

A PLACE OF HONOUR
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Jesus was at table dining with Pharisees. The Pharisees were watching him intently and listening, and not being people known for their modesty or humility, they jostled each other for "a place of honour". Noticing that behaviour, Jesus related a simple parable with which most of us could identify. Imagine yourself arriving early at a banquet, a wedding reception perhaps. Thinking of yourself as a person of some importance you take a place of honour. Embarrassingly, the host approaches you and asks you to move. The place of honour you chose is reserved for someone else. How much better it would have been to have taken a lowly seat and then have the host summon you forward to a better place, even a place of honour. "Those who exalt themselves will be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted."ⁱ

The parable is an exhortation to humility. But it would be a mistake to restrict the lesson to apply it only to our behaviour at banquets. Jesus is not a precursor to Amy Vanderbilt or Emily Post instructing us about proper etiquette and skills needed to avoid embarrassing situations. Nor is he a Dale Carnegie graduate teaching us how to win friends and influence people. Rather Jesus is the Divine Child of God revealing to us the will of God. He is instructing us in the proper relationship people should have with God and with each other. Through Jesus Christ, God has invited us to a magnificent feast, the Messianic banquet, the feast of the Messiah, the Christ. The places of honour at the Lord's Table are reserved for those who are humble, those who do not desire and strive for the places of honour, for "the humble will be exalted."

So, what does it mean to be humble?

To be humble is to recognize the limitations of the human

situation and our own personal, individual limitations.

Concerning the intellect, we may be tempted to boast of our great knowledge. Yet as the boundaries of knowledge expand, we find ourselves presented with more questions than answers, and the answers we have obtained grow so feeble and inadequate.

I recall the wife of my New Testament professor asking him, "Heinz, after 30 years of study don't you have all the answers yet?" to which he replied, "No, I haven't even asked all of the questions yet."

How much can any one individual know anyway? Who can boast to have acquired anything more than an infinitesimal piece of all there is to know? In ancient Athens, when the body of knowledge was vastly smaller than it is today, students entering their first year of university were called Wise Ones. In second year, they became "those who love wisdom." In their third and final year, they were known simply as Learners.

When I was in the guidance class in grade 9, I recall the teacher saying that the more you know, the more you know that you don't know anything. As you learn more the vista of knowledge opens before you and our inadequacy to explore and grasp it is truly humbling.

Concerning physical prowess, it seems obvious that one of the distinguishing characteristics of the human species is our defenselessness and weakness.

I remember years ago when Uncle Homer removed a hornet's nest at the cottage, after the adults were gone, we watched the new hornets hatch. They were exactly like the adults. I lived on a dairy farm for a while when I was a student. A newborn calf is so much more self-sufficient than a newborn human baby. Even as adults our physical strength is no match for other creatures similar in size. We are humbled by our weakness.

And what of spiritual matters? Here too our weakness humbles us. The scriptures make us very aware of this. "All sin

and fall short of the glory of God.”ⁱⁱ We all do things we ought not to do, and we all fail to do things we ought. Even things we deplore we too often do. “I do not understand my own actions,” Paul laments. “For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate.” “I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do.”ⁱⁱⁱ Our spiritual weakness humbles us.

Nevertheless, while being humble means recognizing our limitations and weakness, it does not mean denigrating ourselves. Humility, if it be not false, also recognizes and affirms our achievements and worth.

The Trappist monk Thomas Merton commented that “Worship of the self is the last and most difficult of idolatries to detect and get rid of.” But to rid yourself of worship of self, to be humble, to recognize your limitations, does not entail the denial of either our talents or our achievements. If we insincerely denied our talents and achievements, we would be hypocritical. Perhaps you recall Uriah Heep, one of the characters in Charles Dickens’ novel *David Copperfield*. He always claimed that he was an “‘umble person”, so “‘orribly ‘umble”. He seemed to pride himself, as did his mother, on his great humility, even to the point of self-pity. But it never rang true. If we sincerely deny our talents and accomplishments, then we are misled and our talents are wasted, and those who need to profit from them would be impoverished.

Those who are humble must always affirm and use their talents on behalf of others who would benefit from them. And they must also affirm the sources of these talents and achievements, and so be humbled.

