

“A bit about value and motivation” Luke 14:1, 7-14

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. ⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." ¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

When we read the Gospel and meditate on the word of Jesus, we can see how different is Christian, or Biblical worldview comparing with others. How different is a very foundation on which we, as Christians, build our understanding about this world and about us, and how different has to be our motivation if we want to live as children of God.

These two things we'll try to discuss today: the first, what is the source and foundation of our value, dignity and honor, the second one, what is the motivation for our actions.

Luke tells us how Jesus was attending a dinner in Pharisees house. There, during the evening, Jesus was teaching them and told the parable about a wedding feast, and also gave them some wise instructions how to act when we plan to put on a dinner or a banquet.

As the setting for Jesus teaching was the dinner He presented His teaching related to the very same context. At least a part of what He was telling is almost proverbial in many cultures, and I think we all are familiar with it.

This is the old, good story about taking back seats whenever you are invited somewhere . The way Jesus explains it makes sense to everyone. This resonates with our common experience very well.

Just imagine if you have already taken a seat in a banquet and someone asks you to give your seat to someone else, more important than you, and you are left looking for other place... not the best situation to find ourselves.

So we can see that Jesus teaching makes sense. Wise words. But is that all, what Jesus is saying? Just good advice how to pick a seat? How to be safe from embarrassment and may be to receive a little more honour. More comes when after this parable Jesus adds this statement: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

In the Bible this way of expression is called ‘divine passive’. It means that when you have statements in passive then the subject of the action is assumed to be the true God Himself. “Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled (God will humble them), and he who humbles himself will be exalted (God will exalt them).”

How to understand it? What is Jesus saying? Is He still speaking about taking seats or about something else? He speaks about our point or reference. About the very foundation for our value, dignity and respect.

How do we establish our value and honor and dignity? Not much different than in Jesus time. Who are those persons whom almost everyone in society holds in high esteem?

Those who are very honest and faithful to their responsibilities? Exemplary spouses, parents, citizens, employees? Right? No? Yes? What? Or may be rather those who are rich? Who are influential? Who are famous? Best in sports and business and entertainment? And it doesn’t matter how honest, how faithful, how righteous there are... for often they are not. They receive reserved seats. VIP.

And when we think about how valuable we are, how do we decide? What criteria do we use? Don’t we often measure ourselves and others against these famous and popular people? What have we achieved comparing to them? What do we possess

comparing to them? When we think about what we would like to achieve... what are our inspiration, what are our dreams? To be like... who?

It is not anything surprising. We live in our culture. We are immersed in it and exposed to it. We take over values from culture around us even not noticing it. We try to tie our dignity and value to our achievements, or to our expertise and uniqueness.

That's so familiar – we evaluate our lives and lives of others looking at the balance sheet, what is on it? The more achievements and possession we have on it, the more valuable we are.

With His statement Jesus turns this view upside down. “Who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” Listen carefully! Jesus is not saying that to have possessions or to be successful or famous in any realm is something bad. No, not at all. This is not what He is saying.

Throughout the Scriptures we read that wellbeing, prosperity in this world is one of the great blessing of God. This world is good, it is created good, all creation is created good and God rejoices when He can makes us happy by giving us abundantly. I wish we all have excessive means... just imagine how much we could do?

What Jesus is up against is tying our dignity and worthiness to these created things. They *do not determine* our value. Our Lord does. We all are created in the image and likeness of God the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. We are created to be His representatives on the earth.

Each of us specifically in that situations and in those relationships in which God has put us. As ambassadors represents their country, and receive the honor on behalf our their countries, the same way we have the highest value because we are created in the image of God. We are His ambassadors.

Besides, everything is as valuable as someone is ready to pay for it. Right? How valuable are you? What is your price? How much would someone pay for you? Do you know? Yes, you know. Jesus paid for you with His live.

That seemed for Him a fair price to redeem you from sin and death. This is what determines your value. This is how precious you are in God's eyes. Nothing of what you could achieve or obtain won't add to it. And if you have nothing, or suddenly lose everything you have, it doesn't take any dignity away from you.

That's a joyous feeling that God the Father gives us. Freedom. Freedom from striving to exult ourselves. Be free, you are so precious in God's eyes anyway. Use what you have, use your talents and abilities, your potential not to exult yourself, but to humbly exult others and, and when time comes, God Himself will exult you.

Here we come to the second part of Jesus address, where He talks about our motivation. Jesus words may seem strange, and challenging they are.

“When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.”

