

Humility and Honor

¹ On a sabbath he went to dine at the home of one of the leading Pharisees, and the people there were observing him carefully. ... ⁷ He told a parable to those who had been invited, noticing how they were choosing the places of honor at the table. ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not recline at table in the place of honor. A more distinguished guest than you may have been invited by him, ⁹ and the host who invited both of you may approach you and say, ‘Give your place to this man,’ and then you would proceed with embarrassment to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ Rather, when you are invited, go and take the lowest place so that when the host comes to you he may say, ‘My friend, move up to a higher position.’ Then you will enjoy the esteem of your companions at the table. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted.” ¹² Then he said to the host who invited him, “When you hold a lunch or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your wealthy neighbors, in case they may invite you back and you have repayment. ¹³ Rather, when you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; ¹⁴ blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:1,7-14)



Jesus at Supper | Caravaggio (1606) | National Gallery London | PD-US

Keeping Up

On the journey to Jerusalem one of the principal themes has been that of discipleship. Much of Luke 12 attends to that theme especially in terms of preparedness and service. As Luke’s gospel narrative moves ahead, Jesus continues to teach about the nature of discipleship (see, judge, and act), the urgency of the decision to become a faithful and prudent disciple, and that our decisions and actions have consequences in terms of the kingdom of heaven. To that end, here is the recent progression of Sunday gospels. You’ll notice there are gaps and skips.

Luke	Pericope	Used as a Sunday Gospel
12:35-48	Watchfulness and Service	all used on 19 th Sunday

12:49-59	A Call for a Decision	only vv. 49-53 used on 20 th Sunday
13:1-21	Warnings to Repent	not used on Sundays
13:22-35	Prophetic Pronouncements	only vv.22-30 used 21 st Sunday
14:1-14	Conflict at Table	only vv. 7-14 used on 22 nd Sunday
14:15-35	Invitation to the Banquet	only vv. 25-33 used on 23 rd Sunday
15:1-32	Parables of the Lost and Found	all used on 24 th Sunday

Among the portions missing from the Sunday gospels are

- Jesus' call to read the signs of the times as well as one reads the weather in order that one may judge rightly (12:54-59)
- The parable of the fig tree that is permitted to remain in the vineyard for another season even though it has not yet produced fruit (13:1-9)
- A healing of a woman, afflicted for 18 years, who was healed on the Sabbath that Jesus might again teach the meaning of the kingdom of God (13:10-17)
- The parable of the mustard seed (13:18-21)
- The lament of Jerusalem's unfaithfulness (13:31-35)
- A healing on the Sabbath at table (14:2-6)
- The parable of the great feast (14:15-24)
- The cost of discipleship and the necessity of preparations (14:25-35)

Some of the verses missing from Sunday gospels are well covered in the gospels of daily Mass, but there are some great images (reading the signs of time, the fig tree, and others) that would be great to have for Sunday homilies.

That being said, one does well to remember and understand that these verses come after Jesus exhortation to strive to enter that place where are gathered "*Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob and all the prophets in the kingdom of God*" (13:28) (from last Sunday's gospel) and before the parable of the great feast (14:15-24) which speaks to the OT image of the kingdom of God as likened to a great banquet. The placement points out that the attitudes of discipleship in this life are reflected in the banquet of the kingdom of God.

In this week's gospel is at table. As Johnson [*Luke*, 223] notes: "If Jesus eats a meal with a Pharisee on the Sabbath, there surely will be conflict! During the meal Jesus addresses a fundamental attitude that is a constituent portion of discipleship: humility. This is not a new topic addressed to his disciples. Consider Luke 9:

⁴⁶ An argument arose among the disciples about which of them was the greatest. ⁴⁷ Jesus realized the intention of their hearts and took a child and placed it by his side ⁴⁸ and said to them, "Whoever receives this child in my name receives me, and whoever receives me receives the one who sent me. For the one who is least among all of you is the one who is the greatest."

Humility

This word comes into our language from the Middle English, via Anglo-French, from Latin *humilis* low, humble, from "humus" the word for earth. Webster's offers this as a definition

1. not proud or haughty: not arrogant or assertive
2. reflecting, expressing, or offered in a spirit of deference or submission
3. ranking low in a hierarchy or scale: insignificant, unpretentious –or : not costly or luxurious

Does this capture the biblical sense of "humility?" Humility comes from the Greek *tapeinoō* (make low, humble; EDNT 3:334). In its verbal and noun forms, the word occurs 18 times in the NT and describes appropriate human conduct before God. And yet the use of the word often has a passive aspect to it. For example, John the Baptist challenges his listeners to ready themselves for God's salvation by preparing the way of the Lord and making his paths straight. The decisive feature, however, must be performed by

God himself, for every valley will be filled (by him) and every mountain made low (by him), i.e., leveled. The salvific action begins with God's own actions. In this we are to humbly await actions from the Lord.

