to use you for great things—what does Paul say he was compelled to do first? “^{16b} I did not immediately consult with anyone;¹⁷ nor did I go up to Jerusalem to those who were apostles before me, but I went away into Arabia [presumably the desert or wilderness] . . .” (Gal 1:16b–17a). He got alone with God. He got filled with God. The place of honor as an apostle? He didn’t need that. It was just about obedience after that. “If you want me to speak I will. If you want me to write, I will.”
- D. Zach Eswine, commenting on our text in Luke, and writing to pastors in particular, has some wonderful things to add to the discussion. He writes: “Smaller is always better than larger unless, and only if, God extrudes us [thrusts/forces us out]. We lose rest of soul when we believe that bigger is better. The Serpent tempts all of us to believe that some places matter more than others, that some people matter more than others, and that our strategies and gifts rather than God’s wise calling are our answers.

But in Luke 14:7-11, Jesus teaches those who follow him to seek the lowest, not the highest, seats at the table. Francis Schaeffer points out how many of us pastors believe the opposite of what

Jesus teaches. In our way of thinking, 'we are tempted to say, "I will take the larger place because it will give me more influence for Jesus Christ."' But Jesus teaches us that we should determine to take the lower place unless the Lord Himself 'extrudes us' into a larger one.

We are tempted to take up something 'big' in our eyes or in the eyes of others for his name and lose sight of him altogether. Not only does the smaller place enable us humbly and gratefully to have a seat at the table; it enables us daily to sit in his presence, eating his food, hearing his words, delighting in him. Who would ever want to leave this seat? . . . Take the smaller seat then, the seat that allows you such presence with Jesus, instead of the large seat that would take this quiet from you. Only go if the one who calls is going there with you. Only go if you are ready to remain committed there, regardless of size, to the small, mostly overlooked mattering things in Jesus" (The Imperfect Pastor, p. 146).

- E. You hear what he's saying right? Jesus is enough. You get to sit in His presence, eat at His table. You're satisfied. If you have Him it doesn't matter how big or important the world thinks you are. If He gives you more to do, fine, but you have all you need in Him.
 - 1. And this is true, of course, not just for pastors or leaders in the church, but for all of us. Because we are satisfied with the love of God for us in Christ, we don't need the place of honor. We've already been invited to His table. And that is more than enough.

(3) We Are Near-Sighted and Forget How the Story Ends

- A. The third reason I'll give you as to why I think we find ourselves jockeying for the places of honor around the tables of this world is that we are near-sighted and we forget how the story ends. We lose sight of eternity and think it's all about the here and now.
 - 1. We forget the fact that Jesus isn't just talking about dinner parties here. He's talking about how things will shake out in the end at the resurrection and the final judgment.
 - a. If this world is all there is, well then, okay, you better do all you can to get that seat.
 - b. But if, at the end of the ages, God is going to right every wrong, and lower the proud, and raise up the humble, and vindicate those who truly loved him and trusted Him and served Him, well then you can let someone else sit there for now, right? It's not that big of a deal.
- B. If we read our Bibles closely we realize how important getting an eternal perspective really is. For so many of these great men in the Bible, if all we're looking at is how their lives went on earth, things are hard and end badly.
- C. Think about Abraham. God calls him away from his hometown and says: "I've got some land I want to give you." God walks him outside and tells him to look up at the stars and says: "I'm going to give you descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky."
 - 1. But did you notice, Abraham dies a sojourner in Canaan. He's buried there, but it wasn't His land. It would be another 600 years or so before God would call Israel to really start to lay claim to it. And when he dies, he doesn't have descendants as numerous as the stars. He's got a handful of kids and maybe a few grandkids.

a. Don't you see? If Abraham's story ended there, his life was a tragedy. It's a big letdown. But when once you factor in eternity, well then you see it. And everything changes.

i. That's why the author of Hebrews commends him: "⁸ [H]e went out, not knowing where he was going.⁹ By faith he went to live in the land of promise, as in a foreign land, living in tents with Isaac and Jacob, heirs with him of the same promise.¹⁰ For he was looking forward to the city that has foundations, whose designer and builder is God" (Heb 11:8–10). There was no place of honor for him around the tables of this world. He was living in a tent until the day he died. But O how there is a place for him around the table in the city of God!

D. You could look at Paul's life and do the same thing. Where's the place of honor for him? He writes his last epistle, [2 Tim](#), from a prison cell, awaiting his execution.

1. It's as Paul himself wrote in [1 Cor 15:19](#): "If in Christ we have hope in this life only, we are of all people most to be pitied." Because following Jesus here is hard.

a. But we believe in the resurrection, which means Paul's life wasn't ultimately a tragedy, it was a victory. He kept the faith to the end. And no doubt there is a place of honor for Him around the table in the kingdom of heaven.

E. Let me draw things to a close by reading to a few comments from John Piper regarding our text back in Luke: "Jesus says it is better to be thought worse than you are, and then be publicly vindicated, than to be thought better than you are and then be publicly humiliated.

Yes, but what if you take the lowest seat and no one comes to invite you to the front? What if your reputation in this world is always worse among men than it is with God? What if your life is one continual false accusation (Matthew 5:11)? "We are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered" (Psalm 44:22; Romans 8:36). "We have become like the scum of the world, the refuse of all things" (1 Corinthians 4:13).

This parable does not promise that people will always come through for you. They won't. Some will think you worse than you are till the day you die.

What this parable ultimately promises is that at the final wedding feast, Jesus himself will set things right. Your reputation will be vindicated. Truth will come out. The whole universe will know if your reputation was wrong.

So here's the life-changing truth: It is better to be thought worse than you are now, and have the Lord set things right in the last day, than to be thought better than you are now, only to have Jesus put you in your place in the end.

In other words, don't care much about whether your family and friends and acquaintances and enemies know what you are really like. Be true, be real, be humble, and let the Lord settle the matter in the end. In that day, the price of taking the lower place will be seen to be very small."

F. So can I just invite you to step down this morning. Find joy in the small and seemingly insignificant things, in the overlooked and often forgotten places. God sees you. God loves you. In Christ, God delights in you, sings over you. He will care for you. He will satisfy you. He will honor you around His table on the last day. You don't need to fight for it now. It's already yours in Him.