

Committed to Excellence in Communicating Biblical Truth and Its Application

# Orcutt Christian Church

A Grace Driven Church for Grace Needing People!

## ***Rambling Round Revelation #9*** **The Lord's Church in Pergamum** **Revelation 2:12-17**

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**Saturday 3/2: Clean Up: Ciera Plett**

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### **Revelation 2:12-17 (NASB)**

**12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this: <sup>13</sup> 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells. <sup>14</sup> 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of immorality*. <sup>15</sup> 'So you also have some who in**

**the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. 16**  
**'Therefore repent; or else I am coming to you quickly, and I**  
**will make war against them with the sword of My mouth. 17**  
**'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the**  
**churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the**  
**hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new**  
**name written on the stone which no one knows but he who**  
**receives it.'**

As you read Revelation, don't despair if you don't understand EVERYTHING that you read.

Keep in mind that this entire series on Revelation is on the church's website, and you can download and study what has been covered. Keep in mind that John is saying the same thing seven times. Keep in mind that you can't understand chapters 2 and 3 until you understand Chapter 1.

Keep in mind that you can't understand the rest of the LETTER until you understand Chapters 2 and 3.

And, there is so much we can learn about our commitment to the Christian Faith from reading and studying Revelation.

In Chapter 3, Jesus says:

**Revelation 3:19 (NASB)**

**19 'Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline; therefore be zealous and repent.**

The word **discipline** here is the Greek word **παιδεύω paideuō**, a verb.

The renowned Greek professor, Dr. William D. Mounce, defines it as "instruct, train, educate, as an on-going matter, in accord with rules and proper conduct."

Teachers use the word **pedagogy**, "which refers the theory and practice of education, and how this influences the growth of learners."

So, Jesus is using an educational word and primarily means to train, teach, correct, so the child grows up and is able to achieve their full potential.

Only Secondarily does it mean to chastise and administer discipline.

One other observation about the word **discipline** which Jesus uses here.

The word is made up of two words *παῖς páis* which means "child" and *ἄγω ágō* which means "I lead."

Now, think of that wonderful old song we sometimes sing in worship (690)

**He leadeth me: O blessed thought!  
O words with heavenly comfort fraught!  
Whate'er I do, where'er I be,  
still 'tis God's hand that leadeth me.**

**The training takes place in seven areas:**

We are trained by the church of Ephesus to love

We are trained by the church in Smyrna to suffer

We are trained by the church in Pergamum to tell the truth

We are trained by the church in Thyatira to be holy

We are trained by the church in Sardis to be authentic

We are trained by the church in Philadelphia to be missionaries

We are trained from the church at Laodicea to be in worship, to praise and to serve God.

From these lessons in teaching, I think you can get a glimpse of how worthwhile to know something about these seven congregations.

Jesus says

**Revelation 1:3 (NASB)**

**<sup>3</sup> Blessed is he who reads and those who hear the words of the prophecy, and heed the things which are written in it; for the time is near.**

I have in your sermon notes today's text from the New American Standard Bible, the 1997 edition.

Now, as I read from William Barclay's translation, see what images come up in your mind.

Where is Jesus?

To whom is He talking?

What does He say about their situation?

What does He recommend to them?

### **Revelation 2:12-17 (Barclay's The New Testament: A New Translation)**

*<sup>12</sup> And to the angel of the Church in Pergamum, write: These things says he who has the sharp two-edged sword. <sup>13</sup> I know where your home is. I know that it is where the throne of Satan is; and yet you hold fast to my name, and have not denied your loyalty to me, even in the days of Antipas, my faithful martyr, who was killed among you, where Satan has his home. <sup>14</sup> But I have a few things against you. You have among you some people who hold the teaching of Balaam, who taught Balak to put a stumbling-block before the children of Israel, to eat meat offered to idols and to commit fornication. <sup>15</sup> So you, too, have those who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans. <sup>16</sup> So, then, repent. If you do not, I am coming to you quickly, and I will go to war with them with the sword of my mouth.*

*<sup>17</sup> Let him who has an ear hear what the Spirit is saying to the Churches. To him who overcomes I will give a share of the hidden manna; and I will give him a white stone, and written on the stone a new name, which no one but him who receives it knows.*

## **I. Pergamum, the Seat of Satan**

Pergamum had a place all its own in Asia.

It was not on any of the great roads, as Ephesus and Smyrna were, but historically it was the greatest city in Asia.

Strabo called it an illustrious city and Pliny called it "by far the most famous city in Asia."

The reason was that, by the time John was writing, Pergamum had been a capital city for almost four hundred years.

When Attalus the Third died and willed his entire empire to Rome in 133 B.C., out of the dominions of Attalus the Third, Rome formed the province of Asia and Pergamum still remained its capital.

Its geographical position made Pergamum even more impressive. It was built on a tall conical hill, which dominated the valley of the River Caicus, from the top of which the Mediterranean could be seen, fifteen miles away.

The steep sides rose some 1000 feet above the valley floor, which gave it an air of strength, and authority.