Such sources are other people. In the realm of the intellect in the study of science, one of the most distinguished is Sir Isaac Newton who discovered laws of motion, the law of universal gravitation, integral calculus. Yet he modestly said, “If I have seen further [than others] it is because I have stood on the shoulders of giants.” Newton recognized that nothing he accomplished could have been done without the prior work of

others. No great thinker recreates all the thinking that was done before but rather builds upon that thinking.

Similarly in our own lives, each of us has stood on the shoulders of others, giants perhaps, but mostly ordinary folk. Parents and other family members have raised us. Friends have interacted with us helping us grow. Teachers have taught us. Humble people recognize that any achievement is but the byproduct of a multitude of factors not of our own making.

The ultimate source behind everything is, of course, God. From God comes every good and perfect gift.^{iv} All natural abilities come from God. Our intellect, our physical prowess, our beauty, our capacities, aptitudes and talents, even our capacity for righteousness and holiness, are gifts from God. All our achievements thus have their source in God, whether they be intellectual, physical or spiritual.

Having recognized the sources of their achievements, humble people therefore recognize their equality with all people, even the most outcast.

Following the parable of the banquet, Jesus reveals to us the criteria for being accepted by God to this banquet. He tells the host not to invite those who may repay but the outcast of the world who cannot repay. In this parabolic statement Jesus is saying that humble people must accept and respect not just those of talent and achievement, but the outcast who have nothing.

Ofttimes it is said that when we see those who are outcast, poor, disabled, suffering, we should say, "There but by the grace of God go I." But Jesus bids us to say instead, "There go I." In God's eyes those who are outcast are no different than we are. Everything we have which we might reckon as making us superior are but gifts. Whether it be intellect, health, affluence, training and education, emotional stability, spiritual righteousness. Whatever we may be tempted to use to differentiate between ourselves and those outcast are but gifts from God and nothing in which we should take pride. When we strip away all of that, when we accept the outcast as brothers and sisters, as children of God, then we have genuinely humbled ourselves.

This brings us to a rather frightening question. To be humble is to recognize our limitations, to acknowledge the source of our talents and achievements, and to accept those outcast as brothers and sisters. So then how can we make ourselves worthy of God's love? How can we save ourselves? How can we be worthy of self-love. How can we ever deserve a place of honour at God's banquet, the feast of the Messiah?

We can't. We can't deserve a place of honour based on our talents and achievements, not even our spiritual achievements.

That dilemma is why we so commonly exercise our pride. That is why we deny our limitations. That is why we parade our accomplishments. That is why we like to feel superior to others, why we often look down on the world's outcast. It is a front, a mask, an illusion to hide our own fear of unworthiness.

The Pharisees weren't pleased to hear Jesus' exhortation to humility. They thought they could earn God's approval by meticulous adherence to the law. They thought their pious lives made them better than others.

Pharisees of the modern day don't like Jesus' message either. They like to think that their achievements, especially their spiritual achievements, will turn God's face upon them, that their generosity and charity will earn them credit on God's ledger.

He dropped a penny in the plate
And meekly raised his eyes,
Glad the week's rent was duly paid
For mansions in the skies.^v

But Jesus said, "All who exalt themselves will be humbled." And although that makes us feel helpless, it is not a hopeless situation, nor a joyless one, because we need not save ourselves. We need not earn our own acceptance because through Jesus Christ God accepts those who seem unacceptable. "Those who humble themselves will be exalted."

People often say that if you claim to be a Christian that you are bragging that you are a good person who is better than

others. However, a Christian is not defined as a good person, or a perfect person, but rather a person who knows that she is not good, that he is not perfect, but that God through Jesus Christ accepts us anyway, and exalts us to a place of honour because we are humble.

Be humble.

Recognize your limitations.

Affirm your accomplishments while acknowledging the source of your talents.

Accept all people, even those outcast, as your sisters and brothers.

Then you can joyfully give thanks to God that you are accepted as you are to a place of honour.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

ⁱ Luke 14: 11.

ⁱⁱ Romans 3: 23.

ⁱⁱⁱ Romans 7: 15, 18, 1.

^{iv} James 1: 17.

^v Author unknown. Found in William Barclay's *Daily Study Bible* in his commentary on Luke 14.