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Having Jesus for Lunch

(Luke 14:1-24)

Here we meet with four scenes around the lunch table. A prominent Pharisee invited Jesus to Sabbath lunch (v. 1). We don't know where this occurs—Luke is sparse on such detail. But all 24 verses take place around the table. The underlying theme is still 'the kingdom of God and the Jewish people'.¹ I think we can divide up the text by considering certain *questions* Jesus seems to be posing to His hearers. I say 'seems to' because Jesus does not overtly or explicitly ask these questions, but they seem to be implied in and catch the thrust of what He is saying.

In verses 1-6, then, He seems to ask, **Can you see your bondage?** The Pharisees there were 'watching him closely' (v. 1). And—what do you know—there's a man with dropsy (edema)² right in front of Him (v. 2). Was this fellow a 'plant'? Commentators debate the matter, but I think he was. Quite likely he himself did not know he was being 'used'. So Jesus 'answers' the unexpressed attitude of the legal experts and Pharisees with, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?' (v. 3). But they are silent (v. 4a). It's a non-cooperative silence, a challenging silence, a silence

1. See our introductory comments to 12:54-13:21 in *Luke 1-13: The Year of the Lord's Favor* (Ross-shire: Christian Focus Publications, 2021), p. 235.

2. A condition in which there's an excessive accumulation of fluid in tissues or in a body cavity that causes swelling.

that says, 'Step into the trap and then see what we think.' So Jesus does. He takes hold of the fellow, heals him, and lets him go, then poses His second question: 'Should one of you have a son or an ox that falls into a well—wouldn't he immediately haul him out on the Sabbath day?' (v. 5).³ He wouldn't holler down, would he, with 'Son, just hang on a few more hours till the Sabbath's over; you can do it—other people have had broken legs from such falls and lived to tell about it.' No—out of simple compassion any one of these fellows would pull out a son or an ox on the Sabbath day. The claim of compassion would overrule the stricture of tradition. Again, they are silent (v. 6), but this time it is the silence of defeat.

Is it too much to think Jesus is making an appeal to these Pharisees? As if to say, Can't you see that your tenacious commitment to your extra-biblical Sabbath traditions can keep you from living out a proper piety? Isn't there something wrong if you would have a man suffer dropsy for another day [cf. 13:14] rather than seeing him get relief on the Sabbath? Haven't you tied yourselves up into a contorted box when the Sabbath gets so associated with tying knots or untying knots, with lighting or extinguishing fires, with whether a tailor walks out with his needle—and dozens of such picky details you've added to biblical commandments?⁴ Don't you feel the misery of being slaves to man-made requirements?⁵ There is something terribly wrong when Jesus even has to ask the question of verse 3. But, of course, these men suffer from an even deeper bondage, for the problem is not merely that they are sticklers for legalistic rectitude as that they hate and

3. The Dead Sea Scrolls (Qumran) sect had stricter provisions (see I. H. Marshall, *The Gospel of Luke*, NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978], p. 580), but Jesus is not dealing with them.

4. On Jewish Sabbath observance reflected in the Mishnah, see Emil Schürer, *The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ*, new rev. ed. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1979), vol. 2:467-75.

5. The problem is not limited to first century Judaism. One can meet an array of such strictures in contemporary Christian circles, such as: you toy with apostasy if you allow your children to go to public (as in the US) school; Christian young people must not 'date,' but follow a 'courting' procedure; Christian women must not wear make-up; Christian married couples must never use contraceptives. Such matters may be held more tenaciously in some circles than the Apostles' Creed.

despise Him—so entrenched is their anti-Jesus-ism. And that is a bondage only the Father can break (John 6:44).

In verses 7-11 Jesus seems to ask, **Can you see your pride?** He was noting how the Pharisee's guests were trying to choose the prime positions at table. Your place at table reflected your social status, and this was so not only in a Jewish context but throughout the Greco-Roman world.⁶ So Jesus told a parable, a sort of application of Proverbs 25:6-7. Imagine, Jesus says, the scramble for seats at a marriage banquet where this passion for reputation would be so obvious. It seems, however, that the most honorable guests tended to come a bit late.⁷ That would accord with current practice in the American south where guests are said to be 'fashionably late'. This, of course, could put someone in a real pickle. If one had already nailed down a 'high class' position, the host might come along with a more prominent late arrival and ask the occupant to vacate his coveted place in favor of the newcomer. 'Give place to this fellow' (v. 9). Public demotion—pure, shame-faced embarrassment. Better to start out low than end up there. So Jesus advises, 'Settle down in the lowest place' (v. 10) and the host will come by and make a most welcome correction. And how admired (or envied) one would be then!

Someone may say, however, that Jesus' advice appeals to the crassest form of self-interest and is scarcely worthy of Him. I don't think I'd worry about that; Jesus will make His own point in verse 11. In verses 7-10, is it too much to assume Jesus may have spoken then with a twinkle in His eye? Or better perhaps, that He said these words tongue-in-cheek? As if He were telling the guests, 'Let me give you a little practical tip in order to avoid huge public embarrassment in situations like this.' Is there also an unspoken undertow: 'Can't you see how ludicrous your mad game of "musical chairs" is, as you demonstrate what slaves you are to the idol of recognition?' In short, Can't you see your pride?

