

⁷Now 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, ⁹and 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. ¹⁰But 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. ¹¹For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." ¹²He 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. ¹³But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." ~ Luke 14:7-14

Brothers, when you come to Presbytery next week, who will you seek to spend time with? Why? Jesus gives us food for thought about such questions in Luke 14.

I have only flown first class once in my life. But it was not exactly a luxury flight. I was packed onto a 747 with the rest of the 3rd Battalion, 7th Infantry, on the way to Desert Shield in 1990. Our unit, the 24th Mechanized Infantry Division, was the first heavy division deployed to stop a threatened invasion of Saudi Arabia by Saddam Hussein and we were flown over in a hurry.

On the way there we made one stop at some random airbase in Germany. It is the only time I have ever been in Germany and I can't even tell you where it was. But I do remember that at this airbase other American troops who did what they could to take care of us. They provided cots, fed us snacks, and loaded us up with insect repellent and sun block (neither of which we used). They greeted us, cared for us, and then sent us on our way. We never saw them again.

What about these troops in Germany? Did they provide us a valuable service on our way to war? Did they also serve? All they did was man a way station. I have often thought about them as I pastor a church in a college town. Like many of you, we see tremendous turn over every year. The core members of our church pour themselves out into folks who will be here just a few years and then are gone. We send them off to other places and other churches. In many ways, we are just a way station. But the same is true for every church if we see clearly what we are about.

In Luke 14, Jesus gives clear guidance to how we should conduct our lives and ministries. He does so in two parts, each half wrapped around the axle of verse 11. Did you notice that? The first half of the text instructs how to act when invited to a feast, while the second half tells us what to do when we are the ones who throw the feast. But both lessons are wrapped around this theme verse: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted." This is one of three times in the gospels where Jesus states this idiom, each time in a different context. If nothing else, the very fact that Jesus uses this same phrase to teach three different lessons teaches us the centrality of humility to the work of the Gospel. (The others are Luke 18; and Matthew 23, both of which deserve their own study. Look them up.)

So, how do we apply this humility to our lives and careers? First, Jesus tells us how to act when we find ourselves in the nether regions of the Totem Pole; when we are kept outside of the Inner Circle. Say at an awards banquet, or in a committee meeting, or at presbytery. I remember going to church conferences as a recently fired pastor with no other prospects on the horizon. It's funny how quickly ministers can end a conversation once they figure out that you have nothing to contribute to their own situations.

Well, when we find ourselves in such a position, what should we do? He tells us: do not promote yourself but wait until you are invited up. Trust God. Be content with the position and the influence He has given you, knowing that man does not see how God sees. Otherwise, the widow's two mites would amount to nothing. But in God's sight, they are a fortune.

So use your gifts, plow your field, and trust God that if He wants to give you more influence in this world, He will. But none of us know the labyrinths of God's plan, of why He has anyone where He does. If you think you do, just read Ecclesiastes one more time. In the meantime, don't invite yourself up until God does. If you are like me, and struggle with always wanting more influence, or desiring a group of men to respect your work, then I can recommend no better reading than CS Lewis' little essay, *The Inner Ring*. Read it and ask God to purge you from this idol. I wish it were required reading for all ministerial candidates everywhere – especially in the PCA which is riddled through with various Inner Rings (none of which I am in obviously, or I would not complain of them).

Then after all this, Jesus turns the situation around, to when you are the one in a position of influence. You are the one throwing the party and need to decide who to invite. But the same principle of humility applies. As you throw a banquet, are you trying to exalt yourself or humble yourself? You are having that conference for your own benefit and reputation, or to serve?

And so Jesus is quite explicit about what we should do – invite those who cannot pay you back. Now, clearly Jesus' teaching has an important social element to it – He says to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And there is no reason to over-spiritualize that. As John Newton wrote, “One would almost think that Luke 14:12-14 was not considered part of God's word, nor has any part of Jesus' teaching been more neglected by his own people. I do not think it is unlawful to entertain our friends; but if these words do not teach us that it is in some respects or duty to give a preference to the poor, I am at a loss to understand them” (as quoted in *Generous Justice* by Tim Keller).

