

“The only way up is to go down.” (16)

I heard a story about a man and his wife who called another couple to see what they were doing. Their friend said, "Oh, we're just drinking coffee and talking." As woman hung up the phone, she demanded, "Why don't we ever do that? They're just drinking coffee and talking." Her husband said, "So make a pot of coffee." So they sat with their freshly brewed coffee, just staring at each other in silence. And after ten minutes the man said, "Well, call them back, and find out what they're talking about."

And I guess the point is that table talk is something we all do when we are around the dinner table but there's nothing worse than eating a meal with nothing to talk about. Turn your Bibles to **Luke 14**. We are going to look at “**The parable of the chief seats**” today, but let's look at the build up to this parable first.

Luke 14:1-3 “One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?"

Jesus was doing a bit of table talk as He ate in the house of a prominent Pharisee. They were having a Sabbath meal and from the very beginning the Pharisees had been watching Jesus to see what He would do. And so as usual Jesus astounded them by healing a man who was suffering from dropsy on the Sabbath. **Now dropsy is a symptom of a disease of the heart, liver, kidneys, or brain. It involves fluid retention and swelling in the body cavities or in the limbs.**

Now as we know the customs then which were observed around the dinner table were quite different from today. The Greeks and the Romans ate their meals in the reclining position either on the floor or on low couches, drawn up against low tables. The tables were U-shaped which allowed the servants to serve food around the table more easily. At the head of the table was placed the honoured guest and with the Jews this was reserved for the rabbis.

The other guests were seated around the table in descending order of importance. And on most occasions the exact hour of the meal was never announced, so some guests came in earlier and others would come in later. Now the Pharisees had this down to a tea, especially those who were in prominent positions. They would time their arrival so that they could make an unsuspecting entrance and in the presence of everyone else, they would receive the chief seats.

Now I think the scene in the build up to the parable is very humorous. Jesus points out to the Pharisees and the experts in the Law the man with dropsy and tries to reason with them. And so He asks them in **Luke 14:3**, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" Jesus was a master at silencing people without saying too much. **Luke 14:4** “But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away.” He silenced them and went ahead and healed the guy.

Let's read on, in **Luke 14:5+6** “Then he asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" And they had nothing to say.” Jesus asked two questions and received no answers, He totally silenced the critics.

Now I think this is an amusing scene because at this particular feast, which Jesus attended, the Pharisees were scrutinising Jesus' every move. They were observing Him but at the same time He was observing them. Jesus was watching them slyly manoeuvring around the table for the place of honour. And it's after observing them, the Bible says in **Luke 14:7**, “When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable.”

Someone once gave a friend advice before they finally went ahead and had children. They said, “Find a couple of people who are already parents and criticize them about their methods of discipline, lack of patience, appallingly low tolerance levels, and how they have allowed their children to run rampant.” Then they said, “Suggest ways in which they might improve their child's sleeping habits, toilet training, table manners and overall behaviour”. Then finally they said to the friend, “Enjoy it; it'll be the last time in your life that you will have all the answers.”

The reason I told you that story was because Jesus is about to rebuke the Pharisees and the experts in the Law because of their bad table manners. But He is also going to point out to them that they are in a seriously unsafe spiritual condition.

Now it's not a parable, which tells a story, but it is a parable in the sense that it is to be interpreted figuratively. It's a parable in the true sense of the word because it is a comparison that teaches on right relationships in the kingdom of God.

Luke 14:8-11 "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. 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. 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 honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Now Jesus is teaching them about humility, real humility. They were almost playing musical chairs, or looking for the best seat in the house. But Jesus says in Luke 14:11, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." And Jesus uses this phrase over and over again in the New Testament.

For example in Matthew 23 when Jesus is speaking to the crowds and His disciples about the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees who were displaying false humility. He tells them at the end of verse 3, "Do not do what they do, for they do not practice what they preach." And then down in verse 12, He says to them, "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted."

Again in Luke 18:9-13 when Jesus is teaching about self-righteousness and the two men who went up to the temple to pray. One guy said, "Look at me, look at all the good things I do." And the tax collector said, "God have mercy on me a sinner." And so Jesus goes on to say in verse 14, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

And that teaching didn't just stop when Jesus went back to heaven; this truth was carried on and taught to the early church. Paul taught it to the Philippian church in Philippians 2:3+4, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

James taught it to the church that was scattered in James 4:10, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up." Peter taught it to the young men in the church in 1 Peter 5:5+6, "Young men, in the same way be submissive to those who are older. All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under God's mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time."

And church this law stills stands true today as it did when Jesus first uttered those words. It stands against everything what the world teaches about becoming great. Jesus says if you want to go up in the His kingdom then you need to learn how to go down.

