

# Meeting With Christ

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Practical and Exegetical Studies on the Words of Jesus Christ

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Based on sermons of Pasteur Eric Chang

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## THE PARABLE OF THE GUESTS

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### Luke 14:7-11

The Lord Jesus was not one to mince words. In the midst of the Pharisees who were trying to trap Him in any way, Jesus did not hesitate to admonish them for their arrogance. He gave them a lesson on humility in the parable of the guests. Let's read that story. Luke 14:7-11.

*Luke 14.7. So He told a parable to those who were invited, when He noted how they chose the best places, saying to them:*

*8 "When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honorable than you be invited by him;*

*9 "and he who invited you and him come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place.*

*10 "But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes he may say to you, 'Friend, go up higher.' Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you.*

*11 "For whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

### Choose the lowest seat

The background of this passage is that a leading Pharisee invited Jesus to a meal with the intention of 'watching Him closely (v. 1).' In front of them, there was a man with dropsy and the religious leaders wanted to know whether Jesus would heal him. It was a sensitive issue. Would Jesus heal on the Sabbath or would He wait until evening when the Sabbath ended?

'Is it lawful or not to heal on the Sabbath?' Jesus asked the Pharisees. None of them dared to answer Jesus. During their silence, Jesus healed the man. Then He put a further question to them. 'If your child or your ox falls into a well on the Sabbath, what would you do?' Even to that question, the Pharisees did not reply.

After instructing the Pharisees about the necessity to be compassionate on the Sabbath, Jesus now turns to another problem: pride. His teaching results from watching the guests rush to claim the honored seats. His advice is clear and simple: at a wedding feast or any important event, do not take the first seat – just in case someone more important has been invited.

Here is the explanation. Suppose you are occupying a seat of honor to which you are not entitled to. Then an honorable guest arrives when all the choice seats at the table are taken. The host might ask you to give up your place and move to the 'least honorable seat.' You can well imagine the shame. In front of everyone, you must get up and move to the remaining seat at the end of the table.

So it is better not to overestimate your own importance. Otherwise you might put yourself at risk of public disgrace.

The opposite attitude is better. Take the last seat, not the first. By taking the lowest seat, the host's reaction may be entirely different. He may ask you to take a better seat, and in doing so, rather than being shamed, you will be honored in the presence of all the guests.

We cannot say that this passage is a good example of diplomacy. Jesus is invited to a meal. And there, by giving some advice about how to behave at feasts, He seems to be criticizing directly the Pharisees and experts in the law for their pride. Those people who had taken the seats of honor would have been irritated by Jesus' words. It is not exactly the best way to make friends.

### **In life as in the kingdom**

What is the Lord Jesus teaching here? Is He trying to dispense some worldly wisdom? Is He teaching the Pharisees and theologians a few necessary table manners? I don't think so.

If Jesus were speaking to His disciples, then we could say that He was giving some good advice on how to be better people, better disciples. 'Be humble. Don't exalt yourself.' But His instruction was not addressed to His own disciples. He was talking to the Pharisees. And if the Lord was speaking to the Pharisees who need to be saved, you would expect that He will not just give some moral teaching on how to be better persons. You would expect that He would be telling them about spiritual truths, namely about salvation. He would explain to them about the way into the kingdom of God.

Notice that the story is specifically called a 'parable' in v. 7. This indicates that Jesus' instruction on politeness and good manners is intended to teach something at the spiritual level. Wise advice to guests at a feast then becomes a parable about life in the kingdom of God. And the analogy is this: as in life so in the kingdom of God, self-promotion leads to shame.

Now look at the bigger picture. In view of the meaning of the parable of the great banquet that follows in vv. 15-24, it seems reasonable to interpret the wedding feast as a veiled reference to the kingdom banquet of the last times. Invitation to attend this feast means that one has been graciously invited to enter the kingdom. However, the response must be one of humility, not of self-exaltation. The Pharisees presumed their invitation and found in it a cause for arrogance and pride. Jesus reminded them that the proud will be brought down and the humble exalted (v. 11). This statement is not merely an advice. It has spiritual and eschatological overtones, i.e., it makes reference to God's final judgment. It must be seen as an indication of the basis on which His judgment will be enacted. Jesus was explaining that the way to salvation is by humbling oneself.

God is really the subject of this profound sentence. He is the host of the kingdom banquet of the last times. He Himself will make the final seating arrangements in His kingdom. How is He going to decide who sits where? The Lord will humble you if you exalt yourself, but He will raise you up if you humble yourself. He alone will decide who deserves honour and who deserves humiliation.

