

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ!

Etiquette advice from Jesus? As usual with our Lord, there's much more going on here than first impressions provide. Where we should (or shouldn't) seat ourselves leads to a much deeper discussion of who are you and I before God. So why take the seat of honor? For the sake of appearances, to present yourself as important or honored so others will think of you that way. Now personally, unless there's assigned seating at an event, I always prefer the table or seat closest to the door. Much easier to leave unobtrusively that way!

But what provokes the quest for looking important? Probably both pride and self-doubt.

The arrogant person thinks him or herself deserving the high regard of others and does what's needed to maintain such an image.

Someone suffering from self-doubt, simply wants a façade that others accept. They work hard creating an image they think makes them look better than they think of themselves. I suppose you can say both these things come from a faulty sense of self.

Then Jesus comments about who gets invited to lunch or dinner. Often folks are invited on the basis of I'll invite so-and-so, then they'll invite me next time they do something. We might not think of it as being repaid, but only because we have an unspoken assumption that we'll be invited back.

And the thing is, that's life, back then and as we ourselves know it. Most of us, many of us, have done this kind of thing ourselves. Maybe we keep a weather-eye on the social barometer, maybe not. Maybe the invitations are to help our own sense of self-esteem. The truth is of course, we live in a fallen world and these things are part and parcel of living in sin. This can be equated with the idea of success. I wonder how many people over the years have striven, worked hard for success, but not enjoyed it because they get concerned about how they're being judged for whatever they're going to do next, only to realize usually when they're much older that they don't really know what the success they had been striving for, looked like.

Now we have been set free from the bonds of sin, pride, self-doubt. You and I can rest in the love and mercy of God, knowing we don't need to prove anything to other people or to ourselves. Jesus doesn't seem to spend any time wondering what impression he was making, not that he dismissed what other people thought, but it was all understood through the lens of God's love for his Son, and the mission before him.

Jesus lived in and lived out the Father's love. Those who received Jesus, received him who sent him, those who rejected Jesus rejected him who sent him. He didn't

try to become someone or something he wasn't to satisfy the arbitrary demands of other people.

So Jesus spent time with tax collectors, prostitutes and even with the Pharisees, eating with all of them at one time or another. He could encourage his hearers to take a lesser seat, to invite those who couldn't possibly repay them, because having the seat of honor, inviting those who will invite you in return, pales in comparison to being a child of God. By inviting those who can't reciprocate puts God's grace into action, showing the grace of God at work in your life, your witness as a child of God.

What can possibly count more than the mercy of God Almighty? What can be more important than experiencing the peace of God, knowing that you rest in God's love? Whether you think of it this way or not, taking the lowest seat, eating with those who can't repay you, is the power of God at work. Allowing, showing, sharing and experiencing with others the transforming effect of the love of God.

The love of God giving himself to death on the cross for our sake. The love of God enabling us to forgive what others may consider unforgiveable. The love of God that transforms your understanding of yourself to the point where you humble yourself taking the lowest seat, sharing bread with those who have no bread. The love of God that you do this solely for the love of God, and the love of God's people. Because truly my brothers and sisters the one thing that matters is knowing the love of God.

As the author of Hebrews reminds us, Jesus is "the same yesterday and today and for ever." The love of God, his word, is constant, is unchanging. It isn't like one of the fluctuating standards of the world, a constantly moving and fickle target. Not at all, because you and I are dearly loved children of God.

We are free from the bondage of people's opinions, anyone's opinion. We are free to live in God's love as promised in our baptisms. We are free to share the extravagant love of God that God continually showers upon us. We are free to let our hearts rest in Jesus.

AMEN