

New Forms of Hypocrisy? ***Luke 14:1-14***

What sort of reputation do people want? When it comes to the end of their lives and they're lying peacefully in the box at the crematorium, what sort of things do they want said in their eulogy? What qualities would they like chiselled on their graves?

- That he was filthy rich? He beat the stock market. He rode the property boom. He invented his way to a fortune.
- That she was a mega-star? She lit up the silver screen. She topped the charts for nearly a decade. She lived the Olympic dream.

Eulogies often list those sorts of achievements – though most people won't reach those sorts of levels. Yet, those things that we dream about and idolise and even spend lots of effort chasing after in our own limited ways often aren't where the main focus is. People are remembered for their character. It's character qualities that form the greater part of people's reputations. So, what reputation do you want when it comes to your eulogy?

And how important is that reputation to you? What price are you willing to pay to get that reputation? Character qualities have a cost. It's not a cost in terms of dollars. You can't go to BigW and pay \$100 for a nice coat of patience. You can't even go upmarket and pay \$300 for the same coat at a fancy boutique. Yet, patience will cost you. There's a price to pay if you want to be known for this quality.

- You'll have to control your tendencies to impatience – let other people waffle on; be calm in the

queues, bite your tongue.

- You'll have to put aside your own desires and your own more competent plans as you allow others to interrupt what you're doing or how you're doing it.

And so it goes on. And you'll have to do this not just once, but time and time and time again. It's not a matter of showing great patience on one significant occasion and then basking in the glory of that for the rest of your life. It's a lifetime commitment to demonstrating this quality day after day after day. And it's exactly the same with any character quality.

This part of the Bible we're looking at this morning highlights three character qualities: compassion, humility and generosity. Do you think they'll appear in your eulogy? From what Jesus says in this passage, it seems He thinks they should – at least, they should if you're one of His disciples.

Compassion

The first one – compassion – comes through in this healing story. Luke 14:1-6

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, He was being carefully watched. There in front of Him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, He healed him and sent him away.

Then He asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" And they had nothing to say.

It's pretty clear this guy's a plant. Two main clues:

- First, Luke tells us Jesus is carefully watched. These prominent Jewish religious leaders are out to get Him. He's said some pretty challenging things. He doesn't fit into their idea of what a godly person should look like. He's even criticised them and suggested they're not on good terms with God. If they can get clear evidence Jesus breaks their religious law, they can ignore Him. They can dismiss Him as not being a true prophet. They can even attack Him and execute Him.
- Secondly, as the chapter goes on, it becomes apparent that this is a fairly exclusive dinner going on here. It's a group of important people jockeying for the positions of honour at some society banquet. A man with dropsy doesn't belong in their company. It's unlikely he snuck past security. It's much more likely he's been invited for other purposes – namely, as bait for a trap.

Jesus seems quite happy to walk straight into their trap – He heals the man. Yet, in the process of doing so, He asks two questions that turn the trap around. The first question: Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not? Back in Luke 6:9, Jesus asked a similar question:

I ask you, which is lawful on the Sabbath: to do good or to do evil, to save life or to destroy it?

What are they to say to such a question? If they say it's permitted, their trap's gone. They admit it's OK for Jesus to heal this guy. They may even admit their interpretation of the Sabbath laws are in error. If, on the other hand, they say it's not permitted, they show themselves against doing good and showing compassion on the Sabbath. And is not the Sabbath the symbol of God's rest – the

symbol of harmony and peace and health and well-being?

The second question: If someone's in trouble on the Sabbath – or if one of your animals is in trouble on the Sabbath – won't you help them? Won't you go to their rescue? Won't you show them that level of compassion? And if you'll do this for a mere animal, how much more should you do it for another person?

Jesus is driven by a higher quality than mere adherence to a set of man-made rules and regulations: compassion. He sees this man suffering. He has the ability to relieve that suffering. He does so. He could have opted out – tell the man:

Come back tomorrow. If I heal you today, it'll upset these religious leaders. They'll think I've broken God's rules. That'll be a hassle for Me. It may also be a hassle for you. It'd be much more convenient if you turned up to be healed tomorrow.

But no. He heals the man on the Sabbath.

- He shows compassion toward the sick man – relieving his suffering straight away.
- He shows compassion toward the Pharisees – challenging them to think about their ungodly and uncompassionate thinking and to repent.

Darrell Bock puts it well:

Where is God working? Where is the evidence of His authority? Where is His power and presence displayed? It resides in Jesus, not the leadership. In addition, what does God desire of His people, as indicated by the One He has sent? He desires mercy and compassion that reaches out to meet needs. Even

on the day of rest there is no cessation of compassion.¹ There seems to be something very incongruous in these Pharisees using God's law as an excuse to deny showing compassion to this man.

What excuses do we have for not showing compassion? Let me give you the sanitised version of some of the ones I've used during my lifetime.