Naturally, we can see *their* pride; often ours is not so obvious. J. B. Phillips, the New Testament translator of

6. See, e.g., Mark Strauss, 'Luke,' ZIBBC, 1:440-41.

7. Marshall, p. 581.

the mid-twentieth century, was in consultation with a psychiatrist, Dr Leonard Browne. Browne knew that one of Phillips' problems was 'shame at the unacceptable conceit revealed by his inner thoughts'. Phillips was told he should jot down these thoughts. One of his entries in May 1945 read: 'I want to be colossal or soon die. Christianity is a bore unless it can help me to demonstrate my uniqueness. I really haven't any interest in others—unless they are connected with building up my reputation. *My reputation*—that's the thing! The best vicar ever!'⁸ That is stark and perhaps shocking. We try to evade such candor. But I have to say I understand that perfectly. Pardon the grammar, but it is both mad and me. It is well with my soul to see how unwell my soul is.

Jesus draws His own application in verse 11: 'Because everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and the one who humbles himself will be exalted.' The main verbs are 'divine passives', i.e., will be humbled or exalted *by God*. We run on to language like this in Jesus elsewhere (13:30; 18:14), and therefore we may regard it as a sort of commonplace. It's nothing of the sort. It's a reference to the last judgment and to God's action at that time, and so this matter of nailing down prominent seats is not a bit of trivia—it is a symptom of that self-centered arrogance and self-idolatry that will be damned. 'If self-admiration and exaltation can lead to disastrous consequences in human social settings, it will lead to even more disastrous results in the final judgment.'⁹

Thirdly, Jesus' words to His host ask, **Can you see your insulation?** (vv. 12-14). Some may be aghast that Jesus would dare to instruct His host about his hospitality. But we must beware of making assumptions about what folks must not do. I remember my next older brother, who was about fourteen at the time, sitting in the back pew in a Sunday evening service. My father who was preaching thought he saw him whispering to his friend and called him out on it: 'Jim should sit up and listen to his father's sermon!' Now that's the sort of thing one saves for later; one doesn't give a personal rebuke right

8. Vera Phillips and Edwin Robertson, *The Wounded Healer* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), p. 12 (emphasis in original).

9. David E. Garland, *Luke*, ZECNT (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2011), p. 576.

in a church service. But my father did. He wasn't necessarily conventional. And neither is Jesus—so He takes the liberty to correct His host's hospitality, blunt and ungracious as that may seem.

It's common for expositors to assure us that Jesus does *not* mean that we can *never* invite friends or relatives for dinner, and that's fine. But Jesus wants to press His host to see hospitality as an opportunity for generosity and to use it as such. There is such a danger of getting caught in a pay-back routine. 'When you make a lunch or dinner, don't summon your friends nor your brothers nor your relatives nor rich neighbors, lest they also invite you back and "pay-back" occurs' (v. 12). Instead, when throwing a reception, Jesus says to invite the poor, disabled, lame, blind, who 'do not have the resources to pay you back, for you will be paid back at the resurrection of the righteous' (v. 14).

Jesus' counsel fits nicely with the directions Yahweh gave Israel in Deuteronomy. For example, when they celebrated the 'Feast of Weeks,' they were to be glad 'before Yahweh your God, you and your son and your daughter and your male servant and your female servant, and the Levite within your gates, and the sojourner, the orphan and the widow who are among you, at the place which Yahweh your God will choose to make his name dwell there' (Deut. 16:11; cf. 14:29; 16:14; 26:11). There were others beyond the family circle, ones with a touch-and-go livelihood, who were to be included in their festive meals at the sanctuary. It is interesting how Jesus links 'last things' with here-and-now needs, as if the 'resurrection of the righteous' should supply motive enough for inclusion of poor, disabled, lame, and blind. Eschatology should drive present-time service. But Jesus' host and his ilk will have to break out of their cocoon of simply receiving pay-back invitations and enjoying adulation from their peers.

Bishop John Hooper (d. 1555, martyred by 'Bloody Mary') exemplified what Jesus had in mind. John Foxe describes something he discovered when Hooper was Bishop of Worcester:

Twice I was, as I remember, in his house in Worcester, where, in his common hall, I saw a table spread with a good store of

meat, and beset full of beggars and poor folk. And I asking his servants what this meant, they told me that every day their lord and master's manner was to have customably to dinner a certain number of the poor folk of the said city, by course, who were served by four at a mess, with whole and wholesome meats. And when they were served (being before examined by him or his deputies, of the Lord's prayer, the Articles of their faith, and the Ten Commandments), then he himself sat down to dinner, and not before.¹⁰

We ourselves, however, must take care not to throw stones at Pharisees, for we can so easily slide into the mode of only consorting with congenial Christian friends. And sometimes Jesus must push us out of *our* insulation. Perhaps we live in a university town and some university students (not necessarily professing Christians) show up at our church. What an opportunity to invite them home for lunch and conversation. Or, you may be part of a large and fairly affluent church, but if people come there because there is faithful biblical teaching, you will find plenty of folk who are not 'upper crust.' Here's a head of house, for example, who is currently unemployed, or a couple who work part-time jobs to make ends meet—ones you can make welcome by having them into your house and forming a bond with them. Or we might think of our neighborhoods. I live in what is thought to be the friendly American south. But move in and hardly any neighbors will come by to welcome you or introduce themselves. I usually have to go and greet my neighbors who had arrived long before I did. But no matter. It gives an opportunity to invite several of them over for dessert. Are they Christians? Not usually. Mostly pagans. But who knows what opportunity may arise over peach cobbler? Maybe we're wandering from Jesus' concern, but I don't think so. We have to watch out that we don't imprison ourselves in our own Christian hothouse. Can you see your insulation?

Finally, Jesus so much as asks His fellow diners, **Can you see your danger?** (vv. 15-24). Jesus' use of 'blessed' and His

10. Cited in J. C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (1890; reprint ed., Welwyn: Evangelical Press, 1980), pp. 92-93.