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Luke 14:1,7-14

PLEASE NOTE JESUS' PROPER TABLE ETIQUETTE

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Quite a number of you will remember the television show, "The Beverly Hillbillies." It was a very popular comedy fifty years ago. Jed Clampett discovered oil and became a very rich man. He and his family moved to Beverly Hills, California. It was a clash of cultures as Jed and his family tried to figure out all the new-fangled inventions like the doorbell. Every time music played, someone would come to the door. They ate on the pool table, the "fancy-eatin' table, and the pool cues were the pot passers as Granny passed around her roadkill possum stew. Their manners were not what the snooty Mrs. Drysdale wanted to see at social functions.

The matter of manners and social etiquette is really not stressed today. It almost seems like the hillbillies have won the war. Some of you remember that every newspaper had daily columns on proper manners and etiquette. What should I do if I am invited to a fancy dinner? What fork and spoon do I use? How do I properly reply to the invitation? Many people today don't think of such things. They don't respond to invitations. Even though they can send in a self-addressed card or e-mail or text or call, they choose to do none of the above. If you've ever had a son or daughter getting married, you know what I mean. People don't send thank you cards when they receive a gift. People often dress inappropriately for special occasions like weddings and funerals. They don't know table manners. And above everything else, they simply don't care. This is nothing new. There were many problems in Jesus' day as well. PLEASE NOTE JESUS' PROPER TABLE ETIQUETTE for guests and for hosts!

We see that Jesus was invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee for a Sabbath meal. He was a very important man, a member of the Sanhedrin, the highest ruling body of the Jewish people. Now we would like to think that the invitation extended to our Lord was an act of pure kindness. He and his friends were interested in what Jesus had to say. Perhaps this Pharisee wanted Jesus to have that impression. That was not the reason that he was invited. Other Pharisees and teachers of the Law were also invited and we hear that Jesus "was being carefully watched." They did not come to listen to him. They didn't want to hear his precious words of life. They wanted Jesus to do something or say something for which they could put him to death.

Jesus noticed how the guests scrambled to get the places of honor at the table. The Jews, like many Oriental people, reclined on couches at the table. These couches held three or more people. The choice places were those at the left end of each couch because the guests in those places had the best view of the host and the other guests. They would push and shove to get the best places because they thought that they deserved them. Similarly they looked for the best places in the synagogue.

Jesus would once more speak in a parable. "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. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say, 'Give this man your seat.' Then humiliated, you will have to take the least important place." Jesus purposely chose a wedding feast because many guests would be present. Imagine if you were invited to a wedding and you decided that you would sit at the head table right next to the groom, the place reserved for the best man. You were sitting there when the bridal party arrived and came in for the dinner. All the guests were watching. How humiliating it would be for someone to come up to you and say, "I'm sorry! This place is reserved for the best man!" You would then

have to get up in front of everybody and move somewhere else, probably to one of the tables farthest away. You would be walking with your head down, totally embarrassed and humiliated.

Whoever assumes that he must have the place of honor above all others is conceited and proud. If he is the most distinguished guest, he can expect that the host will direct him to his place of honor. But simply to assume it can result in disgrace. In itself, it is not a disgrace to sit at the lowest place at a wedding feast. It is an honor to be there at all. What causes the disgrace is that the invited guest proudly seeks a place of honor that he then must give up to another in front of all the guests. His pride has been revealed and he is then shamed.

Jesus was doing more than correcting bad table manners. "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." Jesus was not counseling the Pharisees then nor us today to play the role of humble people for the express purpose of being honored. The Pharisees' habit of claiming places of honor at feasts was only a symptom of a serious spiritual sickness.

They viewed themselves as much better people than the others in Israel, the kinds of people that Jesus usually ate with: tax collectors, prostitutes, sinners, every day people. They felt that God would surely honor them as true sons of Abraham, deserving of all earthly blessings and certainly entitled to the best places in heaven. In their selfish pride they despised Jesus. They would never accept a lowly man like him as their Messiah. They hated him with every fiber of their being. They refuse to see their sins of pride and self-righteousness.

Jesus said, "For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." It wasn't only the Pharisees who had that attitude. Jesus' own disciples would often argue as to which of them was the greatest. Who deserved the places of honor at Jesus' right hand? On the very night that Jesus was betrayed a dispute broke out among them over this very thing. It was Jesus who got down on his hands and knees and washed their dirty feet. How about you? We all think of ourselves as better than some others. We don't put ourselves in the same category as murderers, thieves, robbers, rapists, child molesters and drug pushers. Perhaps we don't put ourselves on the highest plane, but we don't put ourselves on the lowest either.

True humility is a way of life. It comes from knowing that we are all by nature damned sinners who have nothing to offer God but our sins. We deserve nothing but God's punishment. But God in his love and grace has freely pardoned us for Christ's sake. We rejoice because of what Christ did for us.

Jesus humbled himself so that we might ultimately become exalted. He left the glories of heaven and became one of us. He took upon himself the very nature of a servant. He would suffer the worst disgrace, dying a criminal's death on the cross to take away our sins. In doing so he would be exalted. He would be raised to the right hand of the Father. He would be King of kings and Lord of lords. The stone that the builders rejected would become the capstone.

Jesus now turns his attention to his host. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid." The Pharisee had invited his "own kind" to the dinner, other Pharisees and teachers of the Law, people who were wealthy and looked up to in the community. He would never have thought of inviting the kind of people that Jesus would often associate with. That would be foolish and embarrassing to him. Can you imagine what his friends would have thought if they saw some of "those kinds" of people there at his house? He would expect to be invited when one of his own kind invited the same group for a meal at that person's home. No doubt this closed, select group would keep up the invitations until all the rounds had been made. But they would invite only those who would be able to repay the

invitations – rarely any others. They were hoping, of course, to get some pretty nice invitations to some pretty nice houses with plenty of good food lavished upon them by their hosts.

Now there is nothing wrong with inviting friends, relatives and neighbors to a social gathering. Jesus is warning against giving only where there is hope of receiving something in return, only to those who are able to repay our acts of friendship and hospitality. The Apostle Paul spoke of true love in I Corinthians when he said, “Love is kind; love is not self-seeking.” Kindness practiced with an eye out for a return favor is not genuine kindness. Love displayed in the hope of gaining a material advantage or profit for ourselves is no love at all.

“But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” Love, worthy of the name, goes out spontaneously, freely to all without a thought of getting repaid. It is a pure, unselfish love.

Our love to others can never be as great as God’s love to us, but it can be like God’s love. We give freely of ourselves, our gifts, and our material goods to others who cannot repay us. Think of the devastation in the flooding of Baton Rouge, Louisiana. We have the opportunity to help people who have been displaced by sending money for supplies. There is always a tragedy where people need help, whether in some faraway place in the world, here in our nation or even in our neighborhood. There is always a need for people’s time, monetary resources, prayers, blood and many other things. As we give, we do so not in the hope of somehow being repaid, but simply because people need our love. We are to love even those who do not love us so much so that they can see our faith and love.

Jesus gives us his promise that we will be blessed and only later repaid. He says this to rule out and kind of expectation of a reward for our acts of love and kindness. Being blessed should be good enough for us, and it is. It is never a reward of merit; it is a reward of grace. God sees what we do. On the Last Day he will mention our works of love as the fruit of our faith, as evidence that we trusted in him. We are righteous, not because of anything that we have done, but because we have put on the perfect righteousness that Christ has won for us.

We practice humility. We practice Christian charity and love. We love because Christ first loved us. Note Jesus’ proper table etiquette and practice it! AMEN.