

### [Luke 14:1-14](#)

Meals out are a bit of a theme in our family at present. We had a large gathering of relatives in a pub recently to mark my wife's big birthday. We are about to have another family meal before my sister and brother-in-law move away from this area.

Then a week or so ago, Debbie and I went for a Chinese before seeing a film at the cinema. Who was on the table behind us? Eamonn Holmes. It appeared we had happened upon one of his regular haunts.

We know that in the Gospels lots of important things happen around a meal table with Jesus. He even turns one of them into the central way that we remember his death for us.

And a meal table is a place where we see lots of protocols and cultural habits. In our case, they might range from not putting your elbows on the table to waiting for everyone to be served before beginning to eat.

There were certainly protocols and cultural values aplenty at the home of the Pharisee where Jesus dined in today's reading. Yet what this story shows us is that the culture of God's kingdom is often the reverse of the diners Jesus was with.

So today we're going to examine what we see here about the culture of God's kingdom and ask whether there are ways in which we need to reverse our values, too. Each of the three episodes in today's story has something to tell us.

**Firstly, in God's kingdom, *rules are interpreted by love.***

I'm thinking of the first six verses of the reading here, where we learn that the meal is happening on a Sabbath, and people watch to see whether Jesus heals a sick man (just as he has done on a Sabbath in a synagogue). Sure enough, he does.

Jesus does not dispense with the rules. He honours them. But he will not apply them woodenly. He lives by the Law of God, knowing its intention for good. As he explains elsewhere, the Sabbath was made for the benefit of human beings, not vice-versa.

So here he makes it clear that of course you can and you should do good on the Sabbath. Any use of the Sabbath to prevent that would go against the spirit of God's intentions about his Law.

If on the other hand all you do with the rules and laws is apply them literally and woodenly without any love, who benefits? The people who are in power.

And who doesn't benefit when laws are interpreted woodenly and unlovingly? Those in need.

Jesus won't have this. He has come to bring good news to the poor. God's Laws must be interpreted in the spirit of love so that those in need receive good news. God never provided his Laws just to buttress the position of the wealthy and the powerful.

It's something we need to bear in mind in the church. We have our own set of rules by which the church is governed. They contain a lot of wisdom. They should not be dismissed. But at the same time if all we do is enforce them rigidly and harshly, what good does that do? Who does that help? Only the rule-makers.

It isn't being faithful to Jesus to ditch the rules – and especially not God's Laws – but it is the way of Jesus to interpret them with love and compassion for those in need.

**Secondly, in God's kingdom, *status is replaced by humility.***

We come now to verses 7 to 11, where Jesus tells dinner guests not to take for themselves the seat of honour, in case their host demotes them, but rather to take the lowest seat, from which they may be called up higher.

In Jesus' society, honour and status were everything. They determined your work, your income, your friendship circles, and who you could marry. This was given visual demonstration at meals. Therefore, in order to get on in society, people strove for higher status and greater honour. But

Jesus' teaching here not only undercuts the importance of status; it also sees status and standing as something that is given, not something that is gained—a gift from another (specifically God), not something accrued by one's own effort.<sup>1</sup>

People still lust after honour and status today. But why? It is selfish and self-centred. Not only that, it doesn't necessarily last. A loss of income or the onset of a serious disease can take it away quickly. Why settle for something temporary and selfish when an alternative is on offer that is eternal?

But to have eternal honour and status in the kingdom of God requires a different approach. It requires being like Jesus, who had more status and honour than any other human being, but who laid it aside to be born into poverty and obscurity, and who laid down his life for the salvation of the world.

The best honour and status, then, is out of our hands. We humble ourselves and leave things in the hands of God. But we do so knowing he is full of mercy and grace. He does not habitually raise up the rich, the powerful, and the celebrities, he exalts the humble.

Some people will not like the idea that their status is out of their hands. They will not like such powerlessness. But our aim as Christians is not to exalt ourselves, it is to exalt Jesus Christ in our daily lives. If we have done that, then that will satisfy us.

Too many people in the church still get obsessed with rank and status. It's time we put all that to bed. As Wesley's hymn 'Captain of Israel's host, and guide' puts it, 'Our end, the glory of the Lord.' Let that be our ambition and let us be content to leave any elevation to him, putting aside our toxic pride and jealousy.

### **Thirdly, in God's kingdom, *giving is all about grace.***

We come to the third and final section of the reading in verses 12 to 14, where Jesus tells meal hosts not to invite people to meals in order to get a return invitation, but rather to invite them who have no chance of being able to reciprocate. We are not to give in order to be repaid in this life, says Jesus.

This was revolutionary teaching. In the ancient world, you gave a gift to somebody because you considered them worthy of it. You didn't give many gifts, but those you did tended to be lavish.

How was someone deemed worthy of a gift? It might be to do with their ethnic background, their social status, their sex, their moral qualities, their success in life, or their beauty. For 'gift' in the ancient world you might want to think something more akin to a 'prize' in our society.<sup>2</sup>

Now Jesus comes along and says that God's approach to giving is utterly unlike this. It has nothing to do with the person deserving it, nor is it decided by the ability of the recipient to give back in return. Giving, according to Jesus, is an act of grace. God gives to people who neither deserve it nor can repay him.

God invites people to his table on the same basis: the invitation goes out even though people do not deserve to be there, and even though there is no prospect of them reimbursing him.

That is why we are in the family of faith. None of us deserved to receive the invitation. None of us can pay God back for all he has done for us in Jesus Christ. But God in his grace said to each one of us, 'Come to my feast.'

We cannot give back to God in equal measure of his gift to us. But we can show our gratitude, and we can pay it forward. For just as we have received the grace of God's gift, so we can in grace give to others without expecting recompense, and we can invite those who could not possibly invite us.

After all, how else will the world know about the transforming grace of God in Christ unless we not only speak about it, we demonstrate it?

I have always loved a story that the American preacher and sociologist Tony Campolo used to tell. He would recount how when he was driving on a toll road, he would come up to the toll booth where he needed to pay and give the attendant twice as much money as he needed to.

'That's for me, and that's for my friend in the car behind,' he would say.

Of course, he didn't know the person in the car behind at all, and he would drive off slowly watching in his rear view mirror with amusement as the toll booth attendant tried to explain to the next motorist that they didn't need to pay.

**So** – our reading leaves us with three challenges this week. They are simple to state:

Firstly, how can I keep the Law of God lovingly this week?

Secondly, where do I need to let go of my desire for status and humbly leave my life in God's hands?

And thirdly, how can I show the grace of God this week by giving to someone who cannot pay me back?

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<sup>1</sup> Ian Paul, <https://www.psephizo.com/biblical-studies/jesus-the-kingdom-and-the-politics-of-the-table-in-luke-14/>

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.*, quoting John Barclay, <https://www.psephizo.com/reviews/the-subversive-power-of-grace/>