

“How To Be Exalted”

Luke 14:7-11

September 1, 2013

15th Sunday After Pentecost

Many decry the lack of proper etiquette these days. Good manners always used to be important, especially at the dinner table. There used to be a proper way to dress for meals, a proper way to eat meals, and even the proper place to sit for meals. Formal dinners would have place cards that showed you exactly where you would sit and where you would not sit. Anyone who didn't sit where they were supposed to sit would be corrected and moved.

These table manners were especially true in Jewish culture from which our text comes. Everyone had their place to sit. The important people sat in places of honor (literally “first seats”). The unimportant people sat in unimportant seats (literally “the last places”)

A problem arose if you thought you were more important to the host than you actually were and tried to seat in one of the places of honor. If someone more distinguished than you arrived, the host would tell you to give your place to him and move to the lowest place. That would cause much shame for you.

Jesus said that a person should sit first in the lowest place. Then the host could come and say, “Friend, move up higher!” In that way, you would be honored in the presence of all the people sitting at the table with you.

Jesus concludes with this proverb: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” In other words, if you try to exalt yourself, someone else will take you down. However, if you are humble, someone else will lift you up.

This is more than simply an etiquette lesson. Jesus is using the occasion of a formal dinner to teach about reclining at table in the kingdom of God in heaven. Many would like to get the best seats they can in heaven and think they can do so by impressing God with their behavior. We may not say that in so many words, but I bet we think it or feel it many times. A lot of people keep their names on

a church roster even though they never attend. Why? Might it be so they can stay on the good side of God? Do you ever feel that you are a tad closer to God than others because your worship attendance is better than theirs? Do you try to get closer to God by serving Him in Church in various positions and duties? Do young men and young women go off to seminary and college with the hope of getting a higher place in heaven by being pastors and teachers? Again, I doubt that many would admit to these things if they were said out loud. However, examine your motivations for the good things you do. Are they pure motives or an attempt to get a place of honor at the heavenly feast?

If we are trying to exalt ourselves in any way before God, we will be humbled. God will bring us down. We will be put in our place, much to our shame.

You see, you can't impress a holy and perfect God and get a special inside position with Him by your imperfect and impure behavior. First, you can't meet His standard of perfection which He expects and requires. Holiness is the minimum requirement. To impress Him and earn a special spot in heaven, I suppose you would have to be better than perfect.

Yet the Word of God is clear about how close we are to perfect. Paul writes to the Romans, "None is righteous, no, not one; no one understands; no one seeks for God. All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one." (Romans 3:10-12) But, you say, we try our best and that should be good enough. Even our best is no good. The prophet Isaiah says, "all our righteous acts are like filthy rags." Did you get that? What we consider to be good – to be righteous – are like filthy rags in God's sight.

Not only can't you meet God's standard of perfection, you don't have to. Someone more distinguished than you has come along to the heavenly feast – the Son of God, Jesus Christ. However, instead of taking the place of honor to which He was entitled and instead of exalting Himself as He so richly deserved, He did exactly the opposite. He humbled himself and took the place of shame.

Paul's letter to the Philippians says it this way, "[Christ Jesus] though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2:6-8)

Jesus took the lowliest seat possible – a wooden cross – and had nails driven through His hands and a spike through His feet. He humbled Himself in the worst way possible. He took on your sin and my sins – the sin of the entire world. The one who had no sin became sin for us. By this, a great exchange took place. He took your sin, your death, and your damnation from you. He has given His holiness, his life, and His salvation to you.

He who humbled Himself was then exalted by another – God the Father. Paul continues in his letter to the Philippians, "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." (Phil. 2:9-11)

The One who was dead has become alive again, nevermore to die. The One who humbled Himself to the lowest has now been exalted to the highest by the Father. By His resurrection, we shall not remain dead, but live. By His exaltation we will not be humbled, but be exalted. And what do we have to do to gain this grand exaltation to the heavenly feast and the eternal celebration? Absolutely nothing! As Jesus says, "He who humbles himself will be exalted."

But, you might ask, "Isn't humbling oneself doing something?" If you have to "do" humbleness, force it upon yourself, or even fake it, that is not true humbleness. By being forgiven and given Christ's holiness through His humbleness, you are freed from having to *do* anything at all. You don't have to exalt yourself, impress your God, or claim your place in the heavenly banquet. You are free by Christ's humility to live in His humility.

What does that mean? Instead of pumping up our actions and accomplishments, we live in repentance. By the work of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God, we will confess (as we already did this morning) that we “are by nature sinful and unclean”; that we “have sinned against [God] in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone.”

Living in Christ’s humility means living humble lives of faith in Him, rather than trusting ourselves and our actions. It means living lives in which we serve instead of being served. It means not even noticing that we ARE being humble. We just are. It’s not something we actively come up with on our own and do by our power. It is something worked in you by the Word of God and lived out in the power of the Holy Spirit.

When we humble ourselves in that way, we don’t have to worry about exalting ourselves. God in Christ Jesus will exalt us beyond anything to which we could exalt ourselves or even dream of exalting ourselves.

He exalts us to sonship and daughterhood by virtue of our baptism. What higher positions could we possibly attain to than what we already are: sons and daughters of the only true God and Creator of the Universe with Christ Jesus as our elder brother?

He exalts us to holiness through the forgiveness of sins won for us by His Son’s death on the cross. After wearing ourselves out trying to be good and do better, what higher status could we possibly dream of than being holy in the sight of the only true God and the Judge of all nations?

He exalts us to eternal life through the new life Jesus gained by His resurrection from the dead. After working so hard fearing death, avoiding death, and trying to delay death, what better gift could we get than eternal life in the presence of God with all of your friends and relatives who had faith in Jesus Christ in a grand and glorious celebration beyond our wildest dreams and which lasts forever?

If your family was like mine, when you gathered for big family dinners, there was always the kids’ table and the grown-ups table. Do you remember as a kid wanting to sit at the grown-ups table? You could cry and whine, try to argue or impress or do whatever you wanted, but you’d never get to

go to the “big table” that way. Remember how disappointing that was? However, there came that day when someone – a parent or a patriarch – would say to you, “Sit at the big table this year.” You probably didn’t feel any older or better, but you had been called. Remember how thrilling that was?

God’s heavenly banquet table operates in the same way. You can cry and whine, try to argue or impress, or do whatever you want, but you’ll never sit at His table in heaven that way. However, living a life of repentance and faith, (both of which are gifts of the Holy Spirit through the Word of God and your baptism), the Lord Jesus Christ calls you up to His banquet table to sit and celebrate with Him, all the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, all the apostles and believers of the New Testament, and with all of His people throughout the ages forever. How thrilling that will be! May that give you comfort, confidence, and hope as we wait for that banquet to begin! Amen.