



Luke: Lessons from Jesus
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Christian Etiquette

LUKE 14:7–14; 18:9–14

Each culture has its own list of well-known and sometimes obscure rules of etiquette. One area of life that has a particularly high number of etiquette rules is mealtime. Consider: don't put your elbows on the table; pull a chair out for a woman; use certain pieces of silverware for certain courses; place a napkin on your lap; serve guests first; and chew with your mouth closed. When it comes to meals, some behaviors are deemed appropriate and others fall outside the boundaries of good manners.

Imagine dining at a nice restaurant when all of a sudden a man at the next table lets out a burp so loud it can be heard all the way in the kitchen. You would anticipate the whole restaurant falling silent as heads turn discreetly to identify who released this massive burst of gas. The glares and hushed conversations that would follow would be evidence that this was an epic breach of etiquette. Unless, of course, you are in a part of the world where a burp after the meal is understood to be a compliment to the cooks. In this case, no one would be offended and the cooks in the kitchen would smile with satisfaction as they heard the burp echoing through the restaurant.

The rules of etiquette change based on location and culture. On his web site, *The Sideroad*, Neil Payne offers guidelines on how to avoid dining faux pas and show good manners in different parts of the world. For instance, if you are having dinner in Germany, cut food with your fork and not your knife; this will tell the cook the food is tender. In Japan it is good manners to try a little of everything. In Turkey, asking for more food is taken as a compliment to the chef. In the Middle East you should tear your meat by holding it against the dish and tearing off a piece with your forefinger and thumb pressed together.

When it comes to wedding meals, certain rules of etiquette transcend time and many cultures. Imagine attending a wedding reception where up front, slightly elevated on risers, is a large head table set with special decorations, fine linen, fancy crystal, and the best china. As the reception begins, the guests enter and take their seats at round tables on the main floor, but two guests wander up to the empty head table and take the center seats. They are not in the wedding party. Everyone else in the room is sitting at the round tables with regular plates, plastic table covers, and ordinary silverware and glasses. They look at the two who have decided to take the places of honor and you can feel the tension in the air. Then the wedding party arrives. Can you guess what is going to happen next?

Making the Connection

1. Describe what you think will happen next in this wedding reception scenario.

Tell about a time when you, or someone else, broke a rule of etiquette (either knowingly or accidentally).

Knowing and Being Known

Read Luke 14:7–14

2. What are the rules of etiquette that come up in this passage?

What are some possible spiritual issues or lessons we find behind the rules of etiquette Jesus addresses?

The Danger of Presumption

Why is Jesus so concerned about protocol around tables and etiquette at meals? Is he really worried that one of his followers might get a wrong seat and then be asked to move to a different table? Is the Son of God all that concerned that one of his disciples would get the public recognition of being asked to come up to the head table after choosing to sit near the back of a banquet room? Is this really what Jesus is getting at with these rules of etiquette? Or, is there something deeper going on here?

As was often the case, Jesus was using an ordinary occurrence or life-situation as an opportunity to teach a profound spiritual lesson. If we take note of the setting of this story (Luke 14:1), we discover that Jesus was eating a meal in the house of a prominent religious leader. We also see that the people there were watching Jesus closely. What they did not notice was that Jesus was watching them too. He saw that as each guest entered the room they looked for the most prominent and best place to sit. They wanted to be noticed. They were focused on self-promotion. They were all about themselves. They were committing what can be called “the sin of presumption.”

The issue was not the position of the seating chart, but the condition of their hearts. These guests wanted the best position and were ready to take it for themselves. They also had no concern for anyone else at the wedding banquet. Jesus was addressing a social presumption, but on a deeper level he was pointing out the problem with spiritual presumption. This comes when people become so obsessed with self that they actually believe they deserve a seat at every head table and recognition wherever they go.

Read Luke 14:7 – 10 and 18:9 – 14

3. How does each of these passages reveal a spiritual presumption of superiority?

How does God respond to this condition of the heart?

4. What are some of the ways people self-promote in our day and age, and how does this reflect a problem on a deep heart level?

5. Two signs that presumption is growing in our hearts are: (1) a feeling of being a little (or a lot) better than other people, and (2) an effort to constantly promote ourselves at the expense of others. What are some of the possible consequences of living with presumption in our hearts and actions in *one* of the following areas?
- Among siblings in a family system
 - In a marriage
 - In the workplace
 - In the church
 - In a neighborhood
 - On an athletic team
 - On a school campus

The Wisdom of Humility

I play a little game occasionally just to help keep my life in perspective. I don't do this out loud, but quietly, in my heart. I call it the "Where did you get that?" game. It goes something like this. I say, "Bill, it's time to make a list again. What do you have and where did you get it?" To start the game I begin to make a list:

- *My life*, where did I get this? It is a gift from God.
- The *breath I just drew in*, where do I get the air? God made it.
- Where did I get the *abilities* I have to teach and lead? These are gifts of the Spirit.
- How did I end up with such an extraordinary *wife*? Only God!
- I have *two healthy kids*, where did I receive such family blessings? From the hand of a loving God.
- The *church* I serve, how did I receive this privilege? Only from Jesus, the head of the church.

