

Victory Lutheran Church- Jacksonville, FL
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Worship Series: *Hard Truth*

Service Theme: *The Humble Will Be Exalted; The Exalted Will Be Humbled*

Sermon Theme: Self-Promotion? Or Self-Awareness?
(August 28, 2022) Luke 14:1, 7-14

Last week, I was streaming old episodes of *The Office*. If you've never seen it, *The Office* was a popular mockumentary sitcom during the mid-2000s about a clueless, self-centered boss named Michael Scott, and his employees at a paper company. If you're an *Office* fan, you might remember the episode, Phyllis's wedding. Phyllis was one of the employees.

What Michael Scott says at the beginning of the episode foreshadows what follows. ***"It's a big day for Phyllis. But it's an even bigger day for me-- Employer of the Bride."*** Throughout the day, Michael constantly tries to put himself into positions at the wedding he has no right to be in. Sliding into pictures of the bridesmaids. Squeezing in next to the groomsmen at the front of the church during the ceremony. Starting into what he intended to be a 40-minute speech at the reception. Until he finally gets booted from the wedding.

It's a classic example of the cringeworthy but hilarious comedy that made *The Office* so popular. It's funny because of the absurdity that anyone could be so clueless, unaware, and self-centered as Michael. But we get why he spends the day trying to put himself in the spotlight at the wedding. It was all about self-promotion-- attempting to convince himself and everyone else at the wedding that he is important and valuable. But we'd never do that, right? Or...would we?

That episode sticks in my mind, not only because it's hilarious, or because my wife called it, "Too awkward to handle," but because in a way, it's a modern re-telling of the parable Jesus tells in today's

sermon text. One Sabbath day, Jesus was invited to a feast hosted by a prominent Pharisee. But before you applaud this Pharisee for his hospitality, note why Jesus was invited—***"He was being carefully watched."*** The Pharisees hated Jesus so much that they were watching for some misstep or misspeak they could use to accuse and condemn him. But what they didn't expect while carefully watching Jesus was that he was actually watching them. When the guests started taking their seats for the feast, ***"[Jesus] noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table."***

At feasts in Jesus' day, there was an understood pecking order to the seating. Guests usually reclined on cushions around small U-shaped tables. The host would sit at the center seat of the center table, with the most important guest sitting to his left, and the second most important guest sitting to his right, with that pattern repeating at each table as their distance lengthened from the head table. Basically, the closer you sat to the host, the more important you were.

So when Jesus noticed the guests all rushing to sit in the places of honor, he knew why. Self-promotion! Sitting near the host was basically a big neon sign over their heads that said, "I'm valuable and important!" Observing their prideful self-promotion, Jesus told them this parable. ***"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, 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 person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place."***

It's not hard for us to visualize Jesus' point, because that's usually how modern weddings work too. The bridal party sits at the head table, and the parents, grandparents and close relatives usually sit at the next closest table, and so on. So imagine going to the wedding reception of someone you're not particularly close to, and sliding into a seat at the head table. Or plopping down next to the parents and grandparents. It would be good self-promotion, right? Everyone there would think, "Who's that up at the head table?" "Who's that sitting next to Great-Grandma Ethel? Must be someone important!"

But Jesus points out why that's foolish. Eventually, someone way more important will take that spot, and you'll get booted to the kiddie table with the crayons and chicken fingers. Because you tried to exalt yourself to a spot you didn't warrant. Just like Michael Scott, that'd be ridiculous! But we'd never do that, right? Or...would we?

Even if not by your seating choice at a wedding, prideful self-promotion is a more prevalent part of your life than you realize. Pride is a sneaky sin, because we can quickly identify pride, self-promotion, and boasting in other people, but we're slow to spot it in ourselves. And pride can manifest itself in so many different ways.

There are the "one-upper" people who hear someone being praised for something, and are quick to point out how they have, or could have done it bigger or better. There are the critics who hear someone being praised, and critique their performance or point out their flaws to lessen their accomplishments, because they hate others having the spotlight instead of them. There are the people who always talk about themselves and promote their skills and successes to their peers or superiors. There are the people whose social media accounts are overflowing with self-promotion— with more news about their children's latest, greatest achievements; with bikini pictures or bathroom selfies; with humblebrag stories about their charitable giving, or their service to the needy—and for what purpose? To promote themselves, and gather an abundant harvest of likes, hearts, and praising comments. There are the prideful busybodies, who tell themselves, "I have to do it all, because no one else can do it as good as me." There's even the prideful people who will always do or say whatever they think their classmates or co-workers want, because they pridefully believe they can make everyone like them.

