

**+ Luke 14:1, 7-14 + Where Do I Sit at His Table?<sup>1</sup> +  
+ 15th Sunday after Pentecost + 6 September 2015 +**

Why does it seem like Jesus cares about where you sit at a wedding banquet or who you invite to a dinner party? Perhaps a similar question crossed your mind when you heard Luke 14 earlier. Is Jesus being like Miss Manners this morning? “Forks are always on the left. Spoon and knife are always on the right. Always lay a napkin across your lap. Make polite conversation with other guests, but stay away from politics and religion. When you are at a wedding make sure that you sit at your assigned seat and do not take the seat next to the bride or groom unless you are the best man or maid of honor. About inviting people to parties...”

Perhaps you got the same impression from the other Scripture lessons. Is the lesson from Proverbs really about how to avoid a social *faux pas* the next time you stand before a king or head of state? Is James really reminding you not to treat people in shabby clothing in a shabby way? Maybe now you’re even wondering if Pastor is going to preach about good manners and being polite to other people, but is that really the point? Are good manners really the reason why Jesus speaks of seats and guests or is he trying to teach us a heavenly truth with his earthly advice? Why does it matter **WHERE I SIT AT HIS TABLE?** Let’s take a closer look and find out!

It was a challenging time in Jesus’ life and ministry. He had been publicly preaching and teaching for the past three years. He had burst on to the scene with amazing miracles and powerful preaching like no other rabbi. Soon he became quite popular among the people especially among those who were the outcasts, the rejects, and the despised in society. Time and again Jesus demonstrated tremendous, self-sacrificing love for people who were struggling, hurting, stuck in a rut of sin and guilt, and helpless.

At the same time, Jesus was willing to call out those who were considered the spiritually “elite”—the Pharisees. He didn’t despise them. In fact, he loved them just as much as the lowly. He even wept for them when they rejected his invitations, but his love for their souls resulted in sharp words that popped their egos like so many self-righteous balloons.

So you can imagine why it wasn’t long before many of them started opposing Jesus at every stop, every town, every teaching opportunity. The opposition grew even more stubborn when Jesus began a final journey to the city of Jerusalem. Along the way, a **“prominent Pharisee,”** a religious leader among the people, invited Jesus to a dinner party one Sabbath Saturday.

Jesus accepted the invitation, but it wasn’t going to be easy. He **“was being carefully watched”** from the moment he got there. You see, Jesus was a very popular, yet polarizing person at that time. You could say that news of his miracles and preaching had gone viral. He would be right up there at the top of trending lists all over the internet because everyone was talking about him—and everyone had their own opinions about him.

The guests at that dinner were sizing him up and forming their own opinions. “Does this Jesus measure up to my expectations? Does he meet our standards? Does he really fit here or should we sweep him out like dust on the floor?” They wanted to know if Jesus was really worth all the hype.

Yet for all their careful watching, none of them noticed what Jesus was actually doing. He was watching them. More specifically, **“he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table.”** It looked so foolish. Here you have a group of religious leaders—the spiritually “elite”—elbowing and side stepping and hip checking each other to get the most important seats at a dinner party in Galilee 2,000 years ago. You can almost see them trying to slip past each other without being obvious all while they basically play a game of dinner party musical chairs. It was all pretty ridiculous.

They looked so foolish to Jesus that he told them a parable. This wasn’t a Mr. Manners lecture on properly taking your seat, but a parable where Jesus used what they knew to teach them God’s way. Imagine going to a family wedding and Great-Uncle Ted decides that he doesn’t want to sit back near the kiddie table where he was assigned. No, he wants to sit right next to the bride and groom. Then the best man shows up and Great-Uncle Ted has to make the walk of shame all the way from the head table to the kiddie table because someone else took his seat. It’s a funny story, but why does Jesus care about seating at a wedding banquet?

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<sup>1</sup> Some of the thoughts and language from this sermon were received with thanks from a 2010 sermon by Pr. Joel Seifert. <http://www.shiningmountains.org/home/180004014/180004014/docs/2010.09.05%20Luke%2014.pdf>.

