

Luke 14:15-24 (NRSV)

¹⁵One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" ¹⁶Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. ¹⁷At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' ¹⁸But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.' ¹⁹Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.' ²⁰Another said, 'I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.' ²¹So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' ²²And the slave said, 'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.' ²³Then the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. ²⁴For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.' "

"The Cowboys play early today." "I have guests for the weekend." "Sundays are the only day I can sleep in." So many excuses, so little time. Today, we meet some folks who made one excuse too many.

As with most of Jesus' parables, understanding the literary context is essential to grasping Jesus' meaning.

Here (Luke 14), Jesus is invited to the home of a leading Pharisee for a Sabbath meal with other guests. As he is entering the house, Jesus sees an ill man and asks the gathered lawyers and Pharisees if it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. They stand there in stupefied silence as Jesus leads the man away, heals him, and then returns to the dinner. Once inside, Jesus sees how much care everyone is taking in finding their seats, for such meals had more to do with social jockeying than nutrition. He then urges them to take the lowest place at such an occasion, for "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (14:11). Jesus then turns to his host and tells him that he shouldn't be giving such dinners for the benefit of the rich and powerful for they can repay him. Rather, the Pharisee should invite the poor and crippled, for they could never repay him, and instead, he would be repaid on the Day of the Lord. You have to wonder if by now the Pharisee is regretting his decision to invite Jesus!

Hearing the exchange between Jesus and the Pharisee, one of the dinner guests says to Jesus, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of heaven!" In reply, Jesus tells today's parable. It is a simple story:

A host plans to throw a big dinner and invites many guests. But at the last minute, one guest after another offers some flimsy excuse for bailing out of the party. Understandably

Dinner with Jesus

This parable is set during a dinner at which Jesus is a guest. He has been invited to the home of a leading Pharisee to share a Sabbath meal.

In the Gospels, a lot happens around the dinner table. Jesus teaches. He performs miracles. He sparks controversy in merely choosing his dinner companions. What's going on?

Throughout the NT, meals play a pivotal role. This isn't too surprising given the importance of meals in the Greco-Roman (and Jewish) world of the first century. Meals were a means of creating and solidifying social bonds in a culture driven by social status. Typically, 10-15 diners would gather in a square or rectangular room. The diners would recline on benches that lined the walls so that each diner faced inward toward the others. (We can forget our mental pictures of tables and chairs!) Diners would be arranged by social rank and good hosts were adept at making such distinctions.

The controversies that swirled around Jesus' meals were centered on who would eat with whom? By eating with assorted "sinners," such as tax collectors and prostitutes, Jesus deeply offended the sensibilities of the "right-minded" Pharisees. They understood the symbolic significance of Jesus' dinner partners.

By coupling his choice of dinner companions with his kingdom announcement, Jesus was enacting his proclamation that all would be welcome at God's great banquet (see the pg. 2 text box).

angered by the many rude snubs, the host sends out his household to round up a whole new batch of guests, starting with all the “wrong” sorts of people and then looking high and low to make sure that the dinner party is filled so that none of the banquet goes to waste. Finally, the host issues one final instruction – none of the no-shows are to be let into the dinner.

God’s Banquet

In his book, *The Bible Makes Sense*,¹ Walter Brueggemann urges Christians to learn how to read the Bible as an insider. A key to this is learning to appreciate some of the most powerful biblical images, such as the image of God’s banquet.

My family may be like yours; we use food to celebrate everything. It has always been this way. Even in ancient Israel, battlefield victories were marked by a great banquet. Not surprisingly then, the Old Testament prophets used the image of a great banquet that would celebrate God’s final victory over evil. Because the final victory would mark the arrival of God’s Messiah and God’s kingdom, we sometimes refer to this celebration as God’s messianic banquet.

“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.”

