

TABLE MANNERS IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Today's Text: Lk 14: 7-24

Extracts:

So [Jesus] told a parable to those who were invited, when *He noted how they chose the best places*, saying to them, “When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, *do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honourable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then you begin with shame to take the lower place.*” ... Then He also said to him who invited Him, “*When you give a dinner or a supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbours, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind. And you will be blessed [and] repaid at the resurrection of the just*” [Lk 14: 7-9; 12-14]

*In the popular movie, **Pretty Woman** (1990), Edward Lewis (played by Richard Gere) was a successful businessman visiting Los Angeles from New York. He met a young beautiful prostitute (Julia Roberts) whom he hired for a week as his escort for social events. To prepare herself for a dinner that Edward was hosting in a restaurant, Vivian privately sought coaching help on table manners from the hotel manager (Hector Elizondo). He taught her how to sit and how to use cutlery, among other rules of table etiquette. However, on getting to the restaurant, they were served clams on the half shell as a first course, something Vivian had not been prepared for. So, in trying to use her knife to open a clam, it flew off and hit a guest's face!*

Table manners are as important as the food itself. That is why there are experts on the subject, to prepare guests for formal occasions such as feasts, state dinners and royal weddings. Cultures all over the world observe table manners. For example, in Africa, it is considered inappropriate to come before or right on time to such invitations because you should never give your host the impression that you are hungry or suffer lack back home! Western colonisers who did not understand it derogatively called it ‘African time.’

In this week's study, Jesus was invited to a dinner. After observing how the other guests and even the host himself were behaving, He gave them a parable, to draw their attention to the table manners that are required and acceptable in His kingdom. Since you aspire to spend eternity in that kingdom, you may be interested in what He had to say. I am! So, let us find out about the matter in this week's interesting study.

1. Background: God's kingdom is about feasting!

Speaking about the coming judgment and the establishment of God's kingdom on earth, Isaiah prophesied, "For the Lord of hosts will reign on Mount Zion and in Jerusalem and before His elders, gloriously" [Is. 24: 23] and "in this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all people a feast of choice pieces, a feast of wines on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of well-refined wines on the lees" [Is. 25: 6]. Jesus also used the Parable of the Wedding Feast to portray to His listeners what the kingdom of heaven is like [Matt. 22: 1-14], just as John was shown on the island of Patmos a vision of the marriage of the Lamb in heaven [Rev. 19: 7-9]. In fact, the angel that spoke with John said to him, "Write: Blessed are those who are called to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" In all those cases, God's coming kingdom is portrayed as a feast, especially a wedding feast. That is more than a mere coincidence or metaphor for, as Jesus has said, the kingdom of God is within us [Lk 17: 21], that is, an integral part of every true believer.

However, the word of God also says that the kingdom of God is not food and drinks but righteousness, joy and peace in the Holy Spirit [Rom. 14: 17]. That suggests that the feasts and weddings there are spiritual in nature, requiring spiritual table manners. If we are desirous to live in that kingdom for eternity, it is good for us to understand the spiritual table manners required of guests and hosts there. In this week's Bible story, Jesus had been invited to a dinner where He observed that the guests "chose the best places" [Lk 14: 7]. He also observed the calibre of guests at the occasion and they seemed to be the movers and shakers of society [v. 12]. Therefore, it was an opportune moment for Him to teach His disciples and other listeners the table manners they needed to have if they wanted to enjoy feasts in His coming kingdom. His discourse can be examined as follows:

a) *How to behave as a guest*

Jesus told His listeners, "When you are invited by anyone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in the best place, lest one more honourable than you be invited by him; and he who invited you and him come and say to you, 'Give place to this man,' and then you begin with shame to take the lowest place" [vv. 8-9].

