

Hebrews 13:1-8, 15-16

Keep on loving one another as brothers and sisters. 2 Do not forget to show hospitality to strangers, for by so doing some people have shown hospitality to angels without knowing it. 3 Continue to remember those in prison as if you were together with them in prison, and those who are ill-treated as if you yourselves were suffering. 4 Marriage should be honoured by all, and the marriage bed kept pure, for God will judge the adulterer and all the sexually immoral. 5 Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, 'Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.'

6 So we say with confidence, 'The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid. What can mere mortals do to me?'

7 Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.

8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and for ever.

15 Through Jesus, therefore, let us continually offer to God a sacrifice of praise – the fruit of lips that openly profess his name.

16 And do not forget to do good and to share with others, for with such sacrifices God is pleased.

Luke 14:1, 7-14

1 One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.

7 When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, he told them this parable: 8 'When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited.

9 If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, "Give this person your seat." Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.

10 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 honoured in the presence of all the other guests. 11 For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.'

12 Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.'

The lowest place Luke 14:1, 7-14

When you are invited, take the lowest place, v10. Jesus was *being carefully watched* says Luke. The Pharisees were desperate to find some flaws, to catch him out, and it's quite funny to observe their repeated failures, particularly trying to find fault with him for breaking the law on the sabbath. But his generosity of spirit always overcomes their small mindedness.

The arrangements for the sort of meal described here were that guests would sit in a U shape around the table, with the person of highest social rank at the base of the U. The guests reclined on their left elbow, and the 2nd place was on the left, 3rd place on the right, and so on. The theologian Ian Paul points out why this mattered: *where you sat in the pecking order determined every aspect of your life—your work, your income, who you could associate with, and with whom you could intermarry—and the places around a meal, nearer or further from your host, were a tangible expression of this status.*

So naturally there was a scramble for the best places, and Jesus noticed it. He was watching the watchers! The problem was that if you went for a high position there was a risk that someone else would come along with a higher claim to it and you would get bumped. So the advice was often given to choose a lower place because then you had a chance of being invited higher up. So an early example of social climbing!

He does seem to be giving them advice on etiquette – don't sit in the posh seats, there might be someone more important arriving, so go and sit in the back row. Then I realised this clearly explains why so many people sit at the back of church! But Luke tells us specifically that it's a parable, so there's obviously more to it than how to avoid social embarrassment.

He actually begins by mentioning a wedding feast, probably a more formal occasion. You can see a parallel with St John's prophecy of the wedding feast of the Jesus and the church in heaven, and there are other parables about feasts including one that immediately follows this one. How much does our position in society really matter? He's asking how we see ourselves in relation to others and to God, and He's using this to teach us humility. That yes, we should believe in ourselves and be confident that we're valued and loved by God, but that we should also be humble. In other words, realistic about our strengths and weaknesses and limitations, and not be arrogant. You often hear self help advice along the lines of 'you can do anything you want' or 'you can achieve your dreams'. But what do we want? As followers of Jesus how should we define success? What are our dreams? Jesus wanted to help others at the expense of his own life. He told a parable of a Pharisee who congratulated himself that he was better than other people, and a tax collector who admitted that he was a sinner.

Who was right?

Luke 18:14: *all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.*"

Phil 2:8 says *being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross.*

It's easy to be lured by the idea that worldly success and wealth make you superior to others. It might make you temporarily happy, but ultimately it has little value. If you make a billion you have to make more for fear of losing your 'chart position'. If you've reached the top the only way is down.

It's a sign of the depth of our understanding of God's grace if we realise that we don't ultimately deserve anything God has given us. If from the start we can regard life as his free gift we will undoubtedly be in a healthier frame of mind.

The most fulfilling way to live is first to pay attention to the needs of others. I heard someone on the radio recently saying this: that when she got work which had some value to the community there was much more of a sense of satisfaction with life than when she was in a well paid but ultimately soulless job.

I wondered what her motive was? Maybe she stumbled across this by accident, but Jesus never tired of pointing out the truth that the way to find peace was to follow his lead in putting the focus *outside* of ourselves. I think we all know this is true but we also know that our tendency is more often to selfishness and not selflessness, and so we try it our way, just to see if *maybe* we can have it all.

Jesus goes on to the question of motives when he says that it's not our friends and family we should invite to the feast but the poor and the sick.

Ian Paul points out that *'in the ancient world gift-giving was a vital part of the mechanism of social exchange'*. If you gave a gift then the person was in your debt in some way. This of course is very much the way business still works today, not least in politics.

Jesus is saying that if there is some sort of recompense expected for our actions then there is no generosity in them. True generosity expects nothing in return. This is the New Testament understanding of hospitality. The word translated hospitality [in our Hebrews reading] in Heb 13:2, *philoxenias*, means **love of a stranger**. And it's a spiritual gift. That's the very nature of God's unconditional love. Do we love in order to attract people to faith? Is that genuine love? Shouldn't we love just because we are commanded to love, and for no other reason?

God also gives us spiritual gifts, without discrimination, and without asking anything in return.

Ian Paul again: *if you find that, in fact, these gifts are given both to the free and to slaves, to adults and to children, to the educated and to the uneducated, to males and to females, your whole notion of worth, and thus your social values, is thrown into disarray.*

Everyone is equally but differently gifted. The world sees this as a subversive idea. But if we use our gifts for his Kingdom, we're truly blessed.

As Jesus said, the poor are always with us, so there is a lot to do. It's the reality which never goes away. I remember at our last church we had a campaign called Make Poverty History, around the year 2000.

22 years on there is even more of a problem than there was then. Much of the world's population are in 'the lowest place'. Injustice is built in to the system. And Jesus is encouraging us to always have the whole community in mind, the whole country, the whole world, wherever we find ourselves on the scale. And to put them first. The Kingdom of God turns the values of the world upside down. These are kingdom values which the world desperately needs to learn. The good news of the gospel is that if each one of us acknowledges these values and lives by them the Kingdom will grow and the world will have hope.

Amen