

“BOUNCERS OF THE GOSPEL”

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Text: Luke 14:1-14 NLT

God's Word: James 1:19-27 NLT

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14 One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat dinner in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching him closely. ² There was a man there whose arms and legs were swollen. ³ Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in religious law, “Is it permitted in the law to heal people on the Sabbath day, or not?” ⁴ When they refused to answer, Jesus touched the sick man and healed him and sent him away. ⁵ Then he turned to them and said, “Which of you doesn’t work on the Sabbath? If your son or your cow falls into a pit, don’t you rush to get him out?” ⁶ Again they could not answer. ⁷ When Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honor near the head of the table, he gave them this advice: ⁸ “When you are invited to a wedding feast, don’t sit in the seat of honor. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? ⁹ The host will come and say, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! ¹⁰ “Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, ‘Friend, we have a better place for you!’ Then you will be honored in front of all the other guests. ¹¹ For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” ¹² Then he turned to his host. “When you put on a luncheon or a banquet,” he said, “don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbors. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. ¹³ Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. ¹⁴ Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.”

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Luke opens chapter 14 by telling us that Jesus “went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee,” on the Sabbath and that “he was being carefully watched.”

You’d think this would make Jesus a bit nervous. Most people would try their best to fit into the “norm.” Not to “rock the boat.”

After-all, this wasn’t just a casual gathering of old friends. This was one of the social occasions of the year. It was a party for the “haves and the have mores.”

If People Magazine had existed back then, this gathering would have been a featured story. An invitation to this shin-dig could slingshot a person to the top of the social ladder.

And of course, Jesus didn't usually hang out at the top of that ladder, but He had been invited because He'd been in the news lately. The Pharisees wanted to see if Jesus was as good as His reputation. The local blue-bloods wanted to check Him out. They needed to know, "Is he one of us or is he going to cause problems? Is he in or out?"

There is a little church in Oak Ridge, Tennessee which was pastored by the now nationally-renowned preacher, Fred Craddock.

There were a whole lot of new people moving into the town when the Oak Ridge National Laboratory was created, and Rev. Craddock urged the people of the small 112 year old church to visit the newcomers in the area and invite them to church.

"They wouldn't fit in here," was the reply. Eventually, the conflict came to a head. Someone made a motion at a meeting that no one be admitted into the membership of that church unless they owned property in the county. The motion passed overwhelmingly.

Years later, the Craddocks moved back to that area, and drove by the old church. They were surprised to see that the parking lot was filled to overflowing. Then they saw a big sign out front: "Barbeque—ALL YOU CAN EAT!" The building was no longer a church. It had become a restaurant. The Craddocks went inside.

Several of the old pews were over against a wall. The old organ had been pushed into a corner. And sitting around all the plastic and aluminum restaurant tables were all kinds of people. Craddock said to his wife, "It's a good thing this place is not still a church, otherwise all these people couldn't be here."

The Pharisees of Jesus' day were basically "The Religion Police". They were kind of like the "bouncers" at a club. If you didn't follow their rules to the tee—you were out on the street! And it didn't take long for them to decide that Jesus just wasn't gonna do.

This meal was taking place on the Sabbath. And the Law had its meticulous regulations about Sabbath meals. These rules included the most miniscule details of what a person was permitted and not permitted to do from sunset Friday to sunset Saturday.

For example, no food could be cooked on the Sabbath; that would have been work. Everything had to be cooked on Friday; and, if the food needed to be kept hot, it had to be done in such a way that it wasn't cooked anymore!

According to the Law, in order for food to be kept warm for the Sabbath it must not be put into "oil, manure, salt, chalk or sand--whether moist or dry. Nor into straw, grape-skins, or vegetables—if these are damp. If they were not damp, however, it was okay. Food, could be, put into cloths, amid fruits, pigeon's feathers and flax tow." It was the inflexible observance of regulations like these that the Pharisees and scribes considered as "religion."

