

LUKE AND THE MISSION OF JESUS

(5) JESUS AND FOOD

Luke 14:15-24

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SCRIPTURE

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’” (Luke 14:15-24 NRSV).

MESSAGE

For many people meal times are the best times of the day. The average person eats thirty-five tons of food in a lifetime – many consume even more than that (like Americans). Food is a big part of life.

According to Luke, food plays a major role in the life and teachings of Jesus. One fifth of the sentences in Luke’s Gospel are connected in some way to eating a meal.¹ All four Gospels mention meals like the feeding of the five thousand ((Mt 14:13-21; Mk 6:31-44; Lk 9:12-17; Jn 6:1-14) and the Last Supper ((Mt 26:17–30, Mk 14:12–26, Lk 22:7–39; Jn 13:1–17:26). But Luke has a special emphasis on what we might call table fellowship. The meals in Luke 10, 11, 14, 19 and 24 are unique to Luke. One could argue that the entire structure of Luke is based on this idea of table fellowship. Meals, food, and drink serve as occasions for many of the teachings of Jesus. It is Luke who quotes Jesus as

¹ Markus Barth, *Rediscovering the Lord's Supper*, 71.

saying:

"The Son of Man has come eating and drinking, and you say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!'" (Lk 7:34 NRSV).

Jesus enjoyed spending time eating and drinking, so much so that people accused him of doing it to excess. But for Jesus, meals can be harbingers of the heavenly banquet that is to come. We must be willing to share God's gifts now and place our hope in God's promises lest we allow complacency to rob us of their fulfillment.

Robert J. Karris wrote a book entitled, *Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel*. It is not a collection of recipes based on Bible verses. It does not teach you how to cook with mustard seeds or how to prepare a fatted calf. Rather, Karris says that throughout Luke's Gospel, Jesus "is either going to a meal, at a meal, or coming from a meal."² In fact, Jesus was killed because of the way he ate – or rather what he said when he was dining and the company he usually kept when he ate. To the annoyance of his critics, Jesus pointed out the vanity of seeking the best seat at a banquet and the gracelessness of excluding those who were neither popular nor influential.

We see this in the story of Jesus having a Sabbath dinner at the home of an unnamed but influential Pharisee (Lk 14:1-24). Jesus makes a reference to the resurrection and one of the guests says:

"Blessed is the one who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (14:15).

Jesus then tells the dinner guests a parable that raises questions about who will get to enjoy the heavenly banquet. In the parable we are told that someone decided to hold a great feast and invited lots of people. But when the day came, and the servant was sent to the invited guests to tell them the feast was ready, they all made excuses as to why they could not come.

People have excuses for everything. I came across a collection of excuse notes from parents as compiled by the Office of Educational Assessment at the University of Washington:

+ My son is under a doctor's care and should not take P.E. today. Please execute

² Robert J. Karris, *Eating Your Way through Luke's Gospel* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Order of Saint Benedict, 2006), 97.

him.

+ Please excuse Lisa for being absent. She was sick and I had her shot.

+ Dear School: Please excuse John being absent on Jan. 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, and also 33.

+ Please excuse Roland from P.E. for a few days. Yesterday he fell out of a tree and misplaced his hip.

+ Please excuse Jimmy for being. It was his father's fault.

+ Please excuse Jennifer for missing school yesterday. We forgot to get the Sunday paper off the porch, and when we found it Monday, we thought it was Sunday.

+ Please excuse Jason for being absent yesterday. He had a cold and could not breathe well.

+ Maryann was absent December 11-16, because she had a fever, sore throat, headache and upset stomach. Her sister was also sick, fever and sore throat, her brother had a low grade fever and ached all over. I wasn't the best either, sore throat and fever. There must be something going around, her father even got hot last night.

To our modern ears it seems like all the excuses in our story are reasonable. So we don't understand the reaction of the host. However, the original listeners would have found the excuses lame, even humorous until they figured out that, in Jesus' eyes, this was how they were treating God's invitation to them.

