

CHRIST REBUKES SELFISHNESS

Luke 14:7-11

In the verses preceding this lesson, we are told that Christ Jesus had accepted an invitation to dinner with one of the Pharisees. In accordance with the custom prevailing in that country, an invitation was extended and the time of the gathering was announced. This practice gave those invited ample opportunity to arrange their affairs and be prepared when the feast actually took place. Then, when everything was ready, servants were sent out to advise the guests that the time was at hand.

According to oriental custom, at such a feast the guests reclined on couches, leaning on their left elbows. The "chief seat" was often elevated above the rest. It was reserved for the guest of honor, one more distinguished or held in higher esteem. It was located next to the host and was assigned to the most highly honored guest, and each successive place was assigned to those of lesser importance.

As Christ Jesus looked about the room in the home of the Pharisee in which the feast had been spread, He gave particular attention to the manner in which the invited guests selected for themselves the best seats at the table. Naturally, certain places at the table had been reserved for the honored guests, as the host might appoint. Of course, the observant Christ watched the ill-mannered guests who violated all rules of propriety and good judgment. Unknown to them, Christ had been watching the other guests at the feast as they picked out the best places for themselves. He was displeased and disgusted with the self-esteem, self-importance, selfish ambition and pride which they manifested in their struggle to occupy the best seat. The implication is that there had been somewhat of a mad scramble on the part of those supposedly dignified guests to occupy the places of honor at the table.

True etiquette at a feast always leads a guest to await the appointment of the host or hostess. On him or her rests the responsibility of determining precedence. While doing far more than giving instruction in etiquette, Christ taught that the courteous procedure, when one is bidden to a feast, is not to seat himself until the host or hostess tells him where he should sit.

This unseemly scramble for positions of prominence was characteristic of the Pharisees, but by no means limited to them. Getting ahead, even at the expense of others, seems to have been quite the thing in our Lord's time on the earth, as it is today. This sort of scramble for the first and best places is still evident on buses, street cars, trains and planes. Even in the homes, members of the same family frequently try to get the best food. But, we must ever remember that the watchful and all-seeing eye of Christ is always observing how people live and act. Nothing ever escapes His careful scrutiny. When He sees selfish and ambitious pride manifested, He is courageous enough to rebuke those who sin in this regard. With severe frankness He deliberately, delicately and decisively called the matter to the attention of the offenders and admonished them to change their practices.

Our Lord used this parable to teach a great lesson on humility. To the guests at the feast who were jostling one another for the chief places, which had not been assigned to them and to which probably they were not entitled, He remarked that the proper conduct on such an occasion would be for them to take the lower seats, and then, if they deserved higher seats, the host would invite them to come up higher.

The surest way to the seat of honor is to take the lowest seat, not in mock humility, but in perfect sincerity. One should not take the lowest place merely with the thought of possible promotion, but with a sense of real humility and a willingness to remain unnoticed and unhonored. It is far better to be invited to the higher place than to seek it for oneself. One should not try for the place of honor because it is for the honorable person. One who strives and struggles to sit in the place of honor proves thereby that he is not honorable. Think that over!

Self-exaltation leads to abasement, whereas self-abasement leads to exaltation. Humility commends a person to others, whereas selfish ambition usually leads to demotion. If one pushes himself into the highest place, he may be asked to take the lowest place "For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted." Luke 14:11. "God resisteth the proud, but giveth grace unto the humble." James 4:6. "Humble yourselves in the sight of the Lord, and He shall lift you up."

A general rule is laid down here, namely, the proud are always humbled, sooner or later. This principle is and always will be true. Demotion is the shame of the proud, while promotion is the glory of the humble. The person who craves the praise of men and strives for precedence among men reveals his own selfishness and pride which inevitably lead to a fall.

Over and over our Lord taught that the humble man would be the exalted one. He declared that the pathway to the high place was by way of the lowly place. Of course, this teaching was contrary to natural instinct, which declares that every one must strive to get ahead of others.

Christ Jesus was the perfect pattern of humility. He "took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: And being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross. Wherefore God also hath highly exalted him, and given him a name which is above every name." Philippians 2:7-9.

Andrew Murray once remarked that humility becomes us as sinners and as saints. When we know our own hearts as sinners, we shall always feel that our place is the lowest. And the operation of grace in transforming us into saints increases humility instead of fostering pride. The way up in spiritual things is always down. Humility, which is so despised by the world, is precious in the sight of God, and will be rewarded by Him. Those who live humbly and modestly, remaining unconcerned about their own selfish interests, will receive the very best for themselves. The one who has experienced the redeeming love of Christ and imbibed His spirit will gladly take the place assigned him, faithfully doing his work without any effort to be noticed, and at the same time he will courteously recognize the rights of others. Honor is not a cheap thing just to be grasped at the moment, but something which is earned and is received as a token of respect because of merit somewhere.