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The Gospel of Luke

XLIX. Humility

Luke 14:1-14

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At first glance, it appears to be a story we have heard before. The one where it is the Sabbath day; there is a person in the synagogue in need of healing; Jesus sees the person and heals him or her; and the Pharisees, looking on, are outraged at this egregious breach of the Fourth Commandment, which forbids work on the Sabbath. In our passage, it is indeed the Sabbath Day; there is indeed a man present who needs healing; Jesus heals the man; and the Pharisees are indeed outraged. Been there, read this before.

Except – this time, while it may be the Sabbath Day, the action takes place not in the synagogue, but in the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, who has invited Jesus to join him and his fellow scribes and Pharisees for a meal. Which means the presence of this man with dropsy is a deliberate provocation on the part of the scribes and Pharisees. Dropsy is a condition involving significant swelling all over the body – which means such a man would never ever be welcomed into the house of a Pharisee. The man’s condition renders him ritually unclean, unfit to be around scrupulously religious rule-keepers like the Pharisees. And, in any case, they would have believed his condition to be proof that he must be a very grievous sinner in the eyes of God. So, what is going on here this time, with this particular Sabbath healing, is that the scribes and Pharisees are deliberately baiting Jesus into healing this man on the Sabbath. They want to catch Him in the act, but without the synagogue crowd around to cheer Him on and defend Him.

But Jesus heals the man anyway. He first asks the scribes and Pharisees whether, in their esteemed opinion, it is lawful or not to heal on the Sabbath. They don’t say a word. So Jesus heals the man and sends him on his way. He then turns to the scribes and Pharisees and rebukes them: *“Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?”* He is accusing them, first, of complete and utter hypocrisy. But more deeply than that, He is accusing them of a complete and utter failure to understand what their religion is really supposed to be about. They had not cared one bit, felt not one whit of compassion for that man with dropsy whom they had paraded in front of Jesus. They saw him only as a convenient bit of bait to dangle before Jesus. They had not seen this ill and suffering man as a fellow Israelite, a fellow child of Abraham, a fellow human being with thoughts and concerns the equal of their own, a fellow human being worthy of their kindness and concern. They had seen him only as a tool to prove a theological point.

And that is why Jesus rebukes them. And that is the meaning and force of His rebuke of them. That their theology is deeply wrong if it can lead to actions like this. That their theology is

deeply flawed if it leads them to feel compassion for a cow in a well but not for a man with dropsy. That their theology is, finally, not only wrong, but utterly wrong and an insult to the true God. For if their theology cannot bring them to honor the second of the two great commandments – but, in fact, becomes an excuse not to honor the second great commandment – then their theology is nothing but an offense against God. And, just so we remember: the first great commandment is that we love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength. And the second: that we love our neighbor as ourselves.¹ As ourselves. And if our theology does not lead from the first commandment to the second, then our theology is wrong.

So, how then do the Pharisees, how do we, get to a right theology? That is what the next two scenes in our story will teach us. First, the scribes and Pharisees take their seats around the dinner table. And Jesus watches as they do so – watches how they scramble for the best seats, the seats of honor. The tables would have been arranged in the shape of a U – with the host sitting at the bottom center of the U. And the closer you were to the host, the higher your status. So here they go, scribes and Pharisees, pushing and shoving, arguing over who sits in front of whom, over who is more important than whom. And Jesus chimes in with a little parable. “Here’s a thought,” He says, “When you are invited to a big affair, say a wedding feast, what you really ought to do is sit in the place of lowest status. That way, the host will see you sitting there and make a big fuss in front of everybody about how you are too important to sit there – that you need to move up right next to him. That way, you get credit a) for being humble; and b) also for being very important.” It’s a win-win strategy, says Jesus.

