

SERIES: Parables from the Master Story-Teller

SERMON: **Table Talk: Parables about Banquet Invitations**

SCRIPTURE: Luke 14:1-24

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Suppose you invite a couple hundred guests to a sit-down reception at your daughter's wedding. In the middle of the meal one of them does something really offensive to everyone else, but instead of apologizing he begins to criticize the other guests, then he turns and rebukes you as the host for not inviting the right kind of guests. And suppose he goes even further and tells a story that implies that *you* and most of your friends are going to hell. You wouldn't be very happy, would you? Well, in effect that's what happens in our Scripture text today, and the rude guest at the dinner table is none other than Jesus. Luke 14:1-24:

*One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away.*

*Then he asked them, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" And they had nothing to say.*

*When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

*Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."*

*When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."*

*Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'*

*"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'*

*"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'*

*"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'*

*"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'*

*"'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'*

*"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"*

### **Jesus accepts a suspicious dinner invitation. (1-6)**

I call it suspicious because it comes from a prominent Pharisee and from the note that “he was being carefully watched.” The Pharisees were fast becoming Jesus’ most implacable enemies. There may have been a few Pharisees who had not yet made up their minds about Him, but this man was not one of them, for he apparently had arranged for some of the guests to “spy” upon Jesus, to watch His every move and listen to His every word, so that reports could be taken back to the authorities.

Have you ever wondered how Jesus managed to survive the pressure of being under constant scrutiny and attack. When that happens to most people they lose their nerve, and even more often, they lose their temper. They become irritable and angry. Kenny Rogers of the Texas Rangers and Lance Armstrong have both struggled greatly with a hostile press. Imagine how they would have fared under the Pharisees!

Do you know what the secret of Jesus’ survival was? He never had anything to hide. He was the same at night as during the day, the same in private as in public, the same with friends as with foes. When that’s the case, one doesn’t need to worry about spies or bad press. (Just as an aside, I get exasperated at times by the paranoia expressed by certain groups, liberal and conservative, who are always challenging the Patriot Act or the notion of a National ID card, always fighting the use of public video cameras, and constantly arguing for privacy rights. I know that government prying can get out of hand, but frankly, the person who isn’t doing anything wrong doesn’t have much to worry about, at least not in this country. That’s just my own personal opinion and I won’t charge you anything extra for it).

Undoubtedly these Pharisees were particularly watching to see if Jesus would do the unthinkable again–i.e. heal someone on the Sabbath. To that end they had planted a man suffering from dropsy right in front of Jesus. Now Jesus knows what they are up to, but He goes on the offensive. He asks them, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?”

But they remain silent. Why? Because they can already feel themselves being impaled on the horns of another dilemma. The Mosaic Law didn’t forbid healing on the Sabbath, but their rabbinic traditions did. If they say “no, it’s not lawful,” they will be guilty of going beyond the teaching of Moses. If they say “yes, it is lawful,” they will be in trouble with their own rabbis. Worse yet, they will lose their #1 issue against Him–Sabbath violation.

When they refuse to answer His question, He goes ahead and heals the man anyway, and sends him away. Then Jesus appeals for consistency and a sense of proportion: “If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?” Well, they know very good and well they would. And they know the unspoken punch line: “If you would do as much for a son or an ox, why should I not release a man suffering from a serious illness?” And it says, “They had nothing to say.” What could they say? He gave them an opportunity to speak to the issue before He performed the miracle and they passed. Now all they can do is stare in silence and seeth inside.

Now Jesus has gotten off to a rather rocky start at this dinner. He has done something very offensive to His host and to most of the other guests—not something wrong, mind you, but certainly something thoroughly unappreciated. Now if you’re a guest in someone else’s home, the last thing you want to do is to offend them. And if you do, it might be wise to rebuild the damaged bridges as quickly as possible. Instead, however, what Jesus does is . . .

**He uses a parable to criticize the other guests for their bad manners. (7-11)**

Jesus was always very observant. One of the things He noticed during Happy Hour at the Pharisees’ house is that the guests had maneuvered for the places of honor. From that observation He seizes the opportunity to teach an important spiritual truth.

But first, a bit of background. An ancient dinner was generally held around a low, U-shaped table. The host sat (or actually reclined) at the center of the bend in the U. The highest place of honor was at the host’s left, the next highest to his right, then at the center of each leg. The rest of the places were filled by those of lesser importance. In this particular case, the guests had conducted an undignified scramble for the best seats.

Without mentioning what He has observed and without pointing at anyone in particular, Jesus teaches by means of a parable. He asks them to suppose they have been invited to a wedding feast. He advises them, for their own sake, not to grab for the places of honor, for such an action runs a distinct risk. If one is forced to vacate his place because of the arrival of someone with higher credentials, he may find all the other places occupied (because you can hardly ask everyone in the place get up and move down one place) and have to take the least desirable place. In a society where honor and shame were major issues, having to move from the top place to the bottom was an eventuality that was almost unbearable.

