

Sermon Series: If Jesus Came To Dinner

#4 A New Guest List – Luke 14:1-24 29 March 2020

Intro

Where do you think ***you*** would be seated in the room if Jesus invited you to ***His*** banquet?



I've conducted 100's of weddings over more than 30 years of ordained ministry in the church and the same question arises on the way to the wedding reception: "Where will we be seated during the dinner?"

What I mean by this, of course, is "Where do we rank in the **order of importance** at this event?"

In *The Gospel of Luke*, chapter 14, the **same question** on the lips of the guests at yet another occasion when Jesus is **eating and drinking** (the theme of our series). By their actions, you can see the guests are asking, "how **important** am I?"

Look with me at verse 7 of Luke 14...

7 ... Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honour near the head of the table..."

Jesus has been invited to dine with a leader of the **Pharisees**.¹ The **public** and the **poor** are again watching on and listening in.²

1. A humble heart (7-11)

¹ The Pharisees were an elite, academic group of Jewish lay-leaders in those days with great influence over religious rules for living based on Scriptures that divided the "insiders" from the "outsiders"; the "righteous" from the "unrighteous".

² See Luke 14:1 and note that the same was true of 7:34-37

The guests are vigorously **vying for the best seats**, trying to be seated closest to the host and Jesus takes the opportunity to teach them about **humility**. From verse 8, we read...

8 “When you are invited to a wedding feast, don’t sit in the seat of honour. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? 9 The host will come and say, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! 10 “Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, ‘Friend, we have a better place for you!’ Then you will be honoured in front of all the other guests. 11 For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus’ teaching here sounds like **Proverbs 25:6-7**. James picks up the same theme in his **Epistle in chapter 2**.³ And we know The Gospel of Luke begins with the **humbling of the powerful** and the **exalting of the lowly** in the lyrics of the **Song of Mary**.⁴

Yet we shouldn’t be surprised at Jesus saying “**those who exalt themselves shall be humbled; those who humble themselves will be exalted.**” This proverb perfectly describes the pattern of his **journey to the cross** where he **submits** even to **death for our sins**, and then subsequently is raised to life and ascends to God.⁵

This is the **great reversal** of human pride through the cross of Christ that **produces a humble heart**. It runs through the veins of this Gospel.

³ 3 If you give special attention and a good seat to the rich person, but you say to the poor one, “You can stand over there, or else sit on the floor”—well, 4 doesn’t this discrimination show that your judgments are guided by evil motives?

⁴ Luke 1:48,52,53

⁵ See Paul’s telling of this journey in Philippians 2:1-11

A person who is truly humble in heart would **lament** the way others were **pushed down the pegs of the pecking order** at this party. A truly “righteous”⁶ person would see themselves as **lowly before God** and **not superior** to others.

God regards a humble heart.

2. God’s radical grace (12-14)

The second lesson here is an appreciation of just how **radical God’s grace** really is. It transforms our **understanding of community**.

In verse 12, Jesus turns to his **host**, saying...

12 ... “When you put on a luncheon or a banquet,” ... “don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbours. For they will **invite you back**, and that will be your only **reward**. 13 Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will **reward** you for inviting those who could not **repay** you.”

Note the words “**reward**” and “**repay**” in this passage.

In 1st century Roman society **reciprocity ruled relationships**. There was a **quid-pro-quo** system of social politics built into this shame and honour culture. It even extended to the **meal table**, even those of middle-class Hebrew people.

In that setting, imagine how **unwelcome** Jesus’ advice to his host in verse 12 must have sounded! The up-side-**down** Kingdom of God threatens to **dismantle** this **gift-and-obligation way of life**.

Joel Green says in his commentary⁷,

⁶ i.e. someone who humbly believes God e.g. see Paul’s description of Abraham’s righteousness in Rom. 4:1-4

⁷ The Gospel of Luke, J. Green p.550

This change of attitude “...demanded by Jesus would **collapse the distance between rich and poor**, insider and outsider.”

Jesus knew his **host** did **not yet** appreciate the **radical grace** God offered him in the Gospel.

He had no idea how **loved** and **blessed** by God he is regardless of his rank, religion, or learning, or any other trophy he could produce.⁸

If he did truly appreciate God’s grace it would result in a **community of welcome, inclusion and freedom** and ultimately in rewards unimaginable in the future.

There’s a feature film called **100 Foot Journey** from 2014 with Helen Mirren. A talented and self-taught chef and his family are displaced from their



hometown in **India** and they settle in a quaint **French** village. The Indian family opens a restaurant **just 100 feet** away across the road from an **acclaimed Michelin Star** restaurant.

War erupts between them.

But in the end **understanding, friendship** and collaboration leads to them **accepting one another** and **learning from one another**.⁹

Jesus’ vision too is of a **community of inclusion** and of **mutual benefit**, one to another. He doesn’t call the wealthy in this passage to be saviours of the poor. Instead he calls them to welcome outsiders as **honoured and included guests and friends** – something only a **transformed heart of grace** could actually do.

⁸ Paul explains and illustrates such grace in Ephesians 2:8-9, and Romans 5:6-11

⁹ Mr Kadam: Indian cannot become French, and the French cannot become Indian. Madame Mallory: Mr. Kadam, I think I have just spent the whole day washing those words off your wall.

Jesus offers us a **humble heart**. And when God's grace is fully appreciated, a **radical community** is possible.

3. Jesus' Guest List (15-21)

The final point of this passage is that Jesus' **preferred guest list** is **surprising** and **challenging**.