So what is that all about? I think Jesus is having some fun with them. He’s not really sharing tips on table etiquette, He’s showing them how silly their behavior really is – this lusting after power, prestige, and position. And He’s setting them up for the real punchline of the parable, which is verse 11: “*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*” In that instant, with those words, you see, Jesus goes from talking table seating strategies to talking about the Kingdom of God. He is telling them that the first step in fixing their wrong theology – their bad theology which leads not to love – is humility. A good strong does of humility. “*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*”

But what is true humility? And how is it obtained? Our first guess about humility is usually that it requires us to think less of ourselves, to downplay our gifts and abilities, even our worth as a human being. But that’s not it. In fact, that’s not true humility at all. It is even a path which is more likely to lead, not to humility, but to a new and even more perverse sense of false pride: “*Look at me! I’m the most humble person ever.*” The humble brag. Which reminds me of an old Jewish joke. It’s Yom Kippur, the service of repentance. The rabbi stops in the middle of the service, so moved by the moment that he falls to the floor and cries out, “*Oh God! Before you, I am nothing!*” And then the president of the synagogue, moved by the rabbi’s demonstration of piety, throws himself on the floor, crying out, “*Oh God! Before you, I am nothing!*” At which point the janitor of the synagogue, standing in the back, throws himself down in the center aisle and also cries out, “*Oh God! Before you, I am nothing!*” With that, the president of the synagogue then turns to the rabbi and says, “*So, look who thinks he’s nothing!*”

No, true humility is not self-abasement. In fact, true humility doesn't come from anywhere inside of us. It comes to us only from God – in reference to our God. That's what Jesus is saying when He speaks of the one who exalts himself and so forth – that it comes only from God. Humility comes only from seeing ourselves as God sees us. Seeing ourselves through His eyes and by the Light of His Word. Which means it is to recognize and admit, first of all, our smallness before our Creator. That we are but creatures, utterly dependent upon God for our threescore and ten or by reason of strength fourscore years – whereas God is both eternal and almighty. Humility begins in the cry of the psalmist in Psalm 8: *“When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him?”* True humility begins in seeing ourselves as the mere creatures we are, made by and utterly dependent upon our eternal and almighty Creator. He is very, very big; and we, by comparison, are very, very small.

And then to see that we are not just mere creatures, but also sinful and rebellious ones at that. That we are creatures who routinely offend our Creator. This is the honest voice of the publican's prayer in the Temple – not even daring to raise his head to heaven; only beating his breast and crying out, *“God, be merciful to me, a sinner!”*² If we do not know ourselves as mere creatures before our Creator, and if we do not also know ourselves to be sinful creatures in the eyes of our Creator, then we will never get to a true theology which leads to love – because we will never possess the true humility which comes from seeing ourselves through the eyes of God.

And because then we will also not be able to understand the third thing the Bible says about us – or really about God and what He has done for us. That even though we are but creatures, and even though we are but sinful creatures at that – still we are beloved by God. And that, finally, is who we are; that, finally, is what defines who we are and our place and purpose in this world – that we are those who are beloved by God. True humility, meaning in the first place the first great commandment, is born in us the moment we come to understand that this is the one thing which determines, above all else, who we are and where we stand: we are those who are beloved by God. Someone asks you who you are, don't tell them about your work or your kids or your grandkids or your honors or your hobbies. Just tell them: *“I am someone who is beloved by the eternal and almighty God.”*

Henri Nouwen, the late Catholic priest and writer who has fed my soul a thousandfold, once put it this way:

During our short lives the question that guides much of our behavior is: “Who are we?” Although we may seldom pose that question in a formal way, we live it very concretely in our day-to-day decisions.

The three answers that we generally live – not necessarily give – are: “We are what we do, we are what others say about us, and we are what we have,” or, in other words: “We are our success, we are our popularity, we are our power.”

It is important to realize the fragility of life that depends on success, popularity, and power. Its fragility stems from the fact that all three of these are external factors over which we have only

limited control. Losing our job, our fame, or our wealth often is caused by events completely beyond our control. But when we depend on them, we have sold ourselves to the world, because then we are what the world gives us . . .

Jesus came to announce to us that an identity based on success, popularity, and power is a false identity – and illusion! Loudly and clearly he says: “You are not what the world makes you; but you are children of God” . . .

