

“A Great Banquet” (Luke 14:7–24)

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Recently, I was in Louisville, Kentucky, to do course work on a Ph.D. in philosophy at Southern Seminary. I started this degree last year, and I have to travel to campus twice a year. When I’m there, I usually go out to dinner with a group of other students. Since none of us live in Louisville, we’re not sure of the best places to eat. So, we get on our phones, and with apps like Yelp or TripAdvisor, we look up well-rated restaurants. We can see where the restaurant is on the map, what kind of food it serves, see pictures of the food, and even look at the menu. One of the students had a car, so we could drive to the restaurant of our choice quite easily. And there were many choices. A few times, it took us more than a few minutes to settle on one place. But it was rather easy.

This reminds me of what a young comedian once said. In describing his generation, he said that he often would spend so much time trying to figure out which restaurant to eat at (he lived in New York City), that by the time he was settling on a place, he realized he had run out of time, so had to make himself a peanut-butter-and-jelly sandwich.

We have so many choices today, more than ever before. And it’s so easy to get good food, if we want it. But since we’re drowning in choices, and since so many things compete for our attention, time, energy, and money, we often don’t make the right choice. Instead of choosing the best food, we settle for something quick and easy.

Though we have more choices than ever before, there have always been things that have competed for people’s attention, time, energy, love, money, and other precious resources. And people have always made bad choices.

I mention this because today, as we continue our study of the Gospel of Luke, we’ll see that Jesus tells a couple of parables about meals. In one of them, he warns people about trying to exalt themselves. In the other, he says that the kingdom of God is like a great feast, and many people have been invited to it. But people offer up excuses as to why they can’t come. They have chosen lesser things instead of coming to the great banquet. Those who choose not to come to this meal will never eat the finest of foods, the food that they need.

We’re looking at Luke 14:7–24 today. As your turn there in your Bible, I want to remind us that Luke is a biography of Jesus. Luke told his readers that he had written his biography of

Jesus based on eyewitness testimony so “that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught” (Luke 1:4).¹ Luke wanted his readers to know that what they had already been taught about Jesus was true, that what he writes is real history. It is the truth.

In this section of Luke, we read about Jesus’ many conflicts with the religious leaders of the day, primarily the Pharisees, a group of Jewish religious leaders who were known for their pious adherence to the law that God had given Israel at Mount Sinai many centuries before. Jesus often criticizes these men for seeking honor instead of righteousness, for being hypocrites, and for missing the point of the Hebrew Bible, our Old Testament. But Jesus has a lot more to say than just criticizing the religious powers that be. He teaches all of us about the kingdom of God and how to be a part of that kingdom, where God not only rules over his people, but also blesses them. And in today’s section of Luke, we see that Jesus talks about what those who are part of God’s kingdom should and should not do.

Let’s begin by reading Luke 14:7–11. The first point of this passage is to humble yourself so that you will not later be humbled.

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.”

A couple of weeks ago, we read the beginning of this chapter, when we learned that Jesus was eating in the home of a Pharisee (Luke 14:1). He’s still there, talking to those who were invited to that meal.

The Pharisees were the kind of people who liked to look good. They were concerned about their public reputation. In fact, it seems that they were more concerned about appearances than about the state of their hearts. In Luke 11:43, Jesus chastises them for seeking honor. He says, “Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the best seat in the synagogues and greetings in the marketplaces.” Once again, at this meal, Jesus sees that they chose the places of honor at this

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

meal. In the ancient world, honor was very important. Where you sat at a meal indicated your status. This is still true to some extent. If you attend a wedding and you're seated closer to the bathroom than the wedding party, that tells you a lot about how much the bride and groom value you. But it was more important in the ancient Jewish and Greco-Roman world. Sitting next to the host indicated that you were higher up on the social ladder than those who sat farther away.

Jesus sees the Pharisees scrambling to fill the places of honor, so he tells them a parable, which, in this case, isn't much of a story, but is really a bit of sound advice. He tells them not to sit down at a place of honor. Why? Because there may be "someone more distinguished than you" who comes along and is given your place. Then, you will have to face the shame of moving to a lower place. Jesus says that it's better to take a lower place and then later be asked to sit in a higher place.

Now, this is sound advice. It's actually found in Proverbs 25:6-7:

- ⁶ Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great,
- ⁷ for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"
than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.

It's better to be humble and be elevated than to be proud and face the potential embarrassment of being knocked down a rung or two on the social ladder.

But Jesus isn't just dispensing common sense, or nice little life lessons. He's teaching something far more important. He says, "everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Both James and Peter quote the Greek version of Proverbs 3:34, which says, "God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble" (James 4:6; 1 Pet. 5:5). James continues to say, "Humble yourselves before the Lord, and he will exalt you" (James 4:10).