Sir William Ramsay says:

"Beyond all other cities in Asia Minor, it gives the traveller the impression of a royal city, the home of authority; the rocky hill on which it stands is so huge, and dominates the broad plain of the Caicus so proudly and so boldly."

While history and honor gathered around Pergamum, it could never achieve the commercial greatness of Ephesus or of Smyrna. But as a center of culture, it surpassed all the cities in Asia. But as a center of culture, it was famous for its library, which contained more than 200,000 scrolls.

It was second only to the unique library of Alexandria.

And here is a story of intrigue and political scheming and crafty action.

In the ancient world parchment was the medium which was used to record everything.

For many centuries ancient rolls were written on papyrus, a substance made of the pith of a very large bulrush which grows beside the Nile.

The pith was extracted, cut into strips, pressed into sheets and smoothed. There emerged a substance not unlike brown kraft paper, and this was universally used for writing.

For centuries, one of Egypt's main exports was papyrus.

It was in great demand all over the world, because if you lived back then, this is what you would use to write your grocery list on and your term papers.

I suppose even sermons were written on papyrus!

It was a matter of political power and culture to have the largest library.

And, in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century BC the two largest libraries were in Pergamum and Alexandria, Egypt.

Well, the Pergamum king, Eumenes, really wanted to have the largest library, but Pergamum was in second place behind Alexandria.

Eumenes was very proud of his city, especially its library. But like all sinners, Eumenes wanted more.

And what he wanted most was for his library to move from being the number two library in the world up to the number one slot.

And, to make it number ONE, he needed the famed scholar and librarian in Alexandria to take charge of the Pergamum library.

So King Eumenes bribed Aristophanes of Byzantium, the librarian at Alexandria, to agree to leave Alexandria and come to Pergamum.

When Ptolemy of Egypt heard about Aristophanes being bribed by Eumenes, he became enraged at this seduction of his outstanding scholar.

Ptolemy promptly imprisoned Aristophanes and by way of retaliation put an embargo on the export of papyrus to Pergamum. Faced with this situation, the scholars of Pergamum invented parchment or vellum, which is made of the skins of beasts, smoothed and polished.

In fact parchment is a much superior vehicle for writing and, although it did not do so for many centuries, it in the end ousted papyrus altogether as writing material.

And, one more tidbit of trivia about the political intrigue in Pergamum.

When Mark Anthony married Cleopatra, he seized the entire library and gave it to her, about the same time as Herod the Great began rebuilding the Temple in Jerusalem.

No doubt, Pergamum was a very cultured city, but it was also the center of pagan worship.

There were three temples to three Roman emperors whom had been given God status.

There were temples to all the famous Greek Gods.

Pergamum proudly boasted of having at least four great temples, one for each of the greatest gods of the Greeks.

They had a temple dedicated to Dionysus, the god of wine and drama.

They had one for Athena, the goddess of wisdom in art and war.

They had one for Aesculapius the god of healing

And the biggest temple in town was dedicated to numero uno in the pantheon of Greek gods - Zeus.

A great altar to Zeus was built in front of the Temple of Athene which stood eight hundred feet up on Pergamum's conical hill.

Forty feet high, it stood on a projecting ledge of rock and looked exactly like a great throne on the hillside.

All day it smoked with the smoke of sacrifices offered to Zeus.

Around its base was carved one of the greatest achievements in the world of sculpture, the frieze which showed the Battle of the Giants.

Pergamum was particularly connected with the worship of Asclepius, so much so that Asclepius was known as "the Pergamene god."

Asclepius was the god of healing and his temples were the nearest approach to hospitals in the ancient world.

From all over the world people flocked to Pergamum for relief for their sicknesses, and today Pergamum is called "the Lourdes of the ancient world." The task of healing was partly the work of the priests; partly the work of doctors.

Galen, second only to Hippocrates in the medical history of the ancient world, was born in Pergamum; and partly the work of Asclepius himself.

The commonest and most famous title for Asclepius was Asclepius *Soter*, Asclepius the Saviour.

The emblem of Asclepius was the serpent, which still appears on logos of the medical and healing community.

Those seeking healing were invited to spend the night sleeping on the floor of the Temple.

There were hundreds of non-poisonous snakes that crawled around in the darkness, and should a sufferer be touched by one of the snakes, it was considered being touched by the hand of the god himself.

And, of course both Jews and Christians would be reminded of the garden when Mr. Serpent deceived Eve.

Now, keep in mind that Pergamum was the administrative center of Asia. That meant that it was the center of Caesar worship for the province.

I hope you remember the description of in past sermons, because Caesar worship created a dire dilemma for Christians.

The Christians couldn't bow to Caesar and burn a pinch of incense to god Caesar, and they couldn't say "Caesar is Lord."

Undoubtedly that is why Pergamum was Satan's seat; it was the place where Christians were required on pain of death to take the name of the Lord and give it to Caesar instead of to Christ; and to a Christian there could be nothing more Satanic than that.