Isaiah 25:6 (NRSV)

Imagine how those words would sound to people who lived on a modest diet, with hunger never far way. Isaiah makes concrete the promise of God’s kingdom. Jesus also often used the image of a wedding banquet. Such banquets are hopeful, joyful celebrations of love, relationship, and family.

In all this and more, Jesus’ eating with “sinners” at the “banquets” demonstrated in stark terms that everyone would be welcome at God’s celebration, as does today’s parable.

Now, when it comes to things that I should be doing but don’t do (a long list at times!), I’m really good at making excuses. And each one seems perfectly understandable and quite reasonable. Who, I say to myself, could fail to see that I was way too busy to take the time to listen to someone who needed to talk or reach out a helping hand. But deep down, I know that my excuses are just as lame as those offered by the rude oh-so-busy guests in the parable.

Notice that the guests failed to tell the host in advance that they couldn’t come. No, they waited until the doors were about to be thrown open to inform the host that they couldn’t make it. One simply must go out and look at a piece of land, like it is going to go somewhere. A second actually says that he must go try out some new oxen. That would be like me telling someone that I couldn’t come to their party because I had a new lawnmower I wanted to take for a spin. The third says he is newly married. I guess that marriage just snuck up on him. He couldn’t see that coming? It’s not the specifics of each excuse that matters in this parable, merely that they are all lame . . . lame . . . lame. Indeed, any excuse would be lame.

God’s guests

As lame as the excuses are, they are not the main point of the parable, the surprising twist to the story. When the host needs replacement guests, where does he go? To the poor and the crippled and the blind – all those who the “right” sort of people would have assumed would never been invited to God’s banquet. Why? Because in the ancient world, and no less among the Jews, being poor or lame or blind was a sign that the person had done something awful to offend God and was being punished. To the typical Jew, such people were believed to have been cursed not blessed.¹

And yet they are the very people that the host (God) specifically seats at the table. And if that is not enough, the host goes out looking around the countryside for people to bring to the dinner, even if they have to be persuaded that the offer is real. Some commentators see here a reference to the seating of Gentiles at the great banquet.

For our purposes it is enough to see that this is yet another story of the Great Reversal, wherein the mighty are brought low and the oppressed lifted up. It is an oft-repeated theme of Jesus as he strives to help his disciples understand the true nature of God’s reign: a world turned upside down. In that way, this parable, like so many, is a vivid imagining of the Sermon on the Mount and a world where the meek inherit the earth.

¹Your reading of the Bible will be made much easier and clearer if you remember that in the ancient world, God or the gods were seen to be the cause of all things, including, natural disasters, personal afflictions, and which way the wind blows. Thus, the rich and healthy were seen to be blessed and the poor and lame were taken to be cursed. For example, in the Jewish community of the Essenes at Qumran (on the Dead Sea) the crippled or injured couldn’t hold leadership positions, for they were believed to be sinners who were being punished.

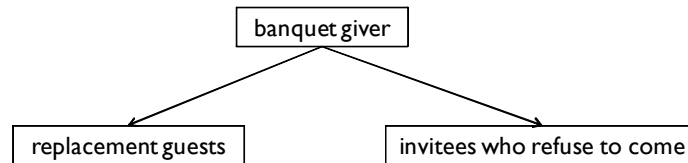
Interpreting the Parable of the Great Dinner

By their nature, parables lend themselves to over- and under-interpretation. For example, it is often said that each parable has a single main point. But this isn't necessarily so. Often, there are important meanings built around each main character. There are some questions to ask yourself about a parable that will help you hear Jesus better. In this text box, we'll step through these questions for each parable in this series.

What is the narrative context of the parable?

- This parable is found in both Matthew and Luke. Matthew places it in the days before Jesus' crucifixion, the time when Jesus directly confronts the temple leadership. Luke places the parable during the course of a dinner at the home of a Pharisee. The "you" in the parable is plural, indicating that Jesus is speaking to the guests at the dinner.
- There are important differences in the form of the parable in Matthew and Luke. The differences reflect the different contexts and probably show Jesus using the same basic story in different ways for different purposes.

