

A Banquet Fit for a King

By Brad Allison on 5/30/2004

Scripture Reference *Luke 14:15-24*

We're concluding today our study of the parables of Jesus, after having covered only about ten of the thirty included in the Scriptures. Jesus delivered his parable of the Great Banquet at a banquet where he was one of the invited guests. Things did not seem to be going very well at this party. There was a great deal of tension in the air, due in part to the fact that Jesus was invited not out of kindness or generosity, but in order to test him. In the part of the passage before the point where we began reading, we note that another invited guest had what our version refers to as "dropsy." This refers to a condition known more commonly today as edema, a swelling of the limbs and joints with water. It seems likely that the Pharisees planted this man in an attempt to catch Jesus in a violation of Sabbath law. Undeterred, Jesus healed him anyway, but only after pointing out that the Pharisees were kinder to their animals than to their fellow countrymen.

After that awkward moment, Jesus notices how the invited guests were all busy in lobbying for the places of greatest honor at the banquet. So he tells a parable in which he instructs them to take the lowest place and await the invitation of the host to ascend to a place of greater honor. But Jesus is still not done. Everything is wrong with this banquet. The guest who should have been honored beyond all others, Jesus, was being tricked. The other guests were so busy selfishly lobbying for places of honor that they had no time for anything else. Finally, the host himself comes under Jesus' fire because his guest list was designed primarily to make the host himself look good. If enough important people came, he would be seen as a man of significance. So Jesus tells him to invite the poor, crippled, blind and lame instead. His reasoning is that this is the path of greatest reward. The reward for inviting important people is short-lived, while the reward for inviting those who cannot repay you is reward from God.

So everyone is manipulating everyone else here. The hosts are using the man with dropsy to trick Jesus. The guests are using the opportunity afforded by the invitation to the party to bring honor to themselves. The host is using the important people present to feel better about himself. Jesus can't let these things pass, and the result is a party that was verging on disaster. At that point, a man says something that strikes me as being an attempt to save the day. He utters a pious-sounding statement that will return everyone to happy agreement with one another. "Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (v. 15). He's referring to that great heavenly feast in which all the saved will join, spoken of repeatedly in the Bible. But Jesus doesn't let his statement pass either. Notice the little word "but" in verse 16. It indicates that Jesus is disagreeing with the man. He doesn't disagree with the statement taken at face value, but with the assumption the man makes. Our would-be rescuer assumes that all of his hearers will be present at that heavenly banquet. As we have seen repeatedly in Jesus' parables, he asserts that in fact many will be surprised on that day. This parable is about those who will in fact eat bread on that great day of God's Banquet, and those who, surprisingly, will miss it. Lest we be surprised on that day, let's look at what Jesus says about these two groups.

I. Those Who Miss the Heavenly Banquet

In this culture, invitations to banquets such as this would come in two stages. The first step would be the formal invitation to which a person would RSVP. As a result, the host would know how much food to prepare. If it was to be a small banquet, a couple of chickens would suffice. If more were coming, they might need to kill a sheep or two. If it was to be a large

gathering, an entire cow or two might be required. Because this banquet is called by Luke “a great banquet,” (v. 16), it is likely that it was a very large one that would require much preparation. There were many invitations and many affirmative responses. The preparations for such a feast would require several days, and it couldn’t be accurately predicted exactly when the feast would occur. That is why the second invitation was needed, which came when the preparations were all complete and the banquet was ready. It was this second invitation that the invited guests refused, even though they had said they would come when the first invitation was given.

The manner of their excuse-making was especially rude. The first person offered the excuse, “I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it” (14:18). The statement is a bold-faced lie, and everyone knows it. Very typically in this culture, where land was scarce, negotiations over a field might take several years. No one would buy a field sight unseen. So this man’s excuse was a calculated insult.

The same is true of the second and third excuses. The second man says, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them” (v. 19). Again, all of Jesus’ original hearers would recognize this as an obvious lie. No one would ever buy oxen like this. They must be checked out first, testing such things as whether the team will pull evenly. If they won’t, they would not be of much use. It’s like someone today saying, “I can’t come to your party because I just bought five used cars, and I need to go and test drive them.” There are two obvious things wrong with that. First, no one buys used cars like that, just as no one would have bought teams of oxen like that. Second, if on some rare occasion someone had done that, the urgency to test drive them would have been removed. If you already own them, you can test drive them anytime.

The final excuse was equally as lame. A man had just married his wife, and offers that as an excuse. In logic, this is called the *non-sequiter* fallacy. That means that the conclusion doesn’t follow from the premise. The premise was that he had just recently taken a wife, and the conclusion is that he can’t come. But why should the one lead to the other? Why couldn’t he bring his wife, or leave her home by herself for a few hours?

These excuses are not just lame; they are insulting. Imagine someone in our day receiving a personal invitation to someone’s retirement party. Suppose the invitation is given by the one being honored to someone he would like to be there. The one inviting would say something like, “This will be a special occasion for me and I would love to have you there to share it with me.” Then the invitee would respond, “Well, let me check my daytimer... Oh, I see here that I have to wash my hair that day, so I won’t be able to come.” An excuse is just a dishonest reason given to do what you really want and to avoid doing what you don’t want to do.

The application of this is clear. Are you one who has avoided God by making excuses? If so, you are in danger of missing the feast, which is to say that you will miss heaven. Since this is so crucial, let me sharpen this just a little by pointing out a couple of things about these excuses. First, according to the context, these excuse makers were using people. The host was using the guests to look good, and the guests were using the host in order to gain prominence and honor before one another. What kind of people miss heaven? Those who have not tasted of the treasure Jesus can be for us, with the result that they look to other people to bring satisfaction to them.

A second thing I notice about these excuse makers is that an excuse is just another form of not applying God’s word. Remember that this invitation came in two stages. The first was an invitation to which all they had to do was say they would come. But the second summons announcing that the feast was ready required more than saying something. They had to do

something and come to the feast. Their failure was one of application. It is generally true of excuse makers that they readily say yes to God, but then don't follow through with the action.

If either of these two clarifications ring true for you, the appropriate action is to repent of offering excuses to God that allow to keep doing what you want to do. Then stop with the excuses, drop everything and follow God. There is much at stake in this, because the excuse makers miss heaven.

II. Those Who Will Eat of the Heavenly Banquet

After the invited guests fail to show up, the master tells his servants to go far and wide and invite all they see. They are to bring in the poor, the lame and the blind. After doing so, there is still room remaining and the master commands the servants to go out once more and compel them to come in. They do so, with the result that all the places for the banquet are filled.

I want to point out just one feature of this group. There is the clear language of election present here. Did you notice that of the first group who came to the banquet, it is said that the servants brought them in? Then the language is strengthened even more in the second round, where we read that the master told his servants to "compel" them to come in. This has sometimes been misunderstood in the past to refer to forced conversions. The people who came to the feast did not come against their will, but there was still a sense in which they were compelled to come and brought in. The Bible teaching of election doesn't mean that God forces us to come to him against our will. Rather, it means that God must change the will of any who come to him because all of us want the wrong things. Before we choose God, God must choose us. If he didn't, no one would choose him.

Illustration: When I was in seminary, my missions professor was the late Harvie Conn, who was a former missionary to South Korea. During his service there, he reached out to the prostitutes of that country with the gospel. For a time, none of them responded. In that shame based culture, they believed themselves to be beyond the hope of the gospel. So he did what any good Reformed missionary would do—he began teaching them the doctrine of election. He said that all people were in the same situation as these prostitutes, not wanting to come to the feast. The only thing that will make someone want to come is that if God chooses her and gives her a desire. The doctrine of election makes us all equal before God. Any who have a desire for God have been given such a desire by God's choice of them. It is this choice that makes the difference. As he taught these things, they started coming to faith in Jesus. He would find homes and jobs for them, which resulted in his getting beat up more than once by the pimps who lost some of their prostitutes in this way.

I want to apply this now to all who are in this category of eating at God's banquet. If you will eat at that banquet, it's not because you are better or smarter than anyone else. It is true that you have chosen to do so, but your choice is because God first chose you. So the application is to worship him. Worship him because at that feast you will really live. Can you imagine the effect such a banquet would have on a poor person who in this culture was constantly hungry? Now, he sees an abundance of the best food ever. And he has permission to eat as much as he wants. He can eat until that empty place in his stomach is completely filled. Do you realize how that's such a good metaphor for heaven? We all live with such great needs in our lives. Do you realize that the great supper in heaven will be the time when a new era begins? All of our desires, so many of which go chronically unmet here, will be filled completely and forever. No more loneliness, no more frustration, no more pain or tears or sadness.

Not only ought we to worship God because we will really live at that feast, but because of that feast we can begin truly to live now. Tomorrow is a day off for many of us. Suppose you

get to do whatever you want to do for the whole day. If you want to sleep in, read a book, play golf or go out to a nice restaurant with your best friends, you can do it. But after you get up tomorrow, a murderer breaks into your house and says that he is going to kill you. He guarantees you that there is nothing you can do to escape his purpose to end your life. But he's a gracious murderer, as murderers go, and he says that before killing you he will grant you four hours to do anything you had wanted to do that day. You can do all those things you had wanted to do after all. But it won't be the same, will it? Somehow it takes away one's ability to enjoy even the best life has to give if you know you are going to die. On the contrary, we gain an ability truly to live and enjoy God's world as we know that our future includes a banquet for eternity.

Finally, we worship God because we have been made to partake of this feast purely by God's grace. We would all have starved rather than come if God had not chosen us and compelled us to come. It is by his grace that we are here today.

CONCLUSION:

Karen Blixen was a Danish woman who married a baron and spent the years 1914-31 managing a coffee plantation in Kenya. She wrote a book about her experiences there called *Out of Africa*, which was later made into a movie that starred Meryl Streep. After a divorce, she returned to Denmark where she began writing under the pseudonym Isak Dinesen. One of her stories, "Babette's Feast," became a well-known movie in the 1980's.

The story is about two sisters, Martina and Philippa, who were the daughters of a pastor. After their father dies, things don't go well in the church and the people begin bickering and fighting with one another. But the hundredth birthday of their late father is approaching, and Babette, who has come to live with the sisters, offers to prepare a feast. It turns out that she was a famous cook in Paris who had been forced to flee when she was caught on the wrong side of a political struggle. She had just won the lottery, and the sisters are sure that she is about to leave them with her new riches. But she prepares an extraordinary feast, costing all of her winnings. At the conclusion of the feast, a general who is in attendance speaks the following words. "We have all of us been told that grace is to be found in the universe. But in our human foolishness and shortsightedness we imagine divine grace to be finite... But the moment comes when our eyes are opened, and we see and realize that grace is infinite. Grace, my friends, demands nothing from us but that we shall await it with confidence and acknowledge it in gratitude."

After the general's speech, this comment is made. "The vain illusions of this earth had dissolved before their eyes like smoke, and they had seen the universe as it really is." This parable tells us how the universe really is. It is a feast like no other, full of grace and prepared with great skill by the king of the universe. Like Babette's Feast, it is prepared for us at great cost to the host. As a matter of fact, it cost everything he had—his very life. We begin to enjoy this feast now, and we are going to do that now as we celebrate the Lord's Supper.