

THE GREAT BANQUET

LUKE 14:15-24

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Have you ever been invited to a party or a social gathering where you knew you were not really welcome? Perhaps you sensed that it would be an opportunity for those in attendance to make fun of you or even ridicule you. Well, if you have ever experienced anything like that you are not alone. That's what happened to Jesus when he was invited to the home of a Pharisee on the Sabbath. In fact, it was a gathering of Scribes and Pharisees, a group of religious leaders, many of whom probably did not like this upstart Rabbi from Galilee. He had said some things about them that they did not like, and he had done some things that they did not approve of, like healing people on the Sabbath. So perhaps they decided that it was time to put him in his place. They would invite him over for a meal and then proceed to take him down a notch or two. So they sent out an invitation, "After the service in the synagogue, join us for lunch."

I'm sure that Jesus was aware of what they were up to, but that didn't bother him. He knew who he was, and he was not afraid to face their ridicule. In fact, I think he was looking forward to this opportunity to spend some time with these men. Perhaps he could help them to get a better grasp of what it means to really live in the Kingdom of God. So Jesus accepted their invitation. Sure enough, during dinner a man with dropsy showed up. It was probably a test to see what Jesus would do. Of course, he healed the man, something that was expressly forbidden according to these Jewish leaders' interpretation of what it meant to honor the Sabbath. Then observing what was going on during this luncheon gathering, Jesus told a couple of parables. The first one was aimed at those who had a problem with humility, namely their desire to have a place of honor at the head table. The second was a reminder that a banquet for the least fortunate is much preferred by the Lord as opposed to just inviting those who will in turn invite you over to their place. I can also almost see the anger in the faces of those sitting around the table in this Pharisee's home. They had desired to embarrass Jesus, and instead he had embarrassed them. It was not a pleasant scene, and to possibly break the tension, one of the guests blurted out, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

In response, Jesus told a third parable, a story about a great banquet. Its message is clear and unmistakable. Let's take a look at it together. But before we do, we need to understand how things were done in the days of Jesus. When we're invited to a banquet or a really special occasion, we usually receive an invitation in the mail or by email. The date and time of the occasion are included so that we know when to arrive and frequently there is an RSVP, so that the host will know whether or not we are coming. That's not the way things were done in the days of Jesus. Parties and special occasions were few and far between, and the grandest of them all was a wedding celebration. The invited guests would be informed that a multi-day grand affair was being planned with lots of delicious food and wine. But the date and time were not announced until everything was ready. Then the servants would be sent out to inform the guests that it was time to come. There was a clear expectation that the guests would immediately stop whatever they were doing, get dressed in their best attire, and hurry to the banquet. This was one of those occasions that you did not want to miss. So with that in mind, let's take a look at what Jesus had to say.

First of all, the host of the banquet is God. He is inviting his friends to a special festive occasion, a heavenly event that will endure forever. It's an event described in terms of eating, a universal description of friendship and fellowship. And fortunately it begins right now and stretches on into eternity. Our time here on earth is like the h'ordeuvres that are served before the main event. We've all been to occasions like that. We gather outside

the banquet hall for finger foods with the clear expectation that this is just a foretaste of what is to come. The main event is, however, in the future. And that indeed is what the Bible tells us over and over again. Eternal fellowship with God, beginning now and stretching on into the future, is frequently described as a banquet, a meal shared with friends in the presence of the Lord. When Moses and the leaders of Israel entered into a covenantal agreement with God, they were invited to climb up Mount Sinai and partake of a communal meal in the Lord's presence (Exodus 24:9-11). When Jesus' disciples met the resurrected Lord on the road to Emmaus (Luke 24:13-35), it was when they sat down to break bread that they recognized who he was. And of course, you will remember these words in the Gospel of Matthew. At the Last Supper Jesus commanded his followers to partake of the bread and the cup as a reminder of what he was about to do for them and as a prelude to what would transpire in the future. At the conclusion of the meal, he said, "I will not drink of this fruit of the vine from now until that day when I drink it anew with you in my Father's kingdom" (Matthew 26:29). And then finally there is Revelation 19:9. The angel says to John, "Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb." You and I have been invited to a great banquet and our host is the Lord. In fact, it's a wedding banquet just like the one portrayed in this parable. And best of all, Christ is the bridegroom, and the church, all of God's people down through the ages, including you and me, are the bride, united with the Christ for all of eternity.

It is surprising, therefore, to discover, as we study this parable, that some people were just too busy to attend. They would be missing out on a grand and glorious affair, something in the days of Jesus that people would never have turned down. But that's what he said they did. One replied, "I've just bought a field and must go and see it." Another stated that he had just purchased a yoke of oxen and he wanted to try them out. A third declared that he had just gotten married and would not, therefore, be able to attend. Now there's nothing wrong with buying property, trying out a new tractor, or enjoying married life, but here's the issue. Are any of these things more important than knowing the Lord and accepting His invitation for eternal life? None of them endures forever. They are for a season, our time here on earth. None of them is as important as an ongoing relationship with God. This portion of the parable is, therefore, a reminder that good things can keep us from experiencing the best things in life.

