

# Heading for Rock Bottom with Jesus

*A sermon on Luke 14:1, 7-14 & Jeremiah 2:4-13 by Nathan Nettleton, 28 August 2016*  
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## Message

If we construct our identity around a pursuit of social esteem, we will degrade our true selves, but if we model ourselves on the generosity of God, we will find true life where few look for it.

## Sermon

Jesus can be very funny at times, but we often miss the joke. He didn't speak English, and neither did the gospel writers, and humour is often lost in translation. How often do we hear, "I'm sorry! It was just a joke! It was meant to be ironic!"? When we miss the irony and mistake it for a serious statement, we can end up in all sorts of mess.

The first part of what Jesus had to say in tonight's gospel reading is a case in point. Jesus notices the guests at a dinner party jostling for the most prestigious seats at the table, all trying to one-up each other. At face value, he appears to give them a bit of advice about how to exploit false modesty in order to achieve their goal of climbing over everybody else and coming out on top. Dispensing strategies for how to big-note yourself doesn't seem terribly consistent with Jesus's usual style does it?

Fortunately, Luke the gospel writer tips us off. He doesn't introduce the words of Jesus by saying, "When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he gave them some tips for successful social climbing." Instead he says, "when Jesus noticed how the guests chose the places of honour, he told them a parable."

A parable. Now that's different. Jesus tells parables about kings who burn down towns because guests didn't turn up to dinner, about little weed plants that grow into mighty trees, and about wheat fields that yield a 10,000% return. The parables are laden with ironic twists and bizarre exaggerated details that were never meant to be taken literally. Jesus is not handing out strategic social advice here. He is taking the piss out of what he is seeing going on in front of him. But he is not only taking the piss. His irony is subverting the goings-on in order to make some very important points and hopefully set people back on the right track.

How much you get out of the parables often depends on how deeply you dig into them. There are often layers of meaning with something for everyone. This parable contrasts two different behaviours at the dinner party. One is to jostle for position, charging for the top and trying to get yourself a seat as high up the pecking order as you possibly can, but at the risk of ending up humiliated when you are asked to vacate the seat for some higher status celebrity. The second is to park yourself down in the lowest status seats, which may result in the host publicly promoting you to a more honoured place. A much better look.

But this is not social advice remember. It is a parable of the culture of God. Jesus is not advocating sneaky ways of getting yourself onto the celebrity A-list. Instead he is poking fun at the social shenanigans to illustrate a truth about the emerging culture of God: "those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

This is a frequent theme in Jesus's teaching. "The first will be last and the last will be first." "Those who would be great among you must be the servants of all." The Apostle Paul says it

too: “God chose what is weak in this world to put to shame what is strong; God chose what is base and despised, even things that are not, to bring to nothing the things that are.” (1 Corinthians 1:27-28)

So if you’ve caught that much, you’ve got the essential take-home message of Jesus’s parable. But perhaps we can benefit by digging a little deeper. We may be able to live that truth out a lot more fully if we get a handle on why it is true, and on what it looks like in practice, here and now in the world we live in.

What’s more, Jesus does go on to give some genuine social advice: “When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbours, who will probably later return the favour. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. You will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Bishop Tom Wright says that he once preached on this passage and promptly received three dinner invitations that week from members of the congregation. He says he was too nervous to ask which category of outcasts they thought he was in!

This genuine social advice from Jesus gives us some deeper insights into the practical implications of the parable. So much of human culture, then and now, is driven by an economy of exchange. People do things for us in the expectation that we will do something for them in return. Life is a series of transactions – you play, you pay. We rarely find ourselves receiving gratuitous expressions of love. Instead we receive down payments in anticipation of a return. Life is measured and calculated and weighed up.

Jesus is urging us to break free of this economy of exchange and embrace the culture of God, a culture of overflowing generosity, of super-abundant love, of extravagant hospitality. A culture where, as he said elsewhere, we give regardless of merit and without expecting anything in return (Luke 6:35; Matthew 5:45-47).

So when Jesus urges us to open our dinner tables to those who do not have the means to repay us, it is not just an act of charity for those who need it, as important as that is. He promises that we will be blessed through this ourselves, and it is not just a delayed version of the economy of exchange – do this now and you’ll be repaid after you die.

Jesus is constantly telling us that the culture of God is at hand, right here, right now. If we can break ourselves free of the shackles of the economy of exchange, we will be blessed in the here and now because we will begin to enjoy the radical freedom of God’s culture with its extravagant giving and receiving that are not measured or calculated or targeted. Indeed, as we break ourselves free of targeting our giving to those from whom we expect a comparable return, we free ourselves to receive true love, true generosity, life without measure.