To be honest, he doesn't, but Jesus is trying to teach a heavenly truth. It's not really about good manners and how you look in the eyes of others, but about a humble spirit in God's eyes—and it sounds all too familiar. We're not as far away from a Galilean dinner party as we might think we are.

You have your own ways how you see yourself and how you see others. You may even spend a lot of time wondering how others see you, but we're really no different than the Pharisees at that dinner party. You look at yourself and maybe think, "I'm a good person—not a perfect 10 in God's eyes or even an 8, but that's still pretty decent. I grew up in a Christian home. I haven't committed any of the "big" sins out there. I go to church on Sundays—even bring my family along! Look at what I do for the church! Surely God would want someone like me at his dinner party!" It's easy to think that way, isn't it? You might even believe it for a while, but then Jesus comes along and pops your self-righteous balloon with these sharp words: ***"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled..."***

Something comes along and shakes your self-confidence to its foundations. Maybe you fall back into a particular sin that you thought you had beaten long ago. Maybe you look into the crying eyes of someone you love and finally realize that your little lies have done some pretty big damage. Maybe you realize that your refusal to forgive someone else for their sins against you makes you a proud hypocrite, and not the kind of person God would have in his heaven, let alone a guest at his dinner party. In fact, that's the kind of person whom God says deserves hell. ***"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled..."*** Suddenly you find yourself making the long walk of shame away from God's table altogether.

No sooner does Jesus humble us, but then he tells us, ***"...And he who humbles himself will be exalted."*** When God shows you that you are no better than anyone else, when you realize how unlovable you really are in God's eyes, Jesus says something strange. He calls you not "sinner" or "outcast," but Friend. ***"Friend, move up to a better place."***

A better place? You and I deserve that walk of shame away from God's table, but here Jesus personally takes you someplace better. It's not the wood of a banquet table, but the wood of a cross. As Jesus takes you there, he tells you, "Friend, come to my cross. Come and see this better place where I took away all your sins. Here I gave up everything for you. Here I humbled myself for you, because you did not humble yourself for me."

Suddenly there at that place of shame, Jesus honors you because there he made you holy in God's sight. There God calls you his child—not his enemy or an outcast or a reject, but his own child. God does this because he loves you more than you could ever love yourself. So there at the cross, you have the best seat you could ever have—a seat at the wedding banquet of the Lamb of God, a seat at God's table. What better seat could you have?

Where you sit at God's table is more than just having a place at that table, it also means living a life that reflects that reality. It doesn't mean falling back into the old trap of looking down your nose at others who don't have a seat at God's table. No, instead you live as one who wants more people to join you there. Listen to what Jesus told 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. 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."***

Jesus isn't asking you to go out and open a food pantry or a rescue mission, but he wants your words and actions to reflect your love for others not because of what they can give you, but because of what God has given you. That will then be reflected in what you do with your money, what you do with your food, what you do with your time and talents and everything God gives you.

There's even more than helping out the physically hurting or those in need. You see, you are a guest at God's heavenly banquet. You have a seat guaranteed by an invitation signed with the blood of Christ. Yet did you know that even though you're not the one throwing the party, you can still have a great impact on God's guest list? Think about it. Who can you invite? Who are the spiritually poor and needy in your life? Who doesn't know about their true value in Christ and tries to fill that void in all kinds of other ways? Who's crippled by hopelessness or blinded by sin? Invite them.

Just like Jesus served you, humbly serve them by inviting them to find out about this Savior who gave you a seat at his table. That might mean inviting them to worship or Bible study or Sunday School or it might mean simply sitting around your living room and talking about what really matters and why they really matter to God.

With God's help, you can help them see that there is a better place at God's table—at the cross of Christ—for them too.

So where do you sit at God's table? As much as I'd like to think that God would beg me and others like me to be guests at his wedding banquet, the truth is, the only way I have a seat at God's table is through Christ and what he did for me on the cross. I deserve nothing. He gives me everything. Someday you and I will finally get to take our places at God's table rejoicing in that undeserved love. Until then, we live each day humbly serving our gracious Host and letting his love flow through us to many others that they may join us at the heavenly banquet. God grant it for Jesus' sake. Amen.