And that's what I find taking place in America today. We're invested in the here and now with little or no thought about the future. We've become completely secularized. If it's not of this world, we're simply not interested. The kingdom of God and its representative on earth, the church, are no longer highly valued. Fewer and fewer people attend worship services on a Sunday morning, and when reminded of eternity, a growing number of people assume one of two things. Either there is no God and no heaven, and when our earthly lives are over that's it, nothing more than the grave. Or somehow or some way we're all going to get to heaven, so there's no need to personally respond to God's invitation. Just hope for the best. Either of these two attitudes reminds me of the king who gave his court jester a decorative wand and said, "When you find a fool greater than yourself, give this to him." Years later the king was lying on his death bed. He called for his faithful jester. The king said, "I am going away." "Where are you going and what provisions have you made for the journey?" the jester asked. "None," said the king. "Then receive the wand that you gave to me," replied the jester, "for I have found a fool greater than myself."

Getting back to the parable, when the host received word that the invited guests would not be attending the banquet, he was not only deeply offended but also angry. He told his servant, "Go out into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." When this was accomplished and there still remained room at the banquet table, the host then told his servant, "Go out into the highways and country lanes and compel everyone to come. My table must be filled before the banquet can begin." In other words, when people say no to God, He invites others to take their place. That's what Jesus was saying to those who had invited Him to dinner. These religious leaders had turned their backs on God and the kingdom that he was establishing

through the life and ministry of Jesus. They were content with their meaningless rituals and religious ceremonies. So the Lord would reach out to others, and notice who they were. They were the folks who really needed and would welcome God's invitation.

Years later Paul and Barnabas faced the same kind of rejection when they told some people about Jesus during their first missionary journey. They were preaching to the people in Pisidian Antioch, a city in Asia Minor, modern day Turkey. The people were responding to their message, but some of the Jews were jealous and they spoke abusively against what Paul was saying. In response, Paul and Barnabas boldly stated, "We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles." Then quoting Isaiah 49:6 he and Barnabas declared, "For this is what the Lord has commanded us: 'I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth'" (Acts 13:46-47).

Unfortunately, the same thing is true today. When people, even those who consider themselves to be God's people, are no longer interested in really knowing the Lord and serving him, God moves on. This is true for individuals, religious denominations and even entire cultures. Take for example the Moravians. Once upon a time the Moravians were one of the greatest evangelical groups in the world. They sent out missionaries everywhere and they prayed for them 24 hours a day. But the Moravians grew weary, lost their evangelical zeal and are now a small, struggling Christian denomination known for little more than brass bands on Easter and love feasts serving buns and coffee. And the same thing can happen to us as a church, a denomination, or even as individuals. When we lose our fervor for the kingdom, when we really no longer desire to live under the rule and reign of God, he looks around and chooses others, frequently those who have been set aside as unworthy of his loving consideration, those who at times have even been ridiculed and persecuted, and he says to them, "Welcome, come and have a seat at my banquet table. And speaking of cultures, guess where Christianity is experiencing its greatest growth. It's not in North America or Western Europe any more. It's happening in other places like Africa, South America, and Asia.

But before we bring this sermon to a close, there is one last verse in this passage of Scripture that we need to consider. The host told his servant, "None of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." Even if they had changed their minds and decided at the last moment to attend, they would have been denied entrance. The gate would have been closed, and they would have been turned away. With that in mind, listen very carefully to what I am about to share with you. A woman by the name of Ruth Metzgar had been invited to sing a solo at a very prestigious wedding in Seattle, Washington. After the service at the church, she and her husband drove to the reception. It was being held on the top two floors of the highest skyscraper in the city. As the elevator opened, they beheld a fabulous scene, food and music and the bride and groom leading the guests up a beautiful staircase to the top floor. Upon arrival they were greeted by a maître d' who inquired, "Your names please." Then looking at the bound book containing the names of all the guests, he said, "I'm sorry but I cannot find your names in my book." "But I sang at the wedding," Ruth replied. "It doesn't matter who you are or what you did," he said. "If your name is not in the book, you cannot attend the banquet." Then motioning to one of the waiters he stated, "Show these people to the service elevator, please." On their way home Ruth began to cry. Not only was she terribly disappointed that they had not been able to attend the banquet, she remembered that she had not replied to the RSVP which they had received along with the invitation. She didn't think it was very important, and besides they would know who she was. But even more importantly, she was reminded of what is written in Revelation 21:27, "Nothing impure will ever enter [the heavenly New Jerusalem], nor will anyone who does what is shameful and deceitful, but only those whose names are written in the Lamb's book of life."

Remember what Jesus said at the conclusion of his Sermon on the Mount. "Not everyone who says to me 'Lord, Lord,' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only he who

does the will of my Father who is in heaven. Many will say to me on that day, 'Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name, and in your name drive out demons and perform many miracles?' Then I will tell them plainly, 'I never knew you. Away from me, you evil doers'" (Matthew 7:21-23). It's not who we are, what church we belong to, or what we have done that really matters. It's who we know and whether we are citizens of his kingdom, whether our names are written in his book of life. Then and only then will we be assured that there is a place for us at his banquet hall in heaven.