

A Sermon
Rev. W. Kevin Holder
Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
June 15, 2025

Striving for Glory

Luke 14:1-14

Aim high. That's the message given to graduates, as well as students at prior levels of education. Whether at the elementary school awards ceremony or the college commencement, or somewhere in between, boys and girls, young men and women, are urged to set goals and point their lives toward the future. Think about your aspirations and ambitions. What do you plan to do next? What do want to strive for?

In a book about the spiritual journey of Saint Augustine, James K. A. Smith includes a chapter on ambition. He talks about how Augustine learned to recalibrate his ambition and focus his life on relationship with God. Out of Augustine's experience, Smith broadens the question to include all of us. "What is our aim in life?" he writes. "What are we aiming for when we aim our lives at some aspiration? The question isn't *whether* we aim our lives. Our existence is like an arrow on a taut string; it will be sent somewhere."¹

What is your aim in life? This isn't a question that you engage with only once, as you get your diploma. It can actually be a lifelong question that meets you at numerous points in the journey. As time passes, events unfold, circumstances change, and relationships happen, you may find yourself revisiting the trajectory of your existence. What is my life aimed toward? What am I striving for?

In today's text from Luke, there's a lot of striving going on. Striving for the best seats at the table. Jesus has been invited to dine in the home of one of the religious leaders. A "prominent" one, says Luke (v. 1). In other words, he's pretty far up in the religious hierarchy. No surprise, then, that the seating arrangements at this dinner reflect society's rankings. This certainly doesn't escape Jesus' attention. He notices how the guests jockey for the most important spots at the table, seats that will gain them some public recognition and honor.

Rather than keep quiet about this little contest for recognition, Jesus tells everyone a parable about how to take the way down instead of the way up. Imagine yourself at a wedding feast, says Jesus. As soon as the doors open, you make B line for the seats next to the host. Don't you realize you could be setting yourself up for some major embarrassment? What if someone more widely known, someone with a lot more pull than you, shows up? The host may very well come over to you and say, "Excuse me, I need you to get up and give this person your seat. In fact, you're completely in the wrong section. You need to move way down there where the less influential members of the community sit." Talk about being humiliated!

Instead, says Jesus, you're probably better off starting out at the less glamorous end of the table. Who knows, the host may come and say, "Excuse me, why don't you get up and join us at the other end of the table, in one of the seats of honor." What a nice surprise that would be! Folks will really take note of you and think very highly of you. Then Jesus caps it off with one of his favorite sayings: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and

he who humbles himself will be exalted" (v. 11). This is end-of-time language, designed to help the hearers remember that the coming of God's reign disrupts the accepted norms of power and prestige.

Several years ago, Jordan and I used to attend some Washington Wizards basketball games. If you've been to a professional sporting event, or even if you've just watched on TV, it doesn't take long to realize that who you are and how much you have can have a lot to do with where you get to sit. But during the Wizards games, they often had a moment called the American Express ticket upgrade. A fan way up in the cheap seats, who had purchased their ticket with an American Express card, would be randomly selected, then escorted to another section where he or she would get a much better seat, with a much better view of the game. While all this is going on, the theme song from the TV show, *The Jeffersons*, was blaring: "Movin' on Up." Actually, in this case, it was a matter of literally movin' on down, to the lower level, much closer to the action. The trip down was actually a trip up.

In the ups and downs of Jesus' parable, we're reminded that in the economy of God's kingdom, our ways of ordering society get reversed. What ultimately matters isn't our proximity to the prominent but our presence with the powerless. This is the focus in the rest of today's text, where Jesus, after making his point with the guests, turns to the host and gets onto him for the way he drew up his guest list. Jesus says, I see that most of the seats at your table are filled by friends, family, and rich neighbors. Instead of just inviting wealthy, powerful, well-connected people, the kind of people who can return the favor, you ought to invite the poor and the powerless, the invisible folks who live on the margins of society. Sure, they could never return the favor. But remember that in the end, the only repayment that matters is having God praise you and bless you at the resurrection of his people.

In light of this coming kingdom, and in anticipation of the Messiah's kind of feast, the host and the guests in Jesus' parable need to reassess what they're striving for. Where are they aiming their lives? Where are we aiming our lives?

