

[Tuck In...](#)

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By Rev Paul Graham

Read Luke 14:15-24



I've deliberately broken an unwritten law this week. I've given you a Bible reading that starts in the middle of an ongoing scene. There's action that comes earlier in the chapter for which today's reading is both a response and a development.

To help out, here is a brief precis of The Story So Far...

Jesus has been invited into the lions' den (to borrow from the book of Daniel); viz., a meal given by and attended by Pharisees, his sworn opponents. Surrounded by people who are out to get him, Jesus is not an honoured guest, but an intended victim as his host and fellow diners all look for ways to punish him for blasphemy or poor table manners, or whatever they can pin on him. The meal gets off to a potentially rocky start as Jesus heals one of the hangers-on at the meal. Whether this man is an intruder, or a "plant" brought in precisely to tempt Jesus to do what he does, is unclear. However, this man, described by Luke as having dropsy, is found amongst the diners and Jesus heals him. And on the Sabbath, as well.

Now, for those of us who have kept up with Jesus' ministry among the first century sick and wounded will know that he is not beyond a bit of healing on the Sabbath (see also Luke 6:6-11 and Luke 13:10-17). Not a day of rest for the Son of God, even if the rest of the chosen people of God had a list of 39 prohibited

activities to keep them unoccupied (at least according to the Mishnah, part of the Jewish law of the day). I'm convinced that the Pharisees regarded healing, though not specifically mentioned in the list, as an added prohibition, along with other activities that only Jesus was known for such as walking on water and raising the dead (which he did on other days, but I'm sure he would have done on a Sabbath had the opportunity arisen).

So, Jesus is already on thin ice, though no-one is willing to take up his challenge to compare the worth of a human life to one of their livestock or family (see Luke 14:5). Jesus asks if one of them would save any of these latterly mentioned from certain death on the Sabbath, which of course they would; how much more should they do what they can for someone in need? Hammering home the point, Jesus then gives a salutary lesson on humility and hospitality, possibly also thumbing his nose at the one who tried to lay a trap for him by the invitation to the meal.

You might think that would be the end of the conversation, but as that all happened before we join the action, you can be grateful to the unnamed Pharisee who suddenly (and obliquely) speaks out about the benefits of the catering arrangements in the Kingdom of God. Whether this person knew that he had tapped into one of Jesus' pet topics or not is not revealed to us; maybe this was another carefully crafted trap to see how Jesus would respond.

If that was the case, then surely they wouldn't have been surprised that Jesus responds with a parable; after all, they had heard enough of them by this point. And, as parables go, it echoes much of what Jesus has just been saying about hospitality. Only, because it's Jesus who is telling it, the story has a sting in the tail.

The parable is a fairly straight-forward one at face value. Someone has gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a feast and, rather than waste the food, finds anyone who would be willing to find a place at the table. We probably have little time for those who make their excuses; after all, why can the newly-married man not bring his wife as a "plus-1"? Equally, those oxen can surely wait a day unyoked while their new owner enjoys a hearty meal at his friend's expense.

Alas not, and the invitation is handed out far and wide, much to the delight of your average outcast, tramp and ne'er-do-well, who suddenly find themselves elevated to a social height they would scarcely have dreamed of. The highways and byways of the local area will have been a lot less busy for the next few hours at least...

So, what do we take from this for us today, at a time where dinner parties are but an increasingly receding memory? How do we relate to this story of social climbing, where one person truly finds out who his friends are?

But of course, that's only if we take the story at face value and don't realise what Jesus was actually saying to his audience of ill-wishers.

This is an illustration of the Kingdom of God, the very place that was exhorted by one of Jesus' fellow diners. And each one of those around that table would have looked at each other and nodded sagely. How blessed are we, they would have collectively and rhetorically thought, that we are among those who are included? Oh, look at how great we are, they would go on to say to their favourite audience, how obedient of the law (or at least as much as they want people to see), how pious (in as much as piety is a good thing) and how correct (in their own opinions) we are. Not like the riff-raff out there, with their illnesses, uncleanliness, and problems that keep them out of this esteemed gathering, and therefore the Kingdom.

Except, of course, it is precisely this riff-raff that Jesus is including in the Kingdom. The Pharisees were in serious danger of blowing it, Jesus is saying, unless they realise that the invitation is to come in and join in the feast. The Pharisees had created a restrictive world for themselves; just like the man who couldn't

leave his oxen or the husband his wife (or bring her) - there was no reason not to go except their own imagined rules.

The Pharisees were being warned - change your attitudes or miss out. They were the ones who were excluded from the feast, by their own rules, laws, and restrictions.

So here we go again - Jesus continues to challenge us to get to the heart of the Good News and not to miss out. Be warned, Jesus might be telling us as well, we are in danger of missing out if we put our rules in the way of our hospitality, our restrictions in place of his grace.

It's not as if there's not precedent - after all, who in this day and age would look back at times such as the Inquisition, or (in reference to last week's "Thought") the complicit silence of many in the church in the face of Nazism and say that these were in any way good? We have much to learn about the past, but it is in our present that we will be judged.

We have to ask ourselves the question, are we more like the absent friends or the grateful horde? I certainly think that we can start out as the latter and then evolve into the former, which is equally as dangerous to our eternal health and to those who are longing to feast at the Lord's table but find their way blocked by people who look very much like us.

It is fitting that this is the reading for a Communion service - a reminder that it is Christ who invites us to join in the meal of salvation and on his terms. We are his guests, grateful for the invitation and longing to be counted as those welcome at the feast both today and in eternity.

As a lesson in hospitality, it may be difficult to imagine how we can have guests round for a meal at the moment, but hopefully that time will pass in the coming weeks and months. However, we can make sure that others can find out about the invitation of Jesus to the feast of grace that all are welcome to join.

Amen.

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