Now the principle of humility is obvious and clear but it isn't always easy to find the path, which leads to true humility. How do we begin on that path? Where is the starting point of true humility? I heard about a guy who wanted God to humble him, so he went out on the streets of a busy city centre and placed a sandwich board over his neck advertising a slogan, which said, "Nobody does humility like me."

Well the place to begin is with yourself. But not so much in public places where many people can see how humble we are but away from the rush of things. In quiet places of uninterrupted solitude, where a person needs to submit to the rigour of self-evaluation. Because when you think about it there are many things that should keep us humble.

For example our physical and bodily weaknesses should keep us humble. Psalm 103:13-16 "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear him; for he knows how we are formed, he remembers that we are dust. As for man, his days are like grass, he flourishes like a flower of the field; the wind blows over it and it is gone, and its place remembers it no more."

A person can be an architect or an astronomer, they can be a soldier or a politician but no person is as mighty as they would like to be. There are paths that people can't go, there are cliffs and mountains that they can't scale, and there are galaxies they can't subdue. And because mankind live their days in the midst of suffering and tears, we don't know how to ward of pain, we're unable to defend ourselves against certain diseases.

We can't disguise the inevitable marks of old age, even though some try with plastic surgery. We can't bribe away death and when you think about it death alone is sufficient enough to keep mankind humble. And you know when you think about our bodies they can so quickly get out of balance. Our body systems can be easily disturbed and so quickly break down and sometimes without any notice. But all these things show us how insecure life really is. And when we dare to remember these things, selfish pride will soon vanish away.

Another thing, which should keep us humble, is **our mental limitations**. For centuries mankind has been accumulating facts and perfecting methods. And if you gathered all the knowledge mankind has together and placed it into a storehouse, it would still be infinitely smaller compared to all the things mankind doesn't know yet.

Job 36:26-29 "How great is God--beyond our understanding! The number of his years is past finding out. "He draws up the drops of water, which distill as rain to the streams; the clouds pour down their moisture and abundant showers fall on mankind. Who can understand how he spreads out the clouds, how he thunders from his pavilion?"

Advancements in technology and scientific breakthroughs come painfully slow. And no one is more aware of this than the scholar, a real scholar in whatever field they specialise in is continually shamed by their ignorance.

The learned Socrates was not the best loved person in Athens in his time. His favourite pastime was to go through the city of Athens looking for wise men and then he would corner them, drill them with unanswerable questions, and then leave them in oblivion of his ignorance. Now if Socrates was the wisest man in Athens at that time, it was only for the reason, which he said, "That he alone knew that he knew nothing at all."

A man named Will Rogers once said that, "We are all ignorant, we're just ignorant of different things."

Think about it! A man may be able to speak ten different languages but he may not know how to change a fuse in a plug. A woman may be international authority on the literacy classics but she may not be able to drive a car. An expert on machines, computers and technology may not be able to spell a simple three-syllable word correctly. The simple truth is that life has grown to such proportions that no one is able to be a master of all the arts; no one is able to master all of the sciences. So the littleness of our knowledge ought to be enough to keep us humble.

Another example of what should keep us humble is **our weaknesses and failures**. **Carlyle once said, "It is in general more profitable to recon up our defects than to boast of our attainments."** Nowhere are our defects more obvious to us than in our moral conduct.

Now Christian's ought to be aware of their sin, the purest and noblest of Christians should always be conscious of their sin. The apostle Paul was very much aware of his sin. He said in **Romans 7:21-24 "So I find this law at work: When I want to do good, evil is right there with me. For in my inner being I delight in God's law; but I see another law at work in the members of my body, waging war against the law of my mind and making me a prisoner of the law of sin at work within my members. What a wretched man I am! Who will rescue me from this body of death?"**

In fact he was so aware of his sin that every time he looked at someone else, he didn't condemn them, he looked at himself. **1 Timothy 1:15 "Here is a trustworthy saying that deserves full acceptance: Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners--of whom I am the worst."**

Francis of Assisi who continually helped the poor, pointed to himself and said, "Nowhere is there a more wretched, a more miserable, a poorer creature than I."

Let me ask you, **when was the last time you examined yourself? When's the last time you stopped looking down at others and took a good long look in the mirror? What do you see? A person who is very religious and very proud of the religious things you do? Do you see a person who says to yourself, "You know what, I'm not a murderer, I never miss worship, I don't get drunk, I don't gossip!"**

You see loved ones an honest examination of ourselves will bring us face to face with ourselves. And when we see ourselves clearly we will come away from the mirror seeing just how small we really are. And if you struggle to see yourself clearly then trying praying this **Psalms. Psalm 139 especially verses 23+24**, where the text says, **"Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."**

How many of us would be willing right now to face God in Judgement on the terms of our own natural goodness and on the basis of the works, which we have done in His name? The grand total of all our goodness and all our generosity and all our good deeds are shamefully small. This again above all things should make us conscious of our necessity of humility. You see loved ones when a person meets Jesus Christ and places his life next to Jesus' life the marked difference brings guilt and grief.

