Isn’t it interesting. Everyone of you seems to sit in the same place every week. In the old days they used to have name plates in some churches, where certain people sat every Sunday. You wouldn’t want to sit in a pew that had someone else’s name written on it. They would get mad at you. Doesn’t that still happen today? If you usually sit in a certain location, and someone else is there, don’t you get mildly upset?

So why do you sit where you are sitting. Some of you sit way in the back, as far away from the pastor as possible. Maybe, its because you are a bit shy, and don’t want everyone looking at you. Or you may have to leave early on a regular basis. Or you have grandkids and don’t want them disturbing anyone in the worship. Some of you sit way up front. That might be because you can’t hear that well, and figure that if you are up close, you’ll be able to hear better. Or you may sit up close because you don’t want to have to walk that far for communion. At a pastor Study club in Orlando this past Monday, Pastor Rosenau from St. Mark’s in Leesburg, told me everyone in his church wants to sit as close to the front as possible, so they can listen to his Words, and not miss one of them because of the distractions of people talking in the back of church.

In the days of Jesus, when you had a big dinner, or a wedding feast people picked their places by how important they were viewed by the host. They reclined on couches, not chairs or pews. So if you were right up front by the wedding couple or host, others viewed you as being special, very important. If you were on a couch far away from the host, you were not that important. But Jesus informs us today that intentionally sitting up front is not the wisest thing to do. Let’s find out the deeper meaning behind this parable. So the caution light is flashing: “Be Careful How You Pick Your Seat!”

Jesus had left Galilee and was on his way to Jerusalem. He stopped in Perea. Some religious leaders called Pharisees, came to Jesus and reported that Herod wanted to kill him, and urged him to leave the area. They were hoping he would go immediately to Jerusalem, where they could more easily get rid of him. Jesus made it clear that he would only go to Jerusalem after his work was completed, which he still had to do for the people where he was.

We are told that these Pharisees were carefully watching Jesus. It kind of reminds me of the press today in regards to Donald Trump. If Donald Trump says one thing in an improper way, the press is all over it, and tries to make him look as bad as possible. The Pharisees were like the media, Jesus says one thing, improperly, they can attempt to destroy his credibility and hopefully keep him from being elected by the people as the Messiah. They detested Jesus.

It was the Sabbath day, Saturday, and one of the Pharisees, one of the head teachers, invited Jesus over to dinner after the Sabbath service. He is mentioned as being a leader of the Pharisees. This meant he was very intelligent, or perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin, the ruling council of the Jews.

The house was packed, and the time came for everyone to sit down at the table. Have you ever seen what happens on the first day of school, when students enter a classroom? Often times there’s a mad-rush for the back seats – people are diving and elbowing each other. That’s what Jesus saw at the house of the Pharisee – these grown-ups were trying to get the best seat – it was very much a “me-first” atmosphere.

Jesus noticed this, and so he told them this parable. He told them that when someone invites you to a banquet, don’t show up with a pride-filled attitude. Don’t rush to sit in the best seat. What happens if someone more prominent than you shows up, and then the host has to tell you to get up and move to a lower seat? You’d look foolish in front of all those people. Instead, when you’re invited to a banquet, be humble. Take the lowest seat. And then the host will say to
you, “Friend, move up to a better place,” and you’ll be honored in front of all the other guests.

Have you ever met someone who is full of themselves? Pride-filled people feel that they are highly intelligent. They know better than others how things should be done. They tend to look down on people who don’t agree with their thinking. In fact, they might even refer to others as somewhat stupid or inferior to how they would do things. Pride-filled people have a real hard time admitting they have made a mistake, that they are just as rotten in the sight of God as others. Pride-filled people like to have power and control over others. Pride-filled people like to be recognized in some way for the things they do for others. Either they slip things they’ve done to a few people so it gets out, or they stroke their own ego for what they have done.

As you can see in our story, what happened to the pride-filled person sitting at the front of the wedding feast. He was asked to move, and he was embarrassed in front of everyone. Jesus then tells us about the embarrassment that a pride-filled person will receive one day. Listen to what he says. Verse 11 “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Jesus isn’t just talking about table manners here. He’s talking about our relationship with God. Everyone who is proud before God, who thinks he is an all-around good person because he leads a good life, God will someday humble that person. He will be condemned for his sins. He will be cast out of God’s presence into hell. But the one who is humble before God, who realizes that he’s not any better than anyone else, who believes that he’s just a lowly sinner, and humbly trusts in Jesus Christ for forgiveness – that person, Jesus says, will be exalted by God. It will happen for sure, in the world to come. Jesus is speaking about genuine humility here. Not someone who fakes it by going to the back of the dining hall, thinking, this will get him moved up.