In other Roman cities, the citizens only had to burn that pinch of incense and make their confession of faith in Caesar once a year, but here in Pergamum it was a daily affair.

Our letter opened with Christ saying

**Revelation 2:12-17 (NASB)**

**12 "And to the angel of the church in Pergamum write: The One who has the sharp two-edged sword says this**

And here is the explanation of the beginning of the letter to Pergamum.

The Risen Christ is called **The One who has the sharp two-edged sword**. Roman governors were divided into two classes, those who had the “right of the sword,” and those who did not have the “right of the sword.”

Those who had the right of the sword had the power of life and death; on their word a person could be executed on the spot.

The proconsul, who had his headquarters at Pergamum, had the “right of the sword,” and at any moment he might use it against any Christian.

But the letter reminds the Christian not to forget that the last word is still with the Risen Christ, who has the sharp two-edged sword. The power of Rome might be satanically powerful; the power of the Risen Lord is greater yet.

## **II. The Christians in Pergamum are Commended**

*<sup>13</sup> 'I know where you dwell, where Satan's throne is; and you hold fast My name, and did not deny My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.*

Christ tells the Christian's <sup>13</sup> *I know where your home is.*

Christ says I know this is your permanent place of residence.

It's not just a temporary place.

And it's vitally important that you understand what Christ is saying, because it does have an impact on you.

The principle of the Christian life is not escape, but conquest.

We may feel it would be very much easier to be a Christian in some other place and in some other circumstances but the duty of the Christian is to witness for Christ where life has set him or her. How many times have you heard of someone making a decision to be a Christian, and decided where they worked was too pagan, and they quit so they could find employment in the society of professing Christians.

The more difficult it is to be a Christian in any set of circumstances, the greater the obligation to remain within these circumstances.

If in the early days Christians had run away every time they were confronted with a difficult engagement, there would have been no chance of a world for Christ.

The Christians at Pergamum proved that it was perfectly possible to be a Christian under such circumstances.

Every day in Pergamum the Christian faced death.

Remember the devil is not in Hell, not yet.

He is not locked up in the bottomless pit as he will be someday.

No!

Paul called him the prince of this fallen world (Eph. 2:2)

...the god of this world (2 Cor 4:4)

...and he prowls around this planet (1 Pet 5:8)

He is especially focused on trying to drag people away from faith in Jesus.

But satan is defeated.

Jesus did that when He walked out of His tomb on Easter Sunday.

But in the same way a mortally wounded bear is something to steer clear of, satan is still very dangerous.

Now you may think, “Whew! What a tough place to plant a church. Temples to pagan Gods, the center of emperor worship, and a city full of people too proud to think they need Jesus. Why wouldn’t God put those believers somewhere else? Surely there was an Asian city that would have been a little more open to the gospel message!”

Well, The reason God put a church here is because God loves all people, even the people of Orcutt, even the people of Pergamum who were worshiping all those false gods.

Our Heavenly Father’s heart broke for them.

He longed for them to know Him.

So, He put you right here in Orcutt, where 80% don't attend church.

He put His church in that dangerously difficult city to reach out to its lost residents.

That was His assigned mission field for those particular Christians. That is the part of the world those believers were gifted by God's Spirit to serve, so that's where they needed to be.

In 1865 Rudyard Kipling wrote a poem entitled "Mulholland's Contract."

I don't know if you've ever read it but the poem is about a man named Mulholland who was a cattleman on a cattle boat.

His assigned work station was in the hold, down where the cattle were carried.

Well, in the poem there came a terrific storm at sea and the cattle broke loose. In their terror they were stampeding and trampling everywhere; and it seemed certain that Mulholland would be killed beneath their flailing hooves. So Mulholland made a contract with God.

As Kipling put it in his poem, Mulholland said,

*"And by the terms of the contract, as I have read the same,*

*If [God] got me to port alive I would exalt His Name,  
And praise His Holy Majesty till further orders came."*

Well, miraculously Mulholland made it through the storm, even though wounded.

He spent seven weeks in the Seaman's Hospital where he spent his time studying and reading the Bible. and when he reached the shore alive, he was prepared to fulfill his part of the contract.

He spent seven weeks in the Seaman's Hospital reading and studying the Bible.

His idea was to quit the cattle boats and preach the Gospel out in the world—but in the poem God said to him:

*"I never puts on My ministers no more than they can bear.*

*So back you go to the cattle-boats an' preach My gospel there."*

In other words, it was Mulholland's duty, not to seek an easier place to be a Christian, but to be a Christian exactly where God had put him.

And that's the way it was with the believers in Pergamum.

They were called by God to share His love in that capitol city full of proud, emperor-worshipping, Christian-persecuting people.

God still does that kind of thing.

He still puts us where He needs us.

He gifts us and talents us so that we are able to share His love in specific places.

Now, let that fact sink in for a moment, God has placed you where He needs you, next to neighbors who need to hear of His love, next to co-workers who need to see you live out your faith, next to students who need the Love of Christ.

The next time you start to complain about your place in life, stop and think! Almighty God has put you there as His representative!

