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New Living Translation, Luke 14:7–11

7 When Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honor near the head of the table, he gave them this advice: 8 “When you are invited to a wedding feast, don’t sit in the seat of honor. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? 9 The host will come and say, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table!

10 “Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, ‘Friend, we have a better place for you!’ Then you will be honored in front of all the other guests. 11 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

New Living Translation, Ezekiel 21:26-27

Take off your jeweled crown,
for the old order changes.
Now the lowly will be exalted,
and the mighty will be brought down.

²⁷ Destruction! Destruction!
I will surely destroy the kingdom.
And it will not be restored until the one appears
who has the right to judge it.
Then I will hand it over to him.

The dangers of being exalted.

I moved to Boulder from southern California in June of 1982 to take a job as a Professor of Computer Science at the University of Colorado. I loved teaching,

and it was very rewarding to be leading a research team and to be traveling around the world attending scientific conferences, teaching overseas, and giving presentations at universities and scientific organizations. I've taught thousands of students, and since the U.S. is where people want to study computing and engineering, I have gotten to know students from India, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. I still teach one course a semester and I deeply enjoy it.

What I did not enjoy was the arrogance and selfishness of my fellow academics. Professors tend to see themselves as superior beings and they let the world know it. And, at a super-liberal institution like the University of Colorado at Boulder, some of my peers were vehemently and vocally anti-Christian.

Since I was in the department of computer science in the school of engineering, – a discipline that is funded by the National Science Foundation and the military - we were expected to bring in large research grants. As a young faculty member, I was told to ignore students and spend little time preparing for class so that I could focus on bringing in federal research money. Our primary jobs were to write research proposals and publish papers. Money and the research reputation of the university was the highest – and the only – priority of the folks I worked with. Not teaching. Not delivering the best product we could to the young people whose parents paid a lot of money for their education.

I'd like to tell about an experience I had as a teacher. I can honestly say that I spent a lot more time on teaching than most faculty members. I wasn't encouraged to do this, and I certainly wasn't rewarded for it. But at the height of my career as an academic, when I was pulling in research grants and doing a lot of international travel, I was caught up in the high rolling lifestyle of a big university professor. It's a life that's very easy to be drawn into: you can't spend your days surrounded by people with puffed up chests without it influencing your own behavior.

One day, late in a semester, a student came to my office. He hadn't been attending class and hadn't been doing the course work. He was set to get an F. He was a tall, good-looking young guy, and about the first thing he said was that he wanted an incomplete in the class so that he could make up the work over the summer and get a good grade. He sat across from me – and I was incredulous.

You have to be passing a class to get an Incomplete, I told him harshly. Incompletes are not for people who haven't been going to class or doing the work. It's for people who have been doing their course work and who are having a medical or personal emergency. That is not you, I said. Sorry, I told him, but you're going to fail this class. In the future, you need to come to class and do the things I tell you do to.

Now, up until this point, he had been extremely reserved, showing zero emotion, and I pegged him as a spoiled upper middle class kid who wasn't used to working hard. I began to lecture him harshly for totally ignoring my class and then having the nerve to come to my office at the end of the semester to try and get special treatment. I pointed my finger at his face and talked loudly. I was the professor – and he was going to listen to me!

Then suddenly, this big young guy started sobbing. He put his hands over his face, and just cried and cried and cried. I suddenly knew that something was very seriously wrong, and I felt the bottom drop out of my stomach.

What's going on? I asked him, but he found it hard to speak.

But let's take a break from this story and look at today's Bible quotes. We'll look at our New Testament passage first, instead of doing the traditional thing and looking at the Old Testament passage first. The Gospel of Luke was written by someone named, well, Luke. He is also the author of the Book of Acts, which describes the spread of the faith after the death and resurrection of Jesus. Since the Book of Acts is quite long, Luke is actually responsible for much of the New Testament. Acts, to a large extent, details the life of Paul as he traveled far and wide planting new churches and staying in communication with them via letters.

Several of Paul's letters are in the New Testament. Luke was a friend and traveling companion of Paul.

In our passage, Luke is quoting Jesus as he is delivering one of his lessons, and as is typical of Jesus, he is doing this via a hypothetical tale. He is assuming that the reader is part of the Greco-Roman world circa the year zero. The story has to do with who grabs the place of honor at a meal. This may sound to us like a silly thing to be concerned about, but in that world at that time, social ranking was a very common thing. It was kind of like being a professor today – some people were simply more important, and they knew it.

Jesus is teaching us that if we insist on claiming the seat of honor, we'd better be careful: a more important person might show up, and it will be humiliating if we have to publicly give up that seat and join the regular people. He warns us:

For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. It's better to be humble. Not only will you avoid making a fool of yourself, you'll also earn a higher place in God's heart.

Our second passage says something very similar. It's from the book of Ezekiel. He was one of the major prophets of the Old Testament and we will look at him again in the future. The prophets served as intermediaries between God

and God's chosen people, the Israelites. The prophets warned the people when they strayed from the life God commanded them to live. The prophets also gave the people hope when their spirits were broken. This was a particularly important role during the time when the Israelites were separated from their land and their temple in Jerusalem. And this was the situation when Ezekiel was a prophet.

The life of Ezekiel coincided with the height of Babylonian power over a vast area. The Babylonians had recently wrested control over Mesopotamia from the Assyrians. The Babylonians were sending their armies out to expand their power base south and west to include much of the Levant, a large area bordering the Mediterranean Sea from Turkey to Egypt. This area included the land of the Israelites, which at this time consisted of two areas known as Israel and Judah. This very aggressive expansion led the Babylonians into wars against Egypt and Phoenicia - with the land including the holy city of Jerusalem caught in the middle.