- They made the choices (choices about spending on credit; frequenting coffee shops; drinking too much; taking drugs). These are the natural consequences. Why should I bail them out?
- If I stop and help now, I'll be late for church/work/Bible study/an appointment/whatever and I'll be holding up all those other people and my reputation for punctuality will be damaged.
- If I give to all the legitimate needs I come across, my kids will miss out on lots of things and I won't be able to buy some of the things I'd like to buy and maybe I won't have enough left to retire on.
- I'm busy having my day off now. I've just sat down to watch a DVD. It's the first time I've stopped for over a week. Come back and ask for help when my day off's finished.

I may not have said those things out loud – but that's the sort of talk that's gone on in my head that sometimes results in me failing to act.

And there's a level of truth in those excuses. Sometimes compassion is complicated and requires great effort to get it right. It's not compassionate to give an alcoholic cash – it'll only feed his bondage; it won't save him. Giving him nothing is probably a more compassionate option – but

¹ Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 9:51-24:53* (ECNT; Michigan: Baker, 1996) 1259.

you'd hardly call that showing compassion.

The reality is that, when I'm looking for excuses, I just demonstrate my underlying lack of compassion. I see it as a duty, not a desire. As a quality, it's still external to me – it's not coming from inside. I need God's grace to change me. I need Him to remove my heart of stone and replace it with a heart of flesh. It needs to become part of who I am, rather than a role I play from time to time.

Humility

Having healed the man – and taken the opportunity that provided to challenge these people about whether they understood God truly – Jesus moves to another challenging topic – humility. Verse 7:

When He noticed how the guests picked the places of honour at the table, He told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests."

It's pretty straightforward advice, isn't it? It's the sort of thing you'd expect to find in Proverbs. Indeed, you do. Have a look at Proverbs 25:6-7

*Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence,
and do not claim a place among great men;
it is better for him to say to you, "Come up here,"*

than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.

It's the stuff of wisdom – practical advice for how to live life to best advantage. If you're the sort of person who's into honour – into looking good in front of other people – well, here are two potential strategies.

- Strategy #1: think of yourself as important. Seek for the positions you think are yours by right. Push yourself forward. The danger is: it may backfire. You may over-reach yourself. You may over-estimate the honour due to you. If that happens in public, you'll be humiliated. Everyone will see you for the social-climbing animal you are.
- Strategy #2: put yourself in places of low honour. Don't demand your rights. Don't push yourself forward. Let others notice you're in the wrong place and not getting the proper attention and let them rectify the situation. That way they'll give you the honour you desire. The danger is (and Jesus doesn't point this out): no one may notice. You may be left in the low place.

That's pretty easy to understand – and, as a piece of wisdom, it makes good sense. Sure, you'll be able to find exceptions. Some people have such a high opinion of themselves and they're so good at bluffing their way through any social situation that they'll always come out on top. But, for most people, this is sound advice that could very well save them from public humiliation.

Now, I must confess, I'm troubled a bit by this parable. Not by the first part – the jockeying for position that goes on in the world and in the church. I think I've got that part down OK – although not necessarily because of Jesus' teaching. By and large, I don't think I involve myself in that sort of thing – the trying to get the place of

greatest honour for myself at official functions.

Yet, that leads to my first troubling thought. Do I just have a blind spot? Now, I think I'm fairly good at spotting the crawlers – the people who gravitate towards the hosts and the special guests of honour at a function. It's amusing to watch the way they extract themselves from conversations with lesser beings and install themselves in the circle of important people. Christians are just as good at this sort of thing as others.

At CMS Summer School last year, we ran into some old friends and were chatting away with them. Someone else they knew came up and we were introduced and she started dropping all these names of prominent Christian ministers and events and I felt very much put in my place. But as I reflect back on that occasion, I ask myself two questions:

- What does feeling "put in my place" mean? Does it not suggest that I had a higher view of myself than I should – that in my own mind I had seated myself higher up the table than I should have?
- And secondly, I felt a touch of envy – why didn't I have all these prominent connections? And that doesn't seem a particularly godly thought.

And as I pondered that some more, I discovered that I do the same thing – just in a different area. The area these guys focused on was social status – and perhaps wealth was tied up with that somehow as well. The area I focus on is knowledge. Get me with a group of Christians – not the ones with doctorates, but the average everyday garden variety – and I'll want to show I'm in the know.

- That I know what the Bible says about it.

- That I know what's going on in Christian circles.
- That I know what's happening in people's lives.

I want people to honour me for my theological knowledge. I want people to honour me for my pastoral knowledge.

But that leads into my second troubling thought about this parable. Am I taking the principle of this parable and simply using it as a means to gain honour? Am I supposed to be seeking for honour at all? What's Jesus really saying by this parable?

- Is he saying: Yes, it's good for you to seek honour for yourselves – it's just that you've got the wrong method. Your method is to take steps to promote yourself. That doesn't work. It has the distinct possibility of backfiring if someone's better at the method than you. Here's a better method to achieve your goal: Get others to do your promotion work for you.
- Or is He saying: You simply shouldn't be bothered about getting honour for yourself at all. It's not: put on an act of humility because that's the means to get to your real goal – personal honour. Rather, be humble because that's a good quality to have – that is the goal to have. Let others – let God – decide whether you should be honoured.

