

In the ✝ name of Jesus.

The true God is not at all as we might imagine God to be, or as Christian antagonists might accuse, as we make Him up to be. He is not a God that rewards us with salvation based on our abilities, our perceived righteousness, our status in life. He just doesn't follow our conventions. He has these unexpected and riddling statements about the first being last — and vice versa (Luke 13:30), about the least being the greatest (Luke 9:46-48) and the greatest being the "*one who serves*" (Luke 22:26), and in our Gospel: "*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

This is the way of God, our Old Testament lesson reminds us. "*It is the glory of God to conceal things.*" He is a hidden God, and that's for our good. God in unveiled glory means death for miserable sinners like us. That's what the LORD told Moses, who wanted to see that glory: "*I will make all my goodness pass before you and will proclaim before you my name 'The LORD.' And I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show mercy on whom I will show mercy. But,*' he said, '*you cannot see my face, for man shall not see me and live*'" (Ex. 33:19-20). And the LORD covered Moses' eyes until after He had passed by.

We see the glory of God similarly, not with our eyes covered or faces veiled, but still hidden, concealed in the preaching of the gospel; we see the glory of God in Jesus, who is the image of God. By this gospel, "*God ... has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ*" (2 Cor. 4:4, 6).

And if we see God's glory in Jesus, then we see it in humility and weakness, in lowliness and shame. We see it in serving. "*For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many*" (Mark 10:45).

Thus, we see Jesus in the house of a high-ranking Pharisees on a Sabbath, being watched by others to see if He might somehow misstep. He challenged the Pharisees' teaching on the Third Commandment regarding the Sabbath. "*Is it lawful [to do good on the Sabbath? To love your neighbor? In this case,] to heal on the Sabbath, or not?*" Is sanctifying the Sabbath really about not lifting a finger to save an ox or even one's own son? Isn't it instead, as Luther teaches, about holding God's word sacred and gladly hearing and learning it? Isn't it also about offering up "*a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name*"? Isn't it also about "*[doing] good and [sharing] what you have,*" remembering that "*such sacrifices are pleasing to God*"?

Jesus gives us the answer as He boldly takes hold of the man with dropsy — that's a condition of excess fluid in your tissues, often in your feet, legs, and ankles

(my.clevelandclinic.org/health/diseases/12564-edema) — and heals him on the Sabbath. The Pharisees' silence thundered the rightness of Jesus' action.

But Jesus wasn't done teaching the way in which God's glory would be manifest in Him. More than this act of serving on the Sabbath, Jesus began to teach of His ultimate act of serving and its consequences. He told a parable. A man invited guests to a wedding feast. Should a guest arrogantly take a seat of honor and the host come in with a more distinguished guest, then he may be asked to move to a lower place ... to his shame. Don't take the places of honor, but the lowest place, such that you may be asked to move higher and be praised, Jesus taught. And He concluded: "*everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

In part, Jesus was instructing the Pharisees of this hidden way of God in Himself, in His own humility. St. Paul describes it this way: "*Christ Jesus, ... though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men.*" But that was just the start; His humility continued: "*And being found in human form, he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross*" (Phil. 2:5-8). In 1 Corinthians, Paul calls this message of Christ crucified "*folly.*" He describes Jesus' coming as weakness. He calls it "*low and despised*" (1 Cor. 1:23, 27-28).

But that's so only for "*those who are perishing,*" for these are really God's glory; they're His wisdom and power. On the other hand, for us who look to Jesus, they're our "*righteousness and sanctification and redemption*" (1 Cor. 1:30), for "*God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father*" (Phil. 2:9-11).

For this wedding feast motif gives us a clue that Jesus' teaching is not really about giving advice on how to act at a wedding. It's not even just about how Christ followers should act in the here and now, namely, with humility, although that's certainly true. After all, in talking about Jesus' humility, St. Paul said, "*Have this [same] mind among yourselves*" (Phil. 2:5). And just before that, he had taught "*Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves*" (Phil. 2:3). In the Old Testament and New, pride is a sin, and humility a virtue. Solomon wrote: "*Toward the scornful [the LORD] is scornful, but to the humble he gives favor*" (Prov. 3:34). Isaiah wrote: "*I [the LORD] dwell ... with him who is of a contrite and lowly spirit*" (Isa. 57:15). Again, "*this is the one to whom I will look: he who is humble and contrite in spirit and*

trembles at my word” (Isa. 66:2). St. Peter wrote: *“Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another”* (1 Pet. 5:5). Thus Christians are to look after the interests of those who are needy: *“the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind ... [those who] cannot repay you.”* And, in fact, this is what made the early Christians stand out from others in the pagan world: their love and charity to the poor, the sick, the abandoned. In this way, Christianity metaphorically conquered the world.

But this wedding feast language that Jesus uses in His parable is really talk of the marriage feast of the Lamb, as St. John talks about it: *“Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb”* (Rev. 19:9). Jesus is talking about our salvation. He’s talking about things eternal. When Jesus says the one who *“humbles himself will be exalted,”* he’s talking about before the Lord. *“Humble yourselves before the Lord,”* James wrote, *“and he will exalt you”* (James 4:10). And the blessed Virgin sang: *“he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate”* (Luke 1:52). This is the favor of God that seats us in the places of honor at His heavenly banquet table, exalted with our brother Jesus, who having humbled Himself in shameful death was raised up again in victorious life and was *“bestowed ... the name that is above every name”* (Phil. 2:9).

So, what is this humility that we are called to; so simple in concept; so difficult in reality? It is repentance admitting to God that we are sinners, just as He says, that we do not deserve the places of honor at the feast. By our sin, we deserve the lowest place. This humility is admitting that we are not God; Jesus is. It means admitting that God’s thoughts and God’s ways are higher than ours (Isa. 55:8-9), and that we need to submit our fallen reason to God’s almighty word — even the foolishness of the cross. It means admitting that we are not righteous, not a one of us, but the Lord is, and He is our righteousness. It means admitting that in our flesh we are enemies of God, but that the Son came down from the heavenly city to take on our flesh, suffering outside the gate for us, sanctifying us by His blood, laying down His life for us to call us friend. And this humility is faith — taking refuge in the Lord, trusting that in Him you will not be put to shame, but invited to sit at His table.

The Lord doesn’t want our self-exaltation; the Son of God wants us to follow His unexpected example of humility, that He might exalt us, even as the Father exalted Him. Thus He calls on us to humble ourselves — that is, to live Christian lives of repentance, trusting in Him, casting all our concerns on Him because He cares for us (1 Pet. 5:7), and offering up our sacrifices of praise and good works to God in humble works of love and charity.

Until that day when we are called to the highest place in heaven to dine with Jesus at His banquet table, Jesus deigns to come down to us humbly still, to dine with us in the lowest places on earth. He does it in His Supper, coming down with His body and blood to feed and nourish us, and in His Word to strengthen us for the daunting and humbling days that lie ahead of us.

And so, I conclude today with this prayer from Philip Melanchthon's wonderful hymn: "Lord Jesus Christ, with Us Abide":

5. Restrain, O Lord, the human pride
That seeks to thrust Your truth aside
Or with some man-made thoughts or things
Would dim the words Your Spirit sings.
6. Stay with us, Lord, and keep us true;
Preserve our faith our whole life through —
Your Word alone our heart's defense,
The Church's glorious confidence.

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit.