

Joy in honoring others above ourselves

*Introduction: Before becoming a born-again Christian I struggled with even wanting to honor God above myself, let alone others. I did have a very powerful conversion where the Lord met me in a powerful way and instantly changed my heart causing me to find great joy in honoring Him more than all else. While this change was instant, it has also been a process of being more and more faithful in walking it out. One area that God has consistently put His finger on is the ability to think of others as being more important or better than myself (read Philippians 2:3 & Romans 12:3-10). Keep this in mind as it will seem like I am off the main point for a while, but it does all come together in the end.*

In Luke 14:7-11 (please read) Jesus warns the Pharisees and others present at a party to not take the places of honor as they were doing. Jesus explains that someone of greater stature may come in, and the host may ask them to give up their seat for the person of greater stature. Jesus is giving good advice for everyone, but He is giving more than just good party tips. Jesus is giving a warning to the Pharisees on how the kingdom of heaven works. The Pharisees had assumed that their high earthly positions would translate to being highly honored by God in the resurrection. Jesus is warning them that simply taking a place of religious power doesn't automatically give them a higher place of honor in heaven; in fact it causes them to be held more highly accountable. James 3:1 really drives this point home, and Romans 12:3-10 reminds us that we are all expected to honor others above ourselves, regardless of personal giftings. God holds us accountable according to how much He has entrusted us (Matthew 25:14-30).

Wait, does this mean there is rank or places of honor in heaven? To be transparent, I would actually prefer to not believe in their being rank or places of honor in heaven. In fact I even had a decent argument against the idea of rank in heaven, but truth is not produced by good arguments. While "rank" may be a bad term, Jesus does teach that there are rewards and places of greater honor in heaven. It may not be divisions, but perhaps more like a slope or queue; not everyone can be closest to the throne, everyone can be close to the Holy Spirit but not the throne.

As much as I would prefer to not believe in rank in heaven, I simply can't argue with scripture and the very words of Jesus. In Matthew 5:19, Matthew 20:20-28, Matthew 18:1-6, and Matthew 19:16-29 Jesus challenges the Pharisees and actually mainly the disciples' concept of who will be honored in heaven. Jesus challenges their ability to predict who will be honored in the kingdom of heaven, but He also at the same time upheld the concept of there being rank or places of honor in heaven, or as in Matthew 19 that God would give rewards to those who left everything behind to follow Him.

I cannot deny that Jesus taught the concept of rewards and places of honor in heaven, but if I stopped here I would be quite unhappy. I am already tired of competition, while I want to be near and pleasing to the Lord; I don't want to compete with others for those positions. And what if I end up among the least? I want to mourn over failing God, but I don't want to live with that shame forever.

Let us continue in Matthew just after where Jesus promises to reward the disciples for their sacrifices made for Him. We then come to Matthew 20:1-16. This is the parable of the vineyard workers. Some worked all day, some half a day, and some just the last hour, but when it was time to be paid they were all paid the same! Jesus finishes with uses the familiar phrase, "many who are first will be last and many who are last will be first." So which is it? We all get the same reward/honor or we receive different

amounts? It can be tempting to just choose one scripture over the other, but I hold both of these and all of scripture to be true. It isn't always clear on how they fit together, but I want to accept it all as truth. It is especially interesting to see these two concepts immediately next to each other.

So how do these two views fit together? In wrestling with this concept the Lord gave me a very meaningful revelation of how these two fit together. I felt the Lord speaking to my heart that though I be among the least group in His kingdom, He would never love me the least. Imagine a breadline, naturally if you are at the end of that line there would typically be fear of not getting any bread. The Lord was saying that though some got to be in the front of that line, even the ones in the back of the line could be sure that their portion was secure; their portion of God's love would not be given to another.

While we cannot be sure about a lot of things about heaven or God's kingdom, there are some things that we can know for sure. While places of honor will exist, competition will be done away with, for we will all finally truly love others as ourselves. In loving each other the same as ourselves we will actually find joy and pleasure in honoring others. Places of honor will exist, but places of shame will not, for the knowledge of God's perfect love for us regardless of our own faithfulness will drive all shame away. The real focus will not be on humans being honored; even the 24 elders are pleased and quick to cast their crowns before the Lord in worship. We will not be worshipping each other. We will be focused on the One, Jesus, who was the "servant of all" and forever will be the Greatest in the kingdom of heaven.

So back to what this has to do with honoring others above ourselves. This proved to be a good litmus test for me as to whether or not I truly believe that honoring others can bring great joy to my heart. In our culture it is commonly believed that joy is found in good self-esteem or pride, in seeing oneself as being more beautiful, more athletic, more intelligent, nobler, or even more humble than others. In thinking on rank in heaven, God was challenging me to believe that I could start now in having great joy in honoring others above myself.

So what does this look like?

- 1) Consider others needs as more important than ourselves, Philippians 2:3. - being selfless
- 2) Thinking of others as better than ourselves, Romans 12:3-10 and Matthew 25:14-30, as every part is judged by faithfulness according to what part they were given in the body of Christ, not by comparison to others. – being humble
- 3) Rejoicing in the success of others. -freedom from envy, jealousy, and critical attitudes

As a part of a larger team or body, we are called to rejoice in our Lord being exalted and glorified regardless of who He uses, and to cheer on those on our team even though they slip and fall. Just as on any sports team, even the bench players show unbridled joy in winning a championship (actually they often celebrate the most). We too are called to rejoice in the victory that we all are a part of regardless of position. We may not have much of a reason to rejoice based on our own success, but we are all able to rejoice in our team's success. Some might be honored more than others, but we all get to share and celebrate the victory that Jesus has won for us who are a part of His team. Most of all when we are secure in God's love for us, it is then easy and a thing of great pleasure to honor others above ourselves, because thinking highly of one's self pales in comparison to knowing that we are loved by God.