

A Ladder that Only Goes Down

A Sermon on Luke 14:1-14

Year C - Pentecost 15

28 - August - 2016

JJ¹

How you use a ladder depends on where you're at. If you're on the third floor of a burning building, it's a ladder to get down. If it's a ladder on a slide, it's a ladder to go up, unless of course you get scared when you reach the top. But most of the time we use ladders to go up and down again. Then there's the so called "corporate ladder." That's a ladder you always want to climb and never go down. But that ladder really isn't confined to the business world. You could say there is a ladder for every stage and part of life. Or you could just say life is one big ladder.

We always talk and think in terms of moving forward, getting better, growing, improving etc. The only time we seriously talk about going back or shrinking is when we're talking about our waist. When we think of life as a ladder, we picture it is as ladder we only want to climb up. Today Jesus turns a lot of that thinking upside down as he shows us **A LADDER THAT ONLY GOES DOWN.**

"For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." That's the heart and core of Jesus' message the day he was invited to "eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee..."

It was a Sabbath day. That means it was Saturday, the Jewish day of worship and rest. And if you pay attention as you read the Gospels, you see Jesus' enemies seem to like to attack and set their traps on Sabbath days. Which really isn't too surprising because the Sabbath day was their favorite day. Not because they didn't have to labor in the fields. They didn't do that any other day. It also wasn't because they loved going to synagogue to hear God's Word. No, it was the day they got to show off the most (Lk. 20:46). It was the day, more than any other, on which they could show how far they had climbed up the ladder of self-righteousness, self-importance, self-exaltation. Of course, they didn't call it that and neither did the people who looked at them in awe. To them and to most it was just the ladder of holiness reaching to heaven. But Jesus could see through the smokescreen, and today was no different.

Luke tells us Jesus was being "carefully watched" by his enemies. He was being scrutinized in his every move so that they could try and find a way to discredit him and get rid of him. They just hid it behind the smokescreen of a meal at the house of a prominent Pharisee. Probably a member of the ruling council of Israel.

¹ JJ is the acronym for *Jesus Juve*, which is Latin for "Jesus Help". It is a short prayer used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the beginning of their work.

Although we're not told, knowing the Pharisees and their actions at other times, the man suffering from dropsy was probably a plant. He was probably the test. Why else would a man they otherwise would have never associated with be at the house of a prominent Pharisee? Remember, almost any kind of disease was looked upon as a judgment from God for some sin committed. Dropsy especially had the connotation as a punishment for sexual sins (cf. Numbers 5:11). This man was only there to serve their purposes and it seems that purpose was to see what Jesus would do, on the Sabbath. They don't try very hard to hide their motives either. They make sure he's seated right in front of Jesus!

But like every test they have brought before, Jesus quickly turns the test on to them. "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" They say nothing, and Jesus heals the man and sends him on his way. Then Jesus asked, "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?" Again, they're silent.

I wonder why they're silent. Is it because they sat there condemned? Or is it just because their trap didn't work? Either way, in their desire to make themselves better, in their zeal to climb the ladder of self-exaltation, they're blind to the man's need and only see their own.

How often have you ignored the needs of those around you because it would interfere with your plans or your journey to the top of whatever ladder you were climbing at the time? How many times have you walked past someone in need because you thought you didn't have the time? How many times have you avoided the weirdo at school because it would hurt your image with the "in" crowd? Or, how often have you used that weirdo at school as the butt of a joke to gain status with friends or others? Have you avoided conversation with someone because they talk too much, thinking your time isn't worth it and forgetting they go home to an empty house every night?

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Oh these **ladders we climb that only go down!** Our selfishness and desire to build ourselves up at the expense of others shows how little we've achieved in showing real love to others!

While Jesus' enemies were watching him, he was watching everyone else and "noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table and 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.'"

