

Our Inconceivable Honour

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Reading: 1 Cor 12 and 13

Over 20 years ago when I used to teach tertiary level economics, my Head of Department called me into his office one day and said, “There have been complaints about your teaching Andrew”. As he recited the list I felt like saying, “It’s not fair, I’m doing my best. Don’t you realise that following Rogernomics none of the New Zealand text books are of any use anymore?” I *felt* like saying these things, but I didn’t and I’m glad I didn’t.

Last year I was playing squash with my son Samuel and his friend Tony in Timaru and they kept on playing miserable shots that I just couldn’t get to or return. I felt like saying to them, “Look guys I’m not really enjoying this very much, if you want me to play squash with you you’ve got to make it more fun for me than this.” I *felt* like saying these things, but I didn’t and I’m glad I didn’t.

The reason that I am glad I didn’t say what I felt is because I now realise that I was in fact being shown great honour, respect, and esteem. I had thought that a criticism meant disrespect and so all I could see was my own anger and hurt ego. I now realise that a criticism can often be an act of great courage on the part of the person making the criticism and reflect great confidence in the person being criticised. A person who gives good criticism believes you are worth the effort, that you are capable of better things, and they are willing to risk a confrontation to help you get there. A good criticism from a good person actually contains an unspoken promise – *I promise, to the best of my ability, to tell you the truth and to help you become the person I believe you are capable of becoming*. No one bothers to bring a good criticism to someone they think is a total dead loss. I had thought that getting a thrashing at squash was humiliating and all I could see was my wounded pride and frustration. I now realise that Samuel and Tony, by playing their hardest against me, were showing their respect for me – that they considered me a worthy opponent and an equal. For an older man to be considered a worthy opponent and an equal by younger men represents real honour, respect, and esteem and is something to be valued. For me to have “played the old man card” would have ruined everything.

We recently received an email from Samuel’s wife Rachel concerning our granddaughter Evie who is 2 years old and lives precariously with an extraordinarily rare chromosome disorder that means she has her own unique and unknown developmental timeline.

Today is Evie’s assessment day with the early intervention ladies. We had to fill in a booklet with the things Evie could do so far. I didn’t get to tick much off but felt there was more to Evie that wasn’t being asked in the booklet. After initially feeling a bit

sad, Sam and I decided to make up an additional booklet with all the things Evie could do to go along with the official assessment.

Evie's Awesomeness

Can your child play sleeping tiger and other great games?

YES! Evie loves games and interacts by laughing, kicking, flapping and moving close to us.

Does your child laugh when objects fall on or near her face?

YES! Evie loves most moving objects- just not helmets, sunglasses, paper or phones. She loves when we drop cushions or soft toys beside her or on her face. She laughs when we move or tip the couch.

Can your child play for over 30 minutes in an Excer-saucer?

YES! Evie loves being in her saucer and plays with the objects really well.

Can your child hold a spoon and feed herself yoghurt?

YES! Evie can feed herself approx ½ teaspoon at a time when she is in the right mood.

Can your child play with your hair, face and earrings?

YES! Evie will reach out to touch our face, pull my fringe or earrings. She pulls very gently.

Can your child hold her legs and nearly her toes?

YES! Evie plays with her knees when she is contented and can almost reach her toes.

Can your child roll competently?

YES! Evie is a pro roller baby! She even commando rolls in stealth mode for extra sneakiness. She will roll to get places really quickly.

Can your child do assisted push-ups, holding her head up?

YES! Evie does this very well using Dad to help her. Her record is 13 in a row!

I am convinced that there is a parable in these things in relation to how God sees us and relates to us. God treats us exactly according to who we really are, exactly according to what he has created us to be, and exactly according to our true status and condition. I want to call this “Our inconceivable honour”. There are two parts to this that I want to stress this morning.

First – As human beings created by the God who loves us we have great capacity.