And so we must remember this text when asking who it is that our churches are trying to attract. Well, how about it, church planters? Are you happy for people to come who don't obviously add to the ministry? We all need to ask that question as we seek to grow.

But what interests most for our purposes is the motive Jesus gives to why we should invite the poor and lame. It is precisely because they cannot pay us back. It is not just to engage in some sort of social justice or leveling. It is to demonstrate our faith in the Gospel – that there is a place called heaven where our true reward lies. That is what Jesus says: “For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just” (verse 14). By pouring ourselves into those who cannot pay us back, we are demonstrating that we are all pilgrims on the way to the New Heavens and Earth.

But we have not always acted this way in our ministries, have we? Influenced by such books as *The Master Plan of Evangelism*, we have developed “key person” mentalities where we think it is our job to hang out with the “key” people in our church, and then let them hang out with the poor and so forth. I do realize there is much practical wisdom to be found in Robert Coleman’s book which was a welcome corrective to the event-driven evangelism that characterized so much of evangelicalism. But when we read Jesus’ words in Luke 14, we have to ask if such discipleship strategies have caused us to over-evaluate a person’s practical worth when we decide whether invest time in them. We may come to think, “I need to pour myself into that energetic young couple because they can help lead our youth ministries,” rather than thinking, “I need to pour myself into that young couple, because they need Christ, period.” And then as part of their discipleship, you might look with them at how they might serve. But you do it out of love for them, not because some ministry hole in the church needs plugging.

Do you see the difference? Do you see how ministry is like throwing a banquet? You need to decide who to spend time with, who to invest in, who to pour yourself out for. And you can either look at people in terms of how they will pay the church back – in the form of tithes or service. Or you can throw a banquet for those who cannot easily pay you back – pouring yourself into the sick, the elderly, the imprisoned, that drunken college student who may never darken the church’s doors. I realize there is balance, as Newton himself says. You need to invest in your elders and deacons and women’s ministry leaders. But do not neglect those on the fringe. Live for heaven, and treat every believer as valuable in Christ, not for what they can bring to the table.

So, how about it? You know who the poor are in your community. Who God is calling you to – those who need the Gospel but will not be able to pay you back in this life. Pour yourself into those people, and your ministry will be like throwing a banquet for the poor. And you will show that you actually believe in a place called heaven where your true reward awaits.

Yesterday, I went and visited a member of our church who was recently put on hospice. He is a dear, older man, who lost his wife years ago. He came to us a refuge from the PCUSA. He just wanted a church which preached the gospel. I have no earthly comfort to offer him other than a little bit of friendship and prayer. But whenever I talk to him about the certainty of his salvation in Christ and the sure promise of heaven, he always quietly nods, looks away into the distance, and then lifts his hands a bit out of his lap, palms upward and empty, and says amen. I don’t even know if he realizes that he makes this gesture each time, but I see it. And it is the gesture of faith. Of knowing he is going to that better place, that place won for him by Christ.

Brothers, do you remember when I said that all of our churches are just way stations? It is not just college churches, though it is painfully obvious to us each May. All of us are only here as pilgrims, plodding along with fellow pilgrims on that gospel road. All we can do is to keep pointing the way, knowing that we only have them on our section of the road for a season. Our calling, brothers, is not to hold onto people and milk them for every gift they might have, treating them as one more commodity, some cog in the factory of our church. Our calling is to point them to heaven, and help them on their way.

And when we remember that, that frees us up to pour ourselves into those who cannot pay us back for all who are in Christ are living for the next world not this one. It frees us up to put people before our reputations, and service above our careers. It frees us up to plant new churches, sending off dear families we love, rather than holding onto them, as if this life and our church's size are all that matters. We will have time enough with them in heaven, as we put the kingdom ahead of our own ministries. We are way stations, and we throw banquets for those who cannot pay us back.

So, how about it, brothers? Who will you seek to spend time with at presbytery? Can you see how Jesus makes this a relevant question in light of His teaching in Luke 14? Will you exalt yourself by only hanging out with those who can repay you in some way? Or will you humble yourself and seek to serve someone while we are together? Maybe just to listen. Or to pray with. It may not be anything big. But then again, neither was two mites.