

A poet named George Herbert once said **“Humble we must be, if to heaven we go, High is the roof there, but the gate is low.”**¹ High is the roof there, but the gate is low. Last week we heard that the door to heaven is narrow. Today we find out that the door is also low. Today Jesus teaches us that we need to be humble. And so the theme for our sermon today is

Humble Yourself

- I. By taking the lowest place.
- II. By befriending those who cannot repay you.

First, humble yourself by taking the lowest place. In the Gospel today Jesus was eating at the house of a Pharisee. It was a dinner party. Apparently the guests were able to select their own places. And Jesus noticed something as the guests were selecting their places. He noticed that they selected the places of honor for themselves. It says, **“he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table” (Luke 14:7).** Each guests tried to pick a place of honor for himself. And Jesus responded by telling them that when someone invites you to a feast, do not take the place of honor, instead, **“when you are invited, take the lowest place” (14:10).** Jesus tells us, humble yourself by taking the lowest place. There are many ways to take the lowest place. We take the lowest place when we don’t think too highly of ourselves. We take the lowest place when we are unselfish. We can find a way to take the lowest place in almost every aspect of our lives. But I would like to talk about three reasons *why* we Christians want to take the lowest place. We want to take the lowest place because it is a wise way to live in this world, because we are conscious that we are sinners before God, and because taking the lowest place is a good way to serve others.

The first reason I would like us to consider for taking the lowest place is that taking the lowest place is a wise way to live in this world. Jesus says, **“When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, 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 person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will take the least important place.” (Luke 13:9-10).** If you go through this life with a haughty attitude, you are going to be humbled sooner or later. Sooner or later you are going to run into a situation where you will get humbled. Instead of talking about how great you are, it is better to let others notice you. Jesus says, **“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 honored in the presence of all your guests.” (Luke 14:10).** We should always do our best. When we do our best, it might happen that we receive some honor in this life. But it should come from others, not from ourselves.² That’s what it said in our first lesson for today from the book of Proverbs, the Bible’s wisdom book. It said, **“Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.” (Proverbs 25:6,7).** We take the lowest place because it is a wise way to live in this world. We also take the lowest place because we are conscious that we are sinners before God. Jesus said, **“For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (Luke 14:11).** Jesus said this more than once. He said it here. He also said it at the end of the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector. In that parable, the tax collector showed his humility before God. It says, **“He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, ‘God have mercy on me, a sinner.’” (Luke 18:13)** We’ll be much more willing to take the lowest seat in all kinds of situations in life when we remember that we don’t deserve a seat in the kingdom of God. But what did Jesus do? He humbled himself. He left the seat of honor in heaven and took the lowest place that anyone could possibly think of. He took a seat on the cross. So that I could be in

¹ Quoted in several commentators. Darrell Bock, *Luke*, BECNT, Baker Publishing House, p. 1265; Farrar, c. 44, Arndt, Concordia Publishing House, p. 339;

² Darrell Bock, *Luke*, p. 1267.

heaven with him. How can I take the highest seat for myself, when I know that Jesus took the lowest seat for me? So we take the lowest seat because it's good wisdom, because we remember our station before God, and the third reason is we take the lowest seat because it's good Christian service.

I have told you before that I am the oldest of seven children. I have also told you before that when we were growing up, the seat of honor was the front seat of the car. For whatever reason, we all wanted to sit in the front seat. And it happened more than once that one of my younger siblings sat in the front seat and I said, "I'm the oldest. I get to sit in the front seat." I often wish that I could go back in time and let one of them sit in the front seat. But of course I can't go back in time. The only thing I can do is repent. And take my sins to Jesus. I can't go back in time but I can ask myself, "What is equivalent to the front seat in my life right now? And how can I give it up and sit in the lowest place?" Maybe sitting in the lowest place means letting others get their food first at dinner time. Maybe sitting in the lowest place means volunteering to do the chores no one else wants to do. Maybe sitting in the lowest place means being content with what I have so that we have more money to give to the poor. So we take the lowest seat because it is a wise way to live in this world, because we are conscious that we are sinners before God, and because taking the lowest seat is a good way to serve others. Humble yourself by taking the lowest seat. And, secondly, humble yourself by befriending those who cannot pay you back.

Jesus had addressed the guests at the dinner party. Now Jesus turns to his host and says, **"When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers and sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid."** (Luke 14:12) Jesus is not saying that we can never have our friends or relatives over to eat. Rather he is speaking against the kind of attitude that says, "I'll do good to others, so that I can get something from them in return." You see back in Jesus day they cared a lot about reciprocity: "I do something for you, so that you'll do something for me in return." And that kind of thinking hangs around today and we see it come out in subtle ways. For example, maybe you have heard someone say this or maybe you have said this yourself: "I've done so much for them, when are they going to do something for me?" Well, did you do it in order to get something back? Jesus says, instead of doing kind things in order to get something back, do kind things to people who can't possibly pay you back. He says, **"But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind."** (Luke 14:13). The poor can't pay you back because they don't have the money. The lame, the crippled, the blind can't pay you back because they don't have the strength. Do kind things for people who don't have the money or the strength to pay you back. How can we put what Jesus says here into practice? We need to befriend people who are handicapped and people who are poor and people who have special needs. We have to befriend them. We do have a large Jesus Cares program at St. John's. Jesus Cares brings the Gospel to people with special needs. They meet here at church a couple Thursdays a month. You could volunteer to help with that. You could volunteer to help with the meal that St. John's serves at Love Inc. or visit a home-bound member or make a meal for a family going through a hard time. We need to keep our eyes open for opportunities to befriend people who cannot repay us.

When we do things like this, Jesus promises to reward us in heaven. Jesus says: **"Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."** (Luke 14:14) Several times Jesus promises that he will reward our good deeds in heaven. In Luke chapter 6 Jesus says, **"Lend without expecting to get anything back. Then your reward will be great"** (Luke 6:35). In Matthew chapter 6 Jesus says, **"But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret. Then your Father, who sees what is done in secret, will reward you."** (Matthew 6:3-4) Jesus promises that our good deeds will be rewarded in heaven. We certainly do not deserve a reward. It's a reward of grace. And our motive in doing it is not to get a reward. Jesus' whole point has been don't do things just so you will get something in return. But God cares about the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame so much

that he promises to reward us when we help them. In fact the Bible says in Proverbs 19:17, **“Whoever is kind to the poor lends to the LORD, and he will reward them for what they have done.”**

Some reward may come in this life, but it will certainly come at the resurrection of the righteous. It’s interesting that Jesus mentions the resurrection because he is talking to Pharisees. There were different religious groups within Judaism in Jesus’ day. One was the Sadducees and one was the Pharisees. The Sadducees did not believe in the resurrection. But the Pharisees did believe in the resurrection.³ By mentioning the resurrection here Jesus is saying, “You Pharisees believe in the resurrection, and you’re right about that. So why do you care about gaining honor in this life.” Jesus could say the same thing to us. You believe in heaven, and you’re right about that, so why do we care about gaining honor and glory in this life? Heaven is ours by grace. We don’t deserve it. God gives it to us as a gift. So let’s humble ourselves by taking the lowest place and by befriending those who cannot pay us back. Amen.

³ I owe this insight to Joel Green, *The Gospel according to Luke*, NICNT, Eerdmans Publishing House.