We hate it when other people do things like that, right? But when it's us, well, "I'm just proud of my accomplishments" or "I'm just trying to get noticed and advance my career." But deep down, what is it that really drives us to such pride and self-promotion? To rush to sit in the "places of honor" at the table? Isn't it because we crave validation and exaltation from people? And we chase that praise from others—

because deep down, we think that's what makes us valuable and important!

Just think how you feel when people don't validate your accomplishments, or give the praise you think you deserve to someone else. It's crushing. Deflating. Depressing. It can make you feel completely valueless and unimportant. And let's face it, it's exhausting to be constantly self-promoting in pursuit of people's praise!

That's why Jesus encourages us to have self-awareness, instead of self-promotion. To counter the people racing for the seats of honor, Jesus encourages the guests, ***"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 honored in the presence of all the other guests. For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."***

Now, you might think Jesus is encouraging us, "Just act really humble, so everyone will praise you for being so humble." Or, "Sit at the kiddie table, so when the groom tells you to come sit at the head table, then everyone will cheer and applaud as you grand march up there." Isn't acting humble to get people to praise you just pride in different clothing?

But we have to remember, when Jesus tells a parable, he's not just teaching social etiquette. He's teaching eternal truths through these earthly stories! So, Jesus isn't teaching us to be humble, so we'll be exalted at weddings. He's teaching us that humility is necessary to be exalted at the eternal heavenly wedding feast! Pride isn't just socially off-putting. It's spiritually dangerous and detrimental.

Because pride easily leads us to trust in ourselves, instead of trusting in God. And pride makes us self-focused, instead of focused on others! And if we seek the world's validation in the hopes of feeling valuable and important, it's easy to start following earthly paths instead of walking in God's truth. That's why humility requires self-awareness instead of self-promotion. Self-awareness that we're sinful failures who can't save ourselves, because we haven't measured up to God's

expectations of perfection. Self-awareness that we have no right to claim a seat of honor at the eternal table anywhere near Jesus! Indeed, that sinful self-promoters like us can't claim a place at the feast at all—because those who exalt themselves, will be humbled eternally!

So does that mean we can never feel good about our accomplishments? That we should never fill out a resume promoting our skills in pursuit of a better job? Should we just sit around depressed, tearing ourselves down, and thinking we have no value or importance? Not at all! This C.S. Lewis quote about humility so well captures the Biblical truth about humility: ***“True humility is not thinking less of yourself. It's thinking of yourself less.”*** Self-awareness of who we really are leads us to humility. But self-awareness of who we are in Christ frees us from always needing to think about ourselves!

We can trust when Jesus tells us about our need for humility, because he's the ultimate example of humility. Paul writes in Philippians 2, ***“Your attitude should be the same as that of Christ Jesus: Who, being in very nature God did not consider equality with God something to be grasped, but made himself nothing, taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness...he humbled himself and became obedient to death—even death on a cross!”*** Jesus is the ultimate example of humility, because he didn't just take a lower seat. He was the host, but became a servant! He humbled himself by setting aside his divine power and glory to become true man—suffering and dying, enduring the ultimate humiliation. Not so that he could be exalted—but so that you can be exalted eternally!

And because Jesus was humbled for us, Paul writes, ***“Therefore, God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name.”*** When you have faith that Jesus is your Savior, when God looks at you, he sees Jesus. He sees Jesus' perfect life. He sees Jesus as your substitute, suffering the agony of hell, and dying the death our sins earned. And he sees Jesus, risen from the dead and exalted on high. Which means, you're exalted by God!

So who cares if the world exalts you? You're already exalted by God! That self-awareness means we don't have to be constantly promoting ourselves, because we don't need the world's validation or approval to have value and importance. You have incomparable value and importance because of who you are to God—his dearly loved, blood-bought, exalted child!

You don't have to think about yourself all the time, because God is always thinking about you. And because we don't have to be constantly thinking about promoting ourselves, we're freed to focus on others!

That's what Jesus tells the host of this banquet: ***“When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends...your relatives...your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. 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.”*** If you're freed from constant self-promotion and seeking exaltation from the world, then you're free to show love to everyone. Not just to those who will benefit you or exalt you in return, but especially to those who can't benefit you in return. Not so that others will say how humble we are, but because you're exalted by the one who humbled himself to save you, even though we couldn't benefit him in any way!

Friends, even if it seems like you're sitting in the lowest, least important, kiddie table seat in life. Even if you feel like you have no value or importance. You don't have to be like Michael Scott, self-promoting and seeking the spotlight. Instead, we can be humble, because we're looking forward to the day when the King, the host of the eternal wedding banquet will say to you, ***“Friend, move up to a better place. Come up here.”***