Paul says where ever we are we

**2 Corinthians 5:20 (NASB)**

**20 Therefore, we are ambassadors for Christ, as though God were making an appeal through us; we beg you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.**

That kind of changes things doesn't it!

The Christians at Pergamum proved that it was perfectly possible to be a Christian under such circumstances.

Even when martyrdom was in the air they did not flinch.

Of Antipas we know nothing; there is a late legend in Tertullian that he met his death by being slowly roasted to death within a brazen bull.

But there is a point in the Greek impossible to reproduce in English which is intensely suggestive.

The Risen Christ then speaks about

**My faith even in the days of Antipas, My witness, My faithful one, who was killed among you, where Satan dwells.**

The KJV version says Antipas is a martyr.

In the early church to be a martyr and to be a witness were one and the same thing.

Witness meant so often martyrdom.

Here is a rebuke to us.

So many are prepared to demonstrate their Christianity in Christian circles but are equally prepared to play it down in circles where Christianity is met with opposition.

We must note another thing.

The Risen Christ gives calls Antipas **My witness, My faithful one** and so him nothing less than his own title.

In Rev 1:5 and Rev 3:14 Christ Himself is called the faithful witness.

To those who are true to Him He gives nothing less than His own name.

### **III. The Christians in Pergamum Have Missed the Mark**

Paul makes an astounding statement in **Romans 3:9 (NASB)**

**9 We have already charged that both Jews and Greeks are all under sin;**

The word “sin” is the Greek word “**hamartia.**”

It might seem rather surprising that *hamartia* should be selected as the umbrella term for sin in the New Testament.

“to err, to miss the mark or goal,” conveys the incorrect action’s origin and nature.

Any action deserving punishment or which must be atoned for is called *hamartia*.

The risen Christ says to the Pergamum's

**14 'But I have a few things against you, because you have there some who hold the teaching of Balaam, who kept teaching Balak to put a stumbling block before the sons of Israel, to eat things sacrificed to idols and to commit *acts of immorality.* 15 'So you also have some who in the same way hold the teaching of the Nicolaitans.**

The person who is not prepared to be different need not start on the Christian way at all.

The commonest word for the Christian in the New Testament is “saint” which in Greek is “*hagios*” whose basic meaning is “different or separate.”

The Temple is “*hagios*” because it is different from other buildings;

the Sabbath day is “*hagios*” because it is different from other days;

God is supremely “*hagios*” because he is totally different from men;

and the Christian is “*hagios*” because he is different from other men.

While we are to be in the world, we are not to be part of the world.

And, here is where the Pergamum's were have a problem.

Jesus say **you have there some who hold the teaching**

What He's getting to is moral weakness inside the congregation.

These bold believers were doing a great job of withstanding attacks that came from outside.

Bbut they were weak when it came to threats that came from within.

They tolerated in their midst people who taught falsehood, people who embraced the teachings of Balaam and the Nicolaitans.

Now what exactly are we talking about here?

What did Balaam and the Nicolaitans teach?

According to the book of Numbers when Balak, a Moabite king, heard about the victories of the Hebrew people as they journeyed from Egypt on the way to the promised land when Balak heard the Hebrews were headed his way, he hired Balaam, a well-known prophet to curse them.

Balaam accepted the job, hopped on his donkey, and was on the way to do exactly that when he met an angel of the Lord, and as a result of that meeting he confessed his sin and offered to go home. The angel told him not to do that and to go with the Moabites but to only speak the words that God gave him to say.

So instead of CURSING the Israelites Balaam BLESSED them four times. But Balaam was greedy and to keep from losing his pay he told Balak to send his women to seduce the men of Israel.

In essence he said, “Balak, if you can’t curse them, corrupt them.” Ever since then Balaamism had been known as a teaching that attacked the separation and sanctification that God expects His people to maintain.

So, in short, the doctrine of Balaam was the teaching that Christ-followers could embrace the world’s teachings while maintaining their Christian distinctiveness.

Balaamism is the attempt to make the best of both worlds, the earthly world and the spiritual world.

It’s like trying to run with the hare AND hunt with the hounds.

And the Nicolaitans taught the same basic thing.

They believed that sinning was actually a good thing because it gave God another chance to forgive you.

This led them to happily participate in the immorality of that city.

They went to church on Sunday, and then attended lavish banquets in the temple to Zeus on Monday banquets that were a form of worshiping Zeus as they ate the meat of animals that were sacrificed to him, and became involved in the sexual immorality that served as dessert.

They worshiped Jesus and they also lived like the devil.

I mean, the main liability of this church was the fact that some of its members had compromised their faith.

They were trying to play both sides and as a result this church in Pergamum was becoming like the world.

Instead of transforming their culture as salt and light, they were letting the culture transform them.

Unfortunately this kind of thing still happens.

There are churches today with believers who tend toward this same kind of compromise.

The church must be IN the world - that’s our mission field.

We have to be IN the world but we must not be OF it.

Let me put it this way.

