

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. ...⁷ When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable:⁸ “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.⁹ If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.¹⁰ But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, ‘Friend, move up to a better place.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests.¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

¹² Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.¹³ But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,¹⁴ and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

What is a Humble Heart?

What is your reaction to people you consider to be arrogant? Not very positive, is it? Some people who don't like President Obama feel that he thinks he's smarter than the rest of us. When I was in 7th and 8th grade, we had a pastor that my mother didn't care for. She once said, “In his heart, he thinks he has no sin.” I myself have fallen into the trap of being much too quick to say what I think and not nearly quick enough to listen to other people's opinions. People do not appreciate arrogance. But if we're going to engage in a serious discussion of the sin of pride, we need also to talk about the opposite: humility. Jesus does that this morning. He relates the two and the thread that connects his thoughts in Luke 14 is humility. We need to understand the virtue Jesus is laying out before us. To do that, we'll consider a simple question: **what is a humble heart?**

I.

Jesus was at a dinner given by a Pharisee. People all over the world like to associate with the famous and noteworthy. Jesus was the most famous rabbi of his day. So he continued to get invitations to meals like this even from people who didn't like his teaching. Usually, others were invited, too. No doubt, the Pharisees who invited him wanted to show off the famous guest they could bring in. Jesus lived in a very class conscious society. People were very concerned about their position and the recognition that they commanded. So when they came to a formal meal like this, where they sat mattered. There was usually a head table where the host ate with the most important guests. And the tables closest to that head table held more important guests than those tables farther away.

Jesus noted how people maneuvered to get the highest possible seat they could. He reminded the other guests that sometimes, a person got there early and seized one of the choice seats at the head table, only to discover that someone more important had been invited. Then in front of everyone, the host would ask him to move down. Everyone else did not slide over one seat. They were all clinging to their seats. So the displaced man would be left to find whatever seat was open – invariably at the bottom of the pecking order. In that society, that was humiliating. Jesus urged the guests to avoid that humiliation by seeking the lower seats so that the host would invite them to go up higher and so honor them in front of everyone.

Jesus also had a comment for the host. He told him not to do what people normally do. They normally invited wealthy people, respectable people to meals in their homes. And they fully expected that when those people issued invitations, they themselves would receive one. But in that situation, the reciprocal invitation was the only reward they would receive. Instead, Jesus told him to invite the poor, the lame, the blind. In his day, there was no Americans with Disabilities Act. People who were blind and lame couldn't work. Usually that made them beggars. Jesus called the host and us to be generous with people who have no ability to pay us back and to trust that God will repay us “in the resurrection of the righteous.”

Now, I think we can see the connection to humility in Jesus' words to the guests. After all, he himself said, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”** But what does pride have to do with his comments to the host? Who do you invite to your home for dinner? Your friends, your family members – people that you expect to return the favor, right? And don't we often

expect that at some point, we'll receive a similar invitation ourselves? If we don't, we might even be angry or hurt. Do you see the pride there? Do you see how it would require humility to only invite people whom you knew could never return the invitation? Do you see how it would require humility to not care if people who are popular and who throw good parties, never invite you?

Humility is Jesus' point here. In fact, it's worth noting that the Bible says that Jesus told them a parable when he talked about pride in his advice about where to sit. Without that comment, it might be easy to see both of these observations to be self-seeking, cynical ploys – to get honor and to get a reward from God, this is what you should do. But the word parable invites us to look beyond the simple facts of the case and see the spiritual truth that Jesus is teaching. That truth is humility.

Jesus calls us to humility. He instructs us to turn upside down the normal human way of dealing with others. He teaches us to disregard what seems important here because we trust that God has something greater in store for us in heaven and because we trust that even here, he will turn the sacrifices we make in faith into blessings.

The question for us today is do we have that kind of faith? Do we trust God enough to put ourselves in second place? Our sinful pride is the greatest obstacle to living our faith because pride is all about me. Pride always asks, what's this going to cost me? What am I going to have to do? How much time, how much effort, how money am I going to have to spend? And what are people going to think of me when it's all done? Am I going to look like a leader and winner or like some unimportant schlep whose presence didn't even matter? Jesus' point this morning is that those are the wrong questions. We are not supposed to worry about ourselves at all. God calls us to trust him and turn upside down the natural way of looking at life. God calls us to trust him and be humble, because he loves us and has already sacrificed his Son for us and he promises he will always honor and care for us.

Do we trust him that much? Or do we have to admit that that sinner inside us is always raging about me and what I deserve and looking for the honor that I'm supposed to receive? Sinful pride is the default setting of our hearts. It's the essence of the unbeliever who still lives inside us. It's the way we were born and even after we come to faith, the unbeliever still lurks in our hearts. His pride corrupts all that we do, even our best efforts to serve God. So we all have to admit that we don't come close to living our faith in humility the way that Jesus calls us to. For that sin, we deserve death and hell.

