

You Are Invited!
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Luke 14:15-24
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Introduction

What pictures come to mind when you hear the word “banquet”. Traditionally it may look a little like this White House dinner: in 2015, the Obamas hosted the annual White House Passover Seder where guests were served carrot soufflé, savoury holiday brisket, seared salmon with roasted artichokes, roasted potatoes with garlic and onion, and — for dessert — macarons. Very fancy. Or maybe you would prefer this White House dinner instead: in 2018, the Trumps catered for the college football national champions by ordering over 300 burgers, chips, and pizza. I know which I would prefer.

Heaven is given many illustrations in the Bible, but I love the picture given here in this story of a banquet. The wonderful joy of experiencing good food and sharing great company. If heaven is even slightly like that, I am very much looking forward to it.

I have a bit of a problem with the title of this story though, ‘the parable of the great banquet’. Whilst the banquet does play a major role in this story, I prefer the title ‘the parable of the rejected invitation’. Because the core of this story is actually: to get to the banquet, we must accept the invitation Jesus sends us.

My plan is to recap the parable of the rejected invitation and then to highlight three key details about the invitation. It is an invitation from Jesus, it is an invitation to all, and it is an invitation to accept.

Story

We heard from Nikki, at the start of chapter 14, that Jesus is currently reclining in the house of a prominent Pharisee. He has been invited round for a meal, but this is not a genuine expression of hospitality. The Pharisees were the Jewish religious leaders who opposed Jesus because he challenged their incorrect interpretations of the Jewish law which were supposed to point to God’s holiness, not their own. Jesus has not been invited round for a natter, but so he can be “carefully watched” (v1) for anything that could be criticised or discredited.

But the only people at this dinner who are worthy of criticism are the Pharisees themselves. They quickly reveal their true colours by squabbling over the important seats at the table. So, Jesus calls them out on their selfishness and even suggests to his host that a better use of his “hospitality” would be to invite those who could never invite him back. Verses 13 and 14 say, “*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.*” As well as challenging them on their hypocrisy, Jesus reminds them that the path to heaven, “the resurrection of the righteous”, is unselfish.

But one individual gets the wrong end of stick in v15. Whether it is a self-righteous boast or a genuine expression of awe, he is **presuming** that he will be going to heaven. Which gives Jesus a great opportunity to address the actuality of their beliefs, and he illustrates it with this parable.

A man is planning a great banquet. So, much like today, he sends out his first invitation to gather numbers and plan how much food he needs to prepare. Evidently, all his friends accepted this first invitation because the servant is sent back to them with the second invitation. Their invitation system works a bit different to ours. The first invitation would simply specify a day, and then the second invitation would be sent on that day once all the food was ready so the guests could turn up and start eating right away. So, the servant goes to tell the guests that the food is ready, expecting them to follow him back to the house, but instead they all “alike” (v18) begin to make excuses.

We should not feel any sympathy for these men. These excuses are hollow, shallow, and altogether insulting. You would not buy a field without first seeing it and, at this point, there is no reason you could not postpone your viewing. Likewise, 10 cows would have been a lot of money and not money you would fork out without testing them first. It would be like buying 10 used tractors for your farm without taking them for a test drive or checking they even worked. Again, seeing as this man has waited this long, he can wait a little longer. Then, for anyone who has been involved in planning a wedding, you will know that the last gentleman has no leg to stand on. You do not forget your wedding day is near. He should have turned down the first invitation.

The host is rightfully angry but despite the insult of pitiless excuses, he will not let the food go to waste and he generously sends the servant to invite the very people Jesus told the Pharisees to invite: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. And when there is still room in his house, he sends his servant to summon the untouchables of their day: to the roads where the outcasts and foreigners wandered. So, this great banquet is enjoyed by many, but not by the original invitees.

An invitation from Jesus

Jesus makes it clear what this story means. Verse 24 is not part of the parable; this is Jesus’ open challenge to the Pharisees. *“I tell you (who are sitting in front of me), not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”* The Pharisees self-righteously assume they are going to heaven, but Jesus is saying, while they accepted the first invitation, they have rejected the second and more important one.

God is the host of this beautiful banquet we call heaven, and his servant is Jesus. In the Bible Jesus is also described as the word of God, so the first invitation to heaven the servant brings is the word of God in the OT through the prophets and scriptures there which the Pharisees very much believed in.

But stubbornly, they refused to accept the second invitation. The second invitation came direct from Jesus himself, through his life and ultimately his death. At the beginning of his ministry, he announced, that, *“The time has come... The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!”* (Mark 1:15). He then taught about the reality of heaven and hell, that our wickedness has separated us from God and excludes us from heaven. He taught that we need to repent of that sin and believe in the good news that we can be reunited with God in his kingdom. He also taught how to live as a new life as a repentant believer in that good news.

Then, at the end of his spotless life, he fulfilled this good news. He was put to death on a cross where he substituted all our wrong for his perfection so that he could suffer the just punishment our sin deserves, and we could be made right with God and enter heaven.