It is fine for the boat to be in the water.

But it’s bad for the water to be in the boat.

We must be careful NOT to make their mistake.

We have to realize that following Jesus will mean living differently than people who don’t follow Him.

It will make us stand out—but that’s okay.

We are to be a PECULIAR people—a DISTINCT people—a SEPARATE people.

Paul would reminds us

### **Philippians 2:14-18 (NASB)**

<sup>14</sup> Do all things without grumbling or disputing; <sup>15</sup> so that you will prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world, <sup>16</sup> holding fast the word of life, so that in the day of Christ I will have reason to glory because I did not run in vain nor toil in vain.

<sup>17</sup> But even if I am being poured out as a drink offering upon the sacrifice and service of your faith, I rejoice and share my joy with you all. <sup>18</sup> You too, *I urge you*, rejoice in the same way and share your joy with me.

So it’s foolish indeed to go along with the world if it means ignoring God’s loving laws.

That kind of worldly compromise is a serious liability for any Christian, and for any church.

## **IV. The Christians in Pergamum Are Given A Promise**

**17 'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches. To him who overcomes, to him I will give *some* of the hidden manna, and I will give him a white stone, and a new name written on the stone which no one knows but he who receives it.'**

In the ancient world, they had a white stone, called the “tessera” on which a special privilege was written.

In Rome a great gladiator was the admired hero of all.

Often a gladiator had to fight on until he was killed in combat.

But if he had had a specially illustrious career, when he grew old, he was allowed to retire in honor.

Such men were given a tessera with the letters "SP" on it.

"SP" stands for the Latin word spectatus, which means a man whose valour has been proved beyond a doubt.

This would mean that the Christian is the gladiator of Christ and that, when he has proved his valour in the battle of life, he is allowed to enter into the rest which Christ gives with honor.

Are you holding to your faith as stubbornly as the Pergamum Christians?

Are you guilty of trying to live a comprised life, with one foot in Christ, and one foot in Satan?

Do you think you can make your one set of commandments, and skip the ones Christ has given?

Hear Jesus one more time:

**'He who has an ear, let him hear what the Spirit says to the churches.'**

## **Prayer and Invitation**

## CALLED TO SERVE

**DEVOTIONAL READING:** Luke 14:15–24

**BACKGROUND SCRIPTURE:** Luke 14:7–14

### LUKE 14:7–14

<sup>7</sup>When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: <sup>8</sup>“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. <sup>9</sup>If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. <sup>10</sup>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 the other guests. <sup>11</sup>For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

<sup>12</sup>Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. <sup>13</sup>But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, <sup>14</sup>and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Photo: tamayalper / iStock / Thinkstock

### KEY VERSE

*All those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.—Luke 14:11*

## DISCIPLESHIP AND MISSION

### Unit 1: Call to Discipleship

LESSONS 1–4

### LESSON AIMS

After participating in this lesson, each learner will be able to:

1. Describe Jesus’ view of humility.
2. Distinguish between behaviors that indicate humility and those that don’t.
3. Demonstrate humility in one choice in the week ahead.

## LESSON OUTLINE

### Introduction

- A. God's Way Up Is Down
- B. Lesson Context
  - I. The Humble Guest (LUKE 14:7–11)
    - A. Unpretentious (vv. 7–9)  
*Donut Do That!*
    - B. Exalted (vv. 10, 11)
  - II. The Humble Host (LUKE 14:12–14)
    - A. Wrong Action (v. 12)
    - B. Right Action (vv. 13, 14)  
*The Night Grace Shone*

### Conclusion

- A. What Is Biblical Humility?
- B. Prayer
- C. Thought to Remember

## HOW TO SAY IT

Abraham

*Ay-bruh-ham.*

Deuteronomy *Due-ter-ahn-uh-me.*

Jerusalem *Juh-roo-suh-lem.*

Moses *Mo-zes* or *Mo-zez.*

## Introduction

### A. God's Way Up Is Down

Some drivers hate to make turns against heavy traffic. Faced with the need to turn at an intersection across several busy lanes, they will drive out of their way to avoid the turn. In countries where people drive on the right side of the road, they will make three right turns to avoid one left turn. For them, the way left is right, and right, and right again.

Jesus expressed a similar idea throughout his teaching. He taught that under God's reign, the way up, the way of honor and exaltation, is actually down, in lowly, self-giving service to others. Those who seek prestige, power, wealth, and status will be brought low. But those who lower themselves, who seek nothing for themselves and instead minister to others in humility, God will exalt. Jesus, the divine Lord who gave himself in death for undeserving sinners, taught and demonstrated that humility is the way to exaltation. This is the theme of today's text.

## B. Lesson Context

Today's text is part of the account of Jesus' final journey to Jerusalem; the account extends from Luke 9:51 to 19:28. Jesus was approaching Israel's sacred city, having warned his disciples before the trip began that there he would be handed over to his enemies. They would put him to death, but he would be raised again to life by God the Father (Luke 9:22). Although Jesus stressed, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you," they didn't (9:44).

