

(T) Welcome to **Discipleship training On The Air**. In this teaching series, you will have the opportunity to learn how to understand and teach the parables of Jesus Christ. By using *the guidelines for interpreting parables*, two teachers will study **the parable of the reserved seats** in Luke 14:7-11. Remember that this parable was told in the context of parables about God's kingdom. This is a parable concerning HUMILITY IN GOD'S KINGDOM. As you listen to this programme, make notes in a notebook or record the programme.

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. Please read Luke 14:7-11.

(S) Luke 14:8-11 says, "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honour, 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 man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. 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 honoured in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(T)      **POINT 1. UNDERSTAND THE NATURAL STORY OF THE PARABLE.**

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. This parable is in the form of an exhortation.

What are the true-to-life elements of the story of this parable?

(S)      First. 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 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.

The most important three places were on the centre couch. The central place was considered to be the place of highest honour. To the left of the most highly honoured person, the person second in honour would be reclining. To the right of the most highly honoured person, the person third in honour would take his place. The next three important places were on the couch to the left of the centre couch. Again the central position would be the place for the person fourth in honour, to his left, the place of the person fifth in honour and to his right, the place of the person sixth in honour. The least important places were on the couch to the right. The central position, the place of the person seventh in honour, to his left, the place for the person eighth in honour and to his right, the place of the person ninth in honour.

(T)      Second. 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.

(S)      **POINT 2. EXAMINE THE IMMEDIATE CONTEXT AND DETERMINE THE ELEMENTS OF THE PARABLE.**

The context 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 parable and the explanation or application is usually found *after* the parable.

Let us take turns to describe the context of the parable.

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

One. There was the important Sabbath day dinner. Jesus ate several times with Pharisees (Lk 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 (Lk 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 have a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" This time, they *could not* answer Jesus, because they were unwilling to admit that they were wrong.

(S) Two. There was the unseemly scramble for places of honour. After Jesus had healed the sick man, the invited guests 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.

(T) The story of the parable is found in Luke 14:8-10. The explanation or application of the parable is found in Luke 14:11. Jesus taught, "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(S) **POINT 3. IDENTIFY THE RELEVANT AND IRRELEVANT DETAILS OF THE PARABLE.**

Jesus Christ did not intend every detail in the parable to have some spiritual significance. The relevant details are those details in the story of the parable that reinforce the message of the parable. Therefore, we should not ascribe independent spiritual significance to every detail of the parable. In the parable of the reserved seats, Jesus does not give any of the details any particular meaning.

(T) **POINT 4. IDENTIFY THE MAIN MESSAGE OF THE PARABLE.**

The main message 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 or message, 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 main message of the story.

The parable of the reserved seats in Luke 14:7-11 teaches about *humility in God's kingdom*.

The Main message of the parable is the following. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

*Humility* is a fundamental characteristic of 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 is God and yet he humbled himself to take on the human nature, to become a servant of people and to even die for sinners. Therefore, the people who follow Jesus Christ, that is, the people of God's kingdom, also humble themselves. They do not scramble for positions of leadership or places of honour, but in humility consider others better than themselves (Phil 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.

(S) **POINT 5. COMPARE THE PARABLE WITH PARALLEL AND CONTRASTING PASSAGES.**

The truth in all the parables also 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 and clear teaching of the Bible.

(T) First. I would like to compare this parable with the attitude of two kings in the Bible: According to 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 his heart was filled with pride over his accomplishments, 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 was restored, he was restored to his throne and he became even greater than before. He who humbles himself will be exalted!

But according to Acts 12:21-23, king Herod was not an important nor 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 God. So an angel of God struck him down, and he was eaten by worms even before he died. He who exalts himself will be humbled!

(S) Second. I would like to compare this parable with the attitude of the apostle Paul. The apostle Paul regarded himself as "the least of the apostles" (1 Cor 15:9), as "the least of all God's people" (Eph 3:7-9), as "the worst of sinners in the world" (1 Tim 1:15-16) and even as "nothing" (2 Cor 12:11). He continually humbled himself (Gal 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 Cor 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.*

(T) Third. 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."

Isaiah 14:12-15 describes the fall of the king of Babylon in terms of the fall of Satan. Both Satan and the king of Babylon wanted to be like God and both fell due to their pride.

Proverbs 26:12 says, "There is more hope for a fool than for a man wise in his own eyes".

Isaiah 57:15 teaches that the Lord, who lives in a high and holy place, also lives with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit!

And Isaiah 2:6-22 warns that on the Day of the Lord, that is, 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 behaviour as well as in one's self-esteem.

(S) Fourth. The New Testament has many passages which 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 *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 that God has entrusted to each.

(T) Fifth. In Luke 14:1-14, 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 (Lk 14:12-14)." 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? An important characteristic of the people of God's kingdom is their *hospitality* (Rom 12:13) Another important characteristic of the people of God's kingdom is their *outgoing love* towards their underprivileged brothers and others and their association with them, wherever they may be in the world (Mt 25:34-40). Thus, humility is expressed by *associating with the underprivileged in society, by demonstrating the outgoing love towards underprivileged Christians* in the world and by *practising hospitality.*

(S) **POINT 6. SUMMARISE THE MAIN TEACHINGS OF THE PARABLE.**

Let us take turns to summarise the main teachings or messages of the parable.

(T) First. The Main message of the parable is the following. "Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

(S) Second. All people in the world must know what the God of the Bible or 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. But he also did not reject or avoid association with the privileged people, like the Pharisees, even if many of them were his enemies.

From the application of the parable we learn that *God is sovereign.* He opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble (1 Pet 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 Judgement Day. But people, who stay humble, no matter which position they occupy, do not lord it over people entrusted to their care, but serve them. They are also willing to take the least important places and do the least desired jobs in this life, when called to do this. They will be exalted in the presence of all people on the Judgement Day.

(T) Third. Christians must know what God wants them to be and do. Christians should be humble! Humility is one of the basic characteristics in God's kingdom! The 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 consider others better than yourself, when you are convinced that you can humble yourself only when you are completely dependant on God; when you acknowledge and appreciate the other person's strengths and virtues; when you acknowledge and accept your own weaknesses and faults; when you listen attentively to the other person, take him seriously and accept him; and when you seek to promote the interests of others, especially the interests of God's kingdom in their lives.

(S) **ASSIGNMENT FOR NEXT WEEK**

First. Preach, teach or study this parable together with another person or group of people. Next week we will study the parable of the unmerciful servant. As preparation, please read Matthew 18:23-35.

Second. See the workbooks "Go and preach God's Kingdom and [www.dota.net](http://www.dota.net)

Third. Listen every SATURDAY to WEDNESDAY on the radio to "Discipleship training on the air".