

# *Stories with Intent*

## THE PARABLES OF JESUS



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## The Great Banquet (Luke 14:1-24)

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### **Background & Context**<sup>1</sup>:

As is still true, meals, especially banquets, were among the most important contexts for social relationships. They were the primary context in which shame and honor were assigned. Meals were and are a means for organizing society. Shame and honor were more explicit in the ancient world than in our own. Cultural stratification, privilege, and indebtedness to reciprocate were strongly emphasized, as Luke 14:7-14 demonstrates.

Seating charts emphasized the high status of some and the lower status of others, giving great honor to those who were distinguished and ignoring those who were ordinary or “defective.” We would like to think that these social issues are descriptions of the first-century world of the New Testament and not problems in our own settings. Yet social distinctions do matter far too often in our Christian communities, as those who experience less privilege would easily attest. What was quite explicit in the ancient world may express itself in more implicit fashion in our contexts.

In Luke 14:1-24, the social matrix of first-century life is on display, and we hear Jesus speak into this both with communal wisdom and unexpected, even astonishing, advice. We hear the setting for the story in 14:1. It is the Sabbath, and Jesus is invited to a meal at the house of a leading Pharisee. After an interlude in which Luke narrates Jesus healing a man and defending that Sabbath healing, Luke focuses on the meal scene, a setting he strategically employs in his gospel (e.g., 5:29; 7:36; 11:37; see also 7:34; 15:1-2).

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<sup>1</sup> Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent: A Comprehensive Guide to the Parables of Jesus* (307-10)

### **A Parable on Humility and Generosity (14:1-14)**<sup>2</sup>

At the meal, Jesus observes “how the guests chose the places of honor” (14:7). His response, according to Luke, is two-fold. **First, he tells a parable.** The point of the story is to discourage his listeners from seeking the most prestigious seat at the table to avoid the humiliating situation of being displaced by someone of greater prominence (14:8). Instead, they are to take the lowest place so that they might be elevated to a more honorable seat by their host (14:10). Jesus’ summary comment to the parable is the well-known aphorism: “For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted” (14:11).

How are we to understand this first response of Jesus to the very explicit social ranking at meals? We might note initially that such social ranking was commonplace in Greco-Roman society. In fact, meals were situations that particularly highlighted social disparities in the first-century world.

There is a store of advice given about how to act at such meals. A Jewish wisdom book, Sirach, warns of being greedy and advises being deferential at such meals (Sirach 31:12-18). While this advice fits the tone of Jesus’ remarks in Luke, Jesus goes further in warning against seeking out the most honorable seats. His teaching is to pursue humility, a concept with significant status connotations. Humility was very rarely considered a virtue in Greco-Roman moral discourse. Yet, humility is to mark the followers of Jesus, according to so much of the New Testament witness (e.g., Luke 1:48, 52; 18:14; Philippians 2:3; Colossians 3:12; James 3:13; 1 Peter 5:5).

What might be striking to contemporary readers in this first teaching of Jesus is that he does not speak against the system of honor at meals. Instead, he seems to assume it. Highest and lowest seats figure into his answer (14:10). This may be due to his particular audience in the story, the banquet guests. Jesus’ advice addresses how to navigate the social setting into which they have been invited.

When we move to 14:12-14, however, we hear a more counter-cultural message—one that addresses the fabric of the honor and status structures of the ancient world. Jesus, without using a parable, speaks directly to his host—the one who holds a greater measure of control over the ‘rules of the game’ for this particular meal. His advice to this figure of power in the story works to undermine the very system that upholds status difference at meals. **Jesus tells the host not to invite friends, family, or the rich to meals, since they are able to repay with a corresponding invitation.** Such social reciprocity is the backbone of the patronage system endemic to the first-century world.

**Instead, Jesus calls for inclusion of those who cannot return the invitation: “the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind” (14:13).** This group of persons resonates with the Isaiah-shaped mission of Jesus from Luke 4:18, with the poor and the blind mentioned explicitly there as recipients of Jesus’ ministry. For Luke, Jesus subverts expectations that social payment and repayment should govern life in God’s kingdom community. His promise is that God will repay such hospitality at the “resurrection of the righteous” (14:14; also 14:11, since God is implied in the passive, “will be exalted”).