The statement "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*" (Luke 14:11; cf. 1 Sam 2:7; Ezek 21:31) occurs also in Mt 23:12 and Luke 18:9-13. In these three uses one begins to see that humility is, at its core, a response to a salvific action already begun by God. In Matthew humility is the response of one who responds as a servant (23:11). In Luke the humility of the guest (Luke 14) or the one in prayer (Luke 18) is that they know all is for God to offer, to give, and to answer. Outside the gospels, both James 4:10 and 1 Peter 5:6 exhort Christians to humble themselves so that God may exalt them.

In Philippians 2:8 the verbal use refers to Jesus' free decision to become a human being, which includes the path to death. In the death on the cross Jesus' humility is the very basis of our salvation. It is not a model to be imitated by Christians but rather the basis for Christian humility (v. 3).

In 2 Cor 12:21 Paul fears God will humble him upon his return as Paul feels responsible for the community as seen in his pride concerning them (1:14) and yet he knows that there are abuses and problems in the Corinth church (vv. 20, 21b). Perhaps Paul's pride was enmeshed in believing that his efforts had converted the Corinthians, only to be reminded that conversion depends ultimately on God (v. 21b).

All of these uses echo the OT exhortation that one is to develop a humble attitude of the heart (cf. Prov. 25:7; Joel 2:12-13; Is. 58:5ff.) so as to enter into a right relationship to God (Ps. 116:6).

In Luke 18:14 the humility of the publican sets him in a right relation to God. Mt. 18:4 adds the special nuance that abasement before God means becoming a child before him. Jesus asks for total trust in God that expects everything from him and nothing from self.

Biblically, "humility," (being humble) is indeed different from Webster's definition. Humility, at its core, is being in right relationship with God. We should strive to be more completely humble even knowing all the while that our conversion is accomplished by God's grace. And so we strive in this lifetime to accomplish His will, knowing that it is God who accomplishes all things through us – and in the process via our experiences come to even greater depths of trust in God.

Honor at Meals

The meal setting is common in many of the gospels as a metaphor for the celebration of the Kingdom's come. But it is also often a setting of controversy. Consider that 14:1-6 centered on the debate at table regarding the lawfulness of curing on the Sabbath – reminiscent of earlier discussions about appropriate behavior on the Sabbath (e.g., 6:2, 9; 13:14–16). When Jesus asks if it would be lawful to cure the man with dropsy, those at the table are silent. When Jesus next asks if their son or oxen fell into a cistern would they pull them out, again, they are silent. The easiest take on their reaction is that Jesus has them timid and stumped. But there was a long standing tradition for debate about the understanding of the Law. I would suggest that given Jesus' challenging questions, one would need time to think about the reasoning – and in the face of such challenging wisdom, perhaps there is a struggle for the host to figure out exactly where this wandering preacher from Nazareth should be sitting.

That dynamic then opens the way for Jesus' larger questions about honor at meals. Notice that vv.7-11, addressed to guests, is parallel to vv. 12-14, addressed to hosts, both showing a common pattern in which humility plays out.

As Culpepper points out:

1. to the guests
 - a. "When you are invited...do not recline...place of honor...the host...may approach you..."
 - b. "Rather, when you are invited...take the lowest place"

- c. “Then you will enjoy the esteem....”
 - d. the eschatological implications (v.11)
2. to the hosts
- a. “When you hold a lunch or a dinner....do not invite... in case...”
 - b. “Rather, when you hold a banquet...invite”
 - c. “blessed indeed will you be...”
 - d. the eschatological implications (v.14b)

In 14:1–24 Luke depicts Jesus’ enjoying the hospitality of a leader of the Pharisees following a synagogue service on the Sabbath (14:1). Given, first, the importance of social status as determined by the perception of one’s contemporaries, and, second, the importance of the reciprocity of gift and obligation in ancient society, Jesus’ assertions on right behavior undermine the values and expectations that his meal companions would have taken for granted. The consequences of this right behavior leads to the construction of a new vision of life and community.

Already in this banquet there has been controversy about healing on the Sabbath (14:2-6). Within this opposition and tension, Jesus continued to instruct about discipleship – especially among the culture where pride, shame and honor, and social position are such strong factors in shaping attitudes and behaviors – and so often leading to pride. Jesus regards this dynamic as destructive to spiritual health and so Jesus emphasized that true disciples are marked by humility. There are times when humility is a hard lesson but as parable (v. 7) shows he regards this attitude as fundamental to discipleship. At the same time the parable forms a rebuke to others at the table – and perhaps to his own disciples who had not yet fully learned from Jesus’ earlier rebuke in Luke 9:46-48.

Advice for the Guests

In a wedding banquet setting it was expected that power and prestige would be placed closest to the head of the table (see *Note* on 14:7 below). This was probably more formal than most meals, but the words apply to any banquet. Jesus points out the danger in pursuing seats of honor. He tells the story of a wedding where someone quickly grabs a high seat of honor. But then a person more distinguished walks in, and the host insists that the interloper vacate his position. At that point he may find all the other places occupied, so that the only course open to him is *to take the lowest place*, with all the shame and loss of face implied (cf. Prov. 25:7). So humiliated, the presumptuous one must head to the last seat. The description of the move down the social ladder is drawn out in Greek to underline the person's shame (you begin with shame... to head for the last seat) It is as if every step hurts.

However, if one chooses the lowest place, the only way one can go is up. Rabbi Simeon b. Azzai is reported to have advised guests to take a place two or three seats lower than that to which they were entitled: ‘Better that people say to you “come up, come up,” and not say to you, “go down, go down”’ (*Leviticus Rabbah* I.5).

Notice also the marked tone between the two responses of the host. When he asks the guest to move down from the place of honor, no term of address, respect, or affection is used. He merely says, “*Give your place to this man.*” However, when he invites the guest to move up, the words are markedly different in tone and language: “*My friend, move up to a higher position.*” To be acknowledged as the friend of an influential or important person was itself a particular honor.

But Jesus is not teaching banquet gamesmanship or giving a piece of worldly advice. Jesus’ parable does not point for the first person to take their place, two or three seats away in their proper place, but to take the “*lowest place.*” This should have echoed in the ears of the disciples as they recalled Jesus’ warning, “*For behold, some are last who will be first, and some are first who will be last.*” (13:30) Jesus is teaching people to be genuinely humble. He reminds us that the truly humble person will finish up where he ought to be and receive the honor that is due. It should be noted that the Greek used for “honor” is *doxa*, a word usually translated as “glory.” In following Jesus’ advice, we run no other risk than that of being exalted.

Honor is not to be grabbed; it is awarded. In the same way, salvation is not earned, it is a gift. Those who are truly humble recognize their desperate need for God, not any right to blessing.

Advice for the Hosts

Just as Jesus' fellow guests had occupied themselves in normal, honor-seeking pursuits upon arrival at the meal, so Jesus' host had followed ordinary conventions in putting together his invitation list. Invitations served as "currency in the marketplace of prestige and power" [Green, 552] for those whose framework was the world as we know it. Seen through the framework of the Kingdom of God, a different currency is the "gold standard."

Jesus expands the picture of humility by exhorting his audience to invite to their dinner table the needy and those who cannot repay such kindness. Hospitality should be open to all. This kind of reversal of expectations and status is thematic in Luke (e.g., 1:52; 6:20-26; 18:14). In fact, in the very next passage, our meal story continues with Jesus reemphasizing the notion of inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (14:21), this time in a parable representing the eschatological banquet of God, which will include just such marginalized ones, with the "invited guest list" being left out (14:24).

Jesus admonishes that, whether at the early meal/lunch (*ariston*) or the main evening meal (*deipnon*), hospitality should be shown not to the rich and famous nor to family members, but to those who cannot repay the favor. In ancient culture, the one who hosted a festive meal, as today, would be placed on the invitation list for future meals at the guests' homes. Jesus argues that such "payback" hospitality has no merit. The best hospitality is given, not simply exchanged in a kind of unspoken social contract.

Tannehill writes about this section (*Luke*, 230):

A formal dinner was a way in which an elite family (the kind of family who could afford such a dinner) proclaimed and maintained its elite status. The guest list was important, for the invitation indicated that one was accepted as a member of the elite. Family members and important people of the community needed to be honored in this way, and they would be expected to reciprocate. Jesus' instructions in verses 12-14 conflict with this social function of dinners. It might be a source of honor for someone to give charity to the poor, but it is quite another thing to invite them to a social function in place of family and people of wealth, and eat with them. By doing this, the host is dishonoring family and rich neighbors and in their place is honoring the poor; or, in the eyes of the elite, the host is dishonoring himself by identifying with the poor. Therefore, verse 11 may apply to what follows as well as to what precedes.