Again, we see that it is not just about proper behavior. Jesus is dealing with one's entrance into the kingdom of God.

### **From justification to sanctification**

Now, in order to understand Jesus' purpose here, we must deal with some fundamental principles concerning salvation. The first of these is the fact that we are forgiven by God's grace. The second of these concerns the fact that when we are forgiven by God's grace, there must follow an

appropriate response, an appropriate conduct, that shows that we have been forgiven. There is necessarily a close connection between the forgiveness that we receive from God and the conduct that must derive from it.

We call the first, justification. And the second is called sanctification. Justification is to be forgiven. It is an act of God by which He declares the sinner absolved from his sin. Sanctification is that conduct which comes out of being forgiven and which shows that you have been affected by God's grace. How do we know that God's grace is effective in you? By seeing that your behavior is different.

We can speak of the first one as God's gift of salvation. It is freely available to everyone. We can make an analogy with a medicine. Let's suppose that there is a disease which is killing everyone. And God says, 'Here is my gift to you which will heal you from that disease. Anybody who takes this medicine will be healed.' Now, that is grace. But that grace will not do anything to you until you take that grace, i.e., until you internalize it and it becomes part of you. That's what the medicine does. Once you take it, it goes into your system and it begins to do something in your body. But if you just take the gift in your hand and you put it in your pocket, then nothing is going to happen. You are going to be just as sick as before. To say that I have accepted the free gift of God means absolutely nothing if by accepting that free gift I have simply put it in my pocket.

That was Jesus' point in telling the parable of the unforgiving servant (Matthew 18:21-35). That servant received forgiveness as a gift. But it was not internalized. It did not change him. If really the love of God had penetrated his heart, we would have expected a much more humble and grateful attitude. 'Oh my God, my God. I don't understand this. Why have you forgiven a wretched man like me who does not deserve forgiveness?' As he ponders that, the love of God begins to transform his life and his character. And if somebody comes to him and says, 'I owe you a hundred denarii. Please forgive me that debt,' he would have said, 'My friend, forget that debt. I have just been forgiven a debt of ten thousand talents. How can I think of taking back one hundred denarii from you. Forget it!'

Had the servant spoken like that, we would have seen that God's forgiving grace has become effectual in his life. It has taken effect. It has changed his heart and the way he thinks. But it didn't happen in that person's life. When a fellow servant came and asked, 'Please, forgive me,' the first servant said, 'No! You go to jail until I get my money back from you.' Did he receive God's gift of forgiveness? Well, yes and no. Yes in the sense that he was forgiven. His debt was completely cleared. No in the sense that, like the medicine, he had only put it in his pocket. It didn't go into his system. It didn't change his heart. It didn't change his mind. He was the same selfish person, as we can see from his conduct. That is what we mean by an 'appropriate response' to God's forgiveness. This is not optional. It is obligatory. There must follow from God's forgiveness a proper conduct showing that we have been touched by God's love.

### **From sanctification to judgment**

So the first point is justification. The second point is sanctification. But there is a third point. Having explained the connection between point one and two, now we have to explain the connection between point two and three, the third point being judgment. Here again there is an inseparable link. What is the connection between sanctification and judgment? The connection is that God will deal with us in the same way that we deal with others. So in the case of the unforgiving servant, the connection of point one to two is that his being forgiven should have led him to forgive. Now the connection of point two to three is that insofar as he was not forgiving, the master (God) dealt with him in the same way. In the end, he was not forgiven.

'If you do not forgive others,' the Lord Jesus said as He summed up that parable, 'neither will you be forgiven.' The man refused to cancel the debt of a fellow servant who owed him a trivial amount compared to what has already been forgiven him. Instead he had him thrown into a prison.

When the king heard what the unforgiving servant did, he turned him over to the torturers until he pays back all he owes, which he will never be able to do. So the principle here is that we, by our own attitude towards others, determine what will be the attitude of God towards us. This is precisely what Jesus says in the parable of the guests, that God's judgment and our conduct are very closely related.

*Luke 14:11. For whoever exalts himself (that is the conduct) will be humbled (that is what God's response to the person's conduct will be at the judgment. He will bring him down, i.e., he will come under His condemnation), and he who humbles himself will be exalted (by God).*

That is the connection of point two to three, of sanctification to the judgment to come. A person's conduct will determine God's response to him, either in commendation or in condemnation.

