

Two Meals Luke 14:1-14

Now my conscience is at peace, From the Law I stand acquitted;
Christ hath purchased my release And my every sin remitted.
Naught remains my soul to grieve— Jesus sinners doth receive. (TLH 324:7)

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ, Amen.

Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I have good news for you today: Your Savior Jesus is at a meal— and you are not invited!

I. The Pharisees' Meal

Jesus is eating bread with the Pharisees in one of their homes, and the menu has little to do with the meal. Jesus has been invited to eat so that the Pharisees might watch Him closely—scrutinize His every move, scan for weakness, see how He might be used or abused. In fact, meals among the Pharisees are less about food and more about status: Those who are deemed most important get to sit near the head of the table, and those who have less status sit lower down. Already, this meal has been interrupted once: Somehow, a man sick with dropsy has found his way in, looking for Jesus, and Jesus has healed him on the spot. The Pharisees aren't quite sure what to do with this: On the one hand, Jesus has broken their strict rules by laboring on the Sabbath; on the other hand, His labor consisted of healing a man. In any event, when the man has departed, Jesus tells this parable:

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."

It's interesting, isn't it? It sounds as if Jesus is just quoting Proverbs and giving the Pharisees some simple, political strategy for life in their world. If you do well, sit in a lower spot anyway; that way all that can happen is that you'll be positively recognized. But if you take a high spot at the table, there's the chance you'll suffer the embarrassment of having to move back down.

That's how it works in Pharisee-World: The better you do, the higher up the table you move. In fact, that's how it works in the world generally—the better you do, the farther you go. However, the problem with the Pharisees is that they see salvation the same way: The better you keep the laws, the closer you are to heaven.

So, beneath what seems to be benign political strategy, Jesus is warning them of their sin: If they try to exalt themselves, they will be humbled. Of course, if they all strive to be the humblest at the foot of the table, that's no better. Nobody likes someone who exults in their humility. So, whichever end of the table they're shooting for, only humiliation awaits them. Furthermore, if they truly want to be virtuous, Jesus says they shouldn't be having dinner with each other; instead He tells them to "invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, [and] the blind." If they're truly interested in keeping the Law, they'd be inviting the downtrodden of society. The man with dropsy who dropped on by—he should be sitting with them now. But he's gone away again. He's apparently so lowly that he doesn't even make it into the assigned text.

However, that's the man who gets the most from the meal! The Pharisees are busy about doing enough and being enough in order to sit in a certain spot in relation to each other and Jesus. They're consumed with their own works. But this man has no such positioning on his mind. He comes to Jesus because he's sick and he trusts that Jesus can heal him. He is the one who leaves the meal restored.

II. The Wedding Feast

So now we talk about us; and as we begin, we begin with this assertion: The wedding feast of heaven is not like the Pharisees' meal, where you must always be working hard to position yourself in order to get ahead. Heaven isn't like that at all.

It's easy to get confused, though, because life in this world is a lot like the Pharisees' table. It's about moving toward the top seat. If you work hard and put in the overtime, you're far more likely to get bumped up to a chair at the boardroom table than the guy who calls it quits at 5:00 every night. If you're the first one at practice and the last one to leave, you stand a much better chance of starting the game while the slacker is folding towels on the bench. The more time you spend reading, the longer you last on stage at the spelling bee. The more time you spend with your family, the better your kids are likely to turn out. The more you focus on diet and exercise, the better your health is going to be. The better you handle your money, the more comfortable your retirement will be. That's simply the way the world works, and so it has to be; our sinful, slothful natures need to be goaded into action with such Law motivations as, If anyone will not work, neither shall he eat (2 Thess 3:6), and Go to the ant, you sluggard (Prov. 6:6).

But it's frustrating, isn't it? There are so many ways in which you are required to succeed, and only so much time in the day. And here's the kicker: All these different requirements for success clash and conflict with one another. Long hours at work mean less time with the kids, so you might get the promotion but have troubled teens. More time sitting and studying means better test scores, but less activity equals weaker health. More responsibilities mean more headaches, moving you down the table away from low-stress happiness. To be at the head of the table in one area means to be seated low in others.