But that's exactly why Jesus came. That is exactly why Jesus lived the life of perfect humility that ran from the moment he was conceived until the moment he died. Jesus lived that life for us. He was always the Son of God. But when Jesus came to this world and became one of us, he chose not to be born in a palace, but in a stable. He chose not to live as a prince, but to wander and to teach. He chose not to associate with the rich, but to minister to cripples and prostitutes and the most hated people of Jewish society, tax collectors. Finally, Jesus chose death on a cross. Not a hero's death in battle. Not a triumph that the people of his day could see and cheer about. But a death that looked like defeat. A death that Jew and gentile alike regarded as the most shameful way to die.

God did the most unbelievable thing here: he let Jesus' life stand in our place. So he lets his humility count for us. It's as if we really did live that way. And God let Jesus' death pay for all our pride and sin. Jesus wiped out all record of our pride. He erased all that we are guilty of and he rose to make sure we know that. Then he came to us in that gospel message and he gave us real trust in him. He came to us in the gospel and taught us to give up all thought of winning eternal life for ourselves and to depend on him for everything. To go back to our central question, **what is a humble heart? A heart that trusts in Jesus.**

II.

True humility is unnatural – at least in this sinful world. It simply does not and cannot exist in our hearts by birth or by our own effort. So we can never decide to trust in Jesus. God has to do a miracle in our hearts and give us faith. God has to reach down from heaven and crush the unbeliever inside us before we depend on Jesus in this life and in the life to come. He did that when he showed us our sin and then he showed us our Savior. That same miracle makes want to live the way that Jesus calls us to this morning.

Now we don't live in a society in which people are seated at banquets according to their importance. For us, sinful pride may show itself more in wanting to be with the movers and shakers at work. It may show itself in wanting to be part of the "in" crowd at school – with the guys that everybody likes and wants to be a part of. For us, it may come out in hanging around the people with money and power and in trumpeting our

own achievements so that people look up to us. We all have moments like that. We want people to see how smart our kids are. We want people to tell us how clever or dependable or friendly we are. We want to think of ourselves as indispensable at work, in the family, here at church.

God calls us to live differently – to live like Jesus did. He had a humble heart. Now, that does not mean that he was afraid to speak. Jesus often told people things they didn't want to hear. Being humble is not abdicating our responsibilities. A humble boss is still the boss. A humble husband is still the head of house. A humble parent is still God's representative in his or her home. But a humble heart gives all glory to God for what he has done. A humble heart doesn't need to be praised and it doesn't worry about whether people appreciate what we do because a humble heart trusts in God who knows better than we ourselves do what we have contributed and what we haven't. Above all else, a humble heart understands that on our own, we'd be on the road to hell. It's a gift of God's grace that we are on the road to heaven. It's a gift of God's grace that we have spouses who love us, children who enrich our lives, jobs that provide clothing and food and a place to live. We deserve none of it. And whatever honor we get in this life and whatever reward God gives us in the life to come, all of it is much more than what we deserve. A humble heart knows that.

Is your heart like that? If it is, then you know how to follow in Jesus' footsteps. You do what needs to be done. You show kindness without worrying about how much it is gonna cost you. You honor others and let God worry about how much respect you should receive. Is your heart like that? Is your life like that? Perfectly, no. They never will be here. But every time we hear the gospel, God increases our faith. So he grows our ability to be humble. When he teaches us truths like his call to humility, he's teaching us how to put into action the growth that he's giving us. **What is a humble heart? A heart that follows Jesus.**

Someone once told a pastor I know that because he was a pastor he didn't have to deal with as much temptation as ordinary people do. I suppose he meant that he didn't go to an office full of unbelievers and have to deal with their attitudes. The pastor answered, "You may be right about some kinds of temptation. But there are other kinds of temptation that are greater for me. The temptation to pride for one." We pastors stand up here and we talk for twenty minutes while you sit there and be quiet. Pride is always a real temptation for us. But pride is a severe temptation for you, too. We all want to be appreciated, to be recognized, to be rewarded. And we want to count the cost for kindness to those who cannot repay us. That pride is sin. It destroys faith and leads us away from God. But Jesus died and rose to take our pride away. And day by day, he teaches us to be humble – not in a sad and joyless way, or in a way that says we can never laugh or smile. Jesus teaches us to rejoice in God's love and to trust in his promises and to be free from slavery to pride. Humility in Christ is freedom from the power of the devil. May God renew in us that freedom every day. May we strive each day against the pride of our hearts. Amen.