

Move Up

Luke 14:1-14

The Iowa State Cyclones had their first game of the season this weekend, and it was an exciting start. The first and second games of the season are already sold out, and are setting attendance records. RV's were camped out Friday night, and tailgaters woke up early Saturday morning to try to get a good spot to get together with their friends.

Of course, that's the challenge. Where are you going to sit? In years when the Cyclones weren't so good, it was a little easier to find a seat. Now, with the success they've had recently, it's getting more and more difficult. In order to get the best seats, you don't just have to get there early. You might have to give a donation to the alumni association or the football boosters so you have a chance of getting a good seat or a good parking spot.

Jack Trice isn't the only spot where finding a good seat is important. As classes began at Iowa State, some of you may have tried to get to class early the first day so you could get a good seat, though your definition of good could mean in the front so you can participate better, or in the back so you can avoid being noticed. The Democratic candidates for president are all still jockeying for a seat, or at least a podium at the debate. After two debates of 20 candidates each, this next one only has 10 candidates, with those barely left out crying foul.

Most movies about high school begin with a map of the cafeteria, telling which group sits where. Jocks over here, nerds over there, the popular girls in the middle, the loners off in the back. Try and sit in the wrong place, and you risk getting mocked, food dumped over you, or beaten up. You have to know where to sit when you eat.

It doesn't get any easier as you grow up. Who will you sit with when you eat in Seasons or at the MU or at another dining hall on campus? Who do you invite to business lunches? Do you have lunch meetings with your boss, or does the whole office go out to lunch without you? How does your family sit at gatherings? Who sits with whom at the wedding reception?

In Jesus' day, the rules of table fellowship were strict. You would only eat with those on the same level as

you. You would only eat with those who were ceremonially clean, with those who were as righteous as you were. Eating with someone meant that they were as close as family, and that came with a lot of obligations, so you were careful who you invited to a meal. You have to know who will eat with you.

Even within that group, though, there were levels. Among your peers, you wanted to be seen as the most important. You wanted to be seated closest to the host. You wanted those who were closest to you to see that you were better than they were, that you were more respected, more well liked, more in favor than they were. It was a chance to show off, to be seen. Where you sat showed your position in society.

At a Sabbath meal, Jesus reminds the guests that it's better to think too low of yourself and be asked to move up than it is to pick a higher place and be asked to move down. Being asked to move down is humiliating. Being asked to move up is uplifting. That's advice we heard in the lesson from Proverbs, too. If you are going to err in where to sit, err too low instead of too high.

Part of that fits within the honor shame culture Jesus lived in. You wanted to make sure you had an accurate depiction of where you were in society, what level you were at. It would be embarrassing to be sent down a spot by the host. But part of it is also, without humility, you won't have an accurate view of yourself at all.

CS Lewis, in his book *Mere Christianity*, writes about how humility helps us find ourselves in ways that exalting ourselves never could. "The more we get what we call "ourselves" out of the way and let [Christ] take us over, the more truly ourselves we become. ... The principle runs through all life from top to bottom. Give up yourself, and you will find your real self. Lose your life and you will save it. ... Look for yourself, and you will find in the long run only hatred, loneliness, despair, rage, ruin, and decay. But look for Christ and you will find Him, and with Him everything else thrown in."

A few years ago, my wife and I went to Colorado Springs. While there, we toured the Air Force Academy. It's a beautiful campus, with stone walkways and a chapel that soars up into the sky. One of the people in our tour group asked about the walkways.

They were squares, but the edge of each square was a strip of marble maybe a foot wide. Our tour guide said that the strips of marble were for the freshmen to walk on. They weren't allowed to walk on the main part of the walkway, or even talk, until the upperclassmen thought that they had earned the right to be a part of the community.

Our tour guide also said that the freshmen there are called "doolies." At first, I figured it was a reference to the famous general James Doolittle, who led a raid on Tokyo during World War II. Instead, it turns out that it came from the Greek word "doulos," which means "slave." The freshmen came to the Air Force Academy in order to learn to be officers. But before they could lead, they had to learn how to follow. Before they could be first, they had to be last. They had to humble themselves before they would be invited to move up in respect.

For Jesus, though, being a doulos, being a slave, wasn't something that you graduated from. It was something you aspired to. "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all." Paul encouraged the Philippians to follow the example of Jesus in being slaves of Christ.

Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others. Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.

Or, as Martin Luther put it, "A Christian is a perfectly free Lord of all, subject to none, and a Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all." It's not that we simply think less of ourselves, but, more importantly, we think about ourselves less.

Jesus lived it out. He didn't ask to move up. Instead, he humbled himself and became a servant. When he hosted the Last Supper, he didn't lord it over his disciples. Instead, he put on a towel and served them. He humbled himself to die on the cross, and was then

exalted, raised from the dead and seated at the right hand of the Father.

What does that look like in our lives? Here's an example. For Super Bowl LI between the New England Patriots and Atlanta Falcons, Meir Kay, a motivational speaker who lives in New York City and happens to be a Pats fan, had the idea to gather up some homeless people for a Super Bowl party, since the homeless are overlooked more on that "holiday" than others. Kay bought some Patriots shirts and found some men on the street who were more than happy to join him for food, drinks and a place to watch the game. Kay invited these homeless men to move up and eat with him, at least for a night, not because they deserved it but because he was gracious enough to invite them. How wonderful for us it is that we've been invited to move up and eat in the presence of Jesus, even though we have done nothing to deserve it!

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