

Parable of the Dinner
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Luke 14: 16-24

Here is one of a pair of related parables that tell of the Father's invitation to the salvation banquet—eternal life through Christ Jesus, our Lord. The companion parable is found in Matthew 22: 1-14, the Parable of the Wedding Feast. In that parable a king is giving a wedding feast for his son, but the invitation is met with refusals and outright hostility. Some commentators deal with these parables as one. However their significant differences in detail prompt us to deal with them separately, though the overall messages are similar.

Luke 14:16-24

But He said to him, “A man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; 17 and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’ 18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.’ 19 Another one said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.’ 20 Another one said, ‘I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.’ 21 And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.’ 22 And the slave said, ‘Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ 23 And the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, so that my house may be filled. 24 For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.’”¹



The fundamental message:

The head of the house (God Himself) has extended a gracious invitation to a lavish dinner, representing eternal life in the Kingdom of God. There is no cost to those invited; the host has borne the entire expense of the banquet. Those invited make various excuses, all of which are trivial in comparison with the invitation to the banquet of eternal life.

The parable rebukes the people of Jesus' day, but carries a strong message for believers today.

First, a wise man or woman will not neglect the invitation to salvation from the King of Kings in order to pursue worldly ambitions or attend to the mundane affairs of this world. Even time with a newly married spouse is secondary to the value of eternal life in Christ. Second, the invitation, though extended to others after those initially invited refused, is never again extended to the original group.

¹ All Scripture references are to the New American Standard Updated version unless otherwise noted.

Comments on the Parable of the Dinner

The parable in this form appears only in Luke, although as we have already noted, a close parallel is to be found in Matthew 22. In the Parable of the Dinner we see the head of household preparing a banquet for his intended guests. Figuratively the head of the household is God and those invited are His chosen nation, the Israelites. Those secondarily invited from the streets and lanes of the city are the Gentiles—the (spiritually) poor and crippled and blind and lame. Finally a third group, culled from the hedges and along the highways, is up for some debate: Perhaps they are those from the great ingathering in the last days; perhaps they are simply more Gentiles representing the push of the Gospel to the uttermost parts of the world. Those who are wise enough (or perhaps hungry enough) receive the invitation and with it eternal life. Those who refuse the invitation have rejected their chance at eternal life.

The head of household gets no respect.

Like the Parable of the Wedding Feast found in Matthew 22, there is a problem with the gracious invitation of the head of the household: The invitations are being refused.

People in our western culture may wonder why the head of the household could get so upset and even enraged by the refusal of his dinner invitation. However, my recent visits to North Africa, where a very different culture prevails, disclosed the answer. To refuse the invitation of a peer or superior to a dinner is to dishonor the host in the most severe of terms. It is tantamount to challenging the honor of the one who is inviting him. It is difficult to imagine a greater insult that could be devised against the host than to refuse such a gracious invitation.



Accepting a dinner invitation by a peer or superior is not only expected, it conveys to the host recognition of respect and most importantly honor.² In eastern cultures, respect and honor is vastly more important than houses, lands, modes of transportation and even time at home with your wife.

The first to be invited in this parable are obviously the upper class, peers and lower to the host. The host is sponsoring a very lavish dinner for them. The fact that all those in the hosts' class of society reject the invitation conveys a very sharp sense of dishonor which would have been instantly grasped by Jesus' hearers. The head of the household is suffering utter shame and disgrace. No wonder he is so angry.

However, the story does not end with the refusal of these members of the upper society. The head of the household now extends the invitation to the poor and the crippled and blind and lame. They are the unfortunates, but not the dregs of society. The third wave of invited guests may be the dregs and they may not. If they are then here come the riffraff, the prostitutes, and

² With thanks to Fr. Thomas Keating who observes this point in his comments on Luke's parable.

the tax collectors of whom Jesus remarked, “Truly I say to you that the prostitutes and the tax collectors will get into the Kingdom of God before you do.”³

“Guess who’s coming to dinner?”

It’s not those you would have expected. Israel, with the benefit of the covenant, the testimonies, the prophets, the Psalter, the history of understanding how God works with men, has refused. Paul puts it this way in Romans 10: 21: “But as for Israel He says, ‘all the day long I have stretched out My hands to a disobedient and obstinate people.’”

Because God was refused by His own people (though not all as indeed Paul bears eloquent testimony), Moses was appointed to testify centuries earlier: “I will make you jealous by that which is not a nation, by a nation without understanding will I anger you.”⁴ And Paul further notes that “Isaiah is very bold and says, ‘I was found by those who did not seek Me, I became manifest to those who did not ask for Me.’”⁵

So who were those without understanding and those not seeking God? It was, quite obviously, the Gentiles. They are the ones who were swept into the kingdom and grafted in when the natural branches were lopped off. And in the present parable, they are the second and third waves of those invited.

What about those excuses?

“They all alike began to make excuses,” the parable recounts. When it comes to excuses, anything will do, but those presented here are indeed inventive. Interestingly, these three excuses, the land, the oxen, the wife, are remarkably similar to those given in Deuteronomy 20: 5-7, as reasons why one may refuse to go out to battle.

The first excuse is “I have bought a piece of land and need to go out and look at it.” Of course the land has been there for thousands of years. One may presume that the man was well acquainted with the land *before* he bought it and had even walked its boundaries. So why must he go now? There is no reason why he should refuse. The excuse is specious. Our worldly concerns, the buying, selling, working and getting cannot be allowed to interfere with the invitation being tendered. This is about the Kingdom of God and eternal life.



The second excuse, “I have bought five yoke of oxen and am going to try them out,” is equally bogus. Here indeed is a wealthy man—five yoke of oxen. Elisha was plowing with 12 yoke of oxen when Elijah found him and threw his mantle over his shoulders. Think about twelve yoke of oxen lined up

³ Matthew 21:31.

⁴ Romans 10: 19, quoting Deuteronomy 32:21.

⁵ Romans 10: 20, quoting Isaiah 65:1.

and pulling, sweat gleaming on their thick hides. What a beautiful sight. If Elisha did not refuse Elijah's invitation on account of twelve yoke, how much more should he who purchased the five yoke be repaying the honor of being invited by his attendance at the dinner? Like the man who bought the piece of land, it is unlikely that this man would have already purchased the oxen without trying them out first. Like buying an expensive car without a test drive is unthinkable, so would be the idea that this man had never before seen what the oxen could do. Rather, he is going now to play with his acquired toy. No matter what we have acquired by trading in the land the blessing should not detract us from recognizing and honoring the one who conveys to us the blessing. Materialism is the worst of all excuses for refusing eternal life.



The third excuse, "I have married a wife and for that reason I cannot come," ups the ante. Anyone would want this man to be enjoying his honeymoon, after all. But then it's not as though he is being asked to cancel his wedding plans. We are not told how long he has been married, but one might presume that he is within a month of having solemnized his vows. Perhaps his wife had amassed a rather lengthy "honey-do" list for him. Regardless, the lesson is this: Nothing takes precedence over this invitation . . . nothing. To refuse the invitation is to refuse eternal life. Only the greatest fool would be so inclined.

The refusal is final.

Those who refuse the invitation are not subsequently re-invited in this story. The invitation, once declined is never extended again, and those who refuse have only themselves to blame. This is a poignant lesson for us. We are a busy people. Invitations are flying as fast as the wind and most of them are bogus, from the Jehovah's Witnesses that are knocking on our doors to the Scientology books flooding the bookstores. But there is one invitation that is real, and it may come but once to a man or woman. Wisdom will see to it that the gracious invitation to the banquet of eternal life is not refused.

