

KINGDOM.

LESSON 21

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God’s guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Commit your group and this lesson about preaching God’s kingdom to the Lord.

2	SHARING (20 minutes) <i>[QUIET TIMES]</i> PSALM 31, 32, 33 and 34
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Take turns and **share** (or **read** from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times with God out of the assigned Bible passages (Psalm 31-34). Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares. Take notes.

3	MEMORISATION (5 minutes) <i>[KEY VERSE IN ROMANS]</i> (8) ROMANS 5:3-4
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Review two by two.

(8) Romans 5:3-4. Not only so, but we also rejoice in our sufferings, because we know that suffering produces perseverance; perseverance character; and character hope. And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out his love into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, whom he has given us.

4	TEACHING (85 minutes) <i>[THE PARABLES OF JESUS]</i> THE RESERVED SEATS AT THE FEAST and THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR
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**The parable of the reserved seats at the feast in Luke 14:8-11
and the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:8-11 are parables about
HUMILITY IN GOD’S KINGDOM.**

“A parable” is an earthly story with a heavenly meaning. It is a true-to-life story or illustration designed to teach a spiritual truth. Jesus used the commonplace and the events of everyday to illumine the mysteries of the kingdom of God and to confront people with the reality of their situation and their need for renewal. We will study this parable by using the six guidelines for studying parables (See manual 9, supplement 1)

A. THE PARABLE OF THE RESERVED SEATS AT THE FEAST

Read Luke 14:1-14.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Introduce. The parable is told in figurative language and the spiritual meaning of the parable is based on that. Therefore we will first study the words and the cultural and historical facts of the background of the story.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

This parable is in the form of an exhortation.

The places of honour. Every country has its own rules of etiquette. The rules with respect to the table etiquette at a wedding in Israel were quite stringent. While in a house there would be one table, at a wedding banquet there would be several tables, depending on the number of guests. In those days, people did not sit on chairs, but reclined on couches. Three couches were arranged in the shape of a “U” around a low table. On each couch, three people would recline on their left arm, with their heads facing the table and their feet hanging over the edge away from the table. They would use their right hand to eat. Every one of these nine places on the three couches around the table represented a different place of importance or “place of honour” in the minds of the people in Israel.

According to a Jewish scholar, the places of honour were arranged in the following way: from the top of the left leg to the top of the right leg: numbers 5,4,6, then 2,1,3, then 8,7,9. However, one would think that because “the right hand” was the place give to the person specially honoured (cf. John 1:18; 13:23-25) the places of honour would have to be arranged in the following way: from the top of the left leg to the top of the right leg: numbers 9,7,8, then 3,1,2, then

6,4,5. What is important is that there was a fixed order in which people were seated. Of course, in the mind of the people places 1,2 and 3 were the most important “places of honour”.

The assignment of places. The host, who was often the owner of the house, would assign the places where each of the invited guests should sit. Jesus exhorted, “When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour. ... But when you are invited, take the lowest place.” The first part of the story imagines one invited guest, who occupied a place that was not intended for him. It was intended for another person, whom the host regarded as a more distinguished person. So, when the host saw what happened, he came and told the usurper, “Give this man your seat.” Painfully embarrassed and humiliated by this public disgrace, the presumptuous guest had to vacate his place and take the lowest place. He had to take the lowest place, because by this time all the other places were already occupied. Or, if there were still several vacant places, he would not wish to experience a second humiliation. The second part of the story imagines this guest taking the lowest place. So, when the host saw what happened, he came and told this humble guest, “Friend, move up to a better place.” Honoured in the presence of all the guests, he took up his place.

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Introduce. The context of “the story” of the parable may consist of “the setting” and “the explanation or application” of the parable. The setting of the parable may state the *occasion* for telling the parable, or describe *the circumstances* at the time of telling the parable. The setting is usually found *before* the story of the parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of this parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of this parable is contained in Luke 14:1-7.