In verse 15 one of the dinner guests **breaks the awkward tension** at the dinner table¹⁰ – he mentions how good it will be to join in God's **heavenly banquet** one day.¹¹

Without being asked to do so, Jesus goes on to tell a story about **who will be invited to that great banquet with God?**

16 “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. 17 When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’ 18 But they all began making excuses...”

In Jesus' parable there's a call to “come, **everything is ready**”. It sounds very like the call of the angel in **Revelation 19:7** to all welcome at God's **great banquet**.

In the same way that many Jewish religious leaders **rejected Jesus'** and his Gospel, so too the invitees, expected to attend the banquet in the story, **drop off like flies**, even though the feast is **ready to go**.¹²

Historians tell us that the various excuses listed in verses 18-20 would have been nothing but **insulting to the host** in that culture.

So, Jesus' audience would have been **nodding their heads** at this point of the story - the host had a **right to be angry**.

¹⁰ You know when you're at a fund-raiser for coal mining and you happen to raise the topic of climate change?

¹¹ An image in Scripture of the afterlife in God's presence e.g. Isa. 25:6; Rev. 19:17

¹² A two-round invitation and RSVP system was common in the ancient east

But **what the host** of the story **did next** the audience would **never have seen before!** Jesus says in verse 21...

21 “The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite **the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.**’

No-one ever heard of a host who **filled his empty seats** with such a collection of **“outsiders”!**¹³

In verse 21 they’re called **“the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind”**. They’re also mentioned in verse 13.

- They were the **“tax collectors and sinners”** of Luke 5, and
- **“the orphan and the widow”** of James 1:27.
- These are the people that the Pharisees of the day deemed to be **“unclean”, outsiders.**

Experts in the Law **twisted a text** such as Leviticus 21:17-23 to **prohibit** the so-called **“crippled, blind and lame”** from entering the temple for worship. Some even taught that they would be **excluded from the great messianic banquet.**¹⁴

This makes Jesus’ **healing** of the man on the Sabbath¹⁵ at the beginning of Luke 14 all the **more controversial**. It’s interesting too that in Matthew 21, after Jesus cleansed the temple, Matthew notes that it was the **blind and the lame** who came to Jesus **in the temple** to be healed.¹⁶

¹³ In these times you could feed the “unclean” at your back door, but never invite them inside

¹⁴ The Essenes sect claimed this in documents found at Qumran

¹⁵ The shabbat is the seventh day of the week (a Saturday for Jews) and a “day of rest” based on the narrative in Genesis 1-3 regarding the creation of the world. The Pharisees and other teachers insisted on no work of any kind as a rule, even if it caused hardship or loss.

¹⁶ Vs. 14

We must be **careful how we use** the **labels** in verse 21 in today's context. Much has been done to **remove the stigma** too often attached to people who are **differently abled** or of **low socio-economic status**.

Instead, we should think today **who** are the ones we **push to the outside of our circles of acceptance** and inclusion. Then this story will **challenge us** as much as those ancient dinner guests.

It's fair to say that **most of the time** we like to dine with "**our kind of people**". As our guests leave our homes we like to say, "we have **so much in common**."

How interesting that the "**outsiders**" of society were "Jesus' kind of people"; those **Jesus shared most in common!**¹⁷ **They** would have been the people at the top of **his guest list!**

I listened to one of the **ministers at the Wayside Chapel in Sydney** this week. He explained that in these current COVID-19 conditions his workers are still serving meals to the homeless and those in government



housing. After the meals are served the same **workers put on backpacks** and go out **into the streets** to find those who are most needy to go, as he put it, to **where they are at**.

What a **great example** of the **mission** that Jesus **embodied!**

¹⁷ Tim Chester writes, 'As a friend of sinners Jesus was saying "these are my people". It's easy to send money. It's hard much harder to extend grace in relational form. To send money alone might say "I can do something for you". This may really mean I am privileged or worse I am superior. It can be coated in compassion but if it doesn't give the needy person an opportunity to do something for you it is still a long way from Jesus. It says we are able, you are unable. When we sit with the poor, the outsider, the terms can be equal, shared, enjoyed. We often think people want help, but they often also want a friend, community.' From *A Meal With Jesus*

Summary

God regards a **humble heart**,

God's grace **radically reshapes our understanding of community &**,

Jesus' guest list **challenges ours**.

It is an ideal time, though not by choice, to make time to spend time in quiet reflection and prayer on these matters raised in Luke 14. In my own estimation, there are at least these three actions to consider:

1. Let's recognise *ourselves* as **poor and marginalized before God** –
 - the sin that separates us from God, apart from the goodness of God's grace, gives us an affinity with being an "outsider" who is invited into friendship with God.
2. Seek to more deeply appreciate the **radical** nature of **God's grace**
 - and consider how freely we are loved, without any means of earning such love and acceptance; without ever deserving such blessing.
3. Ask the Spirit of God **humble our hearts** and **transform our relationships** with others
 - and analyse our own practice of excluding certain types of people from our circle and open our "table" to those God longs to include to "fill His house."

At the beginning of this talk I asked you to **think where you might be seated at the table** if Jesus invited you to dinner? Where in the order of **importance** would you be?

Turns out, this is the **wrong question**. See how Jesus **concludes his story** in verses 22-24...

22 After the servant had done this, he reported, '**There is still room for more.**' 23 So his master said, 'Go out into the country

lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. 24 For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.”

Perhaps a better question to ask ourselves is: “**how am I responding** to Jesus’ invitation to **all people** to have a **place of honour** at *his* table” and, “how can God help me to **welcome others to *mine***?”

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