



[Pastor Steven Billings](#)

Sermon for Pentecost 12
August 28, 2022

Self-Importance

Luke 14:1–14

¹ One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ² And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. ³ And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” ⁴ But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. ⁵ And he said to them, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” ⁶ And they could not reply to these things.

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, ‘Give your place to this person,’ and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

If there’s one thing that each of us has a tendency to do, it’s to exaggerate our own importance and to look to our own works as the source of our importance. This was certainly the case with the Pharisees in today’s Gospel. What we find in these verses from Luke 14 is a lesson on knowing our place as the children of God.

Each of us, in his own way, behaves much like the Pharisees in our text. We all want to sit in someone else’s place and look more important than we are, and when we’re caught in this temptation, everyone else – including God – gets shoved into the back seat.

This honoring of ourselves above others takes on many forms. I know two little girls who will fight over who gets to sit next to Ama and debate about who gets to go first when playing “I spy with my little eye.”

But children aren’t the only ones who do this, are they. Adults may be a little more sophisticated, but the motivation is the same. Have you ever “taken charge” of a situation because it allowed you to assert your importance? Have you ever manipulated or controlled people, events, or information because it made you feel more important?



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We also have this tendency to keep track of our “good works” in order to prove to others – not to mention ourselves – that we are worthy of praise and esteem. We may even go so far as to make ourselves look good by making other people look bad. “Well, I know I’m a sinner, but at least I’m not like so-and-so. Did you hear what she did? No? Well, let me tell you . . . !”

The pinnacle of this attitude of “self-importance” is seen, of course, when we decide that we don’t need God or His Word – when we claim the “right” to choose for ourselves what’s right and wrong, what we should or shouldn’t do – based on how we feel about it, rather than on what God says about it in His Word. “I *feel* I’m a good Christian, I *feel* very close to God, and I don’t *feel* like I’m doing anything wrong.” This, beloved, is nothing less than an effort to sit in a place of honor where we don’t belong. It’s a 1st Commandment issue in which we attempt to bump God off His throne and install ourselves there in His place.

Pastors, by the way, are as apt to fall into this sin as anyone. I’ve noticed, for example, that when an important banquet is being given, where high ranking church officials and theologians are gathered, there are pastors who jockey for positions to sit with or near the more popular personalities. And, just when I start thinking critically about those who scramble for the best seats, I find myself hoping that there’s one more place left for me.

But, in the kingdom of God, we no longer need such things to feel good about ourselves or to be important. We’re no longer captive to a life of “looking out for number one.” In fact, in God’s economy, things actually work backward from this. Jesus tells us in this parable that “everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Our text opens with Jesus going to the home of a Pharisee for a dinner party. Our Lord had become a very popular teacher, and while He was not well liked by the religious leaders of the day, He was well honored by the people. So, this Pharisee invited Jesus to his home, so that he and his friends could look Him over. In fact, verse one tells us that they were watching Jesus carefully. Usually, this means that the religious leaders were hoping to catch Jesus teaching or acting wrongly, so that they could discredit Him and put an end to His popularity, to His place of honor.

But they weren’t the only ones watching; Jesus was watching, too, and He noticed how they all hurried to find seats near the host and his honored Guest. So, when the opportunity arose, Jesus told a little parable, which just so happened to be about people securing for themselves the best seats at a banquet. Then He spoke a personal word to His host, advising him not to make it a practice to invite guests who could return the favor, but to invite those who were unable to give in return. “You will be blessed,” He said, “because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

In this one setting, then, Jesus is teaching about two complementary things: good works and self-importance. He teaches the guests not to presume that they deserve



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places of honor and He teaches the host that a truly selfless deed – a truly good work – holds no expectation of return.

But, here's the interesting thing about truly selfless deeds: There's *always* a return, but it's not expected and has no bearing on the doing of the work.

What, would you say, is the greatest selfless act ever done among men? Isn't it the one Jesus did for us? He gave Himself completely, held nothing back. And what could we possibly have given Him in return? There's nothing we have that He didn't give us in the first place – apart from our sin. There's nothing of value we could ever give Him that He doesn't already have a zillion times over. So, nothing He did was for personal gain; it was all for us, entirely for us. As Paul wrote to the Philippians (2:5-8): "Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." And yet . . .

. . . there *was* gain; He did receive something back for what He gave. What was it? *Us!* Your Lord Jesus Christ humbled Himself and gave Himself for *you*, so that He could invite *you* to His banquet. He took the lowest place, incurring the wrath and judgment of the ultimate Host: God, so that you could be invited to sit in the highest place.

What impact ought this to have on our lives? Paul writes in Romans 12:(16, 17): "Live in harmony with one another. Do not be haughty, but associate with the lowly. Never be wise in your own sight. Repay no one evil for evil, but give thought to do what is honorable in the sight of all."

Martin Luther called pride the most common vice in the church. It's the reason, he said, why lay people often do not yield to their pastors when they should and why pastors refuse correction when they need it. To this sinful pride Luther rightly attributed both the lack of good works and erring teachers. Jesus didn't bring us into His church so that we could fight for the positions of honor and praise. He brought us into His kingdom so that we would know our place and gladly live and serve in it.

Luther wrote: "The Gospel was not given that we might seek our own praise and glory . . . or that the common people might praise us, its ministers, on account of it. But it was given so that through it the blessing and glory of Christ might be illuminated, that the Father might be glorified in His mercy, which He has shown to us in Christ, His Son, whom He gave up for us and with whom He has given us all things. Therefore, the Gospel is the sort of teaching in which the last thing to look for is our own glory. It sets forth heavenly and eternal things which do not belong to us, which we have neither made nor earned." In other words, to serve others with a Christlike heart, is not to ask, "What's in it for me?" We serve because that's what Christ did. It's what He enables us to do by the power of His Spirit. It's who we are and what He has made us by serving us as no one else has ever served anyone.

That said, as there was for Christ, so there is for us a return, which brings us to the last verse of today's Gospel, where Jesus tells the host to invite those who cannot pay him



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back and says, “You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” Here’s the point: The selfless acts of the believer will be repaid . . . but in ways only God can do. He may choose to repay your selfless deeds through the actions of His people today – as you become the “other” served by a brother or sister in the Faith – or He may reserve your recognition for the Last Day – when you learn of selfless deeds done by you that you didn’t even know about.ⁱ

The good news from this Gospel is that we have all been invited to the Lord’s dinner party so that we can feast on the fruit of His gracious, most selfless acts on our behalf through His Word and Sacraments. After all, it is our Lord Jesus Christ who honors each of us by giving us a seat at His table, where He serves us with the fruit of His cross – His very body and blood. Having feasted at His banquet, then, we in turn serve and honor others because He has served and honored us. And even this serving is an honor and privilege, for He has given us our vocations and continues to call us through the Gospel to live and serve in His church.

We children of our heavenly Father, brothers and sisters of Jesus, have received the honor of God simply by being His redeemed children. We have no need to act as the world acts. We needn’t waste our time trying to be first. Instead, we can bask in the joy of serving and loving one another as Christ serves and loves us.

Let us pray: Father in heaven, help us to know our place in Your kingdom on account of Your Son, each of us having been invited by the Master of the banquet to a higher place, who, by faith are now co-heirs of the kingdom. And lead us by Your Spirit to know the joy You alone give when, having been served by You, we in turn serve You by serving one another. In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen

- i. Jesus teaches in Matt. 25:37-40: “The righteous will ask Him, ‘Lord when did we see You hungry and feed You, or thirsty and give You a drink?’ And the King will answer them, ‘I tell you the truth, anything you did for one of My brothers here, even the least important of them, you did for me.’”