The Pharisees refused to believe this even though it was written in the OT! Isaiah 53:5 says, *“But he was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was on him, and by his wounds we are healed.”* Just like the parable, the second invitation is naturally assumed in the first. Yet the Pharisees insult God with poor excuses for not accepting Jesus.

This second invitation is as relevant to us as it is to the Pharisees. In the Bible, we have the full picture. Jesus came and died and then rose from the dead to reveal the good news of the resurrection of righteous, to prove that death and evil are defeated, and life beyond death is a reality. Those that are seen right in God’s eyes, because of their belief in the saving death of Jesus, they will see heaven. As Jesus says himself in John 11:25-26, *“I am the resurrection and the life. The one who believes in me will live, even though they die; and whoever lives by believing in me will never die. Do you believe this?”*

Jesus’ invitation is not a nicety, it is a necessity. **We** are being invited by Jesus to heaven through his death and resurrection which is wonderful news because we clearly cannot get there any other way.

An invitation to all

The second amazing truth of this parable is that this invitation is open to all! In the face of rejection, the host shows remarkable kindness and invites outcasts of all people. This would have been a deeply challenging picture for Jesus’ listeners and provides us with a wonderful illustration of who Jesus is inviting. Let me draw out three characteristics of these invitees.

Firstly, these people would never be able to pay the host back, whether in kindness or with a return invite. Who of us can say we do not fit into that category? Can we live such a blameless life that we are undeserving of judgement? Can we ever repay Jesus for his gracious self-sacrifice that brings us life? Like the poor and the crippled, all we can do is receive such a generous invitation with awe, accept the invitation with faith it will be fulfilled, and attend the meal with respect and honour.

Secondly, there is no prejudice towards their backgrounds. The host doesn’t restrict his banquet to Jews or to able bodied people or people of a certain social standing. So here we see: Jesus’ invitation includes all sexual identities, all gender identities, all relationship statuses, all hair colours, all heights, and all ages. But, only as long you come with a repentant heart. Whilst it is an open invitation to all with no prejudice, we come on Jesus’ terms. If you were invited round to a vegetarian’s house, you wouldn’t bring a meat dish because you want to eat what you want to eat. No, you respect the kind hospitality, and eat what is put in front of you. Jesus’s invitation to everyone is come as you are but don’t hold on to who you are. We are all sinners, and we all need to change. The poor and the crippled would have felt like kings feasting on this scale. They would have forgotten all about their poverty. In a similar way, when we accept the invitation, we leave our sin at the door.

Thirdly, imagine the thoughts running through the minds of the new guests: “He really wants me to come to his banquet? I’m not worth anything and I’m going to need help getting there.” Many of us will admit to feeling unworthy of God’s grace, or maybe you are feeling that you are not worthy of being saved, as the guests would have felt unworthy of an invitation. Here’s where that beautiful word “compel” appears in v23. The host doesn’t simply say, “If they don’t believe you, leave them.” No, he says “compel them.” “I want

them at my banquet no matter their background, whether they feel worthy of it or not, or if they will need physically bringing along. I want them at my banquet”.

One more point I will briefly note. Notice the host’s house is massive, “there is still room.” The invitation is not just **to** all people, but God is prepared for all people to accept. 1 Timothy 2:4 says, “[God] wants **all** people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.” 2 Peter 3:9 says, “[God] is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish but **everyone** to come to repentance.” Jesus’ invitation is not exclusive. **All people** are invited and encouraged to come to heaven.

An invitation to accept.

Which leads me nicely onto our final point. Will you accept the invitation?

Maybe this is the first time you have been invited by Jesus and so you are beginning to think through what it means for you. Well, you’re in the right place and I compel you to accept the invitation, it is the best decision you will ever make.

If you’ve heard the invitation before and not accepted it, then Jesus says you are making excuses. I don’t imagine it is fields or oxen but something in this world is taking your priority. But whatever that priority is, it is second best to the magnificence of heaven. You are being invited to an eternity where our bodies won’t age and they will become more powerful, where people won’t be difficult or evil, where there will be no pain or death, and where we will be in the presence of an all-loving God. I compel you too, please do not settle for second best.

There is also a challenge here to those who falsely call themselves Christians. The Pharisees assumed they were going to heaven but rejected the true call to repentance. It is easy to claim to be a Christian but not have truly accepted the invitation to heaven. So, if you make that claim, ask yourself whether you have really turned away from sin and believe that Jesus died to save you.

For those who have accepted the invitation, remember when I said this invitation is on Jesus’ terms? One application of this parable is to live true to the invitation we have accepted which includes being careful that our Jesus-won righteousness doesn’t corrupt into the self-righteousness of the Pharisees. It also includes modelling the love God shows here. Does our love for people extend to the outcasts and unloved? Do we share the invitation to the gospel with all people or are we prejudiced? It’s never easy to share the gospel but it’s a lot easier to share it with those who are like us or those we know and get on with. But Jesus says in Matthew chapter 5 (v46-48), *“If you love those who love you, what reward will you get? Are not even the tax collectors doing that? And if you greet only your own people, what are you doing more than others? Do not even pagans do that? Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect.”*