Jesus shows us that another result of **climbing ladders that only go down** is that we fail to see what we truly are. When we do this, we only set ourselves up for humiliation before people, and worse, before God. This is what happens when we climb the ladder of pride and self-importance. On the playground or in the classroom it sounds something like this: "Oh yeah, well I..." Adults do the same thing as they try and direct every conversation to talk about themselves. We try to make ourselves look better than we are by stretching the truth or lying outright. It might work the first couple of times, but then people see the truth and we end up making ourselves look worse.

To dig deeper into our obsession with self-exaltation, Jesus tells one more parable. And don't forget, with Jesus' parables he puts each one of us right in the middle of it. "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; 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."

Now is Jesus telling us we can't invite friends, family and neighbors over for a party? Of course not. What he is warning us about is **climbing a ladder that only goes down**. Jesus is warning us not to use people to help ourselves. He's warning us about giving just in order to get. Then we're still just thinking of ourselves. But what Jesus says next should make us pause, and maybe it has already, but for the wrong reason.

When Jesus challenges us to throw a banquet for the poor, crippled, lame and blind instead of people from whom we could get something in return, we probably pause and think Jesus is just using hyperbole. "Oh, he can't be serious." But we should pause for another reason.

Sirens should be blaring in our hearts and minds every time Jesus tells us not to behave a certain way that seems normal and what he tells us to do seems to be out in left field. The fact that we balk at Jesus' challenge shows us how much we love climbing the ladder of self-exaltation, **A LADDER THAT ONLY GOES DOWN**. It shows us how deeply our sin has corrupted our hearts.

Why is it that we try so hard to climb this ladder? Isn't it fear? You might think it's self-righteousness, but what drives self-righteousness? It's fear. Fear of failure. Fear of looking bad. Fear of judgement.

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So what makes us humble? How do we humble ourselves to go down a ladder that will lead to us being raised up? It doesn't start with outward humility like taking a back seat. It doesn't start with caring for the needs of others first. It begins with the recognition, confession and repentance of how deplorably depraved and lowly I am by nature and continue to prove with my sinful desires to climb **A LADDER THAT ONLY GOES DOWN.** Any act of humility which doesn't begin there and motivated by a love for Christ is still done for yourself. It's still done to build yourself up, either in the eyes of others or even in your own eyes.

Humility, friends, begins at the cross. Consider how much Jesus humbled himself. He climbed down the ladder from heaven and was conceived in human flesh in the womb of a teenage girl named Mary. He humbled himself by submitting to his holy laws. He humbled himself by obeying and respecting those in authority over him in Israel, even though they had thrown away any reason for him to do so. But then he climbed down that greatest ladder, the one that lead his holy soul into the heart of hell—the Father's infinite wrath against sin! It was then, and only then, that Jesus was once again exalted to his station of supreme honor and glory.

And friends, consider where Jesus has now gone. He's gone to heaven and prepared a banquet! And who does he invite to this banquet? He has invited you! You who are the spiritually poor, crippled, lame, and blind. He looks for nothing in return for your attendance at his banquet but only wants you to be there in heaven with him!

Friends, because Jesus climbed down the ultimate ladder of humility, he has now destroyed the very thing that drives us to want to climb **A LADDER THAT ONLY GOES DOWN.** Jesus has destroyed fear! Friends, your real, lasting value isn't found in what you can do but in Christ and what he has done *for* you. Seeing ourselves this way, we can now see others as valuable souls for whom Christ also died, people we can humbly serve and not people we can use to serve ourselves.

Through faith, we can now **climb down that ladder of true humility**, as unattractive as it seems at times, because we know waiting at the bottom is a Savior who says to you, "You are my forgiven child! I am the one who lifts you up. I am the one who gives you value. I am the one who blesses you and makes you a blessing to others. Now go, live for me and others as you wait to join me in the heavenly banquet!" Amen.

SDG²

² SDG is an acronym for *Soli Deo Gloria*, which is Latin for "To God Alone Be The Glory". This is a statement of humility used by many ministers and sacred musicians at the end of their work to let themselves and others know that it isn't about getting glory for themselves, but about giving all glory to God.