There's certainly a place in our lives for striving. But striving for what? In his recent book, *The Cost of Ambition*, Miroslav Volf draws an important distinction between striving for excellence and striving for superiority. He writes:

Striving for excellence means striving to become better in some regard, to improve, or at least not to get worse, especially as we age; it is striving to be better than myself. Striving for superiority, in contrast, is striving to be better than someone else, which can range from being better than my sibling, neighbor, or school friend to being better than anyone living, even to become the GOAT—the greatest of all time. As I understand them, these are two crucially different strivings.²

Striving for excellence versus striving for superiority. Striving to be better for the sake of being better, not for the sake of being better than someone else. As Volf points out, one of the things behind our striving for superiority is our tendency to compare ourselves with others. Now comparison, in and of itself, can be a positive thing. It can help us note similarities and differences between whatever it is we're comparing. It might even help us aspire to be more like someone else, viewing that person as a role model. But on the negative side, we're often not satisfied with just learning from comparisons. We go beyond that into craving what others have. We're prone to want to best them, to be better than them.³

Comparisonitis. Yes, it's a word. It's essentially a compulsion to compare our lives and our accomplishments to someone else's, particularly because of the presence and influence of social media. With the rise of technology, now we can not only compare ourselves to our neighbor, a coworker, a classmate, a family member, or someone at church. We can also see how our life stacks up against people across the world.

There's plenty of comparisonitis around the table in Jesus' parable. Maybe some of the guests, at least those who could afford a new smartphone, had already posted on social media that they had been invited. Maybe this helped inspire others who were planning to attend, motivating them to show up a little early so they could have a shot at the best seats.

Chinese Novelist Amy Tan has written powerful books about the immigrant and minority experience in America. In one interview, she talked about growing up with a mother who expected a lot from her. She even told the interviewer that as a child, "she felt that she would be a huge disappointment to her mother if she did not grow up to work as a neurosurgeon during the week and a concert pianist on the weekends." After one of her novels, *The Joy Luck Club*, had reached number four on *The New York Times* Bestseller list, Tan's mother replied, "What happened? Who's No. 3 and 2 and 1?"⁴

Whether it's the bestseller list or the dinner guest list, our fallen, sinful nature makes us prone to striving for superiority. That's why Jesus recommends a different kind of guest list. Remember how he tells the host to rethink his dinner plans and priorities. Rip up those invitations to the prosperous and the popular, and instead send out invitations to the poor and the lowly. Rather than welcoming those who can reciprocate with an invitation to an equally lavish meal at their place, same day and time next week, welcome those who don't know where their next meal is coming from. Treat them as equals. In fact, more than equals. As Miroslav Volf says, "One of the most revolutionary injunctions in the New Testament—a key aspect of the excellence to which the followers of Christ should aspire—is that each person in a community should treat all others as if they were superior to themselves, superior not in achievement but in importance."⁵

Treating others, especially the least and the lowly, as superior to yourself. Not in the sense that you're inferior to them, but in the sense that you elevate them. You lift others up, relating to them as what they already are, people on an equal plane with you in the kingdom of God. Remember that in his reign, there are no second-class citizens. In fact, in Christ, God has already given us a foretaste of a greater banquet to come where every seat is a best seat, and where we're all at the table not because of our merit but because of his mercy.

What are you aiming your life toward? What are you striving for? Christ's call is for you and me to strive for excellence. That includes excellence in the gifts, the learning, the work, the relationships, the opportunities, the careers, and the tasks that God entrusts to us at every stage of life. There is no segment of your life where you're exempt from pursuing excellence, so that whatever you're doing, you're doing it well.

And above all, Christ calls you to strive for excellence in righteousness. Excellence in the things of his kingdom. That means always striving to be a better disciple. Striving to be a better member of the church. Striving to be a better embodiment of God's character. Striving to be a better witness to God's peace and justice in the world. In short, striving to reflect more of the excellence of Christ himself. Striving for glory.

¹ James K. A. Smith, *On the Road with Saint Augustine: A Real-World Spirituality for Restless Hearts* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2019) 88.

² Miroslav Volf, *The Cost of Ambition: How Striving to Be Better Than Others Makes Us Worse* (Grand Rapids: Brazos, 2025) 19. Kindle Edition.

³ Volf, *The Cost of Ambition*, 18. Kindle edition.

⁴ From Scott Sauls, *Jesus Outside the Lines* (Carol Stream: Tyndale, 2015) 102.

⁵ Volf, *The Cost of Ambition*, 168. Kindle edition.