

## Searching for Honor

[Luke 14:1, 14:7-14](#)

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Worship at 9:15 and 11 a.m.

We live in a town and a country filled with people who are searching for honor. Polls tell us who is on top. Invitation lists tell us who wants to be seen with whom. Scores and statistics tell us who's the best. Right now not one official college football game has been played, but the AP poll is out telling us who the top 25 teams are. Now, my alma mater will never get on the AP's top 25 football teams, but it was recently honored by *The Princeton Review*...yes, Wheaton College in Illinois is ranked number one...that's right Wheaton is number one among all of the colleges and universities in the U.S. for...dining hall food quality.

And, not to be outdone, Washington D.C. has the honor of being number one in, well, giving honor. There are statues and monuments all over the place. Apparently someone counted them and discovered that we have more outdoor sculpture than any other city in the United States. We honor people, groups, events, often after we've vilified them and they are no longer around to experience the honor. But, we'll take honor wherever we can get it, won't we? Let us pray.

*Gracious Lord, as we hear your Word to us today, may we be able to see ourselves as you see us. May we be willing to learn what it means to humble ourselves before you, living as those who follow the example of Jesus, who laid aside every honor for our sakes. It is in His name, that we pray. Amen.*

Whether we will admit it or not, I think we all want to be honored. We want to know that someone values us. We may not care so much about public recognition, but we do want someone to think it's good when we're around. In this passage in Luke, Jesus tells us how that happens.

Jesus is at a Sabbath meal in the home of a prominent religious leader. Other religious leaders and lawyers are there as well. And they are watching Jesus. They want to know if he is going to observe Sabbath properly. Remember that last week Doug preached about another Sabbath story in which the leaders tried to get Jesus in trouble for healing on the Sabbath. They're trying again, so they've got their eyes on Jesus.

But Jesus has his eyes on *them*. He's watching them scramble to get the best seats in the house. You can imagine the scene – pushing, some shoving, some discreet shifting of position. Everyone wants to sit next to someone prominent because they can then bask in the reflected honor. So, Jesus uses this scene to teach a parable about what the seating arrangements will be like in the Kingdom of Heaven.

How do we know that this is about God's Kingdom and not just a bit of advice? Well, when Jesus uses the word 'parable' he is giving us a hint that this is, as they said when we were growing up, "an earthly story with a heavenly meaning" – a parable. Jesus is not just some Palestinian Miss Manners giving advice about how not to be embarrassed. He is not an executive coach teaching religious leaders and lawyers how to gain public recognition – they're pretty good at that anyway.

Also, when he tells them not to take the place of honor, he uses the word *doxa*, which is the basis for our word *doxology*. *Doxa* is usually used to refer to or point to the glory of God. So, those who are paying attention know that Jesus is telling us how very different life is (or should be) for those who belong to God's household. Jesus says that those who put themselves above others will be asked to move. I love the way he frames this – try to imagine how this might sound – "You know, someone actually more important than you might just show up."

And then notice what he says in verse 9. It's pretty blunt: *Give this person your place*. It's like a command to a servant. Your only option is to move to the lowest seat. Couldn't you just sit quietly slip somewhere in

the middle? Why do you have to go all the way to last place? Well, it's because everyone's been as ambitious as you and the only seat left is that one.

But notice the contrast to the one being invited to that seat – *Friend, move up higher*. Friend. You're the friend of the host. That's an honor. Jesus concludes this parable by letting us know that things will be reversed when He is the host of the meal. Those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.

Honor and shame were pretty important in this culture and they still are in many cultures. It was and is a way to keep things in order. Having a place and knowing where it was kept society from degenerating into chaos – at least that's what everyone thought. And they would do things we find strange in order to remind people of their proper status in life.

For example, Pliny the Elder records a time when he was the guest of honor and the host had three carafes of wine on the table. This was not, as we might think, three kinds of wine so that the guests could choose their drink. No. The first carafe was the best wine and it was for Pliny and his host – nobody else got even a sip. The second carafe was a mediocre wine – like the boxed wine you get at Safeway – and it was for the rest of the guests. The third wine was really bad – sort of an ancient version lower than Thunderbird -- and it was for the servants. This is not hospitality. This a liquid *Social Register*.

So, Jesus says that the answer to your desire for honor is humility. We have difficulty with this word. We might think of Uriah Heep in Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. Uriah is an obsequious little man whose greed moves him to fake humility as he tries to gain control of his boss' estate.