Our true identity is that we are God’s children, the beloved sons and daughters of our heavenly Father.³

I John puts it this way: “*See what love the Father has given us, that we should be called the children of God. And so we are.*”⁴ That’s the first part of true humility, which enables us to live out a true theology – one which issues forth in us an answering love for God, the fulfillment of the first great commandment. But John also points us to the second aspect of a true humility, which enables us to live out a true theology – one which issues forth also in a new love for our neighbor, the fulfillment of the second great command. The kind of humility, theology, and love which is manifested when we see a man with dropsy and immediately think, not here’s a prop I can use to trap Jesus, but rather here is a person God loves, just like He loves me. Someone who is loved by God every bit as much as God loves me – and therefore someone whose worth in this world is just the same as mine. As John puts it, again in his first letter: “*Beloved, let us love one another, for love is from God, and whoever loves has been born of God and knows God. Anyone who does not love does not know God, because God is love.*”⁵ True humility, which leads to true theology, issues forth in love not only for God – great commandment number one; but also in love for all of God’s children – great commandment number two.

And this is the point Jesus makes in the final scene. When He says to the host of the dinner party, “Next time, don’t invite the people the world considers important. Invite the people who really need to feel the love of God through you – your love – just because they are children of God just like you. It’s the same point Jesus also makes in His parable of the sheep and goats, where those blessed by God and received into the Kingdom are those who have found that when they shared kindness and gave aid to those the world considers to be “the least of these,” they have actually shown kindness and given aid and offered love as if to Jesus Himself.⁶ And that’s what true humility leads to. That’s what true theology is all about. That’s what the two great commandments for our lives are all about – love.

So, let me end with a story, an illustration of this sort of love in action:

In Brooklyn, New York, there is a school for children with learning disabilities call Chush. A few years ago, a father of one of the students, Shaya, spoke at a fundraising dinner for the school. He began mildly enough, thanking this person and that person. Then he startled everyone with an anguished question: “Where is the perfection in my son, Shaya? Everything done in heaven is done with perfection. But my child cannot understand things as other children do . . . Where is the perfection in that?”

The guests sat silent.

“I believe,” the man continued, “that when heaven brings a child like this into the world, the perfection it seeks is in the way people react to this child.”

He then told a story. One day he and Shaya were watching some boys play softball. Shaya wanted to play, and the father went over and spoke with the pitcher of one of the teams. The boy was at first unsure. Then he shrugged and said, “Whatever. We’re in the eighth inning and behind by six runs. We’ve got nothing to lose. Sure. He can play center field. We’ll let him bat in the ninth.”

Shaya was ecstatic. He shambled out to his position and stood there.

But by the bottom of the ninth, his team [was only] behind by three runs and had the bases loaded. They needed a home run to make it work – only Shaya was scheduled to bat. The boys conferred, and to the father’s amazement they handed the bat to Shaya. He stood over the plate, clutching the bat askew, too tight. The pitcher from the opposing team then did a remarkable thing: he took several steps closer, and lobbed an easy ball right over the plate. Shaya swung wildly and missed wildly. One of his teammates came up and wrapped his arms around Shaya from behind, and together they held the bat. The pitcher lobbed another easy ball, and Shaya and his teammate bunted it. It rolled right to the pitcher. All the players shouted for Shaya to run to first. He shuffled along. The pitcher could have made an easy out, but he threw the ball wide and far to right field. Shaya made first base. The players yelled for him to take second. Again, the player in right field threw wide and far, and Shaya made second. On it went, the other players all making home plate, Shaya loping along and everyone from both sides screaming themselves hoarse for him to run all the way. He touched home plate, and the ball came singing in behind him. The boys cheered madly. They mounted Shaya on their shoulders and paraded him as a hero.

“That day,” the father said, “Those eighteen boys reached their level of heaven’s perfection.”

That day they chose to commit an act of unprovoked love.⁷

That day, I would say, they discovered and lived out a true theology, based in a true humility, expressed in an act of devotion to God and of love towards their neighbor, a fellow child of God.

¹ Matthew 22:35-40.

² Luke 18:9-14.

³ Henri J. M. Nouwen, *Here and Now* (New York: Crossroad, 1994), pp. 134-135.

⁴ I John 3:1.

⁵ I John 4:7-8.

⁶ Matthew 25:31-46.

⁷ Mark Buchanan, *Hidden in Plain Sight* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007), pp. 183-184.