The important Sabbath day dinner. Jesus ate several times with Pharisees (Luke 7:36; 11:37; 14:1). This time he was invited to participate in the important Sabbath day dinner. Due to the strict Sabbath laws of the Pharisees, all the preparations for this dinner had been made the day before. We do not know why Jesus was invited, but the Bible says that they were watching him closely. The purpose of inviting Jesus was probably that this Pharisee, together with the other Pharisees and law-experts he had invited, were trying to discover a ground for an accusation against Jesus. They might even have planted the man suffering from dropsy, in order to tempt Jesus to heal him on the Sabbath. However, this is not certain, because in those days it was not unusual for people to walk in uninvited (Luke 7:37-38).

Jesus first asked these Pharisees and law-experts, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” *No one was willing* to answer him. So Jesus healed the sick man and sent him away. Then he again asked these Pharisees and law-experts, “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?” This time, *no one could answer him*, because they were all unwilling to admit that they were wrong.

The unseemly scramble for places of honour. After Jesus had healed the sick man, the invited guests (the Pharisees and the Teachers of the Law) began to take their places around the table. But they did not wait for the host to assign their places for them. They scrambled to gain the highest possible places of honour! This was definitely a violation of proper table etiquette! At this point, Jesus told the parable of the reserved seats.

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 14:8-10.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 14:11.

Jesus taught, “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Introduce. Jesus did not intend every detail in the story of the parable to have some spiritual significance. Parables are not allegories! The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the central point or main theme or lesson of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the story of the parable.

Discover and discuss. Which of the details in the story of this parable are really essential or relevant?

Notes.

Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Introduce. The main message (the central theme) of the parable is found either in the explanation or application or from the story itself. From the way Jesus Christ himself explained or applied the parables, we know how we should interpret parables. A parable normally has only one main lesson, one central point to make. Therefore, we should not try to find a spiritual truth in every detail of the story, but instead look for the one main lesson.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the reserved seats at the feast in Luke 14:8-11 teaches about “humility in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of this parable is the following. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Humility is one of the fundamental characteristics in God’s kingdom! In the context of this parable, we see that Jesus Christ is humble. He is willing to associate with people who were often his enemies. Philippians 2:5-11 teaches that Jesus Christ emptied himself by as One with the Divine Nature to take on the human nature, to become a slave of people and to even die as a criminal on the cross.

Therefore, the citizens of the kingdom of God follow in the footsteps of Jesus Christ and also humble themselves. They do not scramble for the places of honour or for positions of leadership, but in humility consider others better than themselves (Philippians 2:3-4). In the application of this parable, we learn that God himself is the One who will humble the proud people, but who will also exalt the humble people.

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Introduce. Some parables are similar to one another and can be compared. However, the truth in all the parables has parallel or contrasting truth taught in other passages of the Bible. Try to find the most important cross-references that help us to interpret the parable. Always check the interpretation of a parable with the direct clear teaching of the Bible.

Discover and discuss. How does what each of these Bible passages teach, compare to what the parable teaches?

Notes.

The pride of Nebuchadnezzar. **Read** Daniel 4:29-37. King Nebuchadnezzar was in his day the mightiest king on earth. He ruled a great empire and had accomplished great things. But when he began to think that he had built Babylon by his own power, God intervened and he was reduced to live like an animal. He who exalts himself will be humbled! But years later, when he glorified and honoured God, his sanity and throne was restored and he became even greater than before. He who humbles himself will be exalted!

The pride of Herod. **Read** Acts 12:21-23. King Herod was not an important or great king in his day. And yet he behaved as if he was an important and great king. When people spoke of him as being a god, he did not rebuke them nor did he give honour to the God of the Bible. So an angel of God struck him down, and worms ate him even before he died. “He who exalts himself will be humbled!”

The humility of Paul. **Read** 1 Corinthians 15:9-10; 2 Corinthians 12:9-12; Ephesians 3:7-9; 1 Timothy 1:15-16. The apostle Paul regarded himself as “the least of the apostles”, “the least of all God’s people”, “the worst of sinners in the world” and even as “nothing” (2 Corinthians 12:11). He continually humbled himself (Galatians 2:20; 6:14). And yet, the grace of God was magnified in his life. The grace of God caused him to work harder than all the other apostles (1 Corinthians 15:10). Thus, no matter what position one occupies, humility is expressed in the attitude of one’s heart, in the way one thinks and speaks of himself and others, and in the way one behaves towards others.