Jesus is getting at something far more important than proper dining etiquette. Those who are concerned with honor in this life may very well not receive any honor in the life to come. Those who are proud, who strive for positions of power and prominence, may be knocked low for eternity. Those who are part of God's kingdom have nothing to boast about, because they realize their status is a gift from God, not something they've earned, and certainly not something they're entitled to.

This becomes clearer in the next paragraph in Luke 14, when Jesus tells those dining with him who they should and should not invite to a feast. Let's read verses 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.”

In the ancient world, it was assumed that you would be kind to those who could be kind to you in return. In other words, you would give something to those who could give you something back later. If you held a feast, you wouldn't invite people unless they could give you something back later, whether that was an invitation to their own feast, some kind of honor, money, business, or something else valuable.

But Jesus says that we shouldn't give to expect something back in return. He says not to invite the rich and powerful, “lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid.” Earlier in Luke, he said, “love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return, and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High, for he is kind to the ungrateful and the evil” (Luke 6:35).

In that verse and in the verses we just read from Luke 14, Jesus mentions being rewarded, but not from others in this life. The reward doesn't come from those we've flattered, buttered up, and served so that we can receive from them later. No, the reward comes from God. On that great day of resurrection, when human history as we know it is brought to an end, that day when Jesus returns to the world to settle all accounts and to make all things new, the just, those who have been declared righteous in God's sight, will be rewarded. Jesus doesn't mean that we earn salvation by doing a lot of good works, by inviting poor people over to our house. That would be contrary to so much that we read in the rest of the Bible. What he means is that those who have received God's grace, those who have the gift of being declared right in God's sight through faith in Jesus, will extend that grace to others. They will live differently. They will invite others to their homes who can't pay them back, who aren't in a position to do favors in return.

Speaking of grace, we all know that famous hymn, “Amazing Grace.” Many of us know that the words were written by John Newton, a man who once was a slave trader and who later became a pastor. Newton wrote many hymns, but also many sermons and letters. In one letter, he writes this:

Let your friends who are in good circumstances be plainly told, that, though you love them, prudence, and the necessary charge of a family, will not permit you to

entertain them, no, not for a night. What! say you, shut my door against my friends? Yes, by all means, rather than against Christ. If the Lord Jesus was again upon earth, in a state of humiliation, and he, and the best friend you have, standing at your door, and your provision so strait that you could not receive both, which would you entertain? Now, he says of the poor, “Inasmuch as ye did it to the least of these my brethren, ye did it unto me.” ‘Your friends have houses of their own, and money to pay at an inn, if you do not take them in; but the poor need relief. One would almost think that passage, Luke 14:12–14, was not considered as a part of God’s word; at least I believe there is no one passage so generally neglected by his own people. I do not think it unlawful to entertain our friends; but if these words do not teach us, that it is in some respects our duty to give a preference to the poor, I am at a loss to understand them.’²

That may be a bit extreme. The Bible doesn’t forbid eating with friends, and Newton recognizes that. But the point is that if we had to choose between hosting a friend or hosting a poor person, we should choose the poor. We all can and should be gracious not just to those who are like us, those who are already kind and generous towards us. That’s what the world does. Earlier in Luke, when Jesus talked about not giving in order to receive, he said, “If you love those who love you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. And if you do good to those who do good to you, what benefit is that to you? For even sinners do the same” (Luke 6:32–33).

If you’re a Christian, you should realize that everything you have is a gift from God (James 1:17). You don’t experience God’s goodness because you have earned it or because you’re entitled to it. In fact, God has told us that we don’t deserve anything from God except judgment because we have failed to love him and obey him. We fail to obey him because we fail to love him and trust that his ways are good. Instead of God being the King of our lives, we would rather live like kings and queens of our own little dominions. Our sin is a personal, relational issue—a failure to love and live for God, as well as a failure to love our neighbors—and our sin is also an authority issue—we don’t want to come under God’s authority, so we rebel against him. Because of that, we deserve to be excluded from the great feast that God has prepared for all the citizens of his kingdom.

And that brings us to the next paragraph in Luke 14. In the first paragraph, Jesus teaches that those who humble themselves will be exalted. In the second paragraph, he teaches us to

² John Newton, Richard Cecil, *The Works of the John Newton*, vol. 1 (London: Hamilton, Adams & Co., 1824), 136.

invite the humble to our feasts. And in this third paragraph, he tells a parable about a great banquet. Here are verses 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.’”

After Jesus has taught a bit about honor and humility and whom to invite to a feast, as well as what will happen at the day of judgment, someone at this particular meal blurts out, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” Perhaps he did that to break the tension, to change the subject. Or perhaps he meant it. At any rate, Jesus uses that statement to teach about the kingdom. He tells another story.

