

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

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Luke 14:15-24 “When one of those who sat at table with him heard this he said to him, Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. But he said to him, ‘A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. At the time of the banquet he sent his servants to say to those who had been invited, “Come for all is now ready.” But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, “I have bought a field and I must go out and see it. I pray you have me excused.” And another said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them. I pray you have me excused.” And another said, “I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come.” So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, “Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and maim and blind and lame.” Then the servant said, “Sir, what you have commanded has been done and still there is room.” The master said to the servant “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled. For I tell you none of those men who were invited shall taste by banquet.””

In our kitchen there is a beautiful photograph of a banquet table which many of you perhaps have seen. It appeared in *Decision* magazine some years ago. Beautifully set with candelabra, wonderful china and silverware, goblets and the setting the banquet, the limitless havens. Gorgeous chairs drawn up to the table. It looks as if the table stretches for infinity. It is the banquet table of God. The caption on the picture reads “Come, for all things are ready.”

This is the picture, which Jesus gives to us here in this story. For it has been the concern not only of people who lived in Jesus’ day but the concern of people who live in our day. A concern, will things turn out all right? Is there hope for humanity? What will the end be? In this year of political campaign we realize the aspirations that are in our people. With candidates of every persuasion promising us that if only they are elected a measurable step forward will be taken in human progress.

We have countries of South Africa and Rhodesia and Ireland, people fighting for something which they believe will make their society better. If only what they have can be accomplished. If they can win their conflict.

The Marxist country’s dream of a classless society and a worker’s paradise. It’s kind of a dream which expands over the breath of humanity that hopes for something in the future. A paradise, a utopia. Or in the Bible – a heaven.

There is a deep yearning within us that someday the mystery of suffering, the mystery of madhouses, of mass graves, the mystery of widows and orphans will be illuminated. Someday must come the hereafter when we can learn the answers. Someday the paralyzing contradiction between justice on the one hand and blind chance on the other must be reconciled. Someday the tension between the rich and the poor, between the sunny side of life and the gloomy zones of horror must be equalized. Someday must come the kingdom of God.

So Jesus in dinner stories which begin with Luke 14:7 and following begins to unfold what that future age is. Picking up on the theme stated by Isaiah – 25:6 – the Jewish people had come to believe that when the kingdom of God was inaugurated on earth it would begin with a great

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

festive banquet. Isaiah says of Jerusalem “Upon this mountain the Lord almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all the people.” That is why in Jesus’ teaching one of those who hears his dinner stories leaps up to say a phrase that was familiar upon the Jewish tongue “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.” It proceeded evidently from someone who was using it as a typical cliché much as we might pronounce any number that are common to us.

Even as that word is pronounced “Blessed is he who is invited to eat bread in the kingdom of God” cuts through the man’s remark and gives a true idea of what it means to be invited to the messianic banquet. To be invited to the most joyous of all occasions where Jesus sees the kingdom as a kingdom of joy. He sees the kingdom as not only joy now but also joy in the future. The kingdom of God is inaugurated by a banquet. As Revelation tells us we who have been invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb are blessed.

As Jesus thinks about this event which is coming and as he looks about at what is immediately happening for him there must have been a contrast. Jesus is on his way to the cross and he’s feeling very strongly as a human the pain of being rejected. Over and over he has been repeating the invitation to come, to taste, to participate in his kingdom. But over and over the message is being refused. So as he sets out this theme on the kingdom of God and how blessed it is to be invited to the marriage supper he feels something that you and I have felt at one time or another when someone we deeply wanted or some project we deeply wanted does not come to pass. And we have felt grieved.

Jesus, as he surveys his kingdom and who it’s open to, notes three groups of people for whom the kingdom of God is available.

It is available first of all to those who have already been invited in advance. It was the custom in the near east that a servant was sent some time in advance of the date of the banquet to invite people to the banquet. They would accept. Then a servant would be sent later on the day the banquet was to be given to give them the exact time of the banquet, when all things were ready. It was only appropriate if one had previously accepted the invitation when the second messenger came to give the hour of the feast that the invitation would then be acted upon. It was the greatest insult to decline the invitation once it had already been accepted.

Yet Jesus perceives as he moves toward the cross that the religious leadership of the nation has rejected him. That the prophets had been the first messengers that had been sent out – the prophets and the law. For centuries giving the invitation that God’s kingdom was breaking in on the present. That his kingdom was to come. For centuries they had been prepared that the Messiah would come. Now the banquet was about to be given. The Messiah had appeared. And those who had initially accepted the invitation of the law and the prophets were declining it.

These persons stand as typical representatives of all persons since then who have lived in a religious environment but a gap has grown up between what one professes and what one does so that intellectually it was professed – blessed is he who breaks bread in the kingdom of God – but when the time come to actually act upon the invitation, the kingdom of God is coming into society in the person of Jesus, then the invitations were refused.

