

The Path to Exaltation

From the Gospel: St. Luke xiv. 1. ff.

1 And it came to pass , as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the sabbath day, that they watched him. 2 And, behold , there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy. 3 And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying , Is it lawful to heal on the sabbath day? 4 And they held their peace . And he took him, and healed him, and let him go ; 5 And answered them, saying , Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the sabbath day? 6 And they could not answer him again to these things. 7 And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden , when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them, 8 When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; 9 And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room. 10 But when thou art bidden , go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh , he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee. 11 For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted .

I think it would be a fair assertion that the last verse of this Gospel, read as it is, is a foundational principle of the Kingdom of God: *For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased ; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted .* But if it is only slightly altered, it would with equal force state a basic principle within the world of men: “For whosoever exalts himself shall be exalted, and he that humbleth himself shall be abased.”

It is precisely in this matter of exaltation and humiliation that the two kingdoms can be seen as so radically different. The kingdom of men assumes that men are at the top. With this assumption come a host of secondary ones: the position of men at the top is precarious, at best, and therefore one that can be aspired to and, if circumstances are favorable, even challenged. If men are supreme, then the attention, favor, approval, and benediction of men is of highest importance. If ascension on this ladder is the ideal, then the employment of any means toward that end is allowable. It is only by the exertion of will, talent, intelligence, and every other available resource that such a goal will be achieved. And likely it will be at the expense of others, at some point, since a pinnacle is essentially a triangle, with diminishing available space as one ascends, and no extra room whatsoever at the top.

Perhaps it will be objected that not every rise to prominence has by any means involved exploitation, that many have been justly placed in high positions that they rightly deserved. This is undeniable. But ambition fueled by self-exaltation has generally been the byword of human endeavor, and it need only require a brief glance at either current events or history to provide plenty of proof.

The world applauds the winner, and scorns the loser, lauds the powerful and pities the powerless, idolizes success, and has little patience with failure. As long as life circumstances

keep one safely out of the red zone of that virtual ledger, all is well. It reminds me of the poem,

The Noble Duke of York:

The noble duke of York, he had ten thousand men
He marched them up the hill
And then he marched them down again
And when you're up you're up
And when you're down, you're down
And when you're only half way up
You're neither up nor down.

Everyone wants to be “up”. Nobody wants to be “down”. But most, failing to be up, and scrambling as hard as they can not to be down, end up indeed being “half way up”!

But God’s Kingdom operates by an utterly different dynamic, which is fraught, for unbelieving men, with terrifying realities. First of all, the top position is already occupied. It always was, currently is, and always will be... reserved for the Only One who can possibly occupy it. His place there is incontrovertible. He accepts no bargaining from those attempting to buy a share of His glory. He *regardest not the person of men* (Mark 12:14), nor is He inclined to judge men by their accomplishments. Significantly, and wonderfully, He actually is willing to offer His immediate proximity to untold numbers of the redeemed:

[God} hath raised us up together, and made us sit together in heavenly places in Christ Jesus That in the ages to come he might shew the exceeding riches of his grace in his kindness toward us through Christ Jesus. (Ephesians 2:6,7).

But how do they arrive at such a place of honor and dignity?

Perhaps an adequate picture of the means can be afforded us by turning the pinnacle of success on its head. Think of it for a moment: it is a triangle resting upon its peak, its upper reaches become increasingly broad and spacious as one ascends. One might imagine them filled with ever greater light and brilliance as one emerges out of the constricting, dark pit that is more confining and lonely, the lower one descends into it. What is that awful spot at the bottom which appears to allow only one occupant? Let’s call it the place of humiliation. There is no access to the broadening spaces of God’s goodness and love, which never cease expanding, without willingness to *humble ourselves*. And that place of humility is one which the weight of the sorrows and trials and crushing aspects of life will invariably press us into. Those who are ultimately most to be pitied are those who have spent their lives resisting the humbling influences of God, placing between themselves and Him every possible barricade to His will.

The *lawyers and Pharisees* opted for *chief rooms* (New Int’l Version: *places of honor*) as much out of insecurity as out of arrogance. They feared that if they didn’t promote themselves, no one else would do it for them. Perhaps they recognized how hypocritical the attention and adulation of their peers really were. Surely on some level they knew themselves to be rapacious, unlovable, and utterly unworthy of honor. They were afraid they might receive the treatment they

deserved, if they failed to rush to make sure they didn't. But they were united in a confederacy of dissimulation. And they were of one mind in their contempt for the masses and their hatred for Christ.

Now comes the application of these principles to my own life. Jesus instructs me that:

When thou art bidden of any man to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him; And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room.

I am to reflexively avoid taking the place of honor. This is risky. Perhaps I'll be ignored and passed over. But it is safest for me to dismiss self-regard of any kind. Why? I think of all quantities that I might accurately hope to measure, "self" is perhaps the most elusive, at least for *me* to assess. It remains up to others to perform the assessment. Significantly, their ability to do so clearly and objectively will be clouded and compromised by my efforts to assist them! And if I have foolishly honored myself, I will be unable to join wholeheartedly in the honoring of another, and will be forced instead *with shame to take the lowest room*. Oh how painful is such a lesson, and how often it is repeated!

But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.

The lowest room?! Surely you jest. I'm not fit for such a place, nor is it fit for me. But Jesus commands it. It is an act of faith, for it apprehends a principle of a Kingdom higher than that of men, one that will ultimately supersede it. Men love to outdo each another in conferring honors, and in offering standing ovations, because it vastly increases their collective sense of importance. But Jesus affirms that it is unobtrusive self-denial that is perceived by others as a cardinal virtue, worthy of merit and attention. Such a one rises to the top not by the power of intimidation nor impression, but upon the praises of others who are utterly at ease in heaping honor upon one who absolutely refuses to heap it upon himself.

Some day the entire universe will be put through the rigors of self-abasement...

For it is written, As I live, saith the Lord, every knee shall bow to me, and every tongue shall confess to God (Romans 14:11) and ...at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, of things in heaven, and things in earth, and things under the earth... (Philippians 2:10) and ...he must reign, till he hath put all enemies under his feet. (1 Corinthians 15:25)

For those who have practiced it, such submission will be much easier than for those who know nothing of it. Ultimately there will be no more room for proud men and a holy God to exist simultaneously.

When can we practice this virtue? Anywhere. Everywhere. At home, at work, in the community. If we begin privately thinking in this manner about ourselves, it will begin to be ever more demonstrated publicly. Lived out in us, it is a clear demonstration of the One who took the very lowest place in all the world, in order to raise us with Him to the very highest.

To Him be all the glory and honor.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.