Why is it that people focus on the faults and weakness of other people? Why do they gossip when they are out with friends? Why do they judge people by how they talk, or how much money they have or even by the color of their skin? It was not that long ago when there were drinking fountains in the South that had signs on them, “For Whites Only.” There is this awful nasty Pharisee that lurks inside of each of us. It wants to lead us down a path where we delight in exalting ourselves. In the late 1800’s the famed evangelist Dwight Moody was walking with a friend on the streets of Chicago. They walked past a man who was lying in the gutter filthy and drunk. The friend said with self-righteous disdain in his voice, “Isn’t that disgusting!” Moody responded, “Here by the grace of God go I.”

And so, we come before God this morning with tears in our eyes as we humbly confess with the tax collector who came to pray in the temple, “God be merciful to me a sinner.” “Lord, have mercy on me! Christ, have mercy on me!”

We have nothing to offer God that can move him to be merciful to us. But Jesus has picked a prime time seat for us. He gives us Jesus and his righteousness. As we sang in a hymn, “Nothing in my hand I bring, Simply to Thy cross I cling. Naked come to thee for dress, Helpless look to thee for grace.” In Christ, and Christ alone you have the exalted position of being a new creation, the beautiful bride of Christ, members of the body of Christ, Sons of God. Look at where you are sitting this morning. You aren’t in some back corner of the room. You aren’t sitting in the nose bleed seats. Through Jesus you are sitting at the head table next to him as his beloved bride. You, who are humbled by your sin, listen to these words and treasure how exalted you are in Christ: “But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praise of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.”
When you are richly blessed in Christ you long to share these riches with people who don’t have what you have. After talking to the crowd about humility, Jesus turned to the host, and said to him, when you give a luncheon or a dinner, don’t always invite just your rich friends, or your relatives. They’ll pay you back, and you’ll get your reward, that’s true. But when you put on a luncheon – invite people who can’t pay you back – the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind. They won’t be able to pay you back, but you will be blessed. God will pay you back, at the resurrection of the righteous.

What Jesus is describing here is charity. The definition of charity, according to Jesus, is to give of yourself to someone else, and that person can’t give you anything in return. Don’t think you’re being charitable if you’re giving to someone who will eventually pay you back. Its like when you have someone over to your house for dinner. What is the thought you have or they have? Well, they had us over for dinner, we have to have them back, to pay them back. That’s not real charity in having someone over to your house for dinner. Real charity, Jesus teaches here, is one-way giving. Real charity is when a believer in Christ says to himself, “I will give, and it’s OK if I get nothing back. I believe that when Christ raises me from the dead, I will be blessed. I don’t need to be paid back right now.”

Who motivates me to be charitable? That’s right, Jesus. When he came into this world, he didn’t scramble to take the highest place, did he. He took the lowest place. A humble birth. A humble life. A humble death. And there is no place more humble than the cross. That’s as humble as you can get, hanging on the cross, dying with the sins of the world piled on your shoulders. Jesus took the lowest place, and humbled himself, for you and me. And when you read about charity here, think about Christ’s charity. What he gave to this world – he didn’t just give a portion of his income that didn’t affect his lifestyle – he gave his whole life, something that you and I could never repay him for. That was his gift of charity to you – what amazing love, that Jesus would give you himself, so that you could be saved.

Do you know what happens when you ponder these things, and believe these things? God changes you. He changes you from someone who is proud, into someone who is humble. He changes you from someone who is self-centered, into someone who is filled with charity. That’s what happens in our adult Bible studies. That’s what happens every time you discipline yourself, to spend time in God’s Word – God changes you, and you become this person who walks to the beat of a different drummer.

This is the kind of person that God is making you to be - humble. And charitable. Christians give and give and give. And often times, we don’t get anything in return. But we’re OK with that, because Jesus says in verse 14 that you will be blessed. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. There will come a time when God will exalt the humble, lift them up, and bless them beyond their wildest imaginations. And there will come a time when God will repay those who give so generously, while they’re on this earth. Jesus tells us that a time will come, when God will honor all those acts of love, on the last day, when he raises you from the dead.

So where will all of you be sitting next Sunday? Probably everyone will be in the back row. But take heart, Jesus will invite all of you to come right up to the front seats. He has given you all box seats, the best seats in the house. No need to stand in line. So Be Careful How you Pick Your Seat! Be careful how you think about yourself! Amen.