

Humility, Generosity and the Kingdom of God

Luke 14:1-24

There are times in your life when the Lord engineers a set of circumstances, or a turn of events, to get your attention. Something happens, or you go through a period in your life and though it may not be pleasant at the time, with hindsight you can see that God was at work taking you aside, using these circumstances to slow you down, to bring you up short, even sometimes to shut you up, so he could get your attention and address some areas of your life that are out of whack. And that's what happens here as Jesus sits down for a meal with these religious leaders.

It's a Sabbath, and a ruler of the Pharisees – not just any old Pharisee, but one of their leaders Luke tells us, has invited Jesus back for lunch. Now, given that the Pharisees were not exactly Jesus' biggest fans, you've got to ask the question, why would a chief Pharisee with his religious lawyer and Pharisee friends invite Jesus over? Well Luke tells us, v1, 'they were watching him carefully.'

So this is a trap. Jesus is in the lion's den. They're looking to catch Jesus out in something He says or does. But if it's a trap, where's the bait? V2: 'And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy?' Now, if you don't know what dropsy is, this guy is probably suffering from congestive cardiac failure. His heart is weak and it's not pumping like it should and as a result fluid starts accumulating in his body in places it shouldn't. He's oedematous, for you medics, he's hydropic; his legs are swollen, he's short of breath because of the fluid on his lungs, he has difficulty walking, and people have to help him in and out. And it's a Sabbath, and there are all these Pharisees and Lawyers, and they're watching Jesus.

So Jesus asks them, v3, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?' Is it the right thing in God's eyes to heal this man, today? Now, that's a great question, because it goes to the very heart of the issue for these men. The Rabbis, of course, would answer – 'no, it's not lawful'. It's not an emergency, you mustn't do it. And the Pharisees were *the* law enforcement guys, so if they were to say 'yes, it's ok to heal', they risked being exposed as law-breakers, and they wouldn't want that. But they also know that there is nothing in the Law of Moses to forbid such a healing: so if they were to say 'no, it's wrong to heal him', they ran the risk of being exposed as heartless.

So they don't answer the question. Despite the fact that you can be sure they had an opinion, Luke tells us in v4, 'They remained silent.' There they all are, gathered around the table, in their Sabbath best, and there is this awkward, pregnant, deafening silence. And the only thing you could hear was this sick man struggling to breathe.

So Jesus gets up, and Luke says 'he took him' - that probably means he embraced this guy, Jesus enveloped him in a bear hug and healed him and then sent him away. Then He turns to the guests and says, v5, "which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on the Sabbath day will not immediately pull him out?" If your child or even your animal was at risk of drowning in a well, you'd drop everything. And yet you sit there in silence while this man is drowning in his own fluid.

Now, don't get me wrong, because knowing your bible and having right doctrine matter, but the sad truth of the Pharisees is that you can be very committed to your interpretation of the Bible and entirely miss the point of what God is up to in the world. You see, the Sabbath was a day for worship, a day for glorifying God, a day for man's good, a day for rescuing and redeeming, for mercy and compassion.

But once again, Luke tells us, they sat there in silence, v6: 'And they could not reply to these things.' I mean, what could they possibly say? But having stripped away their arguments, having put them to silence, having exposed the contradictions of their hearts, Jesus goes for their hearts. You see acts of mercy should characterize the Sabbath, because they characterise the life of the Kingdom. And speaking first to all the guests, then directly to the host, and then finally to this individual who makes a pious comment, Jesus addresses how the kingdom of God, and its citizens, are to be marked by humility and sacrificial generosity, and how the gospel makes that kind of living possible. So those are our three points this morning: Characteristic of the Kingdom No. 1: Humility; Characteristic of the Kingdom No. 2: Generosity; And then thirdly, How the Gospel makes that possible.

Characteristic No. 1: Humility

Now, the Pharisees thought they were the ones watching Jesus, but it turns out Jesus has been watching them. V7: 'Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honour.' In that culture, if you had a dinner party, people would recline on couches arranged in a U shape around a low table, and the most important person, the patron, the host reclined in the middle of the central couch. And the nearer you were to him, on either side, the more important, or the more favoured you were.

So, where you reclined, spoke volumes about your social standing. If you could get nearer the host, you'd get more recognition, more honour, more notice from others. But also getting nearer the head of the table was a way of getting ahead and promoting yourself in life, if you could get nearer the top man, you could ingratiate yourself with him, ask favours of him, earn his support in your business dealings, be a recipient of his largess when he dispensed it and so on. So where you sat mattered for your standing and for your progress.

Now on the surface that may seem totally alien to us. But is it? Isn't there, just sometimes, the temptation to try and connect with people, to network and work people for your gain, to advance yourself? Now in some sense, there is nothing wrong with that. But what if that morphs into manipulating people for your gain and using them? And when your sense of worth, your own sense of place and of value in the world is dependent on what circles you are mixing with, who you are or are not having lunch with, whether you are in or out of this or that group, then you're in trouble.