The immediate backdrop of our lesson is an occasion on which Jesus was invited to a Sabbath day meal at the home of a powerful religious leader. At this grand meal "was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body" (Luke 14:1, 2; the 1984 NIV has "dropsy," which is an older word for "edema"). Jesus confronted the other guests about their objections to his healing the afflicted man on the Sabbath. Receiving only silence as a response, Jesus proceeded to heal the man, pointing out their hypocrisy in the process (14:3–6). Our text is divided into two parts: advice given to guests at a banquet and advice given to the host.

### I. The Humble Guest

(LUKE 14:7–11)

#### A. Unpretentious (vv. 7–9)

**7. When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable:**

Our text today begins with a teaching of Jesus identified as a *parable*. The noun being translated occurs 50 times in the New Testament, and 48 of those are in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke.

Speaking in parables is a key characteristic of Jesus' teaching. Parables range from brief comparisons ("What is the kingdom of God like?... It is like a mustard seed," Luke 13:18, 19), to elaborate stories ("There was a man who had two sons," 15:11–32). Parables are designed to provoke the listeners' thought processes and challenge the listeners' assumptions.

Jesus delivers this parable at a grand meal. Shared meals in Jesus' culture are occasions for the display of social status. The wealthy could display their abundance on such occasions, and places at the table closest to the host are regarded as carrying the greatest honor. Those not invited to such banquets can observe the proceedings from outside, and the ostentatious display of wealth is often the host's objective. These factors all play a role in our understanding of Jesus' teaching in this text, though his focus is on far more than correcting the customs of his day.

Jesus obviously speaks to those present with him at the meal. But by calling them *the guests* (those invited), the writer Luke emphasizes that Jesus speaks to people who are in a position of privilege. Their important host has invited them as his peers to his sumptuous table. None of them are in positions of weakness like the seriously ill man whom Jesus has just healed.

In response to the invitation, and as people generally do, these seek a prominent position at the table (*the place of honor*). We might think of how people at a crowded event featuring open seating rush to get the best seats with good views.

**8. "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.**

Weddings are common occasions for large meals to which many people are invited. Thus they provide a fitting backdrop for Jesus' example. His counsel is to avoid the

typical behavior of assuming the best position (*the place of honor*) that one can get at the table. To do so is to risk embarrassment. Someone worthy of more honor than oneself might also be in attendance, and that person's presence might result in a socially awkward outcome!

***What Do You Think?***

In what ways can your congregation challenge common secular ideas about who deserves honor?

***Digging Deeper***

How does the parable in Matthew 20:1–16 inform your conclusions, if at all?

As Jesus speaks of those *more distinguished*, we hear an echo of his description of himself on other occasions. In the upper room at the last supper, he will admonish his disciples for the argument about who is greatest, noting that he, clearly the greatest of their company, lives among them as one who serves (Luke 22:24–27). Jesus' own nature as a servant, not their habitual desire for prominence, is what must determine the position that his followers seek.

**9. "If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place.**

The end result of seeking the highest, most honored place may well be the opposite: humiliation. The host of the banquet, the one to whom guests are beholden for the privilege of attending the meal, may tell the honor-seeking guest to give up the place of prominence to allow the more honored person to have the proper seat. But isn't that just common sense? Don't those listening to Jesus know this (and perhaps have experienced it) already? Most likely! But there's a point here that must not be missed: it's not the guests who determine who takes which seats; that privilege belongs to *the host* of the banquet.

Just before telling this story, Jesus had honored an uninvited guest, the man with the swollen body who humbly sought healing, by acknowledging his suffering and restoring him to wholeness. In doing so, he accepted the scorn of religious leaders who saw his actions as a Sabbath violation. Like the host in his story, Jesus exalted the one who took a low position. Like the wise guest in his story, Jesus willingly takes the lowest place, serving others instead of himself. His permanent move to the seat of highest honor becomes certain (Luke 22:69; Ephesians 1:20; Colossians 3:1).

***What Do You Think?***

What are some situations in which you should do better at humbling yourself?

***Digging Deeper***

What Scripture passage, other than today's text, challenges you the most in this regard? Why?

***DONUT DO THAT!***

It seemed like a good idea at the time: impersonate a police officer to get a discount on donuts. So Charles Barry pulled up to the pickup window of a donut shop, flashed a sheriff's badge, and asked for the discount for law-enforcement officers.

The plan worked so well that the fake cop returned multiple times! But eventually an employee got suspicious. When he balked during one of Barry's visits, Barry again

displayed his badge and pointed to a holstered firearm. The clerk took down Barry's license plate number and reported the incident to the police.

Barry was caught and charged with impersonating a law-enforcement officer and improper exhibition of a firearm. The police shield and weapon in Barry's possession were real, belonging to his father, a retired police officer.

Posturing catches up with the pretender sooner or later. Pretending we are entitled to something ends up fooling only ourselves. The eventual unmasking and humiliation are quite costly! Most of us know this either from observation or personal experience. So, why do we still do it?

