

Humility is a tricky business. There's a place in the Book of Numbers where it says that Moses was the most humble man who ever lived. This posed a problem for people who thought that Moses wrote the Book of Numbers: They couldn't figure out how the humblest man who ever lived could call himself the humblest man who ever lived without losing the title. Maybe it was Moses who wrote that old song, "O Lord, it's hard to be humble when you're perfect in every way."

Even in today's parable, Jesus tells the guests if they take the last seat at table they will win the esteem of their friends when they are invited up higher. But it seems to me that if your motive for taking the last seat is to win the esteem of your friends, then you've ruined your shot at humility.

There are other barriers to humility: Sometimes we feel like we're always being put down, and the idea of acting humble actually grates against a very healthy desire to assert our own independence.

Sometimes all we really want in life is equality. Our new tax reform bill is an example. Weren't we all happy to see those special interest groups topple one after another so that we all pay taxes more equally? But ask someone to exercise humility by creeping up into another tax bracket and see how far you get.

It's the second half of today's Gospel which sets the best context for humility. There Jesus tells us that just being equal isn't enough. Just doing for someone who can do in return isn't enough. Our call is to do for those who can't return the favor.

There's a story about a very wealthy man in a small town who was also a terrible miser. Whenever the poor came to see him he turned them away, saying, "I don't give away money." But the people in the town knew there was a poor cobbler who was kind, and whenever the poor went to him, he gave them freely some of what he owned. Eventually the miser died, and the people buried him in an unvisited corner of the graveyard. But now when the poor went to the cobbler expecting the same kindness he turned them away, saying he had no money. So the mayor of the town visited the cobbler and asked him why he had become so miserly. The cobbler explained, "The truth is, I have no money. What money I gave to the poor came from the old wealthy man. He gave it to me to give to the poor provided I would tell no one from where the money came till he died."

This story tells us about God. God is like a wealthy miser who shares His gifts with us through others, often in ways we don't know about. He masterfully grants an answer to our prayers in sneaky ways where we least expect it. When Jesus asks us to do for those who can't return the favor, he's simply asking us to imitate God.

Who was the most humble who ever lived? It wasn't Moses at all. It was God. It was God Who snuck His Son into a manger at Bethlehem. God Who conquered death in the dark of night. And it is God Who tends us through friends, strangers, and events that lead us back to Him.

If you strive for true humility, strive to imitate God. Grant the desires of others who may never know that you were the humblest person they met this day.