This kind of reversal of expectations and status is thematic in Luke (e.g., 1:52; 6:20-26; 18:14). In fact, in the very next passage, our meal story continues with Jesus reemphasizing the notion of inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind (14:21), this time in a parable representing the present and future banquet of God’s kingdom, which includes just such marginalized ones, with the “invited guest list” being left out (14:24).

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<sup>2</sup> This section was written by Jeannine K. Brown and excerpted from her commentary on Luke.

### **The Parable of the Great Banquet (14:15-24)**<sup>3</sup>

The next part of the discussion around this very eventful meal involved the telling of another parable. It appears Jesus' teaching was making some of the guests nervous, so someone at the table pronounced a blessing on those who *will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God*. No doubt the person who speaks up thinks that all at the table will agree with the blessing. But Jesus takes even this occasion to issue yet another warning through a parable. In effect, he says, "There will be surprises at God's banquet table."

The parable revolves around a man's invitation to a grand occasion, a *great banquet*. In the ancient world such a meal would have been preceded by invitations, which would have been accepted by those planning to attend, much like our RSVP. The next step was to hear from the host's servant that the meal was ready, which is exactly what happens in verse 17. But a surprising thing happens on the way to the dinner. Last-second refusals begin to pour in, despite the RSVPs. As the text says, *they all alike began to make excuses*. Jesus notes three specifically.

The **first excuse** involves the need to check out a recently bought field. Some ancient purchases did require a post-purchase inspection. So the excuse is a culturally normal one, but it also reveals priorities: something else is more important than this celebration.

The **second excuse** involves the purchase of five oxen. Since most ancient landowners had only one or two oxen, this man is clearly wealthy by ancient standards. Of course the reaction again reflects priorities.

The **third excuse** involves a recent marriage and the desire to spend time with the new bride. The Old Testament allowed one to be freed from certain obligations in case of marriage (Deut 20:7; 24:5). But it is hard to see why this would be sufficient reason to keep the man from attending this party, especially since he had already accepted the invitation. Again, he is choosing other priorities.

**The servant tells the master of the refusals. The master decides, however, that his party will go on anyway.** Nothing is to be delayed. The promised celebration will be held as announced. The celebration pictures the arrival of salvation in the kingdom's initial phase. There is no delay to the kingdom's arrival associated with Jesus. There are only others who will be invited to come.

**So the host, angered but not defeated, sends the servant out into the streets and lanes so the poor, maimed, blind and lame may come.** This list recalls Jesus' earlier remarks about who is receptive to his message and shows the spiritual connection in the story. God now will invite all kinds of people to the table, and some who had appeared to be in line for an invitation will miss the meal, by choice: when the time to celebrate arrives, they refuse what is on offer.

The servant reports back, noting that many have come but the room is not yet full. So a second invitation goes out to those on the highways and in the hedges; thus the invitation is now extended to travelers from outside the city who may not know the host. It seems that the allusion here is to Gentiles, and Jesus is likely foretelling the mission beginning in Acts 10. Jesus views the current time of his ministry as a celebration, a time when the groom is present (Luke 5:33-39).

Jesus concludes the parable by noting that those who were originally invited will not share in the banquet. At this point the parable becomes a reprimand. The warning is that many in the nation of Israel who were in line for divine blessing and who had responded to an initial invitation to be engaged with God's promise have failed to step forward now that the wedding day has come. The parable pictures Jesus' invitation to experience the blessing of God's kingdom by responding to him.

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<sup>3</sup> This section was written by Darrel Bock and excerpted from his commentary on Luke (251-53).

## Applying the Parable<sup>4</sup>

How did Jesus seek to change attitudes and behaviors with this parable? How will it change our own?