So what do you do? You have to prioritize. You have to balance things out—there's no other way. But if you go for balance, you'll have a middle seat at best. Try to be good at all things, and you'll never be great at anything. Do you know what's really scary? So many believe and teach that heaven is yours if only you do your best. So while you're juggling all these different chairs and responsibilities, you can be sure that you're saved if you do well enough. Of course, what does "Do your best" mean? Self-help books give a lot of advice. Prioritize. Simplify. Take breaks for you. Outsource. Hire somebody else to take swimming lessons for you. Don't bite off more than you can chew. Follow 48 steps toward an easier life. Scripture is far less comforting, because the Law accepts only excellence: Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might; for there is no work or device or knowledge or wisdom in the grave where you are going (Eccl. 9:10). Be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect (Mt. 5:48).

Do you really want a seat at the wedding feast of heaven based upon your work?

So this is not a self-help sermon, for we cannot help ourselves enough. Therefore, as you and I battle the rat-race of demands and priorities, I offer you this counsel of Law and Gospel.

First, the Law. For starters, the Lord has given you various vocations in life. No matter how the world works, the purpose of your vocations is not to get the top chair, but to serve those around

you. Should you reach the boardroom or start the game, thanks be to God; if you remain in the mail room or on the bench, thanks be to God. You are given in life to serve, with the talents and skills and vocations God has given you.

If you are given to serve, then, it only goes without saying that pride is a sin, and a dangerous one. Striving to excel is no sin, but striving to be the best at the expense of others is only sinful pride. Striving for humility is not better, for one will only become proud of how humble he is. But know this: Wherever you do well, you will be visited by pride. Pride will seek to persuade you that you are righteous by your own efforts, not by the work of Christ. Repent of this most destructive sin, for it seeks to separate you from all things, most of all your Savior.

This Law so far seems quite mundane and expected. The third piece of Law may rock you back a bit: Let your daily responsibilities and vocations accuse you. You see, your daily responsibilities and vocations are what God gives you to do: That makes them Law, and the purpose of God's Law is to accuse you, to show you your need for a Savior. In other words, one of the blessings of your vocations is that they show you your limitations. By the time you finish all your responsibilities, you're tired. You want a break. You wish you had more energy. You regret the way you crabbed at somebody around 2:30 when nappy time was setting in. The "To-Do" list hasn't gotten any shorter. Neither has the list of aches and pains. You can't do what you need to do as well as it needs to be done. All of this demonstrates to you that you have limitations—that you only have so much to give. Tomorrow won't be any easier. That's how life is in this world, accusing because it demands more than you've got to give.

But that is not how your Savior treats you. You see, you arrive here on Sunday morning, perhaps still shaking cobwebs from a night's sleep, hopefully recognizing your sins and limitations. Here, the Lord speaks His Word to you. Here, He invites you to His table. But take note of what He doesn't say to you. He doesn't say, "If you do well enough with your life, and if you're good enough at worshiping here, then I invite you to be forgiven." No, He does not tell you that the food's only at the top end of the table, so you'd better get to work and move up a few chairs. Instead, He tells you that because He became flesh, He knows all of your weaknesses and temptations—yet He was without sin. Where you have failed to live up to God's commands, Jesus has kept them for you. Where you merited God's judgment for your sin, Jesus has endured that judgment because He has taken your sin upon Himself. And where you lacked righteousness and perfection, He gives you His own.

So the Lord declares, "I have died for you and I am risen again. I invite you My table—to My wedding feast of eternal life. Do not worry about your seat at the table for this heavenly banquet, for it is not determined by your works and deeds: no, I sit at the right hand of My Father, and I bring you to the table with Me."

Remember the man who isn't mentioned in the text—the man with dropsy. He doesn't care about table position, because one chair or the other won't help him. He comes to Jesus because he needs healing, and he trusts that Jesus will provide it. That is you and me this day: We do not come before the Lord saying, "Look, Lord! We've done some great works this week! Plus, we're extremely humble about them, too!" Rather than worry of impressing Him or one another, we come with the plea of those in need: We pray, "Lord, have mercy upon us." As promised, He has mercy. He cleanses you of your sin. He feeds you His grace. He renews your everlasting life. Dear brothers and sisters in Christ, I pray that you find the comfort that this text gives you. This is a world of seating position, of merit and demand. But this world is not your end, and the way

of this world is not the way to everlasting life. Your everlasting life is sure because of Christ's merit, because He has fulfilled the Law's demands for you, died and risen again. Your place at His wedding feast of heaven is certain, because you are forgiven for all of your sins in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Ghost. Amen