The story is quite simple. A man once held a banquet, a great feast. At the beginning of the sermon, I mentioned how easy it is to find good places to eat. Going out to eat is more expensive than cooking food at home, but it’s relatively easy for us to afford a nice meal. Compared to people of all times and places, we eat like kings and queens. In the ancient world, preparing a feast was a big deal. It’s not like people had refrigerators and freezers and supermarkets. If you slaughtered an animal, you had to cook it quickly and eat it quickly. You couldn’t save the leftovers. If you killed a fattened calf to eat, you would invite many people to come to eat. And preparing a meal would involve much more, such as making your own bread. The point is that having a great banquet was special, it required a lot of sacrifice and effort on the part of the host, and if people were invited, they were expected to come.

In this story, invitations were sent out to many people. And it seems like they at first accepted the invitation. But when the time of the banquet arrives, everyone who was invited has an excuse as to why they can’t come. One says he bought a field and now has to see it, which is

rather strange. Who buys something sight unseen? And why is it such a pressing issue to see this field? Couldn't it wait until the following day? Another person says he bought a yoke of oxen and has to examine them. Again, who would buy expensive animals without first examining them? And even if you bought them sight unseen, it's not like you couldn't wait until later to get a good look at them. The third excuse comes from a man who says he has just become married. There may be a hint here that he will be too busy romancing his wife to come to this feast. Again, this is no emergency. The man could have a date night with his wife at some other time. These excuses are lame. In fact, they're insulting. It's like inviting someone to your wedding, only to be told they can't come because they have to mow their lawn.

So, in this story, the servant who invited people to his master's feast tells the master about the lame excuses he is given. The master rightly becomes angry. He tells the servant not only to invite "the poor and crippled and blind and lame," but also to bring them in. This suggests that they would need help getting to the party. In this society, people wouldn't think to first invite the poor and disabled. There's nothing wrong with them, of course, but they were not regarded as honorable. According to Jewish law, those who were disabled couldn't serve as priests in the tabernacle and temple (Lev. 21:17–23). They were regarded as unclean, as outcasts. They wouldn't be able to repay the master of the feast by inviting him to their own feasts, because they wouldn't ever be in a position to give a feast. You had to have wealth to do that.

When the servant brings in the poor and the disabled, he tells his master that there is still room for more guests at the great banquet. The master then tells the servant, "Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled." Some people believe this is a reference to Gentiles. "If the Jews won't come, then invite the Gentiles to the party!" Some people have misused this verse to try to coerce people to become Christians, to "compel" them by force to make a profession of faith. I don't think either of those views are correct. Yes, Paul said many times that because many Jewish people wouldn't believe his message about Jesus that he would go to the Gentiles. But Paul was a Jewish man who came to faith after first rejecting an invitation to the Lord's table. And he always held out hope that more Jews would come to Jesus. And Christianity has never been spread through force or violence, because it can't. We can't force people to believe something that they don't. We try to reason with people and persuade them to put their trust in Jesus. We invite them to taste and see that the Lord is good, but we cannot force anyone to come into God's kingdom.

The point that Jesus is making is that there is room for all kinds of people in God's kingdom: the misfits, the outcasts, and so forth. There may be many who make excuses as to why they don't put their trust in Jesus, why they don't live for him, read their Bibles, come to church, or obey God's commands. There will always be people who make those excuses. But the ones who realize that this invitation is the best offer they will ever receive will come.

Throughout history, there have been rich Christians, people of high standing. But more often than not, the people who realize their need for Jesus are people who are, in the world's eyes, weak and poor. The apostle Paul told Christians in the Greek city of Corinth:

²⁶ For consider your calling, brothers: not many of you were wise according to worldly standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. ²⁷ But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; ²⁸ God chose what is low and despised in the world, even things that are not, to bring to nothing things that are, ²⁹ so that no human being might boast in the presence of God.

God often chooses to demonstrate his strength through the weak, his wisdom through the simple and uneducated, his glory through the humble. What matters is whether we realize that all of us are foolish, weak, and low, and whether we realize the invitation that Jesus gives to us is to the greatest feast ever.

What kind of feast are we invited to? The answer is given by the prophet Isaiah. He looked forward to a time when God would recreate the world to be a paradise, a new creation without sin and death (Isa. 65:17). In one of the many passages where Isaiah reveals what will happen at the end of history, he writes this:

- ⁶ On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine,
of rich food full of marrow, of aged wine well refined.
- ⁷ And he will swallow up on this mountain
the covering that is cast over all peoples,
the veil that is spread over all nations.
- ⁸ He will swallow up death forever;
and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces,
and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.
- ⁹ It will be said on that day,
"Behold, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us.
This is the LORD; we have waited for him;
let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation" (Isa. 25:6–9).

