

JESUS HAD DINNER WITH A CHIEF PHARISEE**LUKE 14:1-14**

Have you ever noticed that everyday activities can tell us more about ourselves than we might want to know? They can often reveal our innate and natural selfishness. For example, the simple act of getting on and off a plane can tell you a whole lot about human nature. Apparently some people are willing to put your life and limbs at risk by bringing every piece of luggage they can and then some on to the plane with them and trying to load it all in those overhead bins right above your head. Heaven forbid that they should have to waste some of their precious time and money checking their bags! Apparently other people honestly believe that their schedule is far more important than anyone else's because they are the first ones out of their seats when the plane gets to the gate and they'll push and shove ahead of others aggressively at every opportunity. Doesn't their behavior reveal that they believe they and their lives are far more important than you and your life?

Driving is yet another example. Don't you just love getting out of those parking lots after an Ohio State home football or basketball game? You know those folk who refuse to wait their turn or give anyone else a turn. They honestly believe they're just more important than you. I have to admit that I'm just as susceptible to the temptation to be selfish in those situations - as my dear wife annoyingly reminds me. I admit to riding the bumper of the car in front of me on occasion lest another aggressive driver gets his nose in between us. Something kind of primal takes over in those situations, doesn't it?

We are considering seven stories in the Gospel of Luke when Jesus had dinner with one or more people. Guess who's coming to dinner? What happened when Jesus showed up for dinner? Today's story is about a banquet at the home of a prominent or leading Pharisee who's never named. Let's read it just now. Now the Pharisees were a religious sect. They were a group of men within Judaism who took their faith very seriously. Most people considered them very pious, very religious, and very pleasing to God. Jesus, however, could not have disagreed more. He was always finding something deficient, dangerous, or downright hypocritical about the Pharisees understanding of God and how to please God. In fact, Jesus said, "But I warn you--unless your righteousness is better than the righteousness of the teachers of religious law and the Pharisees, you will never enter the Kingdom of Heaven!" (Mt 5:20 NLT) Here's how another translation puts Jesus' warning, "Unless you do far better than the Pharisees in the matters of right living, you won't know the first thing about entering the kingdom." (Mt 5:20 MSG)

Jesus was in the midst of getting people to follow Him. Those followers were expected to become His disciples – not just the twelve men we read about in the Gospels. A disciple was and is a learner – someone who tries to become like his or her teacher. How many of you out there consider yourself a disciple of Jesus? The New Testament makes no distinction between a believer in Jesus and a

disciple of Jesus. Let's get to the bottom line quickly. If you want to go to Heaven when you die and enjoy eternal life, you will be a disciple of Jesus. That means that you will believe certain things about Jesus, true enough. It also means you will follow the teaching and example of Jesus, because you are His disciple. Now, Jesus addressed three marks of discipleship in these verses. That should be of great interest to everyone here today who is a disciple of Jesus. Here's the first observation.

JESUS' DISCIPLE KNOWS GOD'S RULES ARE BLESSINGS, NOT BURDENS.

This dinner might well have been a set up. The Pharisees had become very suspicious of Jesus and were looking to discredit him. We're told that a man with dropsy was at the dinner. Dropsy is better known as edema today. It's when your body swells up painfully because of fluid forming in the cavities and tissues of your body. For some reason, it was commonly believed in that day and time that dropsy or edema was caused by a person's immorality. The Pharisees knew Jesus was apt to heal people even on the Sabbath day (our Saturday) – something they believed to be wrong, to be a sin. This banquet was held on the Sabbath. So was this man intentionally planted to entice Jesus to perform a healing on the Sabbath? Quite possibly.