Pride and humility in the Old Testament. **Read** Proverbs 25:6-7; 26:12; Isaiah 2:6-22; 14:12-15; 57:15. The Old Testament has many passages that teach the necessity of humility among the people of God’s kingdom. Jesus Christ may well have had Proverbs 25:6-7 in mind when he told this parable. It says, “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.” “Do you see a man wise in his own eyes? There is more hope for a fool than for him” (Proverbs 26:12).

Isaiah 14:12-15 describes the fall of the king of Babylon in terms of the fall of Satan. Both wanted to be like God and both fell due to their pride. Isaiah 57:15 teaches that the Lord, who lives in a high and holy place (that is, the heavenly temple), also lives with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite!” And Isaiah 2:6-22 warns that on the Day of the Lord, that is, on the final judgement day at the second coming of Jesus Christ, the arrogance of man will be brought low and the pride of men humbled, and the Lord alone will be exalted in that day! Thus, humility is expressed in one’s self-esteem, once attitude, speech and behaviour.

Pride and humility in the New Testament. **Read** Matthew 18:4; 20:25-28; 23:8-12; Luke 22:27; John 13:1-15; Philippians 2:1-8; James 4:6; 1 Peter 5:5-6. The New Testament has many passages that teach the necessity of humility among the people of God’s kingdom: Matthew 18:4 says, “Whoever humbles himself like a little child is the greatest in the kingdom of God!” Matthew 20:25-28 says that while leaders of the world lord it over people and exercise authority over their subjects, the leaders of the Christian Church should be the servants of the people under their care. Matthew 23:8-12 says that while the Pharisees and teachers of the law like to be called “master”, “father” or “teacher”, the Christians should choose to be called “brothers” or “servants”. Luke 22:27 shows that Jesus himself was among people always the Servant! And 1 Peter 5:5 warns that God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble! Thus, humility is expressed especially in positions of leadership by not lording it over people, but by serving people with the talents and gifts which God has entrusted to each.

Associating with the underprivileged. An important characteristic of the genuine people of God's kingdom is their *hospitality* (Romans 12:13).

Read Luke 14:12-14; Matthew 25:34-40. Jesus does not only have a lesson for the invited guests. He also has a lesson for the host. He says, "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 teaches that it is very important for the people of his kingdom to *associate with the underprivileged in their society!* If the rich only socialise with the rich, the learned only with the learned, and the influential only with the influential, what will happen to the rest of society?

Another important characteristic of the genuine people of God's kingdom is their *outgoing love* towards and association with their underprivileged brothers and others, wherever they may be in the world (Matthew 25:34-40).

Thus, humility is expressed by:

- practising hospitality (Romans 12:13)
- associating with the underprivileged in society (Luke 14:12-14)
- demonstrating outgoing love towards underprivileged Christians (Matthew 25:34-40).

B. THE PARABLE OF THE PHARISEE AND THE TAX COLLECTOR

Read Luke 18:9-14.

1. Understand the natural story of the parable.

Discuss. What are the true-to-life elements of the story?

Notes.

The two men. The temple was a place for all kinds of religious activities. There were public religious meetings and individuals came to bring sacrifices and to pray. Among the Jews, there was the custom to pray three times every day (Daniel 6:10). These two people probably came to the temple to pray at the regular hours of prayer.

The Pharisees were generally looked upon as very pious and they also regarded themselves as very pious. Praying in places where other people could see them was one of their favourite hobbies (Matthew 6:5; Luke 20:47).

The tax collectors were generally looked upon as greedy, extortionists and traitors. The tax system in Israel at that time worked as follows. The Roman government sold the right to collect taxes to a number of Jews who paid a lot of money for it ("tax-farmers"). They were allowed the privilege of levying tolls upon exports and imports as well as upon whatever merchandise passed through that region. The main tax offices were located at Caesarea, Capernaum, and Jericho. These tax-farmers would sublet their rights to "chief tax collectors" like Zacchaeus (Luke 19:2). These chief tax collectors would employ ordinary "tax collectors", like Levi (Luke 5:27) to do the collecting. These tax collectors charged people whatever they could get out of them, and this was often a huge sum of money. That is why the tax collectors had the bad reputation of being extortionists. If the tax collectors were Jews, they were also regarded as traitors, because they collaborated with the foreign oppressor. Of course, the foreign oppressor (the Roman government) protected the tax collectors.