And Jesus watched this jostling for position at dinner, the scrambling to be at the centre, the desire to be 'in', the quest for recognition, and told them this parable about being invited to a wedding feast. And He says, just think of the shame if

you put yourself at the top of the table and the host moved you down. Just imagine the public humiliation of that. But think of the honour you'd feel if you put yourself at the bottom seat and the host moved you to the top.

And, Luke makes clear that this is a parable, so Jesus isn't educating them on social etiquette, like how to use your knife and fork properly like the English do and the Americans don't. He's addressing their and our hearts, about how we relate to God and to others, and it's not, funnily enough, by promoting ourselves.

Rather, Jesus says in the punch-line in v11, 'everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.' The way to real honour, Jesus says, the honour and the sense of significance that counts in the sight of God and man, is not using your elbows to push yourself forward, it's humility. Humble yourself, Jesus says, and let God do the exalting. It's not about you trying to impress God, or others, with how good you are, which is what every other religion will tell you, real honour, real standing before God comes by humbling yourself and saying, 'God I don't deserve you to do anything for me, I'm taking the lowest place.' And yet that's the very one, Jesus says, that God accepts, that's the one He will exalt. Because salvation doesn't come by you proving yourself, it comes by grace.

So characteristic no. 1 of the kingdom is humility. The way down is the way up. The way into the kingdom, is not using your elbows, it's by humbling yourself and saying, "I don't deserve to come" and in response God says, Come. Because, as James tells us (4:6) 'God opposes the proud, *but gives grace to the humble.*' And when you know that God accepts you and in the right sense honours you, then what others think of you falls into right perspective as well.

But then Jesus turns directly to His Host, this leader of Pharisees, and He spells out the second characteristic of the kingdom.

Characteristic No. 2: Generosity

Now, this leader's world would have been built largely around what others thought of him. He would get honour in the community from his acts of righteousness and his dinner parties were opportunities to cement relationships with those who looked up to him, or to curry favour with those he was looking to. And the temptation that runs alongside seeking honour, is to give where you hope to get back. Doing only that which benefits you.

And Jesus tells him, v12, 'When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends, or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbours.' Don't just give, don't just associate with those where there's some kick back, some benefit to you, rather, v13, 'invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind.' Invite the very people who would have been excluded from the temple. Invite the kind of people you are tempted to look down on, invite the people from whom you can't hope to get anything in return.

Now what's Jesus saying there? Is He saying no more enjoyable evenings for you buddy. If you want to stand any hope of entering the kingdom you've got to stop

having your friends over and you can forget about spending any money on yourself and, from this moment on, stop enjoying yourself? No. He's not saying that. But what He is saying is, nevertheless, deeply challenging.

Jesus is saying that sacrificial generosity, generous giving that neither seeks, nor expects, nor receives anything in return, is going to mark the citizens of the kingdom. He's saying that God has blessed you and me, not so we just use it for ourselves, to line our own pockets, to improve our quality of life in our little world, but that he has given it to us to give and to bless the poor and the needy, the ones who everyone else looks down on.

And that giving is to be sacrificial. You see, if you are anything like me, you're happy to give, provided it doesn't cut too close to the bone of what you really want to do with your money; as long as it doesn't negatively influence your lifestyle. As long as you don't have to downsize. And Jesus is saying, this sacrificial kingdom generosity *will* influence your lifestyle, it *will* change how you live, it *will* cost you. Often we look at our finances, decide what we want to spend on ourselves, use it as we like and if there's anything left over, then we give. But Jesus is saying, I want you to turn that around. Give away generously from what I have given you, give first, and if there is anything left over, spend it on yourself. As someone else [Keller] has said, you know you're giving sacrificially of your time, your money, your resources, when it hurts. You know you're giving to Jesus' standard when it costs you.

Now, we all struggle with this. I struggle with this. I read what Jesus says here and I want to water it down. But the fact that we struggle with it is no reason to avoid it. It is a plain and simple call to give of ourselves, to reach out to, and to bless and to care for the poor and the outcast, to the point of it costing us.

Now, what that will mean is going to differ for each one of us. It may mean you have to sit down over the coming weeks as a family and totally realign how you use your money, and where it goes. For you young guys, it may mean you take some steps towards that student at school who everyone else shuns. It may mean that instead of the usual investment portfolio, you take your money and give of your time and use your skills in supporting a business for missions venture in the third world.

Whatever it looks like for you, Jesus calls everyone of us to a radical, costly generosity. And it's radical and costly because the ones you give to, Jesus says in v14, 'cannot repay you.' And that's grace. But whilst they cannot repay you, God can. And Jesus says, v14, 'you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.' You see, if you are just living for this life, kingdom generosity, giving to the point of it costing you, makes no sense. But because resurrection day is also going to be reward day, it makes perfect sense. We worry that if we live like Jesus calls us to we are going to be worse off, and Jesus says, no, it's the person who doesn't live like this who is going to be worse off. The generous person's reward is up ahead and it will last for eternity.

