

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 are You Looking For?

A year or two after we got married, Becky and I visited a Polish museum in Philadelphia. Of course, I visited the gift shop. I poked around in there for quite a long time – so long, in fact, that one of the clerks finally said to me, “What are you looking for?” I shrugged my shoulders and said, “I don’t know.” I just wanted something that reflected my Polish heritage for our home. But I had no clear idea what that would be. Does that ever happen to you? How about when birthdays or Christmas comes? I can remember going to toy stores with my wife a few weeks before Christmas because we needed to get gifts for all three kids, but we really didn’t know what we wanted. Sometimes we made desperation purchases just to get something.

What you’re looking for? That question goes much deeper than just shopping. When your children go to college and they have to choose a major, they have to ask what they want to get out of life. When a young couple is thinking about marriage, they have to ask what they expect their lives together will bring. Do they both want kids? Do they both want to stay in Michigan or move to California? But there’s an even deeper meaning than that, a meaning that Jesus pushes us toward today. He tries to get us to look into our hearts and see the force inside us that confuses our goals for this life. Whether you’re just starting in life or you’re getting close to the end, the question still matters: **what are you looking for?**

I.

Pride looks for honor only to be humiliated. Jesus invited us to look deep inside ourselves when he was at a fancy dinner. What Jesus saw there is a little outside of our experience. It was kind of like a very formal wedding reception, the kind where the family assigns seats to everybody. Only the wedding party sits at the head table. The parents and close family usually have tables very near that head table. The farther out you get, the less well connected to the couple you are. In Jesus’ day, it wasn’t about how closely you were related. It was about how important you were. People wanted to be seated in the best possible positions to make the case that they were important guests. So, Jesus gave a piece of advice: when you go to a banquet, don’t pick the best seats because someone more important than you might have been invited. The host might come to you and tell you to give your seat to that person, and then you’d have to go to the only open space: the lowest seat of all. Instead of being honored, you would be humiliated. Jesus offered the flip side advice: pick the lowest seat and then when your host tells you to move up, everyone will honor you as a truly important guest.

Was Jesus really concerned about good strategies for social advancement? Obviously not. He was pointing out that sinful pride drives us to do and say things that are designed to make us look good. Yet, again and again, they result in embarrassment and humiliation. How many of us can really take that lowest seat? How often don’t we see politicians mocked for the way they trip over their speech or the way they reveal their hypocrisy when they’re trying to sound smart and presidential? How often don’t we secretly hope that people who are pushing themselves forward get to eat a little bit of crow? Sooner or later, sinful pride trips us up.

But when Jesus said, **“For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted,”** he wasn’t just thinking of this life. He wasn’t just concerned about being humiliated socially. Jesus was talking about the heart of a Christian life. The key Christian virtue is humility. Someone

once told me, “I’ve always thought that’s what is wrong with Christianity.” I think her words sum up pretty well the way our society really works. As much as we don’t like it when other people are arrogant and self-serving, we almost can’t resist the temptation to push ourselves forward. Jesus was calling us to have a different attitude. To put God first in our lives. To let his Word decide what we hold to be true. To let his law decide the way that we’re going to live. To walk humbly before him as a servant walks humbly before his or her master.

How can anyone truly be humble before God? It takes trust. If you trust that your boss will always treat you fairly, you don’t need to constantly remind him or her of all you do. If you trust that your spouse will be kind to you, you can actually serve them – you can bring them a cup of coffee or let them sit while you do the dishes or look for an evening activity that they will enjoy. If you trust that God will always take care of you, then you can be humble before him. You can be humble before the people of this world. You can take the lowest station at a banquet or at church or in your job or in your family because God is watching and Jesus says that God himself will exalt true humility. When we get to heaven, God will say to you, “Well done, good and faithful servant. Take your place at my table and feast with me forever.” It might not happen here in this life, but God will glorify us. He will call us his children, princes in his kingdom, forever.

How is it possible to have that kind of trust and be humble before God? By focusing on the One who made himself nothing to save us. We don’t humble ourselves before God because we’re afraid God is going to smack us down if we don’t. We humble ourselves before God because that is following the way of Christ. The Son of God sat on the highest throne in heaven. He ruled the world. Saints and even angels bowed before him. But he stepped off that throne to be born in a stable. To live the life of a lowly human being. To be mocked and ridiculed by the high and mighty of his day. To go to the cross itself, to be condemned for nothing and to die there in our place. Jesus was so humble that it didn’t bother him that he was paying for our sins. He loved us. He trusted his Father. And he took our place. Now, all our pride and sin are washed away and we are holy in God’s sight. We are his children and he will love us forever. True faith trusts in that Savior enough to be humble just as he was humble. And God will exalt us.