I can keep playing this game for a long time, and the answer to every one of my questions is always the same.

After I have played for a while I ask myself, “What do I have to brag about? What could I possibly be haughty about? Why should I deserve a position of honor?” In these moments I am struck by the overwhelming reality that I am a recipient of God’s grace in every way possible. I come to a place of healthy and profound humility because I not only get a clear picture of who God is and who I am, but I begin to see the people around me in a new light.

Read Luke 14:11 and Philippians 2:3–8

6. Make a list of ten things you have that you value (these can be abilities, material goods, relationships . . . anything):

-
-
-
-
-
-
-
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-
-

Take a moment on your own to play the “Where did I get it?” game. Look at each item on your list and honestly reflect on the source of all you have. Then discuss as a group what you noticed. Give an example of how God fits in when it comes to the source and origin of all you have.

How might this awareness impact the way you see yourself and the people around you?

7. Jesus gave the suggestion to sit in a low place and not grab the best seat at a wedding banquet. He called us to humility and became the best example in history of what choosing the way of humility looks like. What are some specific and practical ways people can take a lower seat and put others first?

What might happen if we actually took this invitation seriously and lived it out on a daily basis?

8. Consider a specific situation in life in which you believe God is calling you to humble yourself and take a lower seat.

What action could you take, and how can your group members encourage you and cheer you on as you grow in humility in this way?

Making Room for the Marginalized

We have seen that there is specific etiquette for guests at a banquet. Next, Jesus addresses another issue: the proper etiquette for hosting a lunch or dinner party. Who should be on the invitation list? Jesus' answer is radically countercultural, almost absurd. He says: Don't invite all the people you would normally invite; rather, invite the poor, hurting, and marginalized. He notes the people groups in his time that would have always been last (or never) on the guest list. Then he says, "These are the people you should invite first."

Remember the context of this whole teaching experience? Jesus is sharing a meal at the home of a prominent religious leader and has noticed that every guest had something to offer to the host. (Invitations to these dinners had a real give-and-take feel to them.) But again, Jesus is moving us past a physical example to a spiritual reality. God has a special place in his heart for the broken and marginalized in society. He cares about them and he wants us to care too. If we live by the world's system, we will never care for the outcasts because they have nothing to offer us in return. But if we live by God's system, we will care, love, and serve everyone ... even those who don't care, love, or serve back.

Read Luke 14:12–14 and Zechariah 7:8–10

9. Passages in both the Old and New Testaments reveal a special place in God's heart for those who are poor, broken, abandoned, and living on the margins of society. Why do you think God feels so deeply for these groups of people?

Why does God call his followers to feel love and compassion for the marginalized and to take action on their behalf?

What can get in the way of us caring and taking the action that we should?

10. Just as there were specific groups of people who lived on the margins of society during Bible times, so there are today. Who are some of these groups of people now?

How can we reach out to these people and extend an invitation into: our hearts, our homes, our church, our circle of friends?

11. Throughout history, the church (God's people gathered) has taken steps to care for the hurting of the world, whether providing food for the hungry or clothing for the poor, rebuilding houses for victims of a natural disaster, or caring for people battling various pandemic diseases. What are ways your church has tried to adopt the heart of God toward the marginalized and taken action to help the outcast?

What possible future steps can your church or small group take to care for those who can never repay you, but who are deeply loved by God?

Celebrating and Being Celebrated

When we think of the outcast, the broken, the marginalized, and the “sinners” of society, we should think of ourselves. In God’s sight, we are all broken without his grace. There was a time when we were separate from God. Reflect on this reality:

Remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ. (Ephesians 2:12–13)

Take time as a group to pray, thanking God for what he has done to include you, embrace you, and invite you into his family. Then, pray that God will so fill your hearts that you are ready to love the outcasts of this world the way he loves you.

Loving and Being Loved

One way to keep your perspective right is to periodically remember that all you have is a gift from God. Put a weekly reminder in your calendar for the coming month to play the “Where did I get it?” game (see page 17), then be sure to follow through. If someone happens to notice your calendar notation and asks about it, explain how you are learning that all you have is a gift from God and that this knowledge brings both thankfulness and humility in how you relate to others.

Serving and Being Served

Take time as a small group to identify one way you can work together to serve a person or a group that has been marginalized.

Try to steer away from giving money or anything that feels more passive. Look instead for a ministry opportunity that will move you into action and get you in proximity and relationship with someone who has been marginalized.