In a typical wedding feast (reception), the seats are arranged in this order:

- There is the *High Table* for those who have official roles to play at the occasion. They usually will include the bride and groom, their parents and the chairperson/master or mistress of ceremonies. Even when you know you are qualified to be on that table, you will still have to wait to be invited to go up there.
- Then there may be *Reserved Seats* kept for the bridal train and the groom's men, and specially invited guests and close family

members. As in the case of the High Table, you will still have to wait to be led to your seat by the ushers.

- The *Free Sitting* areas are for all other invited guests. In fact, it is safest, no matter who you are, to first stay there until you are moved up to your proper seat. That is the point that Jesus made when He told His listeners, “But when you are invited, go and sit down in the lowest place, so that when he who invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, go up higher.’ Then you will have glory in the presence of those who sit at the table with you” [v.10].

In spite of the above protocol (that is, officially recognized order of precedence), some people simply walk up and take one of the highest seats without being prompted to do so. In life, there are people who are ahead of you by age, position, location or expertise. When you disrespect them or refuse to accord them their due honour, you are occupying a seat that you do not deserve. It may be due to ignorance or arrogance. For example, James and John, the sons of Zebedee, asked to sit on the right and left of Jesus in His kingdom. He answered them, “You do not know what you ask” [Matt. 20: 20-22]. In other words, they were ignorant of the seating arrangement in the new kingdom. On the other hand, the scribes and the Pharisees sat in Moses’ seat and loved “the best places at feasts [and] the best seats in the synagogues.” Yet, they disrespected Jesus that was an eternity bigger than Moses [Matt. 23: 1-14]. Therefore, it is better to take the road of humility “for whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted” [Lk 14: 11].

b) *How to be a good host*

Jesus also addressed the conduct of hosts. He said to the man that had invited Him to dinner, “When you give a dinner or supper, do not ask your friends, your brothers, your relatives, nor rich neighbours, lest they also invite you back, and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you; for you shall be repaid at the resurrection of the just [vv. 12-14].

Let us be sure that we understand the point that Jesus is making here. He is not questioning whom you invite but your motive for doing so. Are you doing it for your self interest or for others’ or God’s sake? The answer depends on which of the following host profiles best describes your situation:

- The Investor’s dinner

In this type, the host has invited those who are like himself or herself in terms of family, church or cult membership or political

or professional affiliation, among others. It is an exclusive club and every member can reciprocate the gesture in the interest of mutual self-preservation. This is the type that Jesus referred to as the dinner for relatives or associates [**v. 12**]. So, when you give dinners to those from whom you win political privileges or lucrative contracts or loyal clientele, you are making an investment from which you hope to reap huge material benefits. In like manner, when you run after signs and wonders or material blessings instead of salvation, you are investing on earthly treasures [**Matt. 7: 21-23**].

- The Godfather's dinner

In this type of dinner, you are inviting those who are of a lower status than yourself but your motive is to buy their continued loyalty or to curb any ambitions to branch out on their own. You want to remain their godfather for life or for as long as you can keep them. For example, you will not mind to sit on the floor with them or eat from the same plate but you do so in a condescending or patronizing manner.

For example, godfathers can buy drugs or alcohol for their wards but will not work for their rehabilitation. They will lend to their wards for court cases but not for school fees for their children. In other words, they will continue to give their wards fish but will never teach them how to fish. That way, such wards will never be in a position to question their suzerainty! Therefore, godfathers do not fit the host Jesus spoke about that invites the downtrodden (such as the poor, the maimed, the lame and the blind).

- The Enabler's dinner

In this type of dinner, the host is not only inviting those who cannot reciprocate but s(he) wants to enable them to rise above their disabilities. Such hosts can be called enablers. They have no material gain in helping the destitute and the downtrodden but they derive joy in lifting them up to a better status in life.

For example, when the Pharisees saw Jesus eating with tax collectors, they complained to His disciples, saying, "Why does your Teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?" Jesus overheard them and replied, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick... *For I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners, to repentance*" [**Matt. 9: 10-13**]. In deed, how many lame or blind or deaf did Jesus encounter and left

in their destitute state? Did He not cast out seven demons from Mary Magdalene to make her one of His most loyal followers [Lk 8: 2]?

