

In this morning's Gospel lesson, Jesus teaches a parable concerning how one should choose seats when invited to a wedding feast. At first, this might seem a bit odd, or strangely specific. When we go to wedding banquets, or receptions, we tend to pick seats based on being close to the dance floor, or the buffet table, or the door. Aside from the head table, seats really aren't ranked today.

But Jesus is doing more here than just giving guidelines for good manners. In this illustration, He is actually going after a root of evil in our lives: the sin of pride. And at the same time, Jesus is proclaiming the cure for such pride: His own humility. As He says, "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

Pride is this desire to exalt oneself which Jesus speaks against in the Gospel. It's a nasty thing. Pride itself is a wicked sin, and it's also what leads to a lot of other sins in our lives. Many of our evil thoughts, words, and deeds come out of pride.

For instance, our pride causes us to think that we're above others. "I'm better than you." Those specific words might not often come out of our mouth, but they can be seen in our actions.

What is it that makes us refuse to listen to others? Pride. You're above whatever it is that they might have to say, or you know it already.

What is it that causes us to be impatient with others? Pride. Other people aren't worth your time, or at least as much time as they're taking up.

What is it that keeps us from admitting our wrongs and apologizing to others? Pride. You can't look weak, or allow someone to potentially have something to hold over your head.

And on the other side of that coin, what is it that makes us unwilling to forgive one another, to refuse to let go of wrongs that others have done to us? Pride. Whatever that person did, they don't deserve your forgiveness. They haven't earned it; they haven't proven to your satisfaction that they really are sorry.

Pride destroys relationships between people. Friendships, marriages, families, congregations, communities – all gifts of God and blessings to those in them – shattered because of pride.

And even when we see the fall out, even when we suffer the pain, our sinful, poisoned hearts still cling to our pride. We think, in our fallen human reason, that nursing a grudge for months, years, decades even, is better than humbling ourselves before another person.

Pride can bring us to losing that which is most precious to us in this life, and even then, as we watch the crumbling and feel the pain, even then, we refuse to yield.

As if this wasn't all bad enough, pride doesn't only poison our relationship with other people, it destroys our relationship with God. We seek to elevate ourselves over His authority, His control.

This started clear back in the Garden of Eden. God made man and woman and placed them in the Garden with specific roles, tasks that were perfectly suited to how He created them and in which they would have found perfect joy.

But then the tempter comes along and sows the seeds of pride, asking them if they would like to “be like God.” Pride leads them in a foolish and deadly effort to throw off these “restrictions” placed on them by God and choose their own path. This path, though, leads to death, both for them and for all their children, including you and me.

And lest we in pride say that we would have done better, consider your own thoughts, words, and deeds in light of what God has told you in His word. How many things do you do against the Law of God, and then in pride, seek to justify it?

God forbids gossip and slander, and rather commands us to speak well of our neighbors, to give them the benefit of the doubt, so that we might build one another up and live in peace with one another. But it’s just so tempting to pass on some juicy tidbit about someone else and point out their mistakes or flaws. Because after all, in pride, you wouldn’t make such a mistakes or have such flaws.

Or God commands you to gather together as His people and hear His word and receive His gifts of forgiveness, life, and salvation, because He knows that Satan is seeking your destruction like He was Adam and Eve’s, and He knows that your and my sinful flesh aren’t capable of resisting temptation on our own. He knows you need His strength to fight the evil one.

But our pride tells us that we’ll gather for worship when we decide it’s needed, not God. We’ve got plenty of strength to resist temptation. And after all, we know all the Bible stories and we memorized the Catechism at some point long ago and we’re not going to lose our faith in one Sunday.

Or God tells us that He is the only God, that we should have no other gods. And we agree, of course, because after all we’re not silly ancient people who actually bowed down to statues or had a whole list of gods for different things or sacrificed things on altars.

Pride blinds us to the fact that to have a god isn’t to have a statue you bow to, but to look for your good to come from something and trust in it for refuge. So as we spend our time and effort and money pursuing things like careers or entertainment or social status and just assuming that our faith will always be there, we don’t realize that we’re breaking the First Commandment over and over again.

Our pride causes us to rebel against God’s own word, and as we push away His word, we push Him away. We say that we love Jesus, even as we willingly ignore or twist His word, pridefully ignoring that Jesus Himself said, “If you love me, you will keep my Commandments.”

