

Of Banquet Guests and Places of Honor
Luke 14:7-24
February 20, 2022
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Read Luke 14:7-24

"The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever." (Isaiah 40:8)

Introduction

I quoted from Will Smith's autobiography during my last Ecclesiastes sermon back in December; I love it when I can get two illustrations from one book. Will tells a story from his childhood about his grandmother, Gigi, that fits with today's sermon:

"One day we were sitting on Gigi's front porch... when a homeless woman walked by. Her clothes were filthy; her face was darkened and haggard, a mix of dirt and sunburn. Her front teeth were missing. And even though she was down on the street, I could smell the pungent reek of urine... Gigi stopped her. 'Excuse me, miss, what's your name?' I was horrified – I thought, *Gigi, what are you doing? Just let her go!...* 'Clara.' ... 'I'm Helen,' Gigi said, and *invited her into the house*. My mind was furiously flip-flopping between disgust and terror. But it was about to get way worse. First, they went to the kitchen. Gigi didn't give Miss Clara food that was already prepared in the refrigerator; she cooked her a fresh meal, from scratch. While Clara ate, Gigi handed her a robe, took all her clothes, and washed and folded them... Gigi then took Miss Clara upstairs, bathed her with her bare hands, brushed her teeth, and washed her hair. I wanted to scream, *Gigi! Stop touching that dirty lady! She's gonna stank up our bathtub!* But I knew better than to say that. They were about the same size, so Gigi took Clara to her closet and began holding up clothes in front of her in the mirror to see which ones would fit. Miss Clara was grasping with gratitude. Through tears, she kept saying, 'This is too much, Helen, way too much. Please stop. I don't deserve this.' But Gigi wasn't having it. She held both of Clara's hands, gently shaking them to get Clara to look into her eyes. 'Jesus loves you, and so do I,' Gigi said.¹

I'm not sure I've ever known anybody who has gone to those lengths to help someone that most of us would have reacted in the same way that young Will did – with a mixture of disgust, fear, and indignation. It's hard for most of us to fathom that the command to "*love your neighbor as yourself*" would look something like that. Most of us want our neighbor to look and act a lot like we do. We'd like to spend time with, socialize, and live among people that we're comfortable with. Hopefully someone else will love the unlovable and help those who cannot help themselves.

You'll be shocked to find out that Jesus challenges our normal ways of thinking. He turns everything upside down in His kingdom: the last are first, the humble are exalted, the poor are blessed, and He delights to see the dirty outcasts brought in, fed, clothed, and loved. We've got three sets of Jesus' teachings today, and they revolve around banquets and feasts, and they teach us both how to act when we are invited to one, and who to invite when we throw one. But at the heart of this teaching, it's not really about dinner parties, it's about God's kingdom priorities. I've divided the text into three categories: 1) when you are a guest, 2) when you are a host, and 3) when God is the host.

¹ Will Smith, *Will* (New York: Penguin, 2021), p. vii-ix.

I. When You are the Guest (vv. 7-11)

⁷ Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, ⁸ "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, ⁹ and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. ¹⁰ But when you are invited, go and sit in 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 table with you. ¹¹ For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."

We don't really seat people this way today, but back then the closer to the host you were sitting showed how important you were. Maybe think of wedding receptions where the bride and groom sit on one end and their family and wedding party sit close to them. We've probably all been to that wedding where we were seated at Table 35 where we need binoculars to see the wedding party because they were just being polite to invite us because we're only friends of their aunt's ex-fiancé. Imagine you're one of those people who barely knows the bride and groom and you don't know where your seat assignment is, so you pull up a chair right next to them. And someone has to tap you on the shoulder and say, "Um, your seat is over there, WAY over there." That's embarrassing. Jesus gives really practical advice: "Don't embarrass yourself by choosing a good seat; choose a bad seat, a low place and then if your host moves you up, you'll be honored."

Jesus is using a common, real-life situation to illustrate a spiritual truth. Yes, He was rebuking the people who chose the places of honor, but ultimately Jesus doesn't care about who sits where. He wants us to realize that we're all slaves to the idol of recognition. He wants us to embrace humility because that's just wise. In the light of who God is, none of us stands tall, none of us is important in any measure. Why not just embrace being small and unimportant, because we actually are? How much better to embrace humility and have God recognize you than to boast and seek recognition and have God cut you down to size. Verse 11 - "*For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted*" does not specify who will do the humbling and exalting, so it may sound like it's going to happen by chance or karma or just work itself out. But, no, it's implied that God will humble the proud and exalt the humble. God has a particular dislike for human pride. 1 Peter 5:6: "*Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God so that at the proper time He may exalt you.*" How freeing is that? We don't have to run around making sure everyone knows how important we are. We don't have to seek recognition in our professions, we don't have to carefully maintain an image, we don't have to guard our reputations. We just have to be faithful, and whether the world acknowledges us or not, God knows and sees our sacrifice and will reward us.

Of course, Jesus modeled this best: Philippians 2:5-11 says, "*Have this mind among yourselves, which is yours in Christ Jesus, who, though He was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but made Himself nothing, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. Therefore God has highly exalted Him and bestowed on Him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.*" Jesus could have demanded respect and honor when He came to earth; He could have snapped His fingers and had everyone bowing to Him. But He came in humility, lived a life as a man "acquainted with sorrow," knowing every pain and temptation that we experience in this life, ultimately allowing Himself to be tortured and killed at the end of His life. He did all of that so that He could redeem His people and provide the way to salvation and eternal life. God honored His humility and

exalted Him, restoring Him to His place of honor in heaven; one day, every person who has ever lived will be compelled to acknowledge Jesus as Savior and Lord.

A Pharisee wants to be recognized and respected and given the best seat, a true follower of Jesus wants others to be recognized and honored. Give yourself to others in humble service, treat others as better than yourself. Be content to take the lowest place, not as a manipulative trick to get seated higher, not as false humility to secretly advance yourself, but because you want to be like Jesus.

II. When You are the Host (vv. 12-14)

¹² He said also to the man who had invited him, "When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. ¹³ But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, ¹⁴ and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."

The bottom line here is that you have not really done anything morally commendable when you invite people to dinner who can repay you by having you over as well. Not that you shouldn't have people over and reciprocate when others host you – you should definitely do those things. We just experienced both of those things: we had invited our neighbors over and had a wonderful dinner back in the fall and they just had us over for a delicious meal and great conversation. And a pastor and his family had invited us over for lunch back in November and we had them over last Saturday. Both were wonderful times of deepening friendships. But that's our reward, there's nothing extra in it, no spiritual reward Jesus might say. If you want to be seriously blessed by God in the area of hospitality, invite someone over who doesn't have the means to repay you; have someone over who could use a meal or is often left out or is a social misfit or has some issue that makes it unlikely they'll reciprocate. We have friends who throw a big Thanksgiving meal and invite everybody they know who is single, who don't have family in the area, who don't have a lot of friends. It's kind of like the oddball, misfit meal, and it's beautiful and chaotic and takes a lot of patience on their part. But it's a reflection of God's values and even if nobody thanks or rewards them now, God is preparing their reward in heaven.

I got to know a man named Adam who lived in my town in Virginia. He was about my age, he was the nicest person I knew, always inviting me to come to the Special Olympics that he competed in. He wasn't part of my church, but constantly wanted me to take him out to lunch. I found out that he actually had a rotation of pastors that he asked to take him out to lunch. I had nothing to gain by taking him out, he wasn't going to pay for lunch ever, he wasn't going to come to my church, he was already a Christian so it wasn't even an evangelistic lunch. And sometimes I didn't want to go, I made excuses because I was busy, and like I said, there was nothing in it for me. But then I was convicted by Jesus' teachings and values. And I always enjoyed Adam's childlike faith; he would ask me as many questions as he could think of, and he would encourage me as a pastor. It was actually refreshing – because he wasn't part of my church, he wasn't complaining about anything at church and I wasn't trying to get him to sign up for anything.