No wonder Jesus didn't fit in!!! For Jesus is about Love, mercy, and grace! Jesus is about people. Therefore, it was only natural that Jesus heal the man with dropsy right there in the middle of this great religious social event. Dropsy was edema—an abnormal accumulation of fluid in the tissues. The guy probably had swollen ankles.

Not a real big deal, but can you imagine the gasps, and the words of “I never!” floating from the lips of the dinner guests? This was considered to be work!

Then Jesus asked them, *“If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?”* ... *“And they had nothing to say.”* And no doubt knowing that He was taking a risk, Jesus did not let up. He was on a role.

Jesus must have noticed how the guests at this feast had jostled for the best seats at the table. It was kind of like playing musical chairs or yelling “shot gun” as a kid. Everyone wanted to be seen as being the most important.

*“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 man your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. 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 fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”*

On the surface, this looks like a piece of social advice, of practical wisdom. “You want to avoid embarrassment in front of your fellow guests? Then take this tip.” But Jesus didn't come just to offer good advice.

The real meaning is a warning against pushing oneself forward in the sight of God. In Jesus' day it was all too easy for the well-off and the educated to think that they were superior in God's sight to the poor, to those without the opportunity to study, let alone practice the Law. The religious elite were so eager to keep their own places at the top table that love, justice and mercy were not even on their minds.

Pride was their ruler; not God.

But Jesus was saying that our identity or our “worthwhileness” comes from the fact that God loves us—not from anything else. We prove ourselves to be God's children, by loving one another...by humbling ourselves...by serving...by putting the needs of others above our own!

Our value as a person has nothing to do with having our name up in lights. God loves us; we can't improve on that! You don't have to try and prove you are worthwhile by sneaking your nametag a little higher up on the table. And praise God for that! What a relief!

When so many allow their self-worth to be measured by peer pressure, the amount of money they make, how successful they are in their jobs, the kind of car they drive, the clothes they wear, the size of their house...it is Good News indeed that God cares nothing about these things!!! It's amazing how we can get caught up in the wrong mind set.

A pastor friend from Tennessee shared with a group of clergy something about his time spent as a chaplain in the army during the Vietnam War. He said, "When a person has been shot in war they never once ask about their bank account..." and I suppose, for the sake of this passage, we could add "their social standing"... "There are only two things they want to talk about. One is their mother and the other is Jesus! Everything else is dust!"

*"Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Pride is a great big black cloud that tries to blot out God's Light! If I reckon that I deserve to be favored by God, not only do I declare that I don't need God's grace, mercy and love, but I imply that those who don't deserve it shouldn't have it either.

What a selfish and self-absorbed way to live and think.

When Jesus reached out and healed the man on the Sabbath--impressed by His power and confounded by His logic—the Pharisees were speechless! Continuing in the same vein, Jesus turned to His host and advised him that for future parties he shouldn't just invite friends and those who can pay him back in one way or another...but rather he should include *"the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,"* and thus, he will *"be blessed."*

This is what the Kingdom of God is to look like anyhow; right? There is no one who is "in" or "out." God's Kingdom; God's Church is not a country club. It is a place for lost sinners to humbly confess their need for Christ and for each other. It is a place where the truly great are those who serve. It is a gathering of flawed people seeking to live according to the mercy, forgiveness and love they have experienced in Christ. We are here to help one another. We are here to accept one another, warts, swollen ankles and all!!!

The Pharisees could watch Jesus all they wanted, but His healings and His teachings were too strong for them. Eventually these same folks would be the ones who would plot Christ's death. His mercy and love just didn't fit their mold.

When Christ died on that bloody Cross, the Religion Police thought they had won. The "bouncers" celebrated their victory. High fives were given all around. But evil and man-made religious ideas do not have the final say. Pride and arrogance are not the answer.

Mercy, love and grace trump every time! And in this light the proud are brought low and the humble are exalted.