What was the big deal about the Sabbath? What was the fuss all about? It's one of the Ten Commandments. "Remember to observe the Sabbath day (our Saturday) by keeping it holy. You have six days each week for your ordinary work, but the seventh day is a Sabbath day of rest dedicated to the LORD your God. On that day no one in your household may do any work." (Ex 20:8-10 NLT) The Pharisees had concluded that healing a person of a disease or a disability was work or labor; therefore, to do it on the Sabbath was to break God's law. It was OK the other six days of the week, but not on the Sabbath! I have no idea why they came to that conclusion. Nothing in the Bible itself equates healing someone with work or labor. It was just a man-made addition to God's rule that somehow became as important as the rule itself. Jesus wasn't about to accept such an absurd interpretation of God's Word.

There's something to remember about God's rules. Don't add or take away from them. That's what the Pharisees did to the Sabbath. They added all kinds of additional junk to the rule that completely changed and warped it into something God never intended. Then, they began to realize they had to make exceptions. I find it kind of comical that having this dinner on the Sabbath wasn't considered a violation. After all, someone had to prepare the food, set the table, and clean up afterwards! How was that not work? When it became a matter of their own well-being, or of those close to them, or their possessions, the Pharisees were quite willing to find exceptions. Jesus Himself pointed out some exceptions. It was silly to believe it was OK to help your child or your cow get out of a well they'd

accidentally fallen into on the Sabbath, but it wasn't OK to heal a man of a painful disease. We get into trouble when we either add or take away from God's rules.

Now, what Jesus says here and elsewhere about the Sabbath provides us with an important understanding of God's rules in general. This might be the most important truth to remember: all of God's rules are intended to bless us. On another occasion, Jesus said, "The Sabbath was made to meet the needs of people, and not people to meet the requirements of the Sabbath." (Mk 2:27 NLT) That was the original design or intent behind the rule: to bless human beings, not to set up some kind of burdensome, heavy, legislated rule that's hard to obey.

Christians today often wonder if we're supposed to observe the Sabbath even though our day of worship and rest is now Sunday. I don't want to get into a discussion today on what may or may not be appropriate behavior on Sundays. But in passing, let me at least say that there's a Sabbath principle we need to respect. God created your body and your mind to work best when certain rules are observed. There's a rhythm to life and living that needs to be kept or you'll break down. God meant for you and me to take a break at regular intervals – at least every seven days. Set aside time to worship Him. Set aside time to rest. Take it easy. Do stuff that refreshes and renews you and others. Step away from the routine. In addition, by healing this man in the story, Jesus implies here that the Sabbath or our Sunday is a great day to bring blessing to others, to do good things to others, and to encourage others intentionally.

All God's rules are intended to bless us. People sometimes think of the Bible as a massive rule book of do's and don'ts. It's not that at all, but it does contain God's rules for living. God didn't give us His rules to live by, however, in order to make our lives miserable and unhappy. Just the opposite. For example, take all the Ten Commandments. Why did God forbid things like worshipping idols, committing murder, engaging in adultery, or stealing? Was it because there's so much incredible joy and profound happiness to be found in bowing down to idols, killing people you hate, being unfaithful to your spouse, or taking what doesn't belong to you? Of course not! All of those things bring you and me deep pain and regret not to speak of the incredible hurt we bring to others. It's the devil who convinces people that keeping God's rules is because God is some kind of cosmic killjoy. That's not the Bible. That's not reality.

Keeping all God's rules results in blessing and joy ultimately. Disciple of Jesus, remember that truth when you're talking about God's rules with your child, or with someone who doesn't follow Jesus yet, or with anyone else, for that matter. Whenever you suggest keeping God's rules is a burden instead of a blessing, you do God a serious injustice. And remember something else, too. Jesus was teaching here what it meant to be His disciple. Elsewhere, He said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher." (Lk 6:40 RSV) God is always about being a blessing, not a burden. That's His character. When He walked the Earth, Jesus' was always about being

a blessing, not a burden to others. I hope that's true of you and me. It should be if we're truly Jesus' disciples. It's a good question to ask ourselves from time to time. Am I a blessing to others, or a burden? A second observation:

JESUS' DISCIPLE PRACTICES SELF-INITIATED HUMILITY.