But perhaps not surprisingly, someone at the dinner table feels a little uncomfortable, and they make this pious comment, v15: “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.” Because, hey, they were good Pharisees, and they had no doubt they’d be there, so let’s move off talking about the poor, that’s awkward, let’s talk about heaven and the end-times, ‘cos that’s safe, and I’m going to be there. And in His response Jesus questions whether this guy and the others will accept the invitation to be there, and in the process He explains just how the gospel makes humility and sacrificial generosity possible.

How the Gospel Makes it Possible

So Jesus tells this parable of a man who is giving a great banquet. It’s a picture of how God is hosting a party, and inviting people to come and enter into the joy of His kingdom. And the first invite goes out, it’s the RSVP, and the people who are invited say ‘sure, we’re coming’. But when the second invite comes, ‘Dinner’s ready, come and get it’, Jesus says in v18, ‘they all alike began to make excuses.’

One of them has bought a field and he needs to see it. The fact that he’s almost certainly already seen it, because he wouldn’t have bought it if he hadn’t, doesn’t occur to him, but hey, the grass might have grown a bit more and he wouldn’t want to miss that. The second guy has just bought 5 yoke of oxen and he wants to go and examine them. Now, if you were a farmer in those days, you’d be lucky to have one yoke of oxen. This man’s just bought 5, he’s a 5 tractor farmer, he’s a significant landowner. But of course he needs to go and test the oxen, that couldn’t possibly wait, could it? And the third person has just got married.

Now each of those excuses, each reason for not going to the feast is fine: there’s nothing wrong with buying a field, or having 5 yoke of oxen, if you’re into oxen, and there’s certainly nothing wrong with finding a wife and marrying her. It’s not like these guys are saying sorry, can’t come, I’ve got to go and commit adultery with my mistress, would you excuse me, or I’m off to embezzle some money from the bank. They’re all right and proper things, but even good things, things given by God, wealth, relationships, friendships, family, work, business, can become idols, when they take the place of God and His kingdom in our order of priorities. For each of these men, something else mattered more than Jesus and the Kingdom. It wasn’t that the kingdom, or religion meant nothing to them, these guys weren’t atheists, they accepted the first invitation. But in the end, something else mattered more. JC Ryle said, ‘Infidelity and immorality no doubt slay their thousands; but decent, plausible, smooth spoken excuses slay their tens of thousands.’

Money, possessions, relationships, boyfriends, girlfriends, work, the desire to get ahead, can all displace Christ and the Kingdom if we let them. But as Jesus continues this parable He tells us how the gospel helps us get it right.

When the servant comes back and tells the master about the excuses people have made, the master sends the servant out again, v21, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ Now, do you notice that those are the same people Jesus says we are to be generous to in v13? Go out into the back alleys and the dark places of the city and

bring in those who couldn't hope to come, those who don't deserve to come, those who can't pay to come. Tell them, the feast is ready, it's all prepared, you don't have to do anything to deserve it, you don't have to pay me anything to take part, you've just got to come.

And when they come and the servant tells the master there's still more space he tells him to go out again: v23, 'go out into the highways and hedges and compel people to come in.' I want as many as want to come to come and enjoy my feast. Go and find as many vagabonds and beggars and tramps and bums and down and outs and tell them to come and eat at my expense, tell them I want them. I'm paying the bill, I'm picking up the tab, they've just got to come. The people who thought they deserved it, are going to miss it, but those who know they have nothing to bring can come and enter into my joy.

Now, do you get the picture, do you see what's going on here? Who's the poor man, the crippled, the blind the lame man, who the servant gets sent to find? Who is the beggar in the highways and hedges he gets sent to compel to come? He's you and me. We're the ones who don't deserve to be there, who can't afford the meal, who have nothing to repay the master with, and yet out of his abundant grace, he welcomes us in. And when we realize, when it sinks in that God has been sacrificially generous to us, when it dawns on us that that is how he has treated us, and we could never repay him, then we will be sacrificially generous to the poor and the needy in response.

But that should also deeply humble us. When we realize that our entry into the kingdom was bought at the price of Jesus humbling himself for us, when we realize what it cost Him, there's no room for pride. As Paul says in Philippians 2:7 Jesus 'made himself nothing, 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 death, even death on a cross.' The reason humility, and not using others but serving others should characterize the citizens of the kingdom, is because the king humbled himself and served to the ultimate cost. As Paul says in (Php 2:5): 'Have *this* mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ.'

In Jesus, God has opened the way for us to enter the kingdom. But only those who know they don't deserve it can come. In the gospel, God shows us He is a sacrificially generous, giving, seeking God, who desires to bless the very ones who can never repay him. Which is why, if we call ourselves Jesus' followers and citizens of the Kingdom, we can, and must live the same way. We have experienced grace for ourselves, now we must share it with others.