What is the parable's structure?



What background information about culture, customs, geography and so on are important?

- Meals in the Greco-Roman and Jewish world were far more central than they are in ours. Who would eat with whom? Who would sit where? The whole thing could be very stylized, like one of our formal dinners. Jesus insisted on eating with so-called "sinners" – all the wrong types.

What is the perspective of each of the main characters?

- The banquet giver – Invitations are sent out, but no one is forced by the banquet giver to attend the great dinner.
- Invitees who refused to come – All the excuses for rejecting God's invitation are so lame!
- The replacement guests – These are the "dregs" of society – the most marginalized and oppressed. They are the ones that the banquet giver reaches out to when his invitations are rejected.
 - There was a big urban/rural divide; bigger than in our day.
 - God lifts up the weak – they will be the first through the door. This is very much in keeping with Jesus' sermon on the Mount.
- Note the final severity. Those who were invited and made excuses will never be invited. God invites all people to come, but there will come a day when the invitation is rescinded and all that awaits is judgment.

Note: The parable diagrams are taken from Craig Blomberg's book, *Interpreting the Parables*. If you really want to dig into the parables, this book is a good guide.

READING WITH HEART & MIND

Monday, Isaiah 25:6-10 A powerful image of God's banquet and our reconciliation with God. This passage will repay several slow, prayerful readings.

Tuesday, Isaiah 5:11-12 A warning to those who think it is all about the banquet.

Wednesday, Matthew 21:28-32 Jesus tells a parable about those who will actually enter the doors of God's banquet first.

Thursday, Matthew 22:1-14 The parable of the wedding banquet. (Again with the party!) This one is pretty clear – it is the "unsavory" street people who respond to the invitation and are welcomed to the wedding.

Friday, Luke 7:35-50 A Pharisee cannot tolerate whom it is that Jesus has welcomed to the table.

Saturday, Revelation 19:1-10 (esp. 9-10) The marriage supper of the Lamb. Marriage is a commonly used image for the relationship between God and God's people.

Sermon Notes

Our Family Tree: The Stories of the Christian Denominations

A new series in Scott Engle's 11:00 class on Sunday mornings in Festival Hall. This has always been a much-requested series and is the first time it has been offered.

Today: *Yearning for Grace: Luther and the Lutherans*

Next Week: *To God the Glory: Calvin and the Presbyterians*

All the Sermon Background Studies (now more than 350) can be found at www.thebibleacademy.com.

They are posted as easily downloadable pdf files. Your browser can search the listing for studies on specific books of the Bible or Scripture passages. They are suitable for individual study and for biblically-oriented small group discussions.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Excuses. They may not be the main point of the parable, but it is hard to miss Jesus' desire that we stop making excuses. You might begin by making a list of excuses that Christians make for not being in worship each week. In fact, there are really at least seven lists we could make, one for each of the holy habits. What are our excuses for not joining a Bible Study? Or for serving? Or caring? So often, it simply comes down to priorities. Certainly, in my own life there were many times when, sadly, I had much higher priorities than God or church. Even now, sorting out priorities is an on-going challenge. How can we get better at setting the priorities as God would hope we'd set them?
2. What excuses do you hear from people about why they refuse to come to church at all? Why do you think there are so many "unchurched" in this country? Why do more people not respond positively to the message of Jesus Christ?
3. Though the ancients saw the crippled and blind as sinners having earned the disfavor of the gods, we don't see it that way at all. Thus, we have to re-dress the parable in contemporary clothing by seeing the replacement guests as being those who, we assume, have earned God's disfavor. Who do you think those people are in our world? What groups do they comprise? How does the idea of their being invited to God's great dinner strike you? Does it seem wrong or upsetting? In what ways? How can we experience greater joy over the grace God pours out upon others – including those whom we despise?