Jesus concludes this parable in verse 11 with this:

For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

It's everyone who exalts himself – whether by obvious, straightforward means or by less obvious, more cunning means – those people will be humbled. I don't think this parable encourages us to chase after devious means to

achieve a higher level of honour for ourselves – to find ways to puff up our own egos. Rather, Jesus encourages us to humble ourselves. Live genuinely. Don't put on airs and graces. Don't wear a mask to pretend you're more than you are. Simply live openly and honestly before God and others.

I'm sure you've heard the one about the church who gave its pastor a badge celebrating his great humility. As soon as he wore it, they took it off him. That highlights the great problem we have with this quality: whenever we think we're making progress, it's evidence of pride creeping back in. How do we get around this? Three helpful hints:

- First, focus on God. Think of His greatness, His magnificence, His power, His sovereignty, His majesty. He's so much bigger than you. He's even greater than what you can imagine. True humility starts by recognising that He's God, not you. True humility starts by treating Him as God and not pretending you run things. True humility begins by remembering you deserve His judgment, but you've been given His extraordinary grace.
- Secondly, focus on others, not self. When you do that, you focus on serving them and their needs. You're not looking for what you can get for yourself (for example, the best place at the table); you're looking at what you can do for them.
- Thirdly, don't focus on comparisons. As far as God's concerned, how you compare with others is irrelevant. God made us all different. He gave us different abilities and personalities. Our responsibility is to be faithful – faithful to what He made us to be and what He wants us to do.

The heart of humility is to stop being self-centred. That requires God's work in our lives – changing us from the inside out.

If I'm truly humble:

- Enjoying the banquet will be more important than where I sit at the table.
- Learning the truth will be more important than me being the source of it.
- Serving others will be more important than being recognised for my God-given gifts – as if I had any say in them or achieved them without Him.

Thus, it won't matter if others are honoured above me. In fact, I suspect I won't even think in those categories – but I'm not humble enough to know that for sure!

Generosity

A third quality Jesus advocates is generosity. Verse 12:

Then Jesus said to His host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbours; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

Jesus isn't saying never invite your friends and relatives for a meal. It's not that it's wrong to do that – it's simply that it's not particularly godly to do it. Anyone can do that sort of thing. In fact, nearly everyone does.

- Most of us belong to various social cliques that carry on that way. We invite them over for dinner and, a few weeks later, they invite us back.

- Most of us, when we look for friends, expect some level of mutuality. We look for people of similar standing to ourselves – or maybe slightly better.
- In the secular world people say: There's no such thing as a free lunch. When people have business lunches, they expect a return on their investment.

That's the way things work. We give and we get in return.

Jesus says: There should be such a thing as a free lunch. Godly hospitality is given, not exchanged. It's a different spirit. It goes against the cultural norm. Getting seems so ingrained in us because self is so central.

- How will this course advance my future?
- Will this job give me more dollars?
- What will this neighbourhood do for my status?
- What will this friendship do for me?
- Even, how will this church meet my needs?

We expect a return from our investments. Jesus says: Give up on self-centredness. Focus on those who need help. We've only looked at this one briefly this morning – we'll come back to it next week.

The Kingdom of God

So, three important character qualities – compassion, humility and generosity. We've considered each in turn. We've thought about how they relate to our own lives. Jesus thinks they're important qualities. The question is: Do you? Are these the sort of qualities that are likely to get a look in when people write your eulogy? If God were to write your eulogy, would He include them? Do you see them as important enough to pay the cost to develop them?

And there's the catch. If we see it in terms of "cost", perhaps these qualities haven't really grabbed hold of us. Their beauty hasn't yet captured us. They're simply a mask we think we should wear.

As we close this morning, I want to briefly go back over this passage from another angle. Think of these qualities in terms of the kingdom of God.

First, God demonstrates great compassion in saving sinful humans. We don't deserve it. Indeed, under the law, we deserve the exact opposite. God should pour out His just judgment on us. But He doesn't. Instead, He shows great mercy and compassion and rescues us.

Secondly, think of the humility Jesus shows in providing salvation. He could have demanded His rights. He could have demanded His position of honour. Why should He give up that for the sake of rebellious wretches like us? But He did. He humbled Himself. He became human. He lived as a servant. He died a torturous death as a criminal. Even though He didn't deserve it, He endured God's wrath for us.

Thirdly, who does God invite to His great banquet? Is God after some sort of reciprocal arrangement? Is He after a return on His investment – only invites those who can repay the favour? No. God has no need of anything. We have no ability to pay anything and no way to return the favour. God's kingdom is about His generosity. He only invites those who can't pay Him back.

These three qualities are elements of God's character. He wants us to develop the family likeness. More than that,

He wants to change us so that the family likeness shines forth.