The situation Jesus describes reminds me of a story that Chuck Colson relates regarding Gen. Alexander Haig, a man known for an ego as big as all outdoors. On October 5, 1971 Haig, who was White House Chief of Staff, decided to use the Presidential Box at the Concert Hall in the Kennedy Center. Imagine the importance and pride he felt as he surveyed the crowd, which always looks up to see who is sitting in the Presidential Box. Unbeknownst to him, however, Richard Nixon decided at the last minute he wanted to attend the concert. The whole story is rather humorous but we’ll only refer to the outcome. Haig had to vacate the box and apparently spent the remainder of the evening standing in the hall because the concert was a sell-out.

The alternative to the embarrassment of being humiliated is to take the lowest place to begin with, so that if you are moved, it can only be to a higher place. Jesus seems to be alluding to Proverbs 25:6,7, where we read, “Do not exalt yourself in the king’s presence, and do not claim a place among great men; it is better for him to say to you, ‘Come up here,’ than for him to humiliate you before a nobleman.” The message is that the way to the top is to start at the bottom.

Here’s how Jesus summarizes His point in verse 11: “For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” If one starts at the bottom he runs no other risk than that of being exalted. And the truly humble man *will* receive the honor that is due him. He doesn’t need to seek it; he doesn’t need to manipulate others to get it; he doesn’t need to campaign for it. It’s far better to be drafted.

The Apostle Peter says the same thing in his first epistle: “All of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another; because, ‘God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.’ Humble yourselves, therefore, under God’s mighty hand, that he may lift you up in due time” (1 Peter 5:5,6). Friends, God knows how to humble the proud. He did it to Queen Jezebel (1 Kings 21). He did it to King Nebuchadnezzar (Dan. 4).

And He also knows how to exalt the humble. Surely the greatest example of one humbling himself and then being exalted is shared for us in Phil. 2:5-11, which speaks of how Jesus humbled Himself by leaving the glory He enjoyed in Heaven and being incarnated in the womb of a peasant woman.

### **He rebukes the host for his bad motives. (12-14)**

Verse 12: “Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.” At first Jesus’ exhortation seems strange: stop inviting your friends and relatives over for dinner. But clearly Jesus’ point is that we should not *exclusively* invite our friends or relatives or especially our rich neighbors. Why? Because the motives are suspect. It is so easy to have in the back of one’s mind the issue of return invitations. There are other less than noble motives, too. Maybe we just like to be seen with important people. Maybe we like to brag about whom we had lunch with. Maybe we hope the networking will pay off in the future.

Now this is not to cast any aspersions on the salesman who takes a prospective client to lunch with the hope of doing business. Nor is it to suggest that there is anything necessarily wrong in socializing with one’s friends or with famous people or with wealthy people. Even rich people need friends, and frankly, one of the most difficult things for celebrities is to find friends who really care about them and aren’t trying to use them. But it does speak to the question of whether

we are *using* friends for our own purposes or *making* friends for the Kingdom. The best kind of hospitality is that which is given, not exchanged.

Let's take a moment right now to apply what we have learned. I encourage you to examine your own guest list for the past year.

How many guests have you had who are significantly below your social level?

How many guests have you had whom you didn't know well?

How many who were truly needy and unable to return any favors?

How many were unbelievers whom you were trying to reach?

Or perhaps some need to ask, "Have I had any guests at all?"

Jesus says there's a payday coming for those who practice hospitality, but it may not be the payday we desire. Back in the mid-70's there was an oil filter commercial on TV in which a garage mechanic suggests that an engine overhaul was necessitated by the failure to change a \$4.95 oil filter. He says, "Pay me now or pay me later." Well, Jesus says, "Get paid now (with a return invitation) or get paid later (with eternal dividends)."

Well, Jesus has offended everyone and has criticized both the guests and the host. But He's not quite through.

### **He delivers another profound parable on dinner invitations (or perhaps better on excuses).**

We are still in the same Pharisee's house. Everyone is feeling pretty uncomfortable with Jesus' searching words. Perhaps there is an awkward silence as everyone looks at his feet. Suddenly one of the guests decides it's time to move to a more positive subject. He picks up on Jesus' banquet illustration and declares, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." There was a strong expectation in Jewish circles that there would be a great banquet in the afterlife, and this man has no doubt that he would be there. But Jesus challenges the man's assumption. He tells the whole group that those who appear to be in line for such blessing run a great risk of not making it to the table at all.

**Invitations extended.** We see in Jesus' parable the ancient custom of double invitations. Because people had no watches and time was very elastic and banquets took a long time to prepare, the host would generally not only send out invitations in advance of a dinner, but when the actual time came he would send servants to inform those who had accepted the invitations that dinner was now ready.

Everyone seems to have accepted the initial invitation; at least there were no refusals. This might be compared on a spiritual level to the general response of the average person to the evidence for the existence of God and the need for a religious dimension in life. Most people say, "Yes, I believe in God." But when it comes down to the nitty-gritty of actually coming to Him (which is analogous to personal surrender to Christ), then it is a different story. Where one might expect a scramble for seats, he often finds only excuses, and not even good ones.

