

## **An Invitation to The Great Feast**

As we move further into our series on the parables of the kingdom, we encounter our first table story. The table is the focal point of hospitality in all cultures. Not surprising, Jesus spent a lot of time talking around the table. We see this especially in the gospel of Luke. Sometimes he is the host (feeding the 5000), sometimes he is the guest (at the houses of Levi, the Pharisees, Mary & Martha), and sometimes we aren't sure if he is the guest or the host (the meal at Emmaus). Woven into these moments at the table, Jesus tells stories about hospitality, and the way it works in God's kingdom.

The first thing you should know is how hospitality worked in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. Hospitality is probably the one rule of social conduct that was absolutely inviolable. If someone showed up on your doorstep in the middle of the night asking for food, you gave it. If a stranger happened upon you, having no place to stay, you invited him to stay at your house. Opening up your home to relatives, friends, or strangers and eating around a common table was the strength of the culture.

Celebrations within the life of the community were always marked by great feasts. The normal process for holding a great banquet, say a wedding banquet, would be to send out an "save the date" type of invitation to your guests. Once you had heard back from your guests, you could then prepare the feast on the appropriate day. In those days, a host would need a significant amount of lead-time to prepare, so knowing how many animals to butcher and how much food to prepare was essential to a successful banquet. On the day of the banquet, when the food was all ready, the host would send out the invitation to come – now it is ready!

This is exactly what happened in our parable of the great banquet (Luke 14:15-23). The host had invited his guests ahead of time. Now the time for the banquet had arrived, the host had made all of the necessary preparations (which probably took several days), and he sent word to let his guests know that the banquet was ready to begin. But in the intervening time between when the original invitation was extended and when the banquet was ready, the circumstances of the guests changed somewhat, and they found themselves with other priorities at that moment.

Now, we should be careful not to minimize their reasons for backing out of attending the banquet: real estate investment, a new set of oxen, a marriage. None of these things were trivial matters. The real estate investment was concerned with the financial security of an entire family. One's livelihood depended on whether the oxen could work. Spending time laying the groundwork for a lifetime of partnership with a spouse is foundational work. In fact, it was so foundational, newlyweds in Israel were supposed take a whole year off to build a solid foundation with one's spouse. The excuses the guests offer up aren't insignificant. They are real concerns for real people.

But, in the context of the great banquet, they pale in comparison.

We know the rest of the story. The slave is sent to invite the poor and the lame. And when there is still room left at the banquet, he is sent out again to invite those outside the city, in the highways and byways.

We could quickly arrive at the moral of the story: be careful not to be too busy to pass up the invitation from God to join him at his kingdom table, be careful not to ignore the summons of God to be fed by him.

But if parables were just about getting to the moral of the story, we would miss out on the richness and depth of the story. There is much more. This parable is an allegory – it's a story that is really telling a story about something else.

Consider for a moment the first invitation that was offered. The prophets of Israel had already extended that "save the date" invitation hundreds of years before. They spoke of the day that was coming when God's kingdom would be established on earth, and that kingdom was marked by a great banquet in the kingdom of God. Jesus' listeners would have heard Isaiah's words:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. (Isa 25:6)

God had already invited his people to this feast of the kingdom, he had already invited them to come and have fellowship with him, have communion with him. He told them that the days was coming when he would send his Messiah to save his people from slavery, oppression, hunger, sickness, and despair, and invite them into fellowship with him. The Israelites heard this invitation, and they lived their response to it, anticipating the arrival of God' messiah – anticipating the time when the banquet would be ready.

And when God was ready, he sent out another invitation to the people: "the time of waiting is over, the time has come when I will save the world and establish my rule among the nations and all will be fed with my very presence". "Here is my Son, with whom I am well pleased."

Jesus had gone about Galilee summoning people to God's great supper. This was the moment they had been waiting for! But when the moment finally arrived, they found they had more pressing concerns.

So, God expanded his invitation to include all those who had been "dis-membered" from the community of God's people: the poor, the crippled, the blind. They were the unclean, the disenfranchised, the outcasts. But there was room for them in God's kingdom, and they came willingly and eagerly, amazed at being included in God's great feast.

And still there was more room! Out goes another invitation. This time to those outside the city: the Gentiles.

The parable of the great banquet isn't just about accepting the personal invitation of God to join him at the table. It's about the entire history of God's salvation in the world. It's about his relationship with the people he chose to be a light to all the other nations. It's about re-membering (bringing back into fellowship) those who had been outcast. It's about God expanding his kingdom to include all peoples, from all places, and all situations. There is room for all at God's table – and then some! It really is a feast for all peoples. God's hospitality is expansive, generous, and without equal. This is the Good News!

We should also note that parable comes right on the heels of two other stories about humility at the table. True hospitality doesn't jockey for position, and it isn't driven by what you can get in return. True hospitality is about generosity without concern for recognition or reciprocation. And the hospitality of God's banquet table is where God extends an invitation without condition: all are invited to an abundant feast.

This leaves us with three things to think about:

First, as Christians who have heard the summons of God and who have responded to it by joining him in his kingdom, in what ways are our tables of hospitality an extension or a sign of God's kingdom table? What does it mean to celebrate God's kingdom so that the people at the bottom find it to be Good News too – to enjoy the party as well? Most of us probably don't have a problem with the fact that God welcomes all to *his* table. We might have a little more trouble with inviting them to *our* tables. But, as we consider how we are the people through whom God shines his light, and we are the people, the church, the body of Christ, whom God uses to point out his presence in our midst, how will our tables become tables of hospitality that reflects God's table of hospitality: where there is no vying for positions of recognition and honour, where we don't expect anything in return? Tables at which the generosity of God overflows and is poured out on all. Think about that the next time you host or attend a dinner party or a family Sunday night supper. There is lots of room – who else might you consider inviting so that all would know the welcome, the hospitality, the care, and the filling up of God?

Second, how have you responded to God's summons? We might have all kinds of perfectly reasonable excuses for not putting everything aside to show up at God's kingdom party. But when compared to living with God in his kingdom, and being fed with food that doesn't run out, all of our own reasons are merely distractions and diversions. Everything is ready! You just have to show up. But to show up, might mean that an adjustment of priorities.

Finally, when we hear the summons of Christ to come to this table, when we are compelled by Christ to come in to the party, we must recognize that it's not all about us. We are participating in a long history of salvation that didn't start with us, but which graciously includes us, and has room enough for more. Today we celebrate World Communion Sunday. Today we celebrate the fact that we are a part of a body that is bigger than ourselves, we are part of a body that is bigger than time. People from every nation, every circumstance, every time has been invited to join God and celebrate his grace and love for his people. We are a part of that great throng that comes to the feast. It's an abundant feast! And it's a feast where there is room for everyone and still more to spare.

So, come to the banquet already prepared for you, and find yourselves welcomed into the real presence of our Lord, and joined in fellowship with all of God's people throughout time and space. And give thanks for this great grace that God has shown us!