

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away.

Then he asked them, “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?” And they had nothing to say.

When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he 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 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 honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

When I think about my favorite people, and the character traits that they show, I think about people with humility. I like being around highly intelligent people. The things they know and say fascinate me. However, if they come across to me as arrogant then being around them can get very annoying. I love being with intelligent people, successful people, competitive people, skilled people—if they have the humility that comes from wisdom. If someone comes across as arrogant, I have trouble trusting them. I shouldn’t do this I suppose, but I find myself looking for a chance to knock them down a notch or two. Since this is a characteristic that I value, I try to emulate it in my life and work.

Another trait that I admire in my friends is helpfulness. Once I mentioned to my neighbor that I was having trouble with the sprinkler system in the yard. I couldn’t figure out what the problem was. Without my asking, he said he would come right over! He grabbed some tools, started turning valves and checking electrical connections. He didn’t get it fixed, but he gave me some advice that helped me to fix it.

Today’s text is the account of Jesus’ teaching on helpfulness and humility. He found what people call a “teachable moment” and capitalized on it. The teachable moment was one Sabbath day when Jesus was invited to the home of a Pharisee. It says in Luke 14:1 that he was being carefully watched. See, Jesus was different. The Pharisees were the religious leaders, the organized religion of Jesus’ day. The religious establishment. Jesus was not all about all the trappings of religion. But he was all about following the will of God. He was all about reflecting the holiness, love, and mercy of God. I wonder if the Pharisees had this all set up? It was the Sabbath Day, and according to the Law of God, nobody could work on the Sabbath. It says that there, in front of Jesus was a man with dropsy. That doesn’t mean that he was clumsy and kept dropping things. Dropsy is called edema today. It is an excess accumulation of fluid in parts of the body. This man probably had swellings in various parts of his body, which caused him some disfigurement and disability.

Jesus knew he was being watched. He spoke. “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?” Nothing. So Jesus healed the man. His body became healthy immediately. “Suppose one of you has an ox or a child who falls into a pit on the Sabbath, wouldn’t you immediately pull him out?” Of course. The people who helped the victims of the train crash Friday, they weren’t worried about the “No trespassing” sign on the side of the tracks. They just went in and helped. Or driving a vehicle on the athletic field? Normally against the rules but did you see where the ambulances were parked to triage the victims? We instinctively understand that in emergency cases, the rules are secondary.

Jesus made a strong point about what matters most to God. The Sabbath Day was given so that men would set aside a portion of time to rest, and especially to remember the spiritual rest that God was bringing through the promised Savior. Now that Jesus was present, the strict observance of Sabbath law was obsolete. God is pleased with mercy, not sacrifice. The Law of Love superceded all regulations of ceremonial impurity. Instead of using the Sabbath Day as an excuse not to do something, Jesus did what was best: healing the man with dropsy.

In doing this, Jesus was doing something that we too often forget to do: be helpful. How many times have you made an excuse not to help someone else? Simple things like taking out the garbage cans at home—maybe you didn’t do it because you had to get somewhere to do something important. Or maybe you didn’t put the shopping cart back into the cage because you figured the store has employees who can do that. Or when you come across a homeless person or a disabled person asking for help, do you refuse out of fear of catching some disease or getting dirty? Tiredness and fatigue too often become excuses not to do some act of kindness. Failure to live up to that ideal of the golden rule: “Do to others what you would like them to do for you,” is a sin against God for which you should be punished.

But Jesus came to fulfill that law for us. He obeyed, he helped, so that his goodness and holiness would be credited to you and me. God said that everyone who believes in him will receive from Christ “the righteousness of God.” God looks at His Son Jesus, sees that we are joined together with him through faith, and declares us “not guilty.” And the greatest act of helpfulness goes way beyond our expectation. He became obedient to death on a cross, to suffer and to die for the sins that we had committed. To answer Jesus’ question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?” we respond with a hearty “Yes!” Helping others, healing or whatever we can do, is always “in season.” It is always the right time.

Just as we too often fail to live up to the standard of helpfulness, so we also fail to live up to the standard of humility that Jesus sets for us. After healing the man with dropsy, Jesus looked around and noticed that the guests, when they arrived, took positions of honor in the house. Pharisees had a very strict hierarchy. Everyone knew his place. But sometimes, the hierarchy wasn’t set clearly. No assigned seating, no name cards were at the head table. So the honored seats were taken first.

Jesus told a parable: When you are invited to a feast, do not take the position of highest honor. If you do, the host might come to you and say, “Excuse me, sir. You are sitting at the table that is reserved for the honored guest and his friends and family. Would you mind sitting over there?” Humiliated, you would have to go sit at the lowest table. Instead, when you are invited, take the lowest seat. Then, when the host comes he

will say, “What are you doing down here? Sit up here with the other good people. Then you will be exalted.

Jesus is not just teaching about etiquette, although that is probably not a bad lesson to take from Jesus’ words, either. Remember that this is a parable—an earthly story with a spiritual or heavenly meaning. The point that Jesus really wants to make has to do with a person’s relationship with God. “Those who are first will be last, and those who are last will be first.” The first step in building your relationship with God is knowing your place. You don’t deserve to be at the head table at God’s feast. You don’t deserve to be there at all because you have sinned. Realizing how far you are from God’s holiness, bow down before him and humbly confess, “God, have mercy on me, a sinner.” Then, quickly, God will announce to you, “Come up here and take a seat at my side. I have forgiven you all your sins, and you can stay here with me.

Many people, however, take the opposite approach. Instead of admitting their sins, crimes, and faults to God and to each other, they cling to their own righteousness, hiding their sins away out of sight. But God knows. You try to hide behind good intentions—never mind that you never live up to them. You try to hide behind sincere effort, even though you know that your efforts have fallen short of perfection. So you try to live in a religious, spiritual way. You show up early for church, walk to the front, serve on all the boards and committees you can, volunteer to do the jobs that people will notice. But that doesn’t fool God if your heart is far from him. Humility comes from true faith, and true faith is not what you do or how well you do it. It is quite the opposite. True faith recognizes our complete and utter helplessness. True faith depends on and leans on the strength of Jesus, his completed act of salvation, his death and resurrection for us, and the source of faith, the Gospel in Word and the sacraments.

Humility, however, is impossible for our sinful nature. The sinful nature will never submit to God’s Law. It can’t. It cannot come to faith, cannot truly fear, love, and trust in God. Our sinful nature must be drowned in baptism and daily drowned by sorrow over sin and repentance. The Holy Spirit must create in us new hearts, new minds. And thank God, by his Grace, you have come to know your place with God. But the sinful nature keeps popping up again. Even when you think you are doing really well in the area of Christian humility and virtue—there it is, sinful pride. When you think you are contributing so greatly to the body of Christ—there it is, sinful pride. It is our sinful nature that must be beaten down—so the new man can stand in place of it.

So rise up, new man. Jesus has taken your sins away, given you everlasting life, and you are God’s own dear child. Now, you can listen to Jesus’ call to humility, and helpfulness. Without guilt, without fear, help your neighbor with the joyful humble spirit that Jesus displayed. Not because you have to, but because it is your privilege.

And now here is yet another side benefit to all this. Imagine if you learn true helpfulness and humility. Will you not be a more pleasant person? Won’t you have more friends? Won’t that also translate into more happiness and contentment in life? Won’t people be more inclined to listen to your wisdom if you are humble? Won’t people be more helpful to you if you were once helpful to them? Oh, yes, it will. Imagine if everyone of us here today is listening carefully to Jesus’ words, truly understanding them, and putting them into practice? What would that be like? Heaven!