Among those who were refusing the invitations had already been invited to the law and the prophets was a man who said, “I bought a field and I must go out and see it. I pray you, have me

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

excused.” His excuse for not accepting the invitation was business first. I bought a field and I can’t come.

Any of us know that the wise manner of investment is not to purchase a field and then go look at it. There’s enough land speculators around that want to get you to do that. Most sharp investors don’t make that kind of investment.

Here is a person who has the audacity to offer as an excuse that he’s bought a field and now he must go look at it. As if he hadn’t looked at it in the first place.

Our reasons for not doing something are often not reasons at all. They’re simply an invention in order to get out of something we’d rather not do.

Another person had the excuse, “I brought five team of oxen and I can’t come.” In our day he would have been a person who would have just bought a mobile home. He’s got to try it out. If you had five team of oxen that’s ten oxen. In the biblical economy that’s rather wealthy.

I can remember growing up in the orient if a person had just one working domesticated animal they were rather well off. But to have a team was something else! To have several teams was the height of wealth.

Here’s a person who says I bought five yoke of oxen but I haven’t tried them out. I need to go try them out. He certainly would have tried them out before he bought them.

The third person has the best excuse. He says, I’ve married a wife and I can’t come. In Deuteronomy 24 we learn of the Old Testament law that when a man married a wife for one year he was excused from all military or work duty. No honeymoon like that in modern culture.

But it’s a bad excuse. You’d think he’d want to show her off and bring her to the banquet and have her included in the blessing.

What Jesus is really saying about the man who put his business first, and the man who put his oxen first, and the man who put his married life first is that one of the great dangers of life is that good things can come between us and following Jesus as Lord. There’s nothing wrong with buying a field, there’s nothing wrong with buying five team of oxen, there’s nothing wrong with marrying. All these things are right and proper. But one must always keep perspective on them.

As we look at good and legitimate things in our own life and read this story we ask ourselves what excuses do we give for not fulfilling spiritual responsibilities which the Lord invites us to take up. Excuses. One of the difficulties that we have is putting our own interests second so that the interests of the kingdom of God comes first. And making a commitment to our love for the Lord and our labor for the Lord that sticks. Which finds us consciously putting him in first place in every area of our life.

The three men who declined the invitation in this story are ones who had already accepted it but who did not act upon it.

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

Jesus sees that there's a second group of people to whom the invitation to set down at the banquet table comes. It comes to those who are on the receiving end of life's misery – the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame.

In actual fact the story which Jesus tells us an historical parable, where is Jesus has found as he has gone through Israel that the leadership and the synagogues have rejected him. So he has turned to the people. Among the people are those who are without hope. Will they now come to the banquet?

There are really two kinds of poverty. There's a poverty where you have a little money and there's a poverty where you have no money. The kind of poverty, which is spoken of here, the poor, is the poverty that has *no money*. People who have no money don't feel like showing up to a fancy banquet hall where the table is set and where the king is going to preside. You feel out of place when you're not dressed like you should be for a particular occasion. That's why the poor didn't think the kingdom was for them. Jesus goes on to say that the matter of being poor is not a matter of economy; it's a matter of being poor in spirit. To recognize that one doesn't have any currency to buy the kinds of things the king offers. One doesn't have money to buy forgiveness of sin. One doesn't have money to buy eternal life. And the resurrection of the body. All who have come to the banquet table must inevitably be poor.

There are many who come who are maimed. A maimed person is an individual who has lost part of their lives – a hand or eye or ear or leg. Because of the loss of their body they feel deep scars, psychologically. They feel unaccepted, unwanted, ugly. Because of physical limitations they're not at home with people in the group. Jesus says bring to me your hurt, your feeling of unacceptance, your inability to fit within a group. Bring that to me. You're invited to my banquet. Come. The blind come to a banquet? How can a blind person eat graciously at a banquet? Jesus says bring the blind and bring the lame.

We know that when they get to the banquet he's going to give them a wedding garment, his own righteousness. One does not get into the kingdom simply because he's poor, lame, blind, or the like but because the Lord provides his own righteousness. I think also what happens is when the Lord invites the poor, maim and the lame to this banquet in his kingdom they're all made well and whole. One thing Jesus does about human need, he meets it. The poor, the maim, the blind, the lame come. They do not use the excuses of the others. These persons who do not have something else to do are ready to embrace the kingdom. So the Lord comes, as the consistent message of the gospel of Luke, to those who are hungry, who are broken in spirit, who are contrite, who have a recognition in their heart that there is a vacuum which only God can fill. Business can't fill it. Oxen can't fill it. A wife/a husband can't fill it. Only God can fill it. And they come.