Those who invite family and people of status are exalting themselves by proclaiming their place in this group. Those who invite the poor and crippled are humbling themselves.

If God reaches out to all, then those who seek to honor God should reach out also. So the poor, crippled, the lame, the blind should be invited. (This list looks much like the list of Luke 7:22, with a few differences; it is repeated in Luke 14:21.) The poor and the powerless should be welcome. It is in this manner that one more and more becomes servant and thus disciple.

The point is that in doing good we should serve freely, without regard for our own prospects, leaving the recompense to God. This is the way Jesus went about doing good, emptying himself for others without counting the cost. There is Semitic exaggeration in the statement that one should not invite friends, relatives, and neighbors. The kingdom is for everyone, and our hospitality is to embrace all, especially those who are overlooked by most people.

Reflections

Alan Culpepper [287-88] offers these final thoughts

These are liberating words that can free us from the necessity of succeeding in our culture's contests of power and esteem. They free us from over-under relationships and the attitudes and barriers they

create, so that we may be free to create human community and enjoy the security of God's grace.

This commentary on ancient meal practices and social stratification makes two points. First, one should cultivate and practice humility, if only because it is a prudent means of avoiding embarrassment. The eschatological application at the end of each of the two sections drives home a deeper meaning. Although the practice of humility is proper and prudent for disciples, the kingdom of God will bring about an even more revolutionary reversal. The very standards and practices of discrimination will be overthrown. The outcasts will be accepted as equals. Those who live by kingdom standards and values now will not only bear witness to the kingdom but also will be rewarded in "the resurrection of the righteous" (v. 14). Righteousness, not social position or the esteem of others, should be our goal. God does not look on the glitter of our guest list. Instead, God looks to see that we have practiced the generosity and inclusiveness of the kingdom in our daily social relationships. One standard offers the reward of social position, the other the reward of God's favor.

The distinctiveness of Jesus' vision of the kingdom was nowhere clearer than in his protest against discriminatory meal practices. Jesus and the Pharisees ate differently. For Jesus, meals were times of celebration and an inclusive fellowship that foreshadowed the inclusiveness of God's kingdom. The last supper, therefore, not only pointed ahead to the eschatological banquet, but also it reflected on Jesus' meals with the disciples, Pharisees, crowds, and outcasts in Galilee. The greatest crisis the early church faced, moreover, was not the delay of the parousia but the burning issue of whom one ate with (see Acts 10:9–16, 28; 15:19–20; Gal 2:11–14). Perhaps it is time we learned new table manners.

Notes

Luke 14:7 *invited*: Besides the image of a meal, Luke 14 is interconnected by the word *kaleo* ("to invite") which occurs 10 times in vv 7-24. Paul uses the same word in terms of being called by God (see Rom 8:30; 1 Cor 1:9; Gal 1:6, 15; Eph 4, 4).

places of honor at the table: (*prōtoklisia*) At banquets the basic item of furniture was the couch for three, the *triclinium*. A number of *triclinia* were arranged in a U-shape round a low table. Guests reclined on their left elbows. The place of highest honor was the central position on the couch at the base of the U. The second and third places were those on the left of the principal man and on his right. After this there seems to have ranked the couch to the left (with the places as on the first couch), then that to the right of the first and so on. That there was variety of arrangements is probable, later Jewish writings speak specifically to this arrangement.

Luke 14:9 *Give your place*: Jesus' saying alludes to Ezek. 21:26, a text in which Yahweh castigates the "wicked prince of Israel" whose time of final punishment has come (21:25). In this midst of God's acknowledgement of the "humble," we should not lose sight of that He judges those who seek honorable status.

Luke 14:11 *For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, but the one who humbles himself will be exalted*: The allusion to the OT and Jewish texts in Luke 14:11 indicates that the assertion in v. 10 needs to be seen in a larger, eschatological perspective. The source of honor (*doxa* v.10) in God's kingdom is derived not from the social order described by affluent friends, siblings, relatives, or rich neighbors (cf. 14:12), but from the judgment of God who loves the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (cf. 14:13). Jesus emphasizes that God implements new values in his kingdom, values that differ from those that control the contemporary social world. The text asserts that the only reward one needs comes from God who is unimpressed with such social credentials as govern social relations in Luke's world. God acknowledges as guests in his kingdom only those who acknowledge their own poverty.

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