

August 28, Ordinary 22C (Luke 14:1, 7-14)

## **While he has everyone's attention, Jesus challenges the conventional dinner seating practices.**

by [Craig S. Keener](#) in the [August 10, 2022](#) issue

Jesus' meals often prove controversial. Some high-status religious people complain when Jesus eats with sinners. Yet such prominent figures also sometimes invite Jesus to their own dinners, and Jesus comes. Even these dinners can become occasions for theological debate with Pharisees—known for their meticulous knowledge of the law, their traditions, and their theological debates. There are many dinners in this section of Luke, and formal dinners were a common setting for both discussion and lectures.

Since Jesus often teaches in synagogues on the sabbath, his meal at a Pharisaic leader's home on the sabbath might be meant to honor him after he taught nearby. Still, Luke says that others there are observing him closely, ready to challenge him as needed. Given Jesus' growing popularity, they want to make sure that he is leading people in the right way—their way.

Jesus has just healed someone in front of them that same day (14:2-6). The man was suffering from edema, or dropsy. Many ancient physicians believed that the body could be either too dry, as in the case of a withered appendage (6:6), or too wet. They often commented on the latter affliction—edema—in which part of the body swells due to excess fluid. Some believed that particular herbs or other treatments could help, but others complained that when it appeared comorbid with another disease, it was beyond cure.

Pharisees debated among themselves which activities, when performed on the sabbath, constituted work. Shammaites were the dominant school of Pharisees in Jesus' day, and they took a stricter view on this subject: this majority school prohibited medicine and prayer for the sick on the sabbath except when life was at stake. The minority school, the Hillelites, allowed such prayer. After AD 70 they

became the majority school, so subsequent Jewish tradition developed especially the views of the more lenient Hillelites.

Jesus, like the Hillelites, welcomes prayer for the sick on the sabbath. He points out that his hearers would rescue their animal from trouble on the sabbath (though some stricter Jews called Essenes would not). People matter even more than animals. So just as Jesus heals a man with a withered hand (6:10), here he heals a man with edema. Health care is an honorable calling, as Jesus shows.

While he has everyone's attention, Jesus also challenges the conventional seating practice for ancient dinners. Ancient Mediterranean, male, urban culture featured heavy competition for status, a competition often reflected in seating arrangements, including in synagogues and at banquets. Normally a host would invite peers or people of somewhat lower social status. To refuse such an invitation without a good excuse would insult the host's dignity (see 14:18-21).

But guests were also protective of their dignity. The most prestigious positions were nearest the host. Such banquets often had three or four couches arranged around the center of the room. These couches did not have backs, so three or four people could recline on each one. Each diner would recline on the left elbow, with their right hand free to take the food in front of them. They would be facing the center of the room, with their feet pointed away from the table. That is why Jesus, probably on the couch adjoining the host's, can speak directly to his host (7:40) but must turn to praise the woman anointing his feet (7:44).

Sources from this period are full of complaints from guests who felt dishonored because they were given less prestigious places in banquets than they felt they deserved. Although the complaints are most obvious in Roman sources, the Dead Sea Scrolls and other Jewish sources illustrate that seating people according to rank was a Jewish custom as well. In fact, the practice of seeking honor had been around for a long time. "Do not . . . stand in the place of the great," Proverbs warns, "for it is better to be told, 'Come up here,' than to be put lower in the presence of a noble" (25:6-7). Jewish sages had long urged humility, but people of status were often more moved by social mores and the congratulations offered by others.

In keeping with the biblical proverb, Jesus invites his hearers to take the place of lowest status. It brings less dishonor to humble oneself and then be exalted by another than the other way around. Jesus then appeals to a wider biblical principle:

God exalts the lowly but is far from the proud. As Jesus goes on to show, this practice has eternal implications.

Part of maintaining honor was inviting peers to banquets and being honored by reciprocal invitations. But Jesus warns his host that the only reward for this practice is maintaining human honor. Instead, one should invite the poor and those with disabilities who cannot repay, meeting their genuine needs and trusting in God's repayment at the resurrection of the righteous. That is, there is coming a day when God will sort everything out, and it is eternal honor from God on that day that really counts.

While modern Western society is not based on honor and shame to the extent that ancient Mediterranean society was, most of us still care about our reputation. Jesus urges us to have a more eternal perspective. What really matters is not what others think of us now, but what God will bring to light in the future, based on how we can help people that God cares about now.