From the forgoing analysis, we can conclude that to be a good host or guest in the eyes of God will take more than human table manners. You must respect yourself and respect others for “by humility and the fear of the Lord are riches and honour and life” [Prov. 22: 4]. How can you acquire such humility that endears you to God?

2. Learning the table manners in God’s kingdom

The following general principles will help you to learn God’s table manners:

a) *Always see yourself as Christ’s ambassador on earth*

You are in a dinner situation each time you are in contact with anybody else, whether at home or school, in the church or business. The word of God says that believers are ambassadors for Christ [2 Cor. 5: 20]. Since His kingdom is not of this world, it follows that we are not immigrants here on earth but His ambassadors. Therefore, when you find yourself in a situation to host others, your aim should be to lift them out of their destitution or lack, not to benefit materially from doing so.

For example, when the childless Shunammite woman built a small upper room in their house for the prophet Elisha, it was not because she wanted a child.. She told her husband, “I know that this is a holy man of God, who passes by us regularly. Please, let us make a small upper room on the wall for him there, and a table and a chair and a lampstand; so it will be, whenever he comes to us, he can turn in there.” When the prophet, in acknowledgement of the concern that she had shown for his welfare, asked her what he could do for her, she replied, “I dwell among my own people.” In other words, she did not need repayment from him. Gehazi was the one who told his master, the prophet, that she had no child. A year later, she bore a son as the Lord had told her through the prophet [2 Kgs 4: 8-17]. She was God’s worthy ambassador. Whatever she did, she did it for the One that she represented on earth.

b) *Humility means to think less of yourself not to think of yourself less!*

One reason that many people are scared to be humble is that they fear that it makes them less than what they really are. That is not true for, as an African proverb puts it, a dwarf and a 5-year old child may be of

the same height but they are not the same age! For example, Paul, a Roman citizen of Jewish descent, was better educated than Peter, a mere fisherman from around the Sea of Galilee. Yet, Paul subjected himself to the authority of Peter and the council in Jerusalem [**Acts 15: 1-29**]. In appreciation of his humility, Peter acknowledged Paul as “our beloved brother” that God had given wisdom “in all his epistles” [**2 Pet. 3: 15-16**]. How about Jesus? That He came in human form did not make Him less of the Son of God, the Second Person in the triune God. For His humility, His Father exalted Him and gave Him a name above every other name, to which every knee in heaven, on earth and under the earth should bow and which every tongue should confess to His Father’s glory [**Phil. 2: 5-11**].

c) *Upgrade the downtrodden but don’t downgrade God’s table manners!*

To invite the downtrodden to your feasts and dinners does not mean that you should continue to leave them in their state. Instead, you should empower them to overcome their lack so that they can dine with you, no matter the variety of guests that you may invite. For example, in the Parable of the Wedding Feast, when the invited guests did not show up, the king sent his servants to fill the wedding hall with anybody they could find, “both bad and good.” Yet, all the guests, no matter their level of destitution, were expected to put on a wedding garment. The one who did not wear one was cast out [**Matt. 22: 1-12**]. Jesus fed thousands of people during His earthly ministry but only 120 disciples gathered at the upper room on the day of Pentecost [**Acts 1: 12-2: 3**]. Only those who had accepted the table manners of the new kingdom drank of this new wine!

3. Conclusion: Jesus wants to come in and dine with you!

Jesus is the King of the coming Kingdom. In preparing to meet Him, you had better learn your table manners. He is knocking at the door of your heart. He wants to come in and dine *with you and you with Him* [**Rev. 3: 20**]. That makes Him both a host and a guest. As your Host, He is ready to hand you the keys to your mansion in His Father’s house [**Jn 14:1-4**], provided you have accepted Him as your Lord and Saviour. As your Guest, He has asked you to invite others as well, that is, fellow sinners that He has rescued along with you from the destitution of sin [**Matt. 28: 19-20**].

Are you ready?