Turn your Bibles to **Luke 22:24-27** "Also a dispute arose among them as to which of them was considered to be greatest. Jesus said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who exercise authority over them call themselves Benefactors. But you are not to be like that. Instead, the greatest among you should be like the youngest, and the one who rules like the one who serves. For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table? But I am among you as one who serves."

On that last night a quarrel broke out among Jesus' disciples. We don't know how their argument started but since Jesus gathered His group to eat the Passover, which was the most important Jewish observation, it is quite likely that the strife was over the seating arrangements. And what a sad picture this is, in Jesus' last hours of His life, His own disciples, just like the Pharisees before were scrambling over the seats of distinction.

And so Jesus to put an end to the dispute by asking them in **verse 27**, "For who is greater, the one who is at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who is at the table?" And according to **John 13:ff** Jesus washed their feet. **And what did they do?**

They sat there dumbfounded. They sat there utterly disgraced, not believing that they could act so selfishly. The people in Jesus' day didn't believe that a man who pushes himself would be lower. The people in Jesus' day didn't believe that a man who lowers himself would in the end be victorious.

And let me tell you this, things haven't changed; the world still doesn't believe it today. But what we need to remember is that we do not listen to the words of the world, we listen to the words of Jesus. And let me say this too, Jesus practiced what He preached to the Pharisees in **Luke 14**.

And when you think about His life, He had such humble beginnings and such a humble end. When He came into the world, **Luke 2:7** tells us that "He slept in a manger." When He died, **Philippians 2:8** tells us that "He humbled Himself and became obedient to death on a cross." And when He was buried, **Mark 27:57-60** tells us "He was buried in a borrowed grave." Neither at His birth nor at His death could He find a lowlier place. And when you think about Christ's life like that and you measure your own life with His, you will see that His death was truly shameful on us.

Now let me ask you, **do you want to be great in the kingdom of God?** If you do you need to start from the bottom up.

But whose feet will you wash today? Will you help wash the feet of your sister who has got some debts needing paid with prayers and an offering of money? Will you wash the feet of your brother who is struggling as a Christian and needs someone who will just listen to him with their ears? Will you wash the feet of the church by serving them tea and coffee on a Sunday morning? Will you wash the feet of our visitors by helping them feel welcomed?

I mean there are people's feet all around us, all the time. If God was willing to come down to earth in the form of Jesus Christ and wash people's feet them surely we should too. **Mark 10:45** "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." He came to serve and in **Philippi** when a girl who had a future telling spirit in her was following Paul and Silas, she said in **Acts 16:17** "These men are servants of the Most High God."

Jesus served, His disciples served, the early church served, then loved ones we should be serving too and Christian you must serve. And Paul tells us how we can serve in **Romans 12:6-7** "We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man's gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully."

This is what I want you to think about as we close. Everyone hear can serve and if you are a Christian who is already doing that then God bless you for great is reward in heaven.

But what if you are not a Christian and you want to serve God?

Well the way to do that is to serve Him with your obedience to His will. Listen you can get involved with church work, you can donate thousands of pounds to the church, but if you haven't been obedient to His words, then all your good deeds are in vain. And I would hate to see that happen to anyone.

I would hate for anyone to get to the Judgement thinking that they are saved just to find out they aren't. And I would be guilty for not sharing with you the way to be saved. You see getting involved with church life doesn't make you a Christian; coming to worship every week doesn't make you a Christian. Being christened when you were a baby doesn't make you a Christian.

John 14:21 "Whoever has my commands and obeys them, he is the one who loves me." And Jesus commands everyone in **Mark 16:16**, "Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned." He says to Christians in **Matthew 28:19+20**, "Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you."

And so if you ever want to become a Christian you need to obey Him in the lead up to your baptism and you need to continue obey Him after your baptism. After all the only ones which go with Him into eternal life are those He describes in **Matthew 25**, where He says to them in **verse 21**, "Well done, good and faithful servant! You have been faithful with a few things; I will put you in charge of many things. Come and share your master's happiness!"

Let me leave you with a story I heard about a ship called "The Royal Charter." The Royal Charter went on a round trip around the world; it left England and got all the way around the world when it struck some rocks just off the coast of Wales. Can you imagine that! All the way around the world and ending up being shipwrecked in Wales. The ship's captain's wife had dinner ready for him as she was awaiting his arrival after his journey around the world in a ship. The story goes that the minister never forgot the look on her face and she grasped his hand and said, "So near, yet lost, so near, yet lost."

And what I'm wondering today is what will it be like for those of you who are here today, thinking that you have already obeyed God's will, to be so close but yet still lost. You are still here, you are still breathing, you still have time.

Let me leave you with Peter's inspired words from **2 Peter 3:9**, "The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance."