

## **The Greatest Virtue**

### **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

If you go by simple volume and repetition of themes in what we see in the news, and even more in sports, we are really big on ranking things. Whether the ranking is based on opinion polls or statistics, we seem to be really interested in lists – top 10 state parks, the best restaurants, the tallest buildings, the greatest baseball players – and how our current top whatever compares to the top whatever in history. Pretty soon, a lot of people will be obsessed with the college football rankings. Imagine that.

One list I have not seen published is a ranking of what people would identify as a person's most important virtue. Come to think of it, virtue of any kind is not in the news very much. But if we did try to produce such a list, I suspect we would find things like hard work, determination, and perseverance at the top of the list. Those are all characteristics of a person who wants to make something of himself, to get ahead in the world. They are not bad things. They are not, however, anywhere to be found near the top of the list of greatest virtues that Jesus would have made.

If anyone had asked Jesus to rank personal virtues, like they asked Him to rank the commandments, His teachings tell us that the virtue at the top of His list would have been humility.

Before we go any farther, let's define what we mean by humility. Philip Yancey defined it this way: "Humility is an on-going choice to credit God, not ourselves, for our natural gifts, and then to use those gifts in God's service." Yancey is careful here to specify that for a person to exhibit humility does not mean that a person has a negative self-image. Humility does not mean that we think poorly of ourselves or that for us to be humble means that we think of ourselves as somehow having a lower worth or value. It is not necessary to humility that we be poor or infirm or disadvantaged. All those disclaimers are true because humility is an attitude, not a condition, and it has nothing to do with our external circumstances. Humility can be best understood if we think of it as the proper and complete understanding of our relationship to God. When we have that proper and complete understanding of who God is and who we are and how much God loves us, our self-image will be quite healthy because we will think of ourselves first as

children of God. Humility can be thought of as the true recognition of God as the source of all things, and a humble life can be thought of as a living acknowledgement of the gifts and graces that God has granted to each of His children.

It is because of the centrality of humility as a defining characteristic of a person in right relationship with God that I think Jesus would have put humility at the top of His top 10 list of virtues. It made the prophet Micah's top 3, when he asked the rhetorical question "What does God require of us?": Do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. In 2 Chronicles, it was the key requirement for the people as a whole to be in right relationship with God: If my people will humble themselves and pray, then I will hear them and forgive them and heal their land. In the Beatitudes, Jesus taught that the humble – the meek – would inherit the earth – the humble being those in right relationship with God, living as God's children.

In the passage we are focusing on today, Jesus shows us that true humility is not only a critical characteristic of our relationship with God, but that true humility will manifest itself in our relationships with each other.

READ Luke 14:1

This is a good place to set the stage for this event. Jesus had been invited to eat in the home of one of the leaders of the synagogue. He had been teaching in the towns and villages in the area, and seems to have raised some eyebrows among the Pharisees. He had been invited to dinner, not as a guest of honor, but so they could watch and test him. As the rest of this passage unfolds, you might imagine Jesus coming into the room and hanging back a bit to watch for himself as the other guests jockeyed for position.

Only the host would have had an assigned seat at a meal like this. The others would be seated, or would seat themselves, in order of favor with the host or of general social prominence.

READ Luke 14:7-11

After Jesus had spoken to the other guests about humility, He addressed the host.

READ Luke 14:12-14

The lesson for the guests was the analogy to our relationship with God. We should not presume to be entitled on the basis of our social position or education or good

works or any of our own devices to take a place next to God, or in the same building, for that matter. In one of our Communion liturgies, we find the Prayer of Humble Access, which says:

We do not presume to come to this thy table, O merciful Lord,  
trusting in our own righteousness, but in thy manifold and great mercies.

We are not worthy so much as to gather up the crumbs under thy table. But  
thou art the same Lord, whose property is always to have mercy.

Yet we are invited. Our place in relationship to God is a function of God's grace. That we have a place at all is a function of God's grace. All the guests invited to God's table come from the same place, and all stand in the same relationship to God. We are all sinners, and we are all invited.

The lesson for the host was the instruction to reflect the grace he had been shown in his grace toward others, particularly those that he would have viewed as being of lower station. God would be inviting everyone to His banquet.

We can deepen our understanding of humility by comparing it to its opposite: Pride. This is not pride like pride in your children or your work. The pride that is sin is an inflated sense of ourselves, fundamentally a rebellion against God in which we give ourselves honor and glory that is rightfully God's alone, essentially a theft of something belonging to God, and is a form of idolatry. You can further define Pride by inverting Yancey's definition of humility: Pride is the choice to credit ourselves, not God, for our gifts and then use those gifts to exalt ourselves and make ourselves look good. This attitude toward God is reflected in our attitude toward other people, especially those whom we view as being of lower station. We may be reminded here of the story of the Pharisee and the poor man coming in to worship at the same time. The Pharisee says "Thank you, God, that I am not like him", and the poor man says "have mercy on me, O Lord, for I am a sinner." The Pharisee's pride prevents him seeing himself as he really was, while the poor man's humility allows him to see himself as God saw him.

When the ancients listed the "seven deadly sins", Pride was at the top of the list. Pride gets to the top of the list because it so clearly and emphatically separates us from God, and because it is so easy for Satan to tempt us into. Pride plays into our natural

tendency to self-centeredness, and I am becoming more and more convinced that self-centeredness is at the root of all sin. In his book “The Screwtape Letters”, C. S. Lewis invents a junior tempter assigned by his uncle Wormwood, an official in hell, to try to turn a new Christian back to his old ways. The novice tempter finds it well, tempting, to give this new Christian pride in his new-found humility, pride in the great achievement of his salvation. Even grace can be turned against us when we give ourselves credit for having earned it.

True humility is not one of our great human characteristics. We are generally much more easily turned to pride because pride glorifies us, and humility is all about giving all the glory to God. Because true humility runs counter to basic human nature, we cannot hope to attain it without God’s intervention, without the gift of God’s grace.

More than 20 years ago, Glenn Tinder wrote a feature article for The Atlantic Monthly titled “Can We Be Good Without God?” For purposes of the article, Tinder defined “good” in terms of behavior that benefited other people without any expectation of return to ourselves. His findings focused on the basic self-centeredness of human nature. We may behave on our own in ways that benefit others because we expect good things in return or because we feel good about ourselves as a result – either way, we remain self-centered. He concludes that we humans are incapable of behaving in ways that do not have some expectation of return to ourselves unless we live under the influence of God – unless we live under the example and model of God’s selfless grace. The article could be retitled “Can We Be Humble Without God?”, and the conclusion would be the same.

We cannot hope to be people of grace without God’s grace. We cannot hope to be people of true humility without the model of perfect humility in Jesus Christ – the model for the perfect life in relationship with God.

God calls us each to the seat of honor at His table, not because of who we are, but because of who He is and because He loves us. Receive the invitation to the place that God has reserved just for you at that table, receive His grace in the attitude of the sinners that we are – humbled by our sin, humbled by the magnitude of His grace – that grace that overcomes and brings us home.