

THE PLACE OF HONOR

Let me ask you a question. What is it that interests you most? In this world, what fires you up? What impresses you most? If you could have one thing, what would it be? Would it be success? Would it be power? Would it be wealth? Would it be social status? Would it be recognition? Would it be security?

In the Ancient Near East the Answer to that question was very clear. That one thing was honor. They understood honor a little differently than we do. They thought of it in terms of what we might call esteem. Honor was more important than life itself. Appearance was everything. Everything from winning an argument to giving charity somehow reflected on your honor, and for one person to gain honor meant another person lost honor. Honor was a critical thing in the ancient world.

In today's passage Jesus gives us two short sayings regarding the nature of honor. The first has to do with wedding feasts. He says when you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, "Give place to this man," and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, "Friend, move up higher," then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you.

Now, to understand this passage, we must understand that eating was a very social affair. Much more so even than today. Typically, mansions were built so that the dining areas were open to the street. This was so that passersby could see what was happening. If they saw that you had a big banquet with a lot of guests, especially a lot of important guests, that must mean you were an important person. Your honor was increased.

But it didn't stop there. It wasn't just that you had a banquet with a lot of people, they had to be the right people. The setup for the banquet was critical. There was a table in the center of the room, with couches set around three sides of the table. People reclined on these couches to eat. Typically, they would recline three to a couch. Then there were other tables in the room with other couches around them, but the center table was the most important table—the most important people sat there; the most honored people sat there. They got the best food. The people who were less honored sat at the outlying tables, and they got less desirable food.

One of the best ways to gain honor in the ancient world was to invite someone more honorable than yourself to your banquet and have them recline at your table. You can see then that banquets were serious business and the stakes were high. But Jesus takes the existing understanding of honor and turns it on its ear. He says, don't demand this for yourself. Humble yourself, and then others will honor you.

Now, this kind of thing is often difficult to accept. Years ago, when I was a boy, I went on a summer backpacking trip to North Carolina. My scout troop was hiking a portion of the Appalachian trail. For those of you who are not familiar with it, the Appalachian Trail is a foot trail run by the National Park Service. It runs the entire length of the Appalachian Mountain Chain. More than 2,000 miles! We didn't walk all of it.

Now scouting has under its mantle a subsidiary organization called the Order of the Arrow. It's a brotherhood of honored campers. Its members are chosen from within the Scout Troops by the scouts themselves. Membership is exclusive, so only so many boys can join.

At the time of this particular trip, I was not yet a member of the Order of the Arrow. All of the boys who were members were basically required to do no work while we were there. One night in particular sticks out in my memory. We had been asked to cook dinner and set the picnic tables in the campsite. The members of the Order then notified us that only members of the Order could sit at a specific table. Later that night a few of us were sitting by the campfire. It was a cool night up in the mountains. We were tired. I had gathered all the wood for that fire myself. I had helped another boy light it, and all of a sudden, out of the darkness, some of the members of the Order, showed up and told us that we had to leave. They needed the fire. They didn't even ask. They just ordered us to leave.

To my consternation, when I complained to the adults, they supported the members of the Order. A day or so later, I was talking to one of the Order members, and I told him that I thought they were acting like jerks. That I wanted nothing to do with the Order of the Arrow. He said, "Well if act like that, you won't get in." I said, "If you guys act like this, I don't want to get in."

I have a confession to make; that was a lie. I really did want to get in. I wanted that place of honor. As I look back over my life, it's amazing to me how often I've desired that place of honor. How often I've wanted the status, recognition and power that goes with being on top. Albert Einstein once said that there were two infinite things in the universe: the universe itself and the capacity for human stupidity- and he wasn't sure about the first one. After 25 years in the ministry, I'm convinced that the capacity for human pettiness is also infinite.

In the second passage, Jesus says when you give a luncheon, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment comes to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

Now, it's important that we understand the implications of this statement. This is a revolutionary concept for two reasons. First, because inviting people of low honor, such as those mentioned here, to a banquet where everyone could see (because remember the banquet hall is on the street), reflected negatively on your honor. You would lose face within

that community. Secondly, this is revolutionary because in the ancient world, the only reason to do a favor for someone was to have them indebted to you.

However, the gospel is not about the haves and the have nots. It is not about what society thinks of you. It's not about those who are blessed and those who are not blessed. It's not about someone owing you a debt. It's about what God thinks of you.

Paul, I think, said it best. "Have this mind in you, which was also in Christ Jesus, who being in the form of God, did not think equality with God a thing to be grasped, but humbled himself, taking the form of a servant."

How many of us are really willing to do that? How many of us are really willing to give up control? How many of us are really willing to give up power? How many of us are really willing to give up wealth? How many of us are really willing to give up status? Or whatever we picked in that first list? How many of us are willing to do that for the sake of another? I want to point out something to you; Christ did that for you! He gave up all of those things- not to mention his life. He did it for you. He did it for me.

I started this message by asking you what it is that turns you on. Do you know what turns me on? It's not power. I've found that those who want power, are usually the worst leaders. It's not wealth. Often those who acquire great wealth don't put it to good use. It's not status or recognition. Those who crave status are often the least deserving of it. It's not success and security. Those things are illusory. What turns me on is zeal. What turns me on is passion for ministering in God's name. That commodity is in short supply these days.

We have a unique opportunity right now. After the Council of Nicea in 325 AD the church became the chief moral authority in the western world. Ever since then, the church has kept that status, and we've taken it for granted.

That is, until about 40 years ago. We're now seeing the decline of the church in the western world. It is no longer the chief moral authority in our society. We have the best opportunity to minister to the world that we've had in over 1700 years, and we are missing it. Why? Because we've lost our zeal for ministry. Which may be why we lost our spot as the chief moral authority. We aren't going to get it back by whining about losing it. We have to do what got us there in the first place. We have to minister, humbly, without expectation of return.

The place of honor will be ours only if we do what Jesus has asked us to do. Jesus promised us that, after all.