II.

I had a lot of cousins growing up. I remember once when I was ten or eleven, one of the younger cousins had a handful of coins. I offered to give him a nickel for a dime. I didn’t think he’d do it, but I forgot that younger kids don’t always understand how coins work. He immediately saw that the nickel was bigger than the dime, so he was all in. At first, I kind of laughed about the good deal I had made. But then my conscience kicked in. But I couldn’t get him to take his dime back. He thought that bigger meant better. In the second part of our reading for today, Jesus turns from guests to hosts and he again asks us to consider what we hope to get out of this life. **What are you looking for? Pride looks for a reward that’s worthless by comparison.**

Jesus issued a challenge: when you put on a dinner, don’t invite your friends and family because they can repay you. Invite people who can’t repay you – the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Just like today, wealthy people often then had a social circuit. You would get invited to this house and then that one. Sooner or later, your turn to host would come up. Of course, it was expensive to host a big gathering but you would more than make up for it in the dinners you ate at other people’s houses. So, is Jesus saying that it’s a sin to invite your friends and family to your house for Christmas dinner? Is he obligating us to invite the guy begging on a street corner to come to our homes and eat with us? Not really. Rather, Jesus is pointing out that sinful pride focuses on getting ahead in this life. It looks for a reward here for all the good stuff we do. Not just getting invited back to someone’s house, but in general, don’t we think that we deserve to be treated in a certain way? Don’t we think that even God owes us a fair shake in life?

Jesus’ point is that all the rewards of this life are like trading dimes for nickels. Or maybe better, trading solid gold Krugerrands for pennies. The best reward of this life is nothing compared to **“the resurrection of the righteous.”** It’s nothing compared to the praise we will hear when Jesus looks back over our lives and ignores every moment of sin and weakness and he treats all our good deeds as if they really were good. You and I, of course, know all too well how limited our best efforts are. Sometimes, we do good things just for the reward of being praised. We want people to tell us how selfless we are. Or we want the reward of feeling good about ourselves. And we think that is serving God.

It’s not. It’s serving ourselves. But that’s why Jesus came. He took even that sin away when he died and rose. And he remade us in that message of forgiveness. Jesus put a new believer inside us who really

wants to serve God. Who truly is humble and doesn't worry about what we'll get for all our efforts. That believer does not even serve God to get the reward in heaven. We already have heaven. God gave it to us on the day he gave us faith. The believer inside us just wants to say "Thank you" to God.

So which one is winning in your life? Aren't there lots of times when it feels like the sinner inside us is on top? Even when the believer brings us to church or leads us to help those who are in need, that unbeliever is always there, trying to make it all about me. We can't ever get away from him. But because Jesus lived for us, God sees Christ instead of us. God calls us holy and perfect, just like Jesus was. And every time God reminds us of that, he strengthens that believer inside us who wants to be the person God calls us to be.

Do you remember the game show *Let's Make a Deal*? Just in case you're younger than fifty: on *Let's Make a Deal* people would dress up in silly costumes and try to get the host, Monty Hall, to pick them. Then they would do some simple little contest to get a prize. Once they had that prize, Monty would offer them a deal. He'd offer to trade that prize for whatever was behind the curtain on stage number two or hidden inside the box in front of him. The person would have to decide what was better, the prize they already had or the one they couldn't see yet. What were the contestants looking for? The big prizes, right? A new car. A trip to Europe. What are you looking for in life? The big prize, right? A nice house. A beautiful family. A comfortable lifestyle. Well, no prize is bigger than life with Jesus forever. Once you have that prize, it changes your life here. It leads you to be humble and generous. But if you can't escape from the rewards of this life, if you can't escape from the need to be popular and honored and rich here, you're in danger of trading the big prize for a cheap little joke gift. That's why Jesus warns us today to remember what really matters and focus on him and his gift of forgiveness and love and eternal life. Focus on the gospel and it will bring you the ultimate reward. Amen.