Or, we might think of those who are always putting themselves down, saying things like, "Oh, I couldn't do *that*. I'm just not that good." You know exactly what they want you to say in response. But you see, this kind of false humility is pride and self-centeredness wearing a disguise.

Humility is not a strategy for recognition. Nor is it the new business management tool that is being touted in some circles. True humility might help your business or your work, but it's no guarantee that your work will be successful. We need to understand what the Bible says about humility. According to the Bible, humility is not just a matter of how we regard ourselves. It is also a matter of how we see others and how we treat them.

There's a great story about humility in the Old Testament. It's about Moses and you can find it in Numbers, chapter 12. Moses hardly lacked initiative or boldness or bravery. Although he didn't seek it, when the Lord asked him to take a very risky leadership position he eventually said, "Yes." We pick the story up as the children of Israel are in their wilderness wanderings. They are grumbling against Moses. He's been used by God to bring them out of slavery, but now that's not enough. They want a leader who will give them the kind of food they had back in Egypt.

And then, in a case of piling on, his sister Miriam and his brother Aaron are ticked off because Moses has married an Ethiopian. One version of the text says that they complained about "*that woman*." Ever heard that phrase before? They are jealous and filled with envy that their baby brother is the one with status and power. They think, "Nobody likes Moses. We could do this a whole lot better." They claim that they, too, can surely speak for God as well. Then, in one of those Bible conundrums, verse three says that Moses (who is supposed to be the author of Numbers) says that Moses is the most humble man on earth. Bragging about being humble?

It reminds me of a time in my life when I was behaving especially obnoxiously and my husband gave me a beautiful certificate. It was a Humility Award. The small print on the bottom said that the reward would be revoked if displayed. So what is this verse about?

Well, it could be one of three things: (1) if it's true, it's not bragging; (2) a later scribe could have added it, knowing Moses' reputation – you know, honoring people we've trashed after they're dead; or (3) given some confusion in the Hebrew, it could mean that Moses was saying that because of all the things people saying about him, he was the most *humiliated* man on the face of the earth.

There may be some truth in this – there are times when you don't humble yourself. There are plenty of people who are willing to do it for you. You know what that's like – people at work criticizing your every move and wishing someone else (preferably they) were in charge. People in your family don't like the friends you hang out with...friends who are jealous of your success. Then when you hear Jesus say at an early point in his ministry that a prophet is not honored in his own hometown, you want to say to Him, "Lord, you got that right!"

What to do? We are not supposed to seek honor and yet we desire it. The times we should receive honor, it's denied for the most venal and selfish of reasons. How much energy does it take to get the honor you deserve? How much pain does it cause to keep grabbing for status or celebrity? How lonely are you willing to be in order to get what you want? Let's go back to Luke.

Remember, this story happens on the Sabbath. Also remember what you heard last week – Sabbath means – among other things – release from burdens. Last Sabbath a crippled woman was released from her condition and restored to a full life with her family and friends. This Sabbath, you are released from the burden of having to find honor on your own. Jesus says that if we humble ourselves – if we don't try to put ourselves in the place of honor – he will do it for us. And that's what happened to Moses. He became an honored prophet of Israel and, in both the Old and New Testaments is lifted up as a template for what the coming Savior will be like.

It's hard work trying get recognized, to get credit. Now we're not talking about the drive to do excellent work. We should seek excellence as part of the stewardship of God's gifts to us. We're talking about seeking credit whether you did the work or not...of striving for prominence, whether you deserve it or not. It's about that reputation you have to think about that won't let you invite certain people to the party. It's about being popular, even at the sake of walking away from friends who might embarrass you. Searching for that kind of honor that way will wear you out. It's a heavy load to shoulder.

But, we all want a place at the table, don't we? Well, Jesus has the table and Jesus has a seat for you. When you hear those words, "Those who humble themselves will be exalted," you should feel relief. You have given up self-seeking status and placed your life in the hands of God. You have forfeited control and let the Lord who created you and who loves you put you where you belong.

You can be set free from the burden of measuring your worth by the fickle and shallow opinion of those around you. You can be released from the forces of the culture that tell you that you have to have power, money, looks, popularity and good poll numbers in order to be honored. The good news of this Sabbath story is that God does not look on the glitter of your guest list or how close your parking space is to your office.

He looks on your heart that is totally and utterly dependent on him and he lifts you up. Rather than living in the uncertainty, unpredictability and undependability of public opinion, you can live in the certainty, the absolute certainty of God's unconditional acceptance and the total security of his grace. You have a place at His table. Thanks be to God! Amen.