Apparently, Jewish banquets in Jesus' day sometimes resulted in the kind of behavior we observe getting on and off airplanes and getting out of parking lots after a game. Sheer selfishness and a lack of humility reigned supreme! Jesus observed all these dinner guests jockeying for positions of honor at the table in a kind of undignified scramble. It was customary back then for banquets to feature a U-shaped table with the place of highest honor right at the center of the base of the U. The next most honored seats were to the right or the left of that seat. The least honorable seats were located on the two sides of the U farthest away from the base and its most honored seat. It was also customary for the most important guests to arrive at the banquet late intentionally. That being the case, Jesus taught that it was far better to select the least honorable seat and be moved up higher by your host than to select a very honorable seat only to be demoted by your host. Talk about humiliating and embarrassing!

What's Jesus' point? Jesus isn't suggesting a more cunning strategy to get yourself recognized in social situations, but rather the truth that when anybody tries to exalt himself or herself – either blatantly or cunningly - he or she will be humbled. God Himself will see to it. God does not tolerate pride forever. “For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Lk 14:11 NLT) God has so structured His universe that ultimately and inevitably those who are filled with pride and self-exaltation get humbled in the end while those who approach life from a place of humility get exalted. There's a few presidential candidates who might need to be reminded of that truth! Amen? That's a truth taught all over the Bible, but it's very easy to forget. It's said of God, “You rescue the humble, but you humiliate the proud.” (Ps 18:27 NLT) and “Pride ends in humiliation, while humility brings honor.” (Pr 29:23 NLT) Oh, maybe not today, or next week, or even next year. But ultimately, God will not tolerate pride forever. God will deal with it.

It's wise to remember what else the Bible makes very clear in this regard. God is always on the side of the humble. Is there a clearer statement than Isaiah 57:15 (NLT)? “The high and lofty one who lives in eternity, the Holy One, says this: ‘I live in the high and holy place with those whose spirits are contrite and humble. I restore the crushed spirit of the humble and revive the courage of those with repentant hearts.’” But don't miss an additional truth about humility in our story today that is also taught throughout the Bible. Jesus says these dinner guests should have practiced self-initiated humility. They should have appraised the situation in advance and figured out what was the humble, right thing to do.

When you're a disciple of Jesus, you take it upon yourself to get and stay humble through the Holy Spirit. You're called to self-initiated humility. You don't wait for others to make you do the humble thing. You perceive the way of humility in advance and set your mind and heart to do it. The Bible says, "I give each of you this warning: Don't think you are better than you really are. Be honest in your evaluation of yourselves." (Rom 12:3 NLT) Self-initiated humility. "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will lift you up in honor." (Jam 4:10 NLT) Self-initiated humility. "And all of you, dress yourselves in humility as you relate to one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.' So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and at the right time he will lift you up in honor." (1 Pt 5:5-6 NLT) Self-initiated humility.

Nik Wallenda is a disciple of Jesus who has become the most-watched high wire artist and daredevil in the world. His feats have been watched by a billion people across the world. In 2012 Wallenda walked a tightrope across Niagara Falls. In 2013 Wallenda became the first person to high-wire walk across a portion of the Grand Canyon. Wallenda knows that he will be tempted by pride, so after the huge crowds and the media fade away he engages in a simple spiritual discipline: he walks where the crowds have just stood and quietly picks up trash. Wallenda recently wrote, "My purpose is simply to help clean up after myself. The huge crowd left a great deal of trash behind, and I feel compelled to pitch in. Besides, after the inordinate amount of attention I sought and received, I need to keep myself grounded. Three hours of cleaning up debris is good for my soul. Humility does not come naturally to me. So if I have to force myself into situations that are humbling, so be it I know that I need to get down on my hands and knees like everyone else. I do it because it's a way to keep from tripping. As a follower of Jesus, I see him washing the feet of others. I do it because if I don't serve others I'll be serving nothing but my ego."

