

September 6, 2009

Luke 14: A Compelling Invitation

Purpose: To deepen our awareness of the wideness of God's invitation

Key Bible reference: Luke 14.1-24

Key Verse: Luke 14.23

Biblical Interpretation

This parable comes from the middle of a chapter in the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus does and says a number of unexpected things that are not likely to "win friends and influence people." In the house of a Pharisee (a guardian of the Jewish law), Jesus violates the Law by healing on the sabbath (Luke 14:1-6). Then he challenges the seating arrangement at the Pharisee's table by urging people to take the lower places rather than the seats of honor because "all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted" (verses 7-11). Turning to his host, Jesus questions the guest list, stating that the poor, crippled, lame, and blind should have been invited instead of the host's friends, relatives, and rich neighbors (verses 12-14).

This provides a springboard for the telling of the parable of the great feast (verses 15-24), which we will examine more in a moment. Later, while traveling with the crowds, Jesus tells them that those who wish to be his disciples must put him first—above family and even life itself—take up their cross, count the cost, and give up all their possessions (verses 25-33). Finally, he offers a proverb about salt that has lost its flavor being useless and fit only to be thrown out (verses 34-35a).

The chapter closes with Jesus' familiar refrain, "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (verse 35b). In other words, "Pay attention to all I am

doing and saying among you; I am heralding a new era. If you want to be a part of it, you cannot continue with business as usual!" All these sayings and incidents highlight the kind of demands that Jesus places on his followers—demands that are different from what they (and we!) would expect.

Just prior to today's parable Jesus tells his Pharisee host that if he wants to be blessed, he should invite to his dinner those who cannot pay him back (verses 12-14). When another guest comments that only at the end time can the true blessing of God be received, Jesus proceeds to compare the reign of God to a great banquet to which many are invited. When those first invited give excuses for not attending, the host gets angry and sends his servant out first to the local streets and later to the roads and highways to invite the outcasts and neglected to come and partake. For their arrogance and discourtesy in refusing the gracious invitation, those first asked will now be barred from the feast.

This story is Jesus' clear message to the self-righteous Pharisees and their wealthy, religious friends. If they reject God's invitation to accept his messiahship and to adopt the humble, generous, respectful way of treating all people that he is proposing, they may well lock themselves out of God's coming banquet of eternal salvation. If they are not careful, it will not be they but those they reject as worthless

and unclean who will be accepted into the reign of God.

For Luke, Jesus is the servant God sent to invite all into his gracious presence to receive his bounteous gifts. The original invitees are the Jews, the second group may symbolize the Gentiles, and the third group may represent those on the far edge of every remaining group. Another way to interpret the parable is to see those first invited as Israel's elite; the outcasts as the tax collectors, prostitutes, and sinners whom the haughty religious leaders disdain and reject; and those farther out as the Gentiles who will be summoned and even forced to attend in place of Israel's leaders. On either reading, the point is the increasing breadth of God's invitation.

Two invitations were actually sent, as was Jewish custom. The first would have been issued long beforehand and was casually accepted. Perhaps the specific date had been forgotten. But to accept an invitation and then not show up at the appointed time, for whatever reason, was considered a serious affront. In spite of this, when the actual summons to attend came, the prospective guests suddenly had better things to do.

The excuses were not flimsy, however. Indeed, they roughly parallel the Old Testament exemptions from a call to holy war (Deuteronomy 20:5-8). The one who had to go out and survey some land had to inspect the property before the transaction could be finalized. For us, this represents putting business and financial affairs ahead of the things of God. The one who had bought five yoke of oxen had just made a substantial investment. His situation was similar to that of a person today who acquires a new car and cannot wait to jump in and take it for a spin. For

such a person, the thrill of new possessions takes precedence over the spiritual life.

The newly married man had solid precedent in the regulation in Deuteronomy 24:5 that exempted one just married from military service and other duties, allowing him to remain at home a full year. But Jesus is saying that "family values," however important they may be in the proper place, cannot have priority over our love and loyalty to God.

So, for what they felt were justifiable reasons, all three said, "I cannot come." The host is clearly vexed at being rebuffed and wastes no time in filling his table with those usually deemed unworthy but who will be glad for a good meal. These include first the Am Haarez, the "people of the land," among whom Jesus was accepted and revered, and the non-Jews out beyond the hedges.

Luke 14:24 is not just the word of the host in the story. Here Jesus is expanding the scope of the parable to address his pious, wealthy dinner companions who might enjoy the meal that night but miss a much more important feast because of their rejection of God's call to put first things first and love their neighbors as themselves. The religious insiders at the Pharisee's table are in danger of becoming outsiders at God's messianic banquet.

In this passage Jesus' teaching about the inclusiveness of God's reign is set in the context of a feast or banquet. In the Bible feasts commemorate special events in the relationship between God and the people. Feasts were times of joy, thanksgiving, and helping the poor. Also, formal occasions of eating and drinking together were used to communicate important messages.

There are two types of banquets in the Bible: ceremonial and ritual. At a ceremonial banquet host and guests celebrated their sense of oneness and community. Examples are Israel's regular feast days (see Leviticus 23:144), the lavish national banquet in Esther 1:2-9, and the Christian love feast and Holy Communion (1 Corinthians 11:17-33). A ritual banquet was given in honor of people undergoing personal transformation or social transition. The hospitality of a feast makes a stranger into a guest (Luke 5:29) or an enemy into a member of the covenant (Genesis 26:26-31; 2 Samuel 3:20).

The Last Supper was a ceremonial banquet of the Jewish Passover, but Jesus transformed it into a ritual banquet lifting up the significance of his approaching death. The feast Jesus was attending in the Pharisee's house may have been a ceremonial banquet marking a Jewish feast day. But Jesus changed it into a ritual banquet signifying the transition from the old order of similar people gathering to enjoy one another's company to the reign of God in which the entire range of humankind would be welcomed on equal terms.

This transition reveals the magnitude of God's grace. The messianic banquet that culminates history will not be just a chummy little meal among those of us Christians who consider ourselves insiders. We will be astonished at who shows up. The gates of grace will be thrown wide open, and those from the highways and byways will come tromping in. We had better beware lest we find ourselves on the outside looking in because our invitation got buried in a stack of date books, receipts, and travel vouchers.

Grace is the unmerited favor of God. God does not love and accept us because of where we

live, how we spell our name, or whose label is on our clothes. And God does not love us because we have served the church or helped our neighbor. God loves us because of who God is. God cares so much for his children that he sent his Son to win us back into relationship with him. We cannot earn, beg, borrow, or steal grace. It is a gift! We may think that because we are good citizens and church members, we deserve an invitation and are definitely on God's guest list. But the list is God's decision. In addition, we cannot prescribe who else may be invited. That too is God's decision. And this parable suggests that we may well be surprised, if not disturbed, when we find out who is actually on the guest list. Our job is certainly not to try to keep others out—or even to make sure we are "in." Rather, our job is to go out into the highways and hedges ourselves to help extend God's gracious invitation.