### **The condemnation of the Pharisees**

It is on this particular point that the Lord Jesus challenged the Pharisees. On the surface, Jesus seems to say, 'Next time somebody invites you to a wedding feast, take the lower seat. It is better to be humble than to overestimate your own importance because it can put you at risk of public disgrace.' But there is a spiritual meaning that lies under this social instruction. Jesus' point has to do with the connection of point two to three. What He is really saying to these Pharisees is this. 'You think that you are saved? But look at you. Look at your conduct. Look at the way you behave. When you come to the feast, you seek the best place because you want to exalt yourself. And you think you are going to be saved? You really think so? You are theologians. You are religious people. You are Pharisees. You know the word of God. Yes. But your conduct, my friends, your conduct betrays the fact that you are not going to make it. Don't you know that those who exalt themselves will be humbled by God (Ezekiel 21:26)? Yes, He will reject you on the day of judgment.'

That is what the Lord is saying here. Jesus is not just giving some moralizing tips on how they should improve their conduct. He is speaking spiritual truth to them. He is telling them that their conduct shows that they are not saved. That unless they change, unless God's grace becomes effective in their lives and change them, they will never make it.

This is what is called the 'eschatological reversal,' which Luke 14 emphasizes. When we consider together the healing episode and the three parables that follow, the theme of God's mercy emerges. It is a mercy that extends far beyond the limits to which those who are most religious usually restrict it. In the healing episode, we have a man whose pitiful physical condition may very well have been viewed as resulting from divine punishment. In contrast to the religiously significant people – the Pharisees – this religiously insignificant man is the one who experienced God's gracious healing power. Similarly, in the passage that follows (vv. 7-11), it is the unassuming man who is honoured, while in the remaining section the invitation to eat at the messianic table is to be extended to those considered by the religious establishment of Jesus' day to be unworthy. The significance of all this is hard to miss. It proclaims that those least expected to share in the blessings of the kingdom of God will in fact share in them, while in contrast, and surprisingly, those most expected to be participants may very well be among those who will be excluded.

### **A matter of faith**

Now, how do we understand this whole thing? Is not salvation by faith? Is not salvation a matter of God's grace coming to us and received by faith? Well here, it seems that salvation is a matter of taking the lowest seat at a table. Does that imply that the way into the kingdom of God is by proper conduct? Not at all.

I will remind you point number one, that salvation is a free gift from God. This is quite obvious when you read the whole of Luke 14. The kingdom is like a great feast generously offered by

God as a free gift to the poor and others in need. And the appropriate response and way in the kingdom is 'to take the lowest seat,' i.e., by being humble. The consequence, then, in terms of behavior, must be to live out the love of God by bearing the fruit of repentance. If a Christian is a person who has been forgiven, then all his behavior should be marked by a life of forgiveness. In the absence of such change of attitude, then his profession of faith could certainly be called into question.

So Jesus is telling us in this parable that if you have faith, it will be seen in your conduct. It will be seen in the works that you do. You know, the word 'works' is not a dirty word. We are not saved by works, but the works must be a part of the Christian experience because they are the evidence of our saving faith.

When the apostle Paul speaks about works, he is very careful to speak about two kinds of works. The first kind is the 'works of the law' and the other one is the 'works of faith.' Paul is saying that you cannot be saved by the works of the law because you show thereby that you have put your faith not in Christ but in the law. Your works are the expression of some kind of faith, yes, but faith not in the saving works of Christ. It is a faith that is rooted in the law. And the law will not save you. On the contrary, it will condemn you.

Paul speaks about another kind of works which is absolutely essential to the Christian. In fact, he says in Ephesians 2:10 that 'God created us in Christ for good works which God prepared to be our way of life.' These are the works of faith. The Lord Jesus, in His parable, is precisely speaking about this kind of works, the works of faith. And that faith is a faith in God which expresses itself in true humility.

Jesus' teaching is a piece of critical advice to people whose behavior shows clearly their need of it. It tells us that there is a correlation between how we might behave in promoting ourselves before others and in promoting ourselves before God. The prudent approach that might save us from humiliating shame in a social situation applies also to our claim upon the kingdom of God. God honors only the person who comes to Him in humility, a fundamental attribute of faith. It is the person who says, like the tax-collector in Luke 18:13, 'God, have mercy on me. I am a miserable sinner.' Such a person will be exalted in the day of God's righteous judgment.