Listen, I'm just excited if people in our congregation are having others over for dinner. If you can obey Jesus and invite the poor and unfortunate who can't repay you, that's doubly awesome. But I'd be excited just to hear that hospitality is not dead in America. Seriously, we all have our own little private kingdoms where we all arrive after exhausting days at school, work, sports, extracurricular activities, shopping, and all the things we run around doing, and we close the garage door behind us and shut the rest of the world out. How wonderfully refreshing the world will find it if a Christian family will invite them into their home.

III. When God is the Host (vv. 15-24)

15 When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" 16 But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. 17 And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' 18 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. Please have me excused.' 19 And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' 20 And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' 21 So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' 22 And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' 23 And 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. 24 For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

When a man put on a banquet and sent out invitations in that culture, it was quite rude to accept the invitation but then to find an excuse not to attend. The three men in verses 18-20 had all essentially RSVP'd weeks ahead of the date of the banquet that yes, they would be in attendance. But then when the day of the banquet came, they all made flimsy excuses not to attend. Two of them said they had to inspect a business purchase they had just made, but who wouldn't have already inspected land or a large team of oxen that they had bought? You don't make financial deals of that magnitude without assessing their value ahead of time. And the man who says he has just married a wife is using that as a poor excuse as well - no one would have thrown a banquet that would have conflicted with a wedding, and no one would have invited newlyweds anyways.² So the man was not recently married, just looking for any excuse not to come. All three men have greatly insulted the man giving the banquet, there is an element of disdain in the refusals. In our culture, it doesn't sound like a big deal; people keep their options open, don't always keep their word, nothing to get too worked up about. But Simon Kistemaker says that in some parts of the Middle East such a rude refusal was essentially a declaration of war.³ In verse 24, the master says those men would never taste his banquet, which is an echo of last week's teaching that the master of the house would shut the door at some point and not allow those outside to come in if they didn't respond in time.

Some commentators saw in their excuses the same areas of excuse that people give for not coming to church:⁴ "I have to work." "I have just made a purchase and I need to give it some attention." "I have a family commitment that I have to keep." So church gets missed for a week, then two, then they rarely show up at all. There's some truth to that, but I think Jesus is getting at something a lot deeper than just missing church. He's saying that we end up prioritizing all kinds of things in life much higher than we prioritize following God, and when that happens we're in danger of missing the kingdom. We don't feel overwhelmed by His offer of grace and heaven and all the joys and delights He gives us. And ultimately that's an insult to our Creator.

So this host has paid all the money and done all the work of preparing an amazing meal, but his guestlist has shrunk and there will be many empty seats. And he's angry, he's feeling insulted. What did he do? Did he shut down the banquet, cancel everything, and decide "people are terrible, I'm not putting on a banquet for anybody"? No, he decided to fill those seats however he could. He

² Michael Card, *Luke: The Gospel of Amazement* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2011), p. 178.

³ Simon Kistemaker, *The Parables: Understanding the Stories Jesus Told*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2002), p. 164.

⁴ William Barclay, *The Gospel of Luke* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1975), pp. 194-3.

sent his servants out to bring in the poor, crippled, blind, and lame. The people who we noted before would not be able to repay his kindness. When there was still room after that, he sent the servants as far as they could go to urge people to attend the banquet.

This parable is about God hosting the greatest banquet, the most lavish feast ever. It is a picture of God inviting people to come eat at His heavenly table. The banquet is a symbol of salvation and entrance into the kingdom of heaven. The original invitation list was God's chosen people, the Jews, and probably the upstanding, "righteous" important Jewish leaders. But as we've seen in the last few weeks in other parables and teaching of Jesus, they rejected God's invitation for the most part. So God will move on next to the sinners in Israel, the despised and unimportant people, the tax collectors, the prostitutes, the riff-raff. And finally, He would compel the Gentiles, the outsiders, those who were not God's people before to come and be part of the kingdom.