—J. E.

## B. Exalted (vv. 10, 11)

**10. “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 the other guests.**

Jesus' counsel is to do the opposite: to seek *the lowest place* rather than the highest. Doing so not only avoids the potential shame of being moved to a lower place—indeed, there is no lower place—but also makes possible the honor that the host will exalt the humble guest. Jesus adds to this image by having the host address the humble guest as *Friend*. At this banquet, the true friend of the host is not the person who seeks status but the one who acts in lowliness.

From this new position the humble guest will receive due recognition from *the other guests* and *will be honored*. The host reverses the guests' situations so that the humble guest receives the honor that the self-seeking guest had sought.

Jesus' words mirror Proverbs 25:6, 7:

Do not exalt yourself in the king's presence, and do not claim a place among his great men; it is better for him to say to you, “Come up here,” than for him to humiliate you before his nobles.

The context of Jesus' teaching shows, however, that he goes beyond that well-known wisdom. The person who seeks status ignores not just the threat of humiliation, but also the revelation of God in Christ. The person who humbly puts others above self follows Christ as Lord and example. The wisdom of the banquet is not simply about how to conduct oneself in public but how to live as God's humble servant. Like Jesus, such a servant gives up status for the sake of others.

**11. “For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”**

Jesus ends the first of the two parables with a summary statement, one that he repeats on other occasions (Matthew 23:12; Luke 18:14; compare James 4:10). God does not grant glory to those who exalt themselves, but to those who humbly take the lowly position, sacrificing themselves for the sake of others as Jesus did.

History begins with humans who, given an ideal world in which to live, abandon God's provision for the offer of self-exaltation (Genesis 3:5). In the story that unfolds, God grants his promises and does his work through those in lowly circumstances: Abraham, an elderly, childless man; Moses, a speech-impaired fugitive; David, an immature shepherd boy; even all Israel, a weak nation formed in slavery. Meanwhile, the great nations and people of the world, seeking status and power for themselves, come to nothing at God's hand.

In Jesus that story comes to its climax. He has status that belongs only to God, but he willingly takes the lowly position, even to the point of death, for the sake of those in need. His actions reveal the nature of God and of true humanity made in God's image. Jesus' story of guests at the banquet illustrates this larger biblical story and revelation of God. God always turns upside down our ideas of strength and status.

## II. The Humble Host (LUKE 14:12–14)

### A. Wrong Action (v. 12)

**12. Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.**

Jesus' teaching on humility is for all, host as well as guest. Thus a second story focuses on the *host*, encouraging similar selfless lowliness in the service of others.

Invitations to meals in Jesus' time are part of a culture of what might be called “returning the favor,” the idea of being *repaid*. Receiving an invitation, whether to the customary late morning meal (translated *luncheon*) or the second meal in late afternoon (*dinner*), carries the unspoken obligation to offer an invitation in return. The savvy host therefore invites those from whom he can expect a similar invitation. Friends and family are natural to invite as guests and can be counted on to return the favor. Invitations to the rich in one's community promise even greater return on investment. Jesus' audience is familiar with the customs of inviting such people to a meal with the expectation of receiving an invitation in return.

Jesus, however, rejects all such expectation. Obviously, he seeks and accepts friendship with all kinds of people. But giving in order to receive is the opposite of Jesus' teaching of gracious generosity (Luke 6:27–30, 37, 38). For Jesus, such behavior betrays a lack of understanding of and trust in God.

#### ***What Do You Think?***

What challenges must you overcome in order to practice hospitality toward those who are not part of your demographic or cultural comfort zone?

#### ***Digging Deeper***

How can your fellow believers assist you in this?

### B. Right Action (vv. 13, 14)

**13. “But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,**

In place of friends, relatives, and the rich, Jesus' recommended guest list features those unable to provide anything in return. Their poverty and disability indicate that they cannot provide adequately for themselves, let alone hosting a meal for others. An invitation to such people would be completely gracious, made with no consideration for returning the favor. It is a gift without strings attached.

*The poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind* are the same as “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” in the story that follows this one (Luke 14:21, same Greek words). There a wealthy man whose dinner invitations are refused instructs his servants to find such people. It is the weak, not the strong, whom the Lord comes to bless (Luke 5:31;

etc.). Jesus had announced as much at the beginning of his ministry in Luke's Gospel, quoting from the prophet Isaiah (Luke 4:18). But this is really nothing new: long before Jesus' day, God had instructed Israel to use its tithes every three years to be generous with those who had no means of paying back (Deuteronomy 14:28, 29).

*Visual for Lesson 1. Keep this timeline posted throughout the quarter to give your learners a chronological perspective.*

The basis for such generosity is no less than God's own graciousness (compare Matthew 5:45). Though humans may think of themselves as strong and well supplied, we are all weak, poor, and vulnerable in the eyes of God. Our strength is nothing; our wealth cannot last. Yet God gives freely to us, as he gave freely to Israel enslaved in Egypt. For all weak, poor, helpless, unworthy humans, Christ came to die, providing an incomparable gift that can never be repaid in any part.