On the one hand we can understand what Jesus is saying. Today, similarly as in Jesus times, the principle of reciprocity is at work. What you do for me, I'll do for you. Or when I do something for you, I expect you to do the same for me. That is how this world works. And it seems fair, and in fact, quite often people don't want even to return a favour.

Jesus is not talking about our birthday parties or our anniversaries or family reunions. Don't dare to invite your friends or relatives! No, not at all. Jesus is not talking about these kind of feasts. Look at what kind of banquet He Himself was invited. This was a special kind of gathering, where people got together to establish new connections, to be introduced to other who might be useful for them in present or in future.

In Roman empire this system worked so well, and it still works very well in most of societies, at least at a certain level. When you give this kind of business function, you invite all the people who may bring something needed on a table.

Those who have a status, and connections, and power, and expertise, and name and means. Then you socialize with them and when time comes you can get access to them and to all the useful benefits that they can bring.

Now Jesus is saying something meaningless. Don't invite those from your own circles. Don't invite those from whom you may benefit. Don't invite those who can invite you back. Don't... why? That's the whole point of having these banquets – to invite all those listed earlier! Now you are saying 'don't'?!

Again, let us be clear. There are social rules and customs and business rules and culture, and they have come into being to enable us to prosper in what we do. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in doing it. Thanks be to the Lord, if we can afford to have good business functions and to benefit from them.

Then what is Jesus saying? He is speaking about our motivation. What is it? Is it oriented towards our neighbors, or towards us? Do we do things, like giving banquets, for our sake, and other people are just means for us to get what we want, or we do it so that we can serve others with what we have?

What is our motivation? How and for what purpose do we use all our gifts? To enhance ourselves, or to enhance others? It is easy to serve those, who will then later serve you in return.

It is much more difficult to invest in those, who won't be able to repay us. There will be no benefit for us from doing it. So it doesn't make a sense to do it. Right? Wrong! It makes, actually it makes a sense.

Biblical picture of our reality is the one, where everything we are with all our talents and abilities, and everything we have, all of this is received from God the Father and belongs to God. We are only His stewards.

We have received clear instructions. To be fair and faithful with what is entrusted to us. It is not ours, it's given to make the most out of it for the good of entire community. And primary for those, who have nothing.

Serve those, who cannot serve themselves! They also are created in the image of the same God. They have the same God and Father. He has promised to give them their daily bread and He does it ... not somehow, but through us. We are His hands to feed the hungry and to give drink to the thirsty. We are His hands to close the naked. We, not someone else. What is given to us, is given for the sake of all.

Jesus assumes that it won't be repaid in this life. He is not saying, that by doing this you will make society better and then your investments will come back to you in a different way. May be they will. But that's not the point.

Once Luther with his fellow colleagues was visiting other town and passing a beggar on the street gave him money. One of Luther's colleagues did the same and said: "Let it be so, who knows when God will give me in my needs." Luther replied with a smile. "So you think that all that you have, you haven't already received from Him?"

Our motivation is to share what our generous Father has given to us. He has given us everything. He did it first. We are not to judge what others do, how faithful they are, we are here to be responsible stewards over what has been given to each of us.

But this is not the end of the story. Not with this God. He doesn't know such a concept as 'enough'. He already has given us all we have. He gives us meaning for our lives when we, as His coworkers, take care of others. He gives us joy and good conscience, when we know that we do our Father's will and the He is pleased with us, pleased with what we do.

There is a little secret, we are built in God's image. He is giving God. He gives and gives sacrificially. The more we give, the more sacrificial is our ministry to others, the more joyous it is.

We know it from our own experience. When you are passionate to accomplish the missions, the more costly it is, the larger is our joy, when we have accomplished it.

But that's not all. Listen to this. "For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just." Remember, it *is not* about salvation. We are not striving to serve others because we need to get it done in order to be saved. No! Christ has already earned the salvation for us. Our sins are done away. Our relations with the Father are restored. Adoption as children of God is already given to us in our Baptism. It's ours. We already are heirs of God's Kingdom. Just waiting to get there.

But even this is not enough for our Father. "For to everyone who has will more be given, and he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away." (Mat 25:29)

If you are faithful here, much more is to come. Our good works here, they really are important. Yes, we are forgiven, we are made right with God the Father. But our good works are important for those whom we serve, and they are important also for us. For we'll be repaid at the resurrection of the just.

Just think about it. Salvation is already granted. The Kingdom is ours. And for every good work our Father is going to repay you at the resurrection. This is our motivation. This is our wonderful and rich life as children of our Heavenly Father. Go and enjoy this life serving others. For your reward is waiting for you.

Amen.