**Excuses offered.** The first excuse is, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.” Can you imagine someone buying a field without first looking at it? And even if he did, the field would still be there the next day; there was no reason he had to see it on the very day of the banquet. Clearly he did not want to come. I see this as the excuse of possessions—“things” prevent us from being effective disciples. It may be a vacation home, it may be a hobby, it may be sports, but “things” are allowed to keep us from getting serious with God.

The second excuse is *career*. “I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.” This man is obviously a farmer. “Business is booming, I can’t be bothered right now.” But again, there is no need to hurry to try out the oxen; it could be done later in the week.

The third excuse is *family*: “I just got married, so I can’t come.” Actually there was a merciful provision in the OT for the newly married. In Deut. 24:5 we read, “If a man has recently married, he must not be sent to war or have any other duty laid on him. For one year he is to be free to stay at home and bring happiness to the wife he has married.” Not a bad concept! But should a recent marriage isolate a person from *all* social contact, or keep a person from even accepting a banquet invitation, particularly one where the spouse is equally welcome? Marriage certainly involves obligations, but it does not cancel all other obligations. William Barclay writes,

*There is no lovelier thing than a home, and yet a home was never meant to be used selfishly. They live best together who live with God; they serve each other best who also serve their fellow men; the atmosphere of a home is most lovely when those who dwell within it never forget that they are also members of the great family and household of God.<sup>i</sup>*

There are other excuses people give today as to why they are not ready to receive God’s invitation:

- I got too much religion as a kid.
- I need to study the claims of other religions.
- There are too many hypocrites in the Church.
- I’ll consider it when I’m on my deathbed.

Well, I suggest to you that the road to hell is paved, not just with crimes and great scandals or with good intentions, but with inverted priorities, false values, and sorry excuses.

**Two new guest lists developed.** The host in this parable, angry at the lame excuses he receives from those invited, will not allow the ungrateful invitees to disrupt His plans. So He tears up the original guest list and orders His servants to go into the streets and alleys of the town and to bring in the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. These represent the publicans and sinners, the Jewish outcasts like the crippled woman of chapter 13, and the man with dropsy here in chapter 14.

But still there is room at the banquet. So the servant is sent out once more with still another list of guests, this time to the roads and country lanes (the KJV reads, “Highways and hedges”).

These represent the Gentiles, the pagans. Jesus' listeners would certainly not take kindly to the notion that the Messianic Banquet would be attended by Gentiles (the outreach of the Gospel to Gentiles through the Apostle Paul was still future when Luke wrote). But God is intent upon having every chair filled at His banquet, and He is willing to go to the ends of the earth to find those who will accept His invitation.

You see, the reason the Gentiles are acceptable at this dinner is that in spite of their heathen backgrounds, these are the kind of individuals who most readily see their own personal needs and are willing to accept the invitation—people like St. Augustine, John Newton, Charles Colson, and poor lost sinners everywhere.

Vachel Lindsay wrote a poem about the Salvation Army. It was entitled, “General William Booth Enters into Heaven,” and was meant to be sung to the tune of “The Blood of the Lamb.” But I will just read the first stanza:

*Booth led boldly with his big bass drum  
The saints smiled gravely and they said, “He’s come.”  
Walking lepers followed, rank on rank,  
Lurching bravos from the ditches dank,  
Vermin-eaten saints with moldy breath  
Unwashed legions with the ways of death.*

Frankly, that’s not a bad description of many of many of Christ’s followers down through the ages. Maybe it even describes a few people here this morning. In fact, it may describe more than realize it.

The servant is told, “Make them come in (compel them) so that my house will be full.” It is interesting that the medieval church saw in this word “compel” justification for the Inquisition. The infidels must be converted under threat of torture and death! Sadly, there have been times in the history of Christianity when the same methods used by radical Muslims today were employed to expand the faith. But this is a terrible misreading of Jesus’ intent. His point is that there is need for rational persuasion and urging so that the Gentiles and the pagans, who don’t know the host even second-hand, might come to believe that they really are wanted at a banquet designed originally for God’s chosen people.

**Consequences suffered.** The tragic consequence is that there is no second chance for the original invitees. The passage ends with these words in verse 24: “I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” We see again here the urgency of salvation. God is gracious and will receive all who come to Him, but men must not dilly-dally and throw up lame excuses.

**Conclusion:** The parable just given tells us clearly that no one can enter the kingdom of God without an invitation, but it also makes clear that if we are excluded from the kingdom of God, it is only because we refused the invitation.

Do you fear saying “Yes” to God? Please understand that this is an invitation, not to a funeral,

but to a feast, a banquet, a joyous occasion. I grant there has always been a brand of Christianity which took all the joy and color out of life. The emperor Julian spoke of those pale-faced Christians for whom the sun shone and they never saw it. Ruskin, who was brought up in a rigid and narrow home, tells how he was given a jumping-jack as a present, and how a pious aunt took it away from him saying that toys were no things for a Christian child. But Jesus thought of the Kingdom in terms of a permanent wedding feast. No one has ever regretted accepting *this* invitation.

Friends, the deepest tragedy in the human experience is not found in the many wrong and foolish things people do (and they are many), nor in the many good and wise things they leave undone (there are many of these as well), but in their rejection of God's gracious invitation. Do not decline. Do not delay.

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i. William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke*, 194.