Only when we understand that we are weak like those whom Jesus describes can we rightly receive God's gracious gift. And when we do, then we cannot help but respond with similar generosity. As we do, we will take no thought of our own position or expectation of repayment.

### ***THE NIGHT GRACE SHONE***

Several years ago, sports celebrity Tim Tebow revealed an idea he had in an interview in *People* magazine: his foundation would create "Night to Shine." This would be a worldwide prom for people with special needs. Tebow said that he wanted to redefine Valentine's Day by encouraging people to show love to the least among us.

The first Night to Shine in 2015 featured 44 simultaneous prom events with more than 7,000 people with special needs. Attendees walked the red carpet while dressed in formal wear. Special hair, makeup, and shoeshine stations helped them look their best as they headed to the dance floor.

Later, on a talk show while reflecting on the successes of his special-needs proms, Tebow revealed that he had never attended his own prom. The talk-show host then presented Tebow with a corsage, which he in turn presented to a special needs girl in the audience. The band struck up a tune, and the two danced on national television.

Although those with celebrity status can host parties for the rich and famous, Tebow took the command and promise of Jesus seriously. Will you?

—J. E.

#### ***What Do You Think?***

What are some ways your church can model gracious humility as a whole?

#### ***Digging Deeper***

How does whole-church humility differ in appearance and action from humility exhibited by individual Christians?

**14. "and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."**

Like guests who deliberately take the low position, hosts who invite those who *cannot repay* them look to someone of higher standing still. God promises to bless the openhandedly generous, as they follow the pattern of his own generosity. The generous

person trusts him in the act of generosity, knowing that only God can repay or reward when the recipient cannot.

That reward, however, does not take the form of immediate compensation. Rather, Jesus speaks of repayment to occur *at the resurrection of the righteous*, when God raises from the dead his faith-filled, generous people. This will vindicate our openhandedness. Our generosity will be rewarded with even greater gifts of his grace (Luke 19:10–19).

The promise of resurrection at the end of this age is the assurance that God will make things right. This assurance also points us again to Jesus' own generosity and reliance on God. Jesus delivers this teaching while on his way to his crucifixion in Jerusalem, a death about which he knows and has warned his disciples (Luke 9:22).

#### ***What Do You Think?***

How can we keep our service motives selfless and pure as we consider the restitution that awaits us at the resurrection?

#### ***Digging Deeper***

Consider the self-contradictory situation of attempting to develop a sense of humility of which one can be proud.

Confident in God's faithfulness, Jesus has also promised his disciples that God will raise him from the dead. Jesus' death will not be a random event beyond his control; rather, it will be an act of lowly, humble, self-giving service on behalf of others. Jesus is about to give his life for those who have no means of repaying him, trusting that God will restore him to victorious life in response to his generous self-sacrifice.

As the disciples act generously and humbly with no consideration for status or repayment, they follow in their Lord's footsteps. By faith they (and we) commit themselves to God's care. As God the Father will raise Jesus from the dead, so will he do for them (and us).

## **Conclusion**

### **A. What Is Biblical Humility?**

The twin teachings of Jesus in this lesson focus on proper behavior at a grand dinner. But we mistake his intent if we think that the two teachings are merely about such behavior. They combine to reveal that a person genuinely knows God only as he is revealed in the cross of Christ. Such knowledge of God leads to a radical reordering of one's life, from selfish status-seeking to self-sacrificial generosity and service.

The term *humility* is often attached to the point Jesus makes, and that term too is often misunderstood. It is more than modesty about one's accomplishments or sensitivity about displaying one's status. Biblical humility is the lowly spirit that puts others before oneself. As such, it combines Jesus' counsel in these two teachings: we are to seek the lowly position first and seek always to serve others generously.

As we embrace Jesus' teaching, we take no thought of what we think we are entitled to receive in return. Biblical humility is not just social reserve. It is following a lowly Master who willingly surrendered his life for the weak and undeserving. It is Christlike love put into action, with no thought of having earned the right to receive anything in return. It faithfully trusts God's promise of victorious resurrection.

How might Jesus offer these teachings if he were addressing them to our time and place? How might he describe the humble servant-disciple in the workplace, in the

neighborhood, in the family, in the school or church? How would those stories challenge our deeply held assumptions and cherished attitudes? How can you live out stories like that in the places where you find yourself? How can you live as one who is called to serve, who understands that God's way up is down?

### **B. Prayer**

Heavenly Father, we are overwhelmed as we contemplate your Son's humility. May we respond as humble servants who take the lowly position. As we give no thought of receiving earthly reward, may we trust your promise of resurrection. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### **C. Thought to Remember**

God's way up is down.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Weatherly, J., Eichenberger, J., Frey, C., & Kenney, J. A. (2018). [Called to Serve](#). In R. L. Nickelson (Ed.), *The NIV Standard Lesson Commentary, 2018–2019* (Vol. 25, pp. 233–239). Colorado Springs, CO: Standard Publishing.