So when we hear Jesus’s parable and his social advice together, we begin to see and understand the promise of the culture of God more deeply. I’m not finished with this parable though. I think we can go deeper again. This parable can sit alongside some other things Jesus teaches and demonstrates about the culture of God, and shed new light on them too.

While Jesus is taking the piss out of the pretentious social posturing that he witnesses at the dinner party, and facetiously suggesting that they might be more successful by deliberately positioning themselves at the bottom, he is also using the joke to illustrate another deep and serious point.

It is about how we construct our own sense of identity. This is a big issue nowadays. You don't have to look hard to find people angsty over questions of 'who am I really?' and 'how do I find and develop my true self?'

What Jesus is pointing to is the almost universal, but wrong, way of going about finding or constructing our identities, our sense of our true selves. What he sees around the table are people trying to construct their identities in rivalry with one another. They are jostling for position, all wanting the same identity. They all want to construct themselves as the number one celebrity.

The cult of celebrity is not unique to our generation, although there is no doubt that electronic mass media has amplified it to previously unimaginable extremes. What Jesus saw around the dinner table, we see on television and on social media: people trying to construct their identities by looking at other people and trying to mirror those whose levels they wish to rise to.

The self-contradiction of this, of course, is that instead of finding my true self, I am seeking to copy someone else's self. Instead of looking for the image of God that has been imprinted upon me by my creator and which is waiting to be embraced so that it might flourish as my true self, I look at others and try to remake myself in their narcissistic image. It not only alienates me from myself, but it turns everyone else at the table into rivals who I both idolise and resent. That's a very unhealthy me I'm constructing.

In our reading from the prophet Jeremiah tonight, we heard God describing such behaviour as "forsaking the fountain of living water, and drinking instead from cracked cisterns that hold nothing more than a putrid puddle." God grieves when we do this, because God has given us all we need to find our own true and wonderful selves, our fountains of living water, and there is nothing more tragic than watching us die of thirst for no other reason than our refusal to drink from the fountain.

But Jesus is also well aware of the reason that so many of us refuse, and he sees this at the table as well. He knows our aversion to sitting in the lowest place at the table, but that is what he urges us to do if we want to find the fountain of living water.

Why? Well, it is this same dynamic again. We think that part of constructing our socially impressive identity is associating ourselves with the right people. If we want to boost our status, then we position ourselves among high-status people. That's where honour and recognition are given. That's where great reputations are made. We urge our children to choose their friends carefully and avoid bad company. We don't want to see them at the bottom of the table among people of bad reputation who will be a bad influence on them.

But Jesus urges us to go to the bottom of the table, to the place of shame and disrepute. If we want to find God and find our true selves, that's where we need to go. Why? Well, what is

God's reputation really like? If Jesus was our perfect revelation of who God is and what God is like, then what is God's reputation really like?

What was Jesus most frequently accused of? Hanging out in bad company, yes? Befriending sex-workers and traitors and sinners, and even eating their disgusting food at their disgusting tables. Jesus's social reputation was awful. And it was awful because he chose to deliberately and consistently position himself at the bottom of the table, in the place of scandal, the place of shame, the place that we are most afraid of being seen in.

There is no more obvious place of shame than the cross. Crucifixion was intended by the Romans to be not only a means of execution, but a means of public humiliation, of public shaming, so as to terrify the rest of the population into submission.

If you truly embrace the culture of God and begin to live out its values of mercy for the undeserving, love for enemies, and non-competitive hospitality, you will find yourself at the bottom of the table, looked upon by others with suspicion and contempt. But it is precisely there, in the place the world has rejected, that you are closest to God, and that you are most able to find and set free your true self, the self God has given you created in God's own image.

I think Jesus is not only suggesting that embracing the culture of God will lead you to the place of shame, but that heading deliberately for the place of shame can provide you a way into the culture of God. If you willingly turn your back on the status-seeking games of the dominant culture, and choose to associate yourself with those who the dominant culture reject and despise, you will find yourself already being transformed, being opened up to the new life of this new culture. And that will happen, precisely because you will be positioning yourself in the place where Jesus positions himself. You will be closer to him and therefore more able to see who he is and to see the world from the same perspective that he sees it.

In a few minutes, we will be gathered around this table. It is a round table, with no places of greater or lesser honour. But it is the table of the crucified and risen Jesus. We hear words of brokenness and we are fed with signs of humiliation and failure. Here at this table we are being offered our true selves, the body of Christ, so that we might be set free from the status-seeking and free to share our broken selves with others who know themselves broken. Here we are set free to be real and gracious and courageous, to overflow with the love and the scandalous hospitality of the upside down culture of God.