The two prayers. The Pharisee stood and prayed. Praying in a standing position, with hands and eyes uplifted, was not at all unusual (1 Timothy 2:8). He probably stood where most people could see him. Outwardly, he addressed God, but inwardly he was talking about himself to himself. Throughout his prayer he was congratulating himself. He compared himself to other people. He did not compare himself with truly devout people like Samuel or David, but with truly bad people.

The first half of his prayer consisted of *negatives*. He said that he was *not* a robber, *not* an evildoer (a cheat) and *not* an adulterer. And when he saw this tax collector standing in the distance he added that he was *not* like that tax collector! The second half of his prayer consisted of a *proud enumeration of his good works*. He did not just fast once a year as Leviticus 16:29-31 suggests, but not less than twice a week! He did not just give a tenth of the products required in Deuteronomy 14:22-23, but went far beyond what was required and gave a tenth of even the garden herbs (Luke 11:42). Nowhere in his prayer is there a confession of sin or a request for forgiveness. He only used his prayer as a means of proclaiming to other people how good a person he was. He asked nothing - he also received nothing (James 4:2)!

The tax collector stood at a distance, that is, far away from the actual sanctuary in the temple complex. He stood with downcast eyes, because he was ashamed of his sinful conduct. He beat his breast as a sign of self-accusation and near-despair. He did not compare himself with others, but instead singled himself out as *a sinner!* His prayer consisted only of a confession of sin and a plea for forgiveness. He said, "God, have mercy on me, a sinner." He was deeply conscious of his own sinfulness and guilt in the eyes of God and his urgent need of forgiveness. He was hungering and thirsting for righteousness, that is, that God's anger against his sin might be removed and that he might receive God's favour.

The two results. The Pharisee went home with nothing changed! He might as well have stayed home.

But the tax collector went home justified. The word “justified” means that God regarded and treated the tax collector as completely righteous in his eyes. It means that he was completely forgiven and completely accepted by God!

2. Examine the immediate context and determine the elements of the parable.

Discover and discuss. What is the setting, the story and the explanation or application of the parable?

Notes.

(1) The setting of the parable is contained in Luke 18:9.

“To some who were confident of their own righteousness and looked down on everybody else, Jesus told this parable.” It is thus most likely that Jesus spoke this parable to a group of Pharisees (Luke 16:15; John 7:48-49). They were people “confident of their own righteousness”, that is, they regarded themselves as being righteous in God’s eyes, and consequently did not hunger or thirst for righteousness. Because they were righteous in their own estimate, they felt no need for a doctor and certainly no need for repentance (Luke 5:31-32)! They rejected God’s purpose for themselves, that is, they rejected God’s intention that they repent of their sins and receive forgiveness of sins (Luke 7:30)!

(2) The story of the parable is contained in Luke 18:10-13.

(3) The explanation or application of the parable is contained in Luke 18:14.

3. Identify the relevant and irrelevant details of the parable.

Teach. Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning.

4. Identify the main message of the parable.

Discuss. What is the main message of this parable?

Notes.

The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector in Luke 18:9-14 teaches about “humility in God’s kingdom”.

The main message of this parable is the following. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Humility is one of the fundamental characteristics in God’s kingdom. The genuine people of God’s kingdom do not have a proud and self-righteous attitude, but rather have a realistic self-knowledge and a sincere acknowledgement of their need for God’s gracious forgiveness. They express their humility by confessing their sins to God. And God expresses his approval by forgiving their sins, that is, by justifying them in his eyes. People, who give up their pride and self-righteous attitude by confessing their sins to God, will experience that God has forgiven them!

5. Compare the parable with parallel and contrasting passages in the Bible.

Psalms 14:1-3. Even according to the Old Testament, no one is righteous, not even one! No one does good, not even one! Therefore, the assumption and attitude of the Pharisee was absolutely wrong (Romans 3:10-12).

Psalms 32:1-5. Whoever refuses to confess his sins, will experience all kinds of troubles. But whoever acknowledges his sins, the Lord forgives and blesses.