Perhaps we don't appreciate this image of a feast because it's so easy for us to get food. In fact, we have too much food. We're in a strange position in America: we're not harmed by lack but by abundance. It's easy enough to get some pretty good food, and more than we need.

But think about all the good meals you've ever had. I've had a few experiences of eating in some expensive restaurants. Sometimes, I've eaten so much that I feel stuffed and bloated. When eating, I thought, "This is really good food!" But later, I thought, "I shouldn't have eaten that much." At other times, I've anticipated a meal only to think, "Is that all there is? Why did I pay that much for a meal that only satisfies me for a few hours?" That's how it is with so much of what we choose in our lives, whether it's a meal, a career, a relationship, entertainment, or anything else. We don't feel satisfied. We wonder why we chose that thing that was bad for us. We're disappointed. We realize that what we hoped would fill us has left us empty not long afterwards.

But think about the meal that Isaiah prophesied about, the great banquet he foresaw. Sure, he talks about rich food and well-aged wine. But those are just images of how God satisfies our spiritual cravings with the greatest food and the greatest pleasures. Then look what Isaiah says: at that time, God will remove the covering, the veil, that darkens our lives. He promises that God will swallow up death itself. No other feast promises us the end of death. No other invitation that we might receive makes such a grand promise. We might be invited to many things in this life: a party, a game, a rock concert, a job offer, a way to have some quick and cheap pleasure. But none of these things will ultimately satisfy us. And certainly none of those things will remove that great and ugly destroyer of pleasure and hope: death itself.

But Jesus offers us an invitation to life that never ends. He promised us food that will satisfy, that wouldn't leave us feeling hungry or bloated or sick. And the reason that Jesus can make that invitation is because he is the one who gives us that spiritual food.

Think about eating. What do you do when you eat? You take something that was once living, and you consume it so you can live. Think about eating the choicest steak. That once was a cow. Even vegetarians eat things that once were living. To live, we need to feed on something that dies. And this is true of spiritual life. In order to live, we must have a way to evade God's wrath against our sin. We must find a way to escape punishment on that great day of resurrection. If we were to stand on trial before God, who knows everything we've ever thought, every twisted desire we've ever had, every foolish or cruel word we've ever spoken, and every

other action we've ever performed, the evidence would not be in our favor. We would be found guilty, failing to love God and other people the way we should, failing to live according to God's rules for life. We wouldn't be invited to God's table.

Only Jesus lived the perfect life. And if you take time to read about him in the Gospels, you'll see how he always honored God the Father. He was never selfish or cruel. He never compromised. He never sold out for money or anything else. Only he lived a perfect life, never sinning. Yet he died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin—if we trust him, *if* we accept his invitation, *if* we recognize that we have been spiritually blind and lame, *if* we humble ourselves. If we trust in him, Jesus' death gives us life. He becomes our spiritual food that sustains us. He is the only way to the greatest feast, where death is abolished and where we are satisfied.

Jesus warned that those who reject his offer will never taste his banquet. His parable reflects something else in Isaiah:

- 11 “But you who forsake the LORD,
 who forget my holy mountain,
 who set a table for Fortune
 and fill cups of mixed wine for Destiny,
12 I will destine you to the sword,
 and all of you shall bow down to the slaughter,
 because, when I called, you did not answer;
 when I spoke, you did not listen,
 but you did what was evil in my eyes
 and chose what I did not delight in.”
- 13 Therefore thus says the Lord GOD:
 “Behold, my servants shall eat,
 but you shall be hungry;
 behold, my servants shall drink,
 but you shall be thirsty;
 behold, my servants shall rejoice,
 but you shall be put to shame;
14 behold, my servants shall sing for gladness of heart,
 but you shall cry out for pain of heart
 and shall wail for breaking of spirit.
15 You shall leave your name to my chosen for a curse,
 and the Lord GOD will put you to death,
 but his servants he will call by another name” (Isa. 65:11–15).

If you are not yet a Christian, I urge you to humble yourself before the Lord, and to accept his gracious offer to come to his feast. Don't make lame excuses: “I'm too busy. I'll learn

more about Jesus when I have time, but right now isn't a good season in my life." None of us know how much time we'll have left to live. Take the offer now while it stands. When you're dead, it will be too late.

If you are a Christian, invite others to come to this feast. If they make lame excuses, perhaps read Luke 14:15–24 to them. And be gracious. God has invited you, a spiritual outcast, to come to his table. He has taken you, a lowly person, and put you in an exalted position in his house. Be gracious to those who are lowly and weak, and give to those who are poor and can't pay you back. If we have received our Lord's invitation, let us follow our Lord's example.