All of this pride, this elevating ourselves over others and over God and His word, leads nowhere good. As you may have heard before from the book of Proverbs, “Pride goes before destruction, and a haughty spirit before the fall.”

Pride led to the death of Adam and Eve, and pride leads to our deaths as well, both physical and spiritual. And if we think that we can save ourselves, or that we can just keep on doing what we want and it’ll all be okay, that’s simply more pride.

At the judgment, it will be pride that will cause many to be sent, not to the last seat in the wedding feast, but into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his demons.

Our hope then, is not and cannot be in ourselves. It must come from another, someone without the corruption brought about by this sinful pride. And that, of course, is Jesus.

Note what He says again in our text: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Jesus is saying that there will be many who exalt themselves – “everyone who” – but there is only one – “he” – who truly humbles himself. This is part of the amazing reality of the incarnation, God taking on flesh in the person of Jesus.

Our pride leads us to falsely believe that we’re better than others. Jesus, the Almighty Son of God, equal to the Father and the Holy Spirit in power and glory and holiness, objectively is better than everyone else, but He never acts or speaks in a prideful way.

In pride, we look at our achievements and think that we deserve recognition and praise from others. Jesus is the eternal Word through whom all things were made, who upholds the entire universe by His will, and yet He humbled Himself to be born as the poor son of a carpenter, mocked as illegitimate and dishonored in His hometown.

We pridefully don’t think that we deserve when bad things happen. Jesus, who lived a completely perfect, sinless life, never having done or spoke or even thought anything wrong, suffered the agony of crucifixion and the torment of hell. Jesus didn’t deserve to go to the cross. You and I do. Jesus didn’t deserve to endure the absolute terror and suffering and misery of having God the Father turn away from Him. You and I do.

But because of His love, He did all this – for you. To see Christ hanging on the cross is to see perfect humility, the antidote of sinful pride and perfect expression of divine love.

And Christ didn’t give Himself upon the cross just to show this humility. No, He did it so that you might receive this humility in your own hearts, to drive out the sinful pride that separates you from Him. This humility is a gift from God, worked by the Holy Spirit in our hearts through the preaching of the Word.

This starts with the preaching of the Law. Pride hardens our hearts, and it is the Law that comes and smashes that hardness, breaking our old sinful heart into pieces. It is the Law that humbles us, making us realize the extent of our sins and how absolutely dependent we are on Jesus and His grace and mercy.

Now, the preaching of the Law isn’t something that you want to hear. It will offend your sinful flesh to be told that you are sinning. But if this doesn’t happen, if your sinful pride isn’t broken down, then the comfort of the Gospel will be of no use. It’s only sinners who need forgiveness. It’s only the sick who need a physician.

Those brought low by God’s word aren’t left there, though. The Law points out that we deserve to be in the lowest place at the table, indeed not at the table at all. But then the Gospel comes along and calls out, “Friend, move up higher.”

Jesus washes us in the font and clothes us with His wedding garments of righteousness, and then He brings us up to His table, the head table of the wedding banquet, and there He serves us

Himself, the very bread of heaven. He who humbled Himself on the cross and then was exalted by His Father three days later in the Resurrection now lets us share in that exaltation.

He shares with us His position as a son and heir of His Father's kingdom. He grants us the spoils He won in His victory over death. He gives us the deed to a place within His Father's house which He purchased with His own blood.

All of this as a gift. All of this from His goodness and love. All of this guaranteed by the fact of His death and resurrection.

As we receive this by faith, the Holy Spirit then works a thankful humility in our hearts. He lets us rightly see that all we have is a gift from the hand of God. His sanctification – a working of holiness in us – lets us love our neighbors as ourselves, because as Luther put it, we are all just beggars showing other beggars where to find bread. This humility lets us cling to our Lord and God, who gives us gifts far beyond anything we could ever hope to earn or make or build.

Pride caused us to be thrown out of the Garden and into a world full of thorns and thistles, but our Lord humbled Himself so that when we close our eyes in death, we will hear His voice calling us to move up higher, into paradise itself. And there is no higher place imaginable than to be at the eternal wedding feast of the Lamb.

In the name of Jesus, amen.