

**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**



SERMON

August 31, 2025

# Little Christian Lies: Seat Selection

Dr. Jo Forrest



**Little Christian Lies:  
Seat Selection**  
Dr. Jo Forrest

© 2025 by Dr. Jo Forrest and Westminster Presbyterian Church.

All rights reserved.

No part of this sermon may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means including information storage and retrieval systems, without permission in writing from the author.

Printed in the United States of America

First Printing: August 31, 2025

## Little Christian Lies: Seat Selection

---

Based upon your response, this series entitled “Little Christian Lies” has hit a nerve. The sermons intentionally name the way culture seeps into our lives and borrows the authority of faith to actually lure us away from Jesus.

These little lies masquerade as truth so easily that we tend to tip-toe around them despite the damage they create.

Whether in a series with the overt title “little lies” or any other theme, whenever we put scripture next to our lives, just as Jesus did in his day, we see just how far we’ve drifted from the truth.

By honestly acknowledging that vast gulf between where we are and where God calls becomes the space to receive the abundant grace Jesus offers. God wants us to thrive and designs a vast community for that very purpose.

A wise member of this congregation sent me a simple quote: this (life/world/etc.) is God's party and we do not get to choose the guest list.

The more we love Jesus, the more we enjoy his party.  
The more we love as Jesus loves, the better the party becomes for all of us.

Our lectionary reading comes from the Gospel of Luke. We pick up in a line of teaching in which the writer alternates between Jesus’ parables and healings about the Sabbath.

*Dear God, we come to you with so many needs. We need you and yet the voices and ideas of the world outside lure us to want something else. Open our hearts and minds and fill us with the truth of your son. Nourish us with grace so we become agents of your will today. Amen.*

### **Luke 14:1, 7-14**

On one occasion when Jesus was going to the house of a leader of the Pharisees to eat a meal on the Sabbath, they were watching him closely...

When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable.

"When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host, and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, 'Give this person your place,' and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place.

But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher'; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."

He said also to the one who had invited him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers and sisters or your relatives or rich neighbors, in case

they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you, for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

\*\*\*

A couple of quick stories about seat selection.

Before I became a minister, my corporate jobs kept me traveling three or four weeks of the month. As a road warrior – more correctly airline traveler – I learned how to maximize airline perks.

One year on December 30, I flew from Chicago to Kansas City only to turn around and return home without leaving the airport or even buying a coffee. I needed those extra points from that roundtrip to keep my preferred status with the airline.

As silly as this sounds, more than half of the passengers on that flight did the exact same thing. Our return flight to Chicago turned into an impromptu party as we kind of laughed at one another.

You can meet some of the nicest people in airports. As a frequent traveler, I made friends with the customer service agents in airlines clubs and gate agents.

For several years, I traveled home to Chicago on Thursday evening from our office in Boston. Every Thursday became routine. It was the same flight number, usually the same gate, and gate agent. We also became friends.

As we got closer to departure time, he knew my line. I'd smile and ask for *a first-class, aisle seat, preferably next to some good-looking guy*. It made for light-hearted fun after a weary week.

One week, the agent gave me just what I requested.

Following protocol, when it came time to depart, the agent boarded the plane with a final destination check. He hung up the microphone and deliberately leaned into the aisle, made eye contact with me and locked eyes with the good-looking guy next to me. Then he gave me an exaggerated two-thumbs up and the biggest smile before he raced off the plane.

I wanted to fade away. The next week, he and I had a good laugh about it.

Another time for a very early morning departure, I already received an upgrade but needed to print my boarding pass – with the first-class seat – so I could access the preferred security line. This was before TSA and the airline managed access to this shorter line.

The printer at the O'Hare would not work and I needed to get to the gate. As I approached the security checkpoint, my frustration began to boil over. The agent was a petite, older woman with the gentlest brown eyes I'd ever seen.

She looked up at me as I launched into this problem. It was the airline's printer that caused this problem and she needed to let me through. "Please, I'm going to miss my flight. This is a problem."

She paused, looked at me, and calmly said, "yes, I've seen people with problems." She let me through.

I wanted to fade away but for an entirely different reason. I felt humiliated – not by her but by seeing my own attitude. I wanted to beg her forgiveness.

I too had seen so many travelers carrying burdens I could only imagine. I too had witnessed tragedies, overheard heartbreaking conversations, problems I'd never known. I've never forgotten her. I still tear up when I recall her grace, not for letting me through the line but for the piercing lesson of just how privileged I am.

I am so very, very privileged to be alive in a world with such angels like her.

\*\*\*

Jesus teaches by telling stories that make you think.

We call them parables, a word from the Greek root *para* which means "next to" and *bole* that means "to throw." A parable is a story Jesus throws down next to our lives so that we see a truth hidden by our routine. Since his parables speak to basic human nature, they endure time and culture.

The gospel reading describes an encounter between Jesus and a group of Pharisees over their rules about the Sabbath.