Psalms 51:1-12, 15-17. David confessed his sins to God. God delights in a broken spirit and he will not despise a broken and contrite heart.

Psalms 103:12. “As far as the east is from the west, so far has the Lord removed our transgressions from us.”

Isaiah 38:17. “The Lord has put all our sins behind his back.”

Isaiah 43:25. “The Lord blots out our transgressions for his own sake and remembers our sins no more.”

Isaiah 44:22. “The Lord swept away our offences like a cloud and our sins like the morning mist.”

Micah 7:18-19. “Who is a God like *the Lord*, who pardons sin ... He delights to show mercy ... He will hurl all our iniquities into the depths of the sea.”

In summary: God delights in a humble person, who acknowledges his sinful nature and weaknesses, who has a broken and contrite spirit, and confesses his sins and who rejoices in God’s forgiveness (righteousness).

C. A SUMMARY OF THE MAIN TEACHINGS OR LESSONS OF THE PARABLES ABOUT HUMILITY IN GOD'S KINGDOM

Discuss. What are the main teachings or lessons of the parables about humility in God's kingdom?

Notes.

(1) What God is like.

All people, especially the lost, must know what the God of the Bible and Jesus Christ is like. From the context of the parable we learn that Jesus Christ is humble! He especially associated with the underprivileged people in his society. He was "a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (Luke 7:34). But he also did not reject or avoid association with the privileged people, like the Pharisees, even if many of them were his enemies.

In Matthew 11:28-30 Jesus says, "Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn from me, for I am gentle and humble of heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light".

It takes humility to have a realistic view of yourself and your weaknesses and sins. It takes humility to acknowledge that you are weary and burdened under the yoke of 613 man-made (Jewish) religious laws. It takes humility to bring your burdens to Jesus Christ. It takes humility to bring your sins and burdens to Jesus Christ.

You gain a realistic view of yourself when you:

- allow the Holy Spirit to convince and convict you of sin in your life and of what is right in God's eyes (John 16:8)
- again and again look to yourself in the mirror of God's Word (James 1:22-25)
- look in the mirror of God's Word to who Jesus Christ is and learn from him what humility is (Matthew 11:29).

From the application of the parable we learn that God is sovereign. He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Peter 5:5-6). The people, who scramble to acquire the most important seats in this life and elbow everybody else out of the way, will be humbled in the presence of all people; they will lose face in the presence of all people on the last judgement day.

But people who stay humble regardless the position they occupy, who do not lord it over people entrusted to their care, but serve them, will be exalted. They will also be willing to take the least important places and do the least desired jobs in this life (as washing feet). On the last judgement day they will be exalted in the presence of God and all angels and all people.

(2) What Christians should be like.

Christians must know what they should be like. Christians should be humble! The parable teaches us what God wants us to be and to do. It teaches: "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Humility is one of the basic characteristics in God's kingdom! The genuine people of God's kingdom do not scramble for positions of leadership or places of honour, but in humility consider others better than themselves. They do what is written in Philippians 2:3-4, "Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit, but in humility consider others better than yourselves. Each of you should look not only to your own interests, but also to the interests of others."

Practically, you are humble when:

- you consider others better than yourself
- you are convinced that you can humble yourself only when you are completely dependent on God
- you acknowledge and appreciate the other person's strengths and virtues
- you acknowledge and accept your own weaknesses and faults
- you listen attentively to the other person, take him seriously and accept him
- you seek to promote the interests of others, especially the interests of God's kingdom in their lives.

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	[REACTIONS] PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD'S WORD
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Take turns in the group **to pray short** to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two's or three's and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	[ASSIGNMENT] FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. **Commitment.** Be committed to make disciples, build the church and preach the kingdom.
2. **Preach, teach or study** "the parable of the reserved seats at the feast" and "the parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector" together with another person or group of people.

3. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time from half a chapter of Psalm 37, 38, 40 and 49 each day. Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
4. Memorisation. (9) Romans 6:13. Daily review the last 5 memorised Bible verses.
5. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. Romans 6:1-11. Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
6. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
7. Update your notebook on preaching God's kingdom. Include your notes on quiet time, your memorisation notes, your teaching notes and this preparation.