God addresses each one of us. God says to us:

“I am God Almighty, walk before me and be blameless.” (Gen. 17:1)

“I am the Lord your God; sanctify yourselves and be holy, for I am holy.” (Lev. 11:44)

“God chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world to be holy and blameless before him in love.” (Eph. 1:4)

“Follow me and I will make you fish for people.” (Mark 1:17)

God addresses us in these, and similar, ways in the Bible. In doing so God is recognising us according to our *capacities*. God has created us for a purpose and equips us with capacities that correspond to this purpose. God has created us for fellowship with God for a relationship of love, interaction, and sharing – that we might know God and to bear witness to this knowledge with the totality of our beings. God has created us for fellowship with one another – to see and know and interact with one another in mutual caring and assistance toward one another. God has created us with extraordinary capacities for thought and understanding, for emotion and empathy, for physical activity and creativity, for planning and execution of the things that we plan. In all that God does and calls us to God really only wills one thing – that we affirm with the totality of our beings that we are the human creatures that God has created us to be. The second century church Father, Irenaeus of Lyon, expressed it like this – *The glory of God is a human being truly alive!*

But we are often tempted to react negatively in the face of this and say things like, “How can I be blameless – doesn’t God know who and what I am?” “Holiness is an impossible ideal (and it sounds so boring too).” “Why did God choose me – what about *my* choices and *my* freedom to choose?” “Surely following Jesus will take me away from the fun that I want to have and rob me of my freedom – why can’t he just leave me alone so that I can live my life the way I want to?” “All this talk about holiness is just God throwing all my sin in my face and driving me into guilt and despair.”

Because this is our natural way of thinking and reacting we fail to see that in addressing us in this way God is showing us inconceivable honour, respect, and esteem. This is the inconceivably amazing honour that God gives to us. God honours us, respects us, esteems us, and values us beyond anything that we can imagine. God addresses us in this way because he considers that we are worth the effort and that we are made for better things. And in his great love God is willing to risk a confrontation to get us there. God has not given up on us and does not treat us as a dead loss. Moreover, there is a promise contained in these things. God promises to always tell us the truth and there is nothing that God commands that he does not also absolutely commit himself to helping and enabling us to accomplish.

When my Head of Department gave me good criticism years ago and Samuel and Tony played their hardest against me at squash, I see in this that these people were treating me according to my capacity and they were honouring and esteeming me. I see in this a parable of the behaviour of God toward us. In coming to us God never treats us as anything other than the human creatures that we are. God always respects our humanity. He does not violate our freedom nor does he allow us to throw up our hands in despair and reject our responsibility to be the creatures that he has made us to be. God does not rush in and rescue us by taking us off to some spiritual fairy-land where we never have any problems and so never have any need to use the capacities he has given us. God never takes possession of our lives so as to throw us out of the driver’s seat and do for us that which he requires that we do for ourselves. God calls us to be responsible before him, trusting always in his goodness.

We must stress this. But there is second thing that we must equally stress and keep alongside the first so that we hold both together in proper balance and proportion.

Second – As human beings created by the God who loves us we have great need.

God addresses each one of us. God says to us:

“Come to me, all that are carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest”
(Matt 11:28)

“All we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned to our own way, and the Lord has laid on him the iniquity of us all.” (Is 53:6)

“Let us eat and celebrate; for this son of mine was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found!” (Lk 15:24)

“My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.” (2 Cor 12:9)

God addresses us in these, and similar ways in the Bible. In doing so God is recognising us according to our *need*. God has created us for a purpose and equips us with needs that correspond to this purpose. Because God has made us for fellowship, God has equipped us so that we cannot live by bread alone but only by every word that comes from the mouth of God (Matt 4:4). God has not equipped us to live our lives in independent isolation from God. The truth about us is that as human creatures, whether we recognise it or not, it is in God (and in God alone) that we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28). We do not own our lives as some sort of private possession that we have absolute mastery and control over independent from the grace of God. Our very lives come from the life-giving Spirit of God as a gift of mercy and love and our very beings hang only by the single thread of the mercy of God. Our great need is to return to the source of our very lives for we can have no security and no hope if we persist in the mad idea that we can find some sort of a future in a life of independence from God.