It's interesting that in verse 23 the master tells the servants to "compel" people to come, and that sometimes has been looked at poorly: are you saying we should put a sword to people's throats and say, "I'm compelling you, I'm forcing you to convert to being a Christian"? Absolutely not! The idea behind compelling people is this: imagine yourself as a foreigner who has been invited to a great banquet by a wealthy man that you've never met, who is from a different culture than yours. His servant says you're invited, but you're thinking, "Yeah, right, that is way too good to be true. He cannot possibly mean to invite me, he doesn't even know me. Surely this is a mistake." The only way for the servant to get you to come is to assure you over and over that you are truly invited and the master really wants you there. He must compel you, perhaps take you by the arm and say, "Trust me, it's gonna be awesome." That's a more winsome version of evangelism, assuring people that God's salvation is not true good to be true, that it's all waiting for them to respond and come.⁵

Conclusion

Who are we in this parable? You and I are both the foreigner and one of the poor people crippled by sin who are invited to God's great feast. In humility, let us realize that we don't deserve a seat and we have no claim on an invitation and we'll never be able to pay it back. But God invites us anyways. Revelation 19:7-9 says, "*Let us rejoice and exult and give Him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and His Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure*" – *for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angels said to me, 'Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.'*" Do you know what's crazy? As we combine the Scriptural metaphors of salvation, we go from being the outcasts to being the bride of the wedding. We actually go from barely being invited to the focus of the event. Now, none of us is the Bride of Christ on our own, but together, corporately the Church is the bride and Jesus is her Groom. And Jesus will bring us into His eternal kingdom in a way that looks like a marriage. And then the heavens will witness the great wedding feast of the Lamb! It's too bad we're not having communion today, that's a perfect segue into the Lord's Table being a foreshadowing of the marriage supper of the Lamb.

But even more than just a feast, God is inviting you to eternal life in heaven. Your invitation has been sent in the form of Jesus coming to earth, and both explaining the ways of the kingdom and then achieving our entrance to the kingdom by dying on the cross. Your invitation is contained in the Bible's call to repent of your sins, to trust in Jesus by faith, and to enter into a saving relationship with Him. Are you willing to accept that invitation? Are you willing to stop making excuses and set aside your business, your family, your own private kingdom, and make your way to

⁵ Adapted from Philip Graham Ryken, *Luke, Volume 2* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R, 2009), p. 86.

His house and His feast? Many people who get invited never come, including some who said they would. They insult and reject God's amazing offer, choosing to stay in their rebellion to Him. Some people genuinely don't think there's going to be a banquet, it's too good to be true. Others think that Jesus doesn't have the power to give eternal life; He was just a man, how could He be in charge of who goes to heaven or not? Other people think that His invitation is not the only one, that other religions offer an invitation to the feast of eternal life that are just as valid. Most people, though, are *just too busy* - with their work, their possessions, and their families to make the time to commit to knowing Jesus, to dwell on eternal things. Please don't be like them and miss out on the greatest offer you'll ever receive.

How do you apply this sermon? One way is just in your everyday attitude – embracing a posture of humility over pride and exalting yourself. A second way is very practical – invite people over or out for meals, both people who can pay you back and especially people who can't. And finally, realize how amazing your invitation to eternal life is and make sure it is the greatest priority in your life. Stop making excuses for not following Jesus, for not committing to come to His banquet. The feast will happen whether you're there or not. Eternity will either include you or it won't, God will accomplish His plans with or without your participation. The invitation is there, I'm begging you to accept it and come feast with all of the rest of the forgiven sinners who don't deserve a seat at the table, but who are there because of God's great mercy and love! Amen.

Benediction

Philemon 6, 25 – *“I pray that the sharing of your faith may become effective for the full knowledge of every good thing that is in us for the sake of Christ. The grace of the Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit.”*