Jesus was teaching here what it meant to be His disciple back then and today, too. He said, "A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher." (Lk 6:40 RSV) So, did Jesus practice self-initiated humility? Indeed, He did. At this Lenten and Easter season, we're reminded that "He humbled himself in obedience to God and died a criminal's death on a cross. Therefore, God elevated him to the place of highest honor and gave him the name above all other names." (Ph 2:8-9 NLT) A final observation:

JESUS' DISCIPLE PRACTICES RIGHTLY MOTIVATED GENEROSITY.

What a really uncomfortable dinner party! First, there was the man with dropsy probably planted there just to catch Jesus doing something wrong. Jesus raises the tension by healing the man and questioning the logic of the Pharisees' position. Then, He basically calls out everybody for having selfish, proud hearts as evidenced by their disgraceful scramble for the best seats. Finally, he questions the motivation of his host by suggesting that he might have invited the wrong guests to the dinner. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet, don't

invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.” (Lk 14:12-14 NLT) I’ll bet you could cut the tension in that room with a proverbial knife!

Why are people generous? Why do people give anything – their money, their time, their attention, their energy? Why is that important, you ask? The motivation behind a disciple of Jesus’ generosity matters to God most of all. Disciples of Jesus are called to be generous, but our motivation is more important to God than what is given and the amount given. It’s true that some people give out of a sense of duty - not out of thankfulness to God and not out of compassion for people either. Others give in order to feel superior to those they give. It’s really just another expression of pride rather than anything good or commendable. Neither of those motivations are acceptable to God.

Jesus also put His finger on two other kinds of wrong motivation for being generous. Repayment is never a right motivation to give. When you give away your time, your energy, or your money to someone else, it shouldn’t be a kind of quid pro quo arrangement. “I’ll scratch your back, if you scratch mine.” Ultimately, that’s selfish and manipulative. If the real intent of your gift is to make people indebted to you, nothing of godly value will come as a result. Real, authentic blessing only comes when we give with no thought of being repaid.

By the same token, personal comfort is never a right motivation to give. Jesus’ words here aren’t meant to discourage you from having your family or friends – or even wealthy people - over for dinner. But Jesus does suggest that some of our generosity ought to target people who can never repay us. I also believe He implies that some of our generosity ought to target people who might just threaten our comfort zone. Disciples of Jesus open our homes and open our lives to people we don’t know, people unlike and different from us, people we might not like, and people that might never be able to reciprocate our kindness ever. Jesus was teaching here what it meant to be His disciple back then and today, too. He said, “A disciple is not above his teacher, but every one when he is fully taught will be like his teacher.” (Lk 6:40 RSV)

Faith Inspirational Missionary Baptist Church adopted its local high school, the roughest in a rough city. Forty percent of the students at Centennial High School in Compton, California, are from either a group home or a foster home. Most of them don't have any adult who will cheer for their football team. When two of the Faith Inspirational members volunteered to help coach the football team, they were appalled at the state of the locker rooms, so they organized their church to refurbish and paint them. One of the young men on the football team, who was required to help in the project, turned to the lady next to him and asked her why she was painting his locker room.

The Faith Inspirational member simply replied, "Because I love you." "No one loves me," was his skeptical response. At that, the woman set down her paintbrush and went over to the young man and hugged him. "No one has hugged me in seven years," he replied, not knowing exactly what to do with this woman. But she wasn't done yet. She called over a dozen other women, and they lined up to hug this young man, to kiss him on his cheek, to tell him how special he was to God, and that he had a destiny. The young man just wept and wept. After that open door, Pastor Rafer Owens, who is also a police officer in Compton, started lining up 15 adults to adopt each football player. Their primary task? Just go to their games to cheer for them, so they can each know how special they are to God.

Why do disciples of Jesus do things like that? Because Jesus is like that. God is like that. God, in the person of Jesus, gave because He couldn't stop Himself from giving. He gave with no possibility of repayment. He gave with no thought of what was comfortable for Him. "But God showed his great love for us by sending Christ to die for us while we were still sinners. (Rom 5:8 NLT) The most well-known verse in the Bible says, "For this is how God loved the world: He gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16 NLT) That's what God is like. That's what disciples of Jesus are like.