- ♦ **At its most basic level, the parable forces us to realize the importance of one's neighbor.** Here, Jesus is not calling on his followers to provide for the needs of the poor and the disabled; he says to invite them to dinner. This is the New Testament's understanding of hospitality. The word translated "hospitality" means, literally, "love of a stranger." The clear sign of acceptance, of recognizing others as one's equals, of cementing fellowship, is breaking bread together. In the Christian community no one is a "project." Do you suppose Jesus was serious about opening church halls and homes in this way?
- ♦ **The parable of the great banquet repeats and enlarges the concept of hospitality introduced in verses 12-14.** The kingdom is to be found not in a dinner for the rich and famous, but in table fellowship with the poor, with people of no account, and with those who hang out on the street. These are the people who finally take part in the dinner. In this parable Jesus opens a window on the nature of his Father. The celebration of the salvation of God, symbolized by the dinner, is not taking place with the well-to-do and the successful—they declined—but is taking place with the "the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." God comes to those who consent to come to God with their lives just as they are. Can we accept a God who becomes so vulnerable as to join the human condition exactly where it is, or more precisely, exactly where we are?
- ♦ **The warning of this parable must be heard: the biggest obstacles to discipleship are possessions and family, but they are also the biggest opportunities for discipleship.** Whether the excuses are legitimate or paper-thin can be debated, but for Jesus this question is irrelevant. His point is that no excuse is valid when one faces the kingdom. Jesus' concern is that possessions and family do not prohibit discipleship. Those who hear Jesus' parable are confronted with a challenge to change course, to look past the superficial, and to respond to God's work taking place in Jesus' ministry. The point of the parable of the Prodigal in Luke 15 and of the parable of the Banquet can be summarized with a statement and a question: **God is giving a party. Are you going to come?**
- ♦ **Another note sounding in the parable is the sense of joy and urgency that attends the kingdom.**
  - **First, the witness of the church should be characterized by the joy of inviting people to the banquet God has prepared,** a banquet that is both present and future. Too often the joy of the kingdom's presence has been so muted that people are left with no pointers to the presence of the kingdom.
  - **Second, the key to applying the parable is quite possibly a Christian understanding of time.** If the kingdom was present in Jesus' ministry as he issued the invitation to it and continues in the present through the work of the Holy Spirit, do we not have the responsibility to offer the invitation with the announcement that all is ready? Should not the joy of the celebration of the kingdom be so evident that the invitation becomes compelling? And should we not be alert enough to know that the invitation to those on the margins, whom we would not normally think of inviting, is essential?
- ♦ **Having discovered from other parables that the kingdom comes with limitless grace but brings with it limitless demand, these same themes reverberate through this parable.** The invitation to God's table is sheer grace, but it is never cheap grace. The focus of the parable is on the urgency of the invitation and thus becomes a basis for reflection about mission and discipleship.

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<sup>4</sup> Snodgrass, pp. 310-23.

- ♦ **It is crucial to understand here that the party goes on despite the refusal of the original invitees. The party is not postponed; others are invited to take their place.** Opportunity has been lost by some, grace has been extended to others, but the meal is still served. The question is on which side of the divide Jesus' listeners fall. God's grace continues, but we can miss the blessing if we do not respond to Jesus. Even those who seem to be first in line will miss the party if they refuse to come to the celebration. To use Jesus' words elsewhere, "the first have become last, and the last have become first."

## Discussion

1. What purpose(s) can we think of for giving a big dinner? What purpose(s) would make us more likely to attend? What purpose(s) would make us less likely to attend?
2. Verse 7 begins with Jesus noticing the behavior of the guests at the meal he is attending. What influences *us* when we choose a place to sit at a social gathering of some kind (e.g., a meal, a lecture, church)? What similarities do we see between ourselves and the guests in the story? What differences do we see?
3. Jesus seems to give his host advice or instructions about who to invite to a banquet. Are these literal instructions about who to eat with, do we think? If so – what would it mean to follow these instructions?
4. Jesus tells the parable of the great banquet after someone says "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" Is this story an "answer" or "response" to that statement? What point do we think Jesus is trying to make here?
5. What stands out to you about the reasons people give for why they cannot attend the banquet? What do those reasons tell us about these invited guests...and about their relationship with the host? Are there ways we resemble these guests?
6. What does it mean for the church today to go out into the "streets and lanes of the town" in order to bring people into the banquet? Why is this often difficult to do?
7. How do we think we need to understand what Jesus is telling his host at this meal, and what Jesus is telling us?