

Luke 14:7-11

“When you are invited to a wedding feast,” Jesus begins, “do not take the place of honor.” This sounds like something Miss Manners or Dear Abby would say. It’s proper etiquette to sit where they tell you; to let others have the first choice at the table. And most of us have learned good manners over the years. I notice that when the food line opens up in the basement, no one wants to be first in line. The serving ladies often have to urge you to come up and fill your plates. So I really don’t need to preach a sermon on letting others go first and sitting in the lower seats, because you already do these things. You are a well-mannered congregation.

But then, Jesus is no “Dear Abby.” He didn’t come to our world to teach us proper etiquette. His words contain for us a deep spiritual truth, and the last words of our text bring it out: “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” To understand this spiritual truth, Jesus pictures for His hearers, a wedding banquet. I’ve been to some where they have name cards sitting at the places where the guests eat. This way all the guests sit exactly where they are supposed to sit. But there were no such name cards in Jesus’ day. And so, picture a guest walking in and seating himself at the head table—right in the center of that table where the bride and groom are to sit. Imagine his embarrassment when the bride and groom arrive and that guest is asked to sit elsewhere.

We would never do such a thing, would we? We wouldn’t be so bold as to sit down right smack in the middle of the head table...or would we? As we heard earlier, there is a deep spiritual truth being taught here, and the truth be told—we would be so bold! Not at the wedding feasts of our friends and neighbors around Augusta—here we practice proper etiquette. But at God’s wedding feast our good manners seem to fly right out the door, for we do seat ourselves right smack in the middle of the head table.

How so? Remember the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican? Both men went into the temple to pray. The Pharisee exalted himself, but the Publican humbled himself. The Publican did not even notice the Pharisee, but the Pharisee certainly did notice the Publican. “I thank you God,” he prayed, “that I am not like that Publican over there.” He was judging that man. The Pharisee was, by his attitude, seating himself at a table far better than the table of the Publican. And you and I are tempted daily to do the very same thing. Did you take a look at those with whom you are worshipping today? Is everyone here your equal...or above you? Or are there some whom you think are a notch or two below you? Perhaps they complain too much. Perhaps they are big talkers but never follow through. Perhaps you know their secret sins. And we’re tempted to seat ourselves at a higher place than they in God’s Kingdom.

And even if there are none in here who are beneath you, what about out there? Osama Bin Laden has been talking tough lately. Do you deserve a better seat in God’s Kingdom than he does? Or how about that bully at school who gets on your nerves? Do you deserve better than him? Do you become jealous when the teacher praises him instead of you?

The truth is, on a daily basis we judge others. When someone does better than us, we become envious. When someone does something awful and despicable, we think we’re better than them. We’re always judging others. In God’s Kingdom—at His wedding

feast—we are in the habit of choosing for ourselves seats of honor over those whom we think rank below us. If we work harder for the church than someone else does, we think we deserve a seat of honor over them. If we are better attenders, better givers, better at volunteering, we think our place at the table in God’s Kingdom should be higher up on the scale than where others sit.

But let us be careful when making such judgments, for as Jesus points out, there is always someone else who is more distinguished than us. If we are in the habit of comparing ourselves with others, and that becomes the criteria by which we judge ourselves, then we have become the Pharisee in the temple, and we have forgotten that our place in God’s Kingdom is only by grace.

The truth is that you and I do not even deserve a seat at God’s wedding feast. And if we think we do because we’re not as bad as some, and we’re better than most, then we have shown ourselves to be hypocrites...we really don’t mean it when we confess: “I, a poor, miserable sinner...deserve Thy temporal and eternal punishment.” Because when we say these words week after week, we are seating ourselves, not in heaven, but in hell.

The Publican said such words: “Be merciful to me, a sinner.” He humbled himself. He did not seat himself at the head table. He took the lowest seat...a seat in hell; for he knew that he deserved eternal punishment for his sins. But what does Jesus say? “He who humbles himself will be exalted.” That Publican went home forgiven. The Pharisee did not, for “he who exalts himself will be humbled.”

The point is...you will never stay where you sit down! If you seat yourself in hell by confessing your sins, God says to you: “Friend, move up higher.” “You are forgiven of all your sins; eternal life in heaven is yours.” But if you seat yourself in heaven thinking you deserve a place there, like the Pharisee, you will find no place for yourself in God’s Kingdom. You will perish in hell. You never stay in the seat where you sit down, because God always moves you either up or down. Up if you repent, and down if you do not repent. So where do you want to sit?

Well, let’s take a look at where Jesus sat. Here is God’s Son—the most “distinguished One” of us all; He who has no sin to confess; He whose seat is right smack in the middle of the head table—and He seats Himself in hell! Not so that He can move up higher, but so that you can. Jesus took your seat in hell by going to the cross in your place. He suffered your punishment. He endured God’s anger over your sins. He died the eternal death you and I deserved.

Do you know why, when you seat yourself in hell by confessing that you deserve hell for your sins—why God says to you, “Friend, move up higher?” Because Jesus took your seat there so that you can have His seat in heaven—right smack in the middle of the head table; where the bride and groom sit—because you are the Bride! Jesus shed His blood to purchase you for Himself. In your baptism He covered you with His innocence. That is your seat at the head table in God’s Kingdom because your Savior paid dearly to purchase that seat for you. He gave up all that He had to place you next to Himself as His Bride in the feast of heaven.

You and I do not do a thing to earn that seat. It's already yours in Christ! Can we lose that seat? Yes! By refusing to repent. By rejecting Jesus' claim on us. And so learn from the parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. Never exalt yourself before God. Always come before Him confessing your sins. For He promises to move you higher for Jesus' sake.

And He does. He commands your pastor to absolve your sins; to declare to you His words, "I forgive you. Friend, move up higher." He will not allow you to remain in the lowest seat, for Jesus earned for you a seat in heaven. Whether you have gossiped or murdered, lusted or stolen, been lazy or spiritually neglectful; whether you have dishonored your parents, or committed adultery, your seat is in heaven with Jesus—because your sins are all forgiven. You are all forgiven. To each and every one of you, for Jesus' sake, your Heavenly Father says to you today, "Friend, move up higher." Amen.