

The Best Seat in the House

✖ I happened to have been named for a Hollywood actor, James Stewart. If you've never heard of him, that's understandable. He's hardly a pop-culture icon anymore. He had his day in the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, dying in 1997 at age 89. But once a year—at Christmastime—he's all over the TV map. Sometimes two, maybe three channels at the same time run his famous, either-you-love-it-or-hate-it movie "It's a Wonderful Life."

Ironically, during most of that film, Stewart's character, George Bailey, is miserable. Life for him is anything but wonderful.

George was a small-town guy who had dreams of leaving his dudsville hometown, Bedford Falls, for high adventure. He was just about to get that dream started when real life slammed him. The needs of others arose, and out of his compassion he responded. Before he knew it, he had sacrificed his own education for his brother's, kept the family-run savings and loan afloat, protected the town from the greed of a greasy banker named Potter, married his childhood sweetheart, and started a family.

Because his dream of "being the man" was gradually dying he, at the last, contemplates jumping from a bridge to end it all. His guardian angel suddenly intercedes, showing

him the nightmare
that life would have become for the residents of Bedford Falls
had he never been
there and been a part of their lives.

Perhaps you'll see what I mean if
you've ever wanted to be the "it" guy or gal. Truth be known,
probably all of us
have at one time or another.

Jesus talked a little about this common
inner drive in Luke 14:7-11. He told a parable—the closest
thing in His day to
showing a movie—about some folks who had been invited to a big
party. The first
people to arrive chose for themselves the best seats at the
most prominent table
in the house.

Unfortunately for them, those seats had been reserved for
other guests. They discovered this fact the hard way: When the
host of the party
came in, he asked them—in front of everyone—to move to less
prominent seats.

Jesus was telling us that we all have the same tendency to
think of
ourselves as the "it" person. He was pointing out that this
belief causes us to
make choices that aren't good for us—that in fact may be
downright embarrassing
for us.

But He was also saying that if we know we have this flawed
belief about ourselves, then we'd be wise to take a "cheaper"
seat to begin with
and wait for God—the host of the party—to say: "Hey, friend,
what are you doing

back there in the cheap seat? Come up here to the front near Me!”

Jesus

made it clear that when we humble ourselves before God, then God Himself will honor us. He doesn’t say this because God wants less for us in life than we want for ourselves. If that were true, then Jesus wouldn’t have included the imagery of God saying, “Friend, move up to a better place” (v. 10, NIV).

Jesus

was simply illustrating the “how to” of that desire God has for us. He was revealing that we think the way to get ahead is to grab the best seat in the house before anyone else gets it. Then He shows us the contrast: God says the way to get to a better place is to choose humility, maintain a right attitude in our hearts and then wait for the sure thing—God’s voice calling us to “move up.”

George Bailey, fictional though he was, represents a person who chose, like Jesus advised, the cheaper seat—despite desperately wanting the more prominent seat. It took humility on his part to say no to the place of esteem and success he wanted for himself and, at the end of the film he is a picture of a man with a fulfilled life.

He finds that he instead has been moved up to a different, ultimately better place at life’s table. And he’s surprised by

how good it feels to be there.

Jesus is saying that can be our story,
too.