But we are often tempted to react negatively to the idea that we are needy creatures. We often resent the idea that God has entered into earthly existence in Jesus Christ, in human form, to show us our true condition and meet our true need. We would rather think that we are capable of making our own way in life using our own talents and resources. But Jesus Christ is God’s declaration of truth concerning who we truly are. In Jesus, God himself becomes a true human being and enters into fellowship with us, for this is what God has made us for and truly desires. In Jesus Christ we see true human being as humans are meant to be. In the true humanity of Jesus we see our genuine *need* because Jesus shows us what we have become. But in the true humanity of Jesus we also see our genuine *capacity* because Jesus shows us what, by the grace of God, we may and shall become, for “when he is revealed, we will be like him, for we will see him as he is” (1 Jn. 3:2). God has not abandoned us in our need but in Jesus comes *close* to us, *alongside* of us, and *with* us, to carry our heavy burden, to bear our iniquities, and to make the child of God who was dead alive again.

But our natural way of thinking and reacting is to resist the idea that we have great need and that God has answered this need in Jesus Christ. Therefore we fail to see that in addressing us in this way God is showing us inconceivable honour, respect, and esteem. He is doing so because he is telling us the truth – unpalatable as it may be to us. Even more than this, God is showing us inconceivable honour by coming near to us and alongside of us in our neediness to give us the help that God alone can give.

When I heard about Evie's assessment and how the official book of developmental milestones could only point to her failure as a human being and how Samuel and Rachel decided upon an alternative assessment that would point to her success, it moved me to tears of joy. Their alternative assessment didn't so much say things about the sort of child Evie is, but the sort of parents Samuel and Rachel are. I think their attitude and the actions that flow out of their attitude are a wonderful parable in relation to God's attitude and action toward us. The alternative assessment recognised in a beautiful and loving way both Evie's capacity and her need. In a living parable of how God relates to us, they came *near* to Evie, *alongside* her, and *with* her in love. In loving parental commitment and faithfulness they gently called Evie in her neediness to be a responsible human being according to the capacities that she has. In doing so they showed God-like love toward Evie and attributed inconceivable honour, respect, and esteem to her.

This is how God relates to us and it is how God seeks for us to behave toward one another. It is precisely because God has gifted each one of us with a unique combination of capacities and needs that equips the Christian community to function as the body of Christ as God intends. We must not think that our capacities represent God's gift to us but our needs represent some sort of spiritual or physical failure on our part. God's gift to us is *both* our capacities and our needs. We must not think that *some* of us have capacities and *others* have needs and that Christian community is about those with capacities helping those with needs. Each of us individually is a unique combination of capacity and need. If you say *I have no capacity* you are not telling the truth about yourself for God has gifted you with capacities of one sort or another. Part of your maturity as a Christian is to learn to recognise the capacities that God has given you and then learn to use these capacities in serving others. If you say *I have no need* you are not telling the truth about yourself either for God has gifted you (yes *gifted* you!) with needs of one sort or another. Part of your maturity as a Christian is to learn to recognise the needs that God has given you and then learn to allow others to minister to you in your need.

I have just finished reading a Charles Dickens novel called *Dombey and Son*. The key character, Paul Dombey, was immensely wealthy, immensely powerful, and immensely proud. He considered himself utterly without need and utterly resented and ignored his daughter because she lived instead of his son who had died. Yet in his pride he came to great ruin. But in a wonderful story of redemption he comes to recognise his great need – to receive the love that his daughter longs to give him and to give the love that has long lain dead in his pride-filled heart. His great need (and it our great need too) was to both *receive* and *give* love! And out of his brokenness he finds that which his money could never buy – love and life and joy. This also is a parable of how God longs to relate to us.

God intends the church to be a community of people gathered together by the loving power of the Spirit of Jesus Christ who are honestly and humbly enabled to grow in maturity through recognising our capacities and needs and with our capacities and needs serving one another in love. In this way, more than anything else, God intends the church to display the sort of power that God is interested in – that we be perfected in weakness in such a way that it bears witness to the power and love of God. It is in

this way that God's grace is sufficient for us and in this way that God's power is perfected in weakness.

O God, in love you call each one of us to be responsible before you. You have made each one of us a unique combination of capacity and need. In parental commitment, and faithfulness you gently call us in our neediness to be responsible human beings according to the capacities that we have. And in so doing you show us your love and attribute inconceivable honour, respect, and esteem to us. Please help us to know the truth about ourselves and please help us to become the community of loving service that you intend us to be. This we pray in the name of Jesus, Amen.