In ancient Palestine when a person hosted a great feast the day was announced ahead of time but not the hour. When the day came and the banquet was ready then servants would contact the guests to let them know it was time to join the banquet. But the servants only went to people who had already made a commitment to come. To accept the invitation beforehand and then to refuse it when the day came was a grievous insult. Therefore, the anger of the host was justified.

Subsequent to the death, resurrection, and promised return of Jesus Christ we can see this parable in a new light. The host in the story represents God. The invited guests in the parable represent religious people who have said "Yes" to God with their lips but have rejected God with their actions – like many of the Pharisees back then and like many of us

today. How ironic that so many who had longed for centuries to see God intervene in human history would miss it because they were pre-occupied with self interests the day it happened.

The first invited guest in the parable said that he had bought a field and had to go see it and that's why he could not honor his commitment. You would think he would have examined the property ahead of time even if purchased through an agent. He sounds like the kind of person who is susceptible to "get rich quick" schemes – the kind who would eagerly hand over money to someone like American con artist Victor Lustig who successfully sold the Eiffel Tower in Paris, France not once but twice. In any case, the first invited guest represents those who would put material gain over the claims of God.

The second invited guest said he had acquired five yoke of oxen. Even if five yoke of oxen were all he had this suggests he was a wealthy landowner. Surely he had employees or servants who could handle this matter. But he was pre-occupied with his new purchase. He represents those in life who are obsessed with novelty. They let a new game or hobby or even a new friendship take priority over any time with God.

The third invited guest said he was recently married. This was actually a valid excuse for getting out of military service for one year (Deut 20:7; 24:5; see also 1 Macc 3:56).

“A newly married man must not be drafted into the army or be given any other official responsibilities. He must be free to spend one year at home, bringing happiness to the wife he has married” (Deut 24:5 NLT).

However, this was not a valid excuse for skipping a banquet one had promised to attend. It is one of the tragedies in life when we allow good things to crowd out fellowship with the One who is the Source of all good things. Home and family life are wonderful but are not meant to be driven by selfishness. There is an old saying, “They live best together who live with God.”

Those who had been expected to attend the banquet had turned down the host. So the invitation went out to the outcasts of society – those whose very presence would have offended the powerful and self-important. The outcasts in the parable represent people in life who never in their wildest imaginations thought that God really cared about them let alone wanted to welcome them into his family. Earl Palmer has summarized Jesus' preaching in this way: Jesus said to the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Sadducees, the religious authorities and all the self-righteous of his day, “Are you sure you are in?” To the disenfranchised, the ne'er-do-wells, prostitutes, tax collectors and the like, he said, “Are you sure you are out?”

Verse 23 has a term that has historically been misused:

‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled’ (Lk 14:23).

The phrase “compel people to come in” was used, in part, to justify the Roman and Spanish Inquisitions. It was interpreted to mean that it provided justification for the use of force to make people reject “false beliefs” and convert to Christianity — at least the version of Christianity held by the ones in power. Whips, thumb-screws, the rack, and threats of death and imprisonment were all employed.

But verse 23 has nothing to do with force and certainly nothing to do with violence. Rather it refers to a winsome and grace-filled invitation marked by intense kindness. This is how God treats us and this is how we need to treat one another (see 2 Cor 5:14).

I need to say one more thing about this account of a Sabbath dinner at the home of an unnamed influential Pharisee. The notions of food and drink and banquets are prominent here and throughout the Gospel. It is highly significant that Jesus thought of his kingdom as a feast. A feast represents, in the broadest sense, the most joyful experience a human life can know. It is also, therefore, a condemnation of any Christian who is too afraid or too filled with false guilt to enjoy life.

Many people approach religion the way my mother used to describe medicine: “The worse it tastes the better it is for you.” But this does not describe what it means to be a Christ-follower. A sour Christian is a contradiction in terms. The philosopher John Locke defined laughter as a “sudden glory.” A Christ-follower is like one who is forever at a wedding banquet.