The mighty Babylonian army of Nebuchadnezzar besieged and captured Jerusalem. But at one point, Egypt came close to beating back the Babylonians. This caused the Israelites to think that they could rebel against Babylonian control and gain their independence from this giant colonial power. However, they failed and there was a brutal crackdown. Ezekiel had been training to be a temple priest in Jerusalem. Now, though, in retaliation, the Babylonian army sacked Jerusalem

and robbed the temple of its treasures. And to weaken the upstart Israelites further, many of the educated and skilled, along with the rulers of Israel and Judah, and leaders of the army, were forcibly moved about 700 miles away to the heart of the Babylonian empire. This forced deportation happened in multiple waves, and the wave in which Ezekiel was caught up included about 8,000 people.

Ezekiel came into conflict with the leaders of his community. He fought to wrest control from a secular ruling class of Israelites that had emerged back in Jerusalem. Although he was exiled from the land, he proposed that Israel form a strong theocracy that would strictly follow the covenant that Moses had made between God and the Israelites. His vision was that of complete religious observance, regardless of whether or not the Israelites were politically independent. Whether they were free or under the thumb of an invading empire, they would live by God's law – or so Ezekiel prophesized.

The problem Ezekiel faced was that his people – even in exile – had grown very worldly. The secular leaders of Israel were a lot like Professors. They held themselves above the people whom they were supposed to be serving. They held themselves above God.

But being forcibly removed from the land God had promised them did cause the Israelites to finally be humbled and to turn to God for deliverance.

Ezekiel helped his people see the corruption of the human world and the need to get back to living godly lives. Ezekiel believed in a society that was inherently religious; he believed that the laws of the land should be the laws of God. Today, we don't believe in religious authorities running the government, but we sure do hope that our leaders live according to a high moral standard.

So, in our second reading, Ezekiel warns us of what will happen to those who hold themselves high above other people and try to be God-like. But as is often the case with Old Testament prophets, it is not Ezekiel directly speaking, it is God speaking through Ezekiel:

Take off your jeweled crown,
for the old order changes.
Now the lowly will be exalted,
and the mighty will be brought down.
²⁷ Destruction! Destruction!
I will surely destroy the kingdom.
And it will not be restored until the one appears
who has the right to judge it.
Then I will hand it over to him.

Indeed. Ezekiel warned the high and mighty that they will eventually answer to God – and this does indeed happen. But as the Israelites begin to return to living godly lives, Ezekiel begins to prophesize that their land will be restored to them.

Prophets like Ezekiel were constantly under attack by the leaders of the Israelites because prophets were a threat to the worldly power of Israelite leaders and to the corrupt nation over which they ruled. And, like Ezekiel, when Jesus spoke about the exalted who would find themselves humbled, he was in large part speaking of the religious leaders of his day. As with Ezekiel, one of the key reasons they rejected and hated Jesus was because he was a threat to their power and the luxuries they enjoyed.

Now, I don't believe that God is going to humble the professors of this country and force them to write fewer grant proposals and research papers, and instead pay more attention to students. But maybe the state government will do so someday? Maybe the state legislature will start requiring professors to teach classes themselves, instead of handing them off to far less qualified instructors and teaching assistants? Maybe professors will have to teach several courses a year, instead of a token one or two? Maybe eventually, it will become a thing of pride to be a faculty member who is focused mostly on teaching.

So, what about my student, the young fellow who hadn't been to class in weeks and had not been handing in assignments?

I had done something very un-Christian. I had pronounced judgement on someone. I didn't ask why he hadn't been doing any work for most of the

semester. I never thought to stop and see if there was something wrong going on in this kid's life.

It took me a few minutes to get him talking. As he sobbed, he pulled something out of his pocket and held it out to me, his hand shaking. I took it. It was a newspaper clipping. I glanced down at it and saw that it had something to do with a woman being killed and someone being arrested.

"My father shot my mother and killed her," he said, "just before the semester began."

"I'm sorry," I heard myself say from far away.

So, here's how it all ended. He was from Kansas. He had a much older sister back home. I got her on the phone. She talked to me for several minutes, telling me that her younger brother had been extremely traumatized by what had happened. She hadn't realized that he hadn't been attending class and she was very worried about what he had been doing with his time. She had hoped he'd been in class and with friends, getting back to a normal, daily life. But now, she worried that he had probably been isolated and unable to do anything. She told me she would get in her car and start driving. She would be there by morning.

I walked him over to the student health center and found a counselor who could spend some time with him. The folks there told me that someone would

stay with him until his sister got there. I talked to him for a while, trying to show some empathy for his situation. The last thing I said to him was that I would give him an Incomplete and would be happy to work with him over the summer to help him finish up the class. Eventually, he did make up the work.

I realize that this sermon is to a large extent about me. But most of us have a bit of professor in us. We find ourselves in situations where we are tempted to quickly judge someone. We look at things from the perspective of our lives, not the lives other people. We are concerned with ourselves and don't show empathy for others. Someone we know misses a meeting, doesn't return a phone call or an email, doesn't do something they promised to do. Someone cuts us off in traffic, a cashier is grumpy, a neighbor doesn't even smile when we say hello. We don't stop and wonder if perhaps they are suffering, if perhaps they could use our help, rather than being judged as irresponsible or rude.

Being humble and refusing to sit at the seat of honor is a core Christian belief. That is how we live.

But getting back to me for a moment: I'd like to thank everyone here for giving me an opportunity to serve this church. After all those years in the high stress, arrogant world of academia, being here is healing and blessed. Thank you.