At the beginning of time, God gives the recurring gift of Sabbath for all of humanity to simply rest with God each week. Over time, it evolved into a religious event defined with rules.

As an aside, before we ever think this story or any other story about Pharisees or Jews authorizes antisemitism, we must remember that Jesus was entirely Jewish as were his followers and many in the early church.

The gospel stories never were nor should ever be weaponized to harm anyone – that is the exact opposite of what Jesus teaches. When we hear stories of Pharisees, it is best to cast ourselves in this role, first, to receive his teaching.

So back to this Sabbath keeping.

The Sabbath gift evolved into rituals the Pharisees defined to keep it from being abused. In the process they used these rules of religion to leverage themselves into positions of power. Their thirst for control led to corruption.

Rather than confront them directly, Jesus tells a story about a dinner party in which sharing a meal seems the furthest from the minds of host or guest. The patronage culture of buying and selling to gain an advantage overshadowed the joy of gathering around the table to celebrate a wedding.

Guests wondered if this was the right event in which to be seen? Who else might they be seen with? How will their participation and seat assignment reflect their status? A host might wonder how they could parlay the party to more status?

That very notion of turning hospitality into a tool persists.

The HBO series *The Gilded Age* depicts a social-climbing family in NYC during the Victorian era. They use elaborate seating charts to honor certain guests and shame others.

How many sitcoms make light of a long-sought restaurant reservation only to find the table in the back, without a preferred view or in full view of other patrons. Next to the bus station, or the kitchen door? Funny not funny.

Wedding coordinators labor over the shape and number of seats at each table. Wedding couples labor over who to include on the guest list balancing obligation and the overall cost.

That's how our culture works. Human pride feeds a cruel cycle.

The sad truth is that this habit enticed the Pharisees to turn the sacred time of a Sabbath to enjoy God into an exclusive club membership. They used a Sabbath meal to prop up the powerful, allowing them to barter among those on the inside, while completely ignoring the oppressed.

This must have grieved God's heart while it enraged Jesus. The Sabbath meal reenacts God's deliverance of the Israelite people.

To eat the Sabbath meal implies turning everyone's attention to God and rejoicing at God's gift of liberation from enslavement to Pharaoh's system of power and prestige. What began as a meal of pure blessing became a carnival of perpetuating culture's prejudices, ambitions, insecurities, and entitlements.

This finally brings us to a Big Christian Lie. It begins with the lie that we can use religion to make ourselves better.

That's obviously wrong. But, it is so hard for us to believe that we do not earn the grace Jesus offers. We don't. Grace fundamentally means a gift freely given. Thank you, Jesus.

Nor do we control the grace he offers to others.

And, Jesus' teaching points to a more pervasive lie and that is....our religion makes us better than others. This is the hardest truth for Christians to swallow - that we aren't any better than anyone else. We are not better than others.

Please know, I could imagine no other way to live than as someone who tries to follow Christ. I'm a theological mutt, with a history in several other denominations and chose to be ordained in the Presbyterian tradition because I love our theology. But, I have no illusions that we've cornered the truth.

It is healthy and necessary for us to question the Book of Order, with the power of the Holy Spirit in humble obedience to Christ, who is the head of the church necessary. As Presbyterians, we claim that we are *reformed and always to be reformed by the word of God*. If not careful, we could slide like any other collective into poking fingers at another faith tradition or use rules to stifle the life of the church.

Related, it becomes toxic when we allow a faith tradition to claim priority over any other religion within the government. Christian Nationalism and any other exceptionalism feeds a rot within.

When we see ourselves as superior, we become like the Pharisees, who craved power and control and authority.

In Jesus, God humbles God's own self to die on a cross for the sake of others — even for the sake of those who sought his death. Are we willing to humble ourselves for the sake of others, even for those we dislike or think are wrong?

Instead of promoting Christianity as a set of benefits, we are to share Christ. By how we live with all of those whom he loves, we all receive a taste of the heavenly reward in this life. As Jesus said, “those who exalt themselves will be humbled and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

We called this series “Little Christian Lies” to spark your interest since the words *lie* and *truth* assault us in our daily news. We want to know the truth which demands we discern

the lies. Lies originate as we drift from the simple life decreed by God.

It is an age-old tendency we witness in our forebearers and experience ourselves when the religions we construct cannot rationalize tragedy and injustice.

Even though all religions fall short of comprehending the mystery of God, we still try to put God in a box.

Then it takes God, Jesus, or some brave soul with soft brown eyes to thunk us on the head, turn over the money-changers' tables, pull us off our high horse, or rise from the grave to show us the truth is bigger than we can imagine.

To live a life in awe of God will send us to our knees in humility. To live a life in awe of God will lead us to gratitude for the seat Jesus offers us at his table...along with all of the others he welcomes. This is the joy of faith.





**WESTMINSTER**  
PRESBYTERIAN  
**CHURCH**

2040 Washington Road  
Pittsburgh, PA 15241  
412-835-6630  
[www.westminster-church.org](http://www.westminster-church.org)