Then Jesus sees a third group that are invited to his banquet. These are those who never dreamed that such a possibility existed for themselves. Thus when the lame and the blind and the maim have been gathered in, the servants tell the master that they have been gathered and yet there is room. Verse 22 "Sir, what you have commanded has been done and yet there is room." The master said to the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled."

Here's a striking story again set within an historical setting. Jesus is envisioning the spread of his gospel now not only to the poor, and the lame in Israel. But he's seeing his gospel spreading

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

to the network of highways and roads all over the earth. Going to the gentiles, to those who never felt a part of God's offer of the kingdom. It's going to the highways and the hedges. The main thoroughfares, the main arteries of traffic in the countryside and the hedges, the small narrow, country lanes and byways. He's telling his servant, go out and compel these people who don't believe that the banquet is for them. Compel them to come.

There are two ways you can understand the word "compel." Most Christianity unfortunately there have been who have arisen who have misunderstood it and thought that "compel" was to stick a sword to someone's back and say "Confess Christ or die." There have been those terrible times in the history of the church, when people have done that. Acting without the Spirit of Christ, knowing nothing really of the gospel.

But "compel" is not that forceful compulsion at all. It is the kind of compelling where one comes to a person with a story too good to be true. And one literally has to plead with them to believe that what is being spoken is truth. "You're really wanted! Someone really loved you with a great love and has a great thing for you." This is the kind of compelling.

The servant replies to the householder "Still there is room." I connect this with Revelation 21:16 where the physical dimensions of heaven are given as 1500 miles on each side. When one multiplies that out the number of square miles available if one were to take this simply as a physical dimension you have a territory of about 2,250,000 square miles of the city that John saw coming down out of heaven. That's a fairly big city. It's large enough to cover the western half of the United States.

Yet there is room. Which is God's way of saying in the scriptures that there is room in God's heaven for everyone who wants to be there. God is restless and keeps sending his servants out until everyone who had had a chance or wants a chance or needs a chance can respond. God is saying, My banquet is not going to fall through because some reject, because some say no. I am going to give a dinner. Heaven is to be inaugurated with this great marriage supper of the Lamb.

What I learn from this story is that God wants me to come to Jesus. God wants me to come to life in the kingdom now. God wants me to enjoy his riches of eternal life. When does God want me to come? God wants me to come to him when I'm at the pinnacle of my success. When I just bought a field. When I just bought five team of oxen. When I just married a wife. When the things I've been looking for have come to pass. When my business has just gotten going and things that I've worked for a labored for all my life have finally been realized and the peace of the field is now mine. God wants me to come when I'm at the zenith of my profession.

God wants me to come as a trades person, when I've finally put it all together and I'm making the best income I've ever made and have my five team of oxen and my split level and three cars and boat. God wants me to come at the zenith of that success.

God wants me to come in the zenith of my joy. When I have just married and I'm fresh on my honeymoon. God wants me in the best times of my life.

But God also wants me to come at the lowest moments of my life. The moments when I feel like life has fallen through. When I have sunk to the depths of despair. When I am truly poor or maimed or blind or lame. God says to me, You can come to me then as well. It's so easy to look at life and recognize why it is that so often we come to God when we are in that second

ARE YOU COMING TO THE PARTY?

dimension of being poor and in despair. When we're at the zenith of our success we don't feel the need. We think we're self sufficient. We think we can make it on our own. And nothing or no one is harder to reach than a person who feels like they've got it made. But it is in that crucible of being broken that often we sense most our need for God and are the most willing to come to his table.

But Jesus says I take you and I want you at your zenith and I want you at your depth. He also says he wants us even when we're unaware of his wanting us. God wants us at his banquet table and bids us all with that invitation – come, for all things are ready.

God wants us at his banquet table and bids us all with that invitation – come, for all things are ready.

We thank you, Lord Jesus, that you have called us to come to you. I pray that there would not be a single person within this audience who could walk away from this day without having acted upon your invitation to come to you and find life and joy. We think of your kingdom, Lord, and the beautiful setting, which you have shown us of it. Serve you in true joy and true happiness and nothing in this world could compare to the joy and the peace and the love that you give to your own. Let alone the offer of the age to come. Being with you forever. We thank you for your great love for us. As we soberly and carefully pray today we think also not only of your coming kingdom but we think of ways that you want your kingdom to come right now in our lives and in our church. I pray that we will reflect upon this story which you have told that we will examine excuses in our life that we are prone to offer you of reasons why we are not serving you more ably than we ought. Help us to truly weigh when an opportunity is presented to us to serve you, to truly weigh what is only a way out which is not of you. And when a true objection, a true declining can be given. Lord, we pray to put you first in everything, that your will will be fully done in our lives and in our church. Bless your people today with the great joys of your kingdom we ask in Jesus name. Amen.