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The Great Banquet

Introduction:

Open your Bibles with me to Luke 14:15-24. In the first 24 verses of this chapter of the Third Gospel, Jesus teaches about the kingdom of God as a banquet. The setting of this instruction is at an actual banquet, hosted by a leading Pharisee, the conservative party of the Jews who were some of Jesus' fiercest opponents. On the way into the house Jesus heals a man with a bodily malfunction and because Jesus heals him on the Sabbath, he of course will be challenged by these legalists. Jesus silences their would-be criticism by another of his "how much more" arguments. If they would not think twice about rescuing a child or even an animal on the Sabbath, how much more then should Jesus rescue this man? (verses 1-6).

Jesus then enters the house of the Pharisee and continues his teaching. He responds to the typical social maneuvering that took place at banquets and feasts of those in the higher social strata. In the homes of the wealthier, there were u-shaped, low tables and the guests reclined on couches around the table. It was a matter of prestige and social rank to be seated at the places near the head of the table, where sat the host. Noticing these guests "jockeying" for the

best seats, Jesus taught the kingdom value of taking the lower seats, and waiting for others to promote you instead of being humiliated by a demotion. Then Jesus challenged the prevalent social custom of using banquet invitations as social-climbing devices. Those invited to these important banquets were obligated to reciprocate, and they would add to their own guest lists the names of prominent people who would in turn reciprocate their invitation. Thus they would “climb the social ladder” (See “Banquet” on pages 71-72 in *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, Leland Ryken, et. al., editors).

Jesus next made reference to the importance of practicing kingdom hospitality toward the broken and needy, those always excluded from these banquets of the important people. Jesus’ reference to eternal reward sparked a comment from a fellow guest at the banquet, one that Jesus knew was stated glibly and presumptuously. This man assumed he had a secure reservation for the heavenly banquet, but Jesus knew that he and the others around the table were not in any spiritual condition to participate in the Great Banquet of the kingdom of God.

Follow as I read **Luke 14:15-24**.

Particularly in Luke’s Gospel we see the importance that Jesus placed on the meal as a context for experiencing God. The presence of Jesus and now of the risen Christ turns the most basic of meals into a sacramental experience of his presence. At meals with his disciples, both in his earthly and post-resurrection appearances, Jesus taught them truths, such as being the Bread of Life and the source of the joy that accompanies times of feasting and banqueting. He is the fulfillment of the Old Covenant’s hope for the Messianic Feast, such as described in passages like Isaiah 25:6-9 and Psalm 23:5.

At mealtime, we should invite Jesus as our Guest of Honor. And when we invite him as Guest he has a way of becoming the real Host and we are the guests who learn from him and even feed upon him. This is what happened at the home of this Pharisee, who got more than he “bargained for” in inviting Jesus.

Perhaps the Pharisee had invited Jesus so that he and his fellow Pharisees could scrutinize Jesus’ actions more closely, particularly the way he continued to heal people on the Sabbath. Not all of the Pharisees were equally antagonistic toward Jesus and this host could have had an unusual openness toward his teaching and a sincere desire to engage him in conversation (See page 546 of Joel B Green, *The Gospel of Luke*, NICNT). Jesus at this meal transitioned from being guest to teacher. He first challenged the way the Pharisees sought prestige for themselves and overlooked the needs of the poor and outcast instead of practicing genuine hospitality. And in response to the comment about their supposed hope of the heavenly feast of God Jesus began to speak about The Great Banquet of God and those who were invited and particularly about the surprising responses to God’s invitation.

Note how that in the setting of this feast Jesus gave the parable of The Great Banquet and taught about, first...

➤ **The invitation to the banquet (verses 15-17)**

This “certain man” whom Jesus described in the parable as preparing the great banquet (verse 16) is no doubt God the Father. Jesus refers to himself, it appears, as the servant/messenger who is sent to issue the Father’s invitation to the feast, which is none other than the feast of salvation, the fulfillment of the hopes of the Old Covenant, as seen in passages such as Isaiah 25:6-9 and Psalm 23:5 (referenced above). Notice that the heavenly Father, the banquet host, as he makes...

- *The preparation of a great feast*

When Jesus began his public ministry, he preached the announcement of the availability of the kingdom of God (Mark 1:15). Because of his incarnation and subsequent sacrifice on the cross, the way of access into the kingdom would be available to all who would repent and believe the Good News. In this parable Jesus is saying that the Father/Host was making preparation for his people to gain entrance into the kingdom of God, which is what salvation is all about. The Father/host can now send out the second wave of invitations because “everything is now ready” (verse 17).

In speaking of the host’s preparation of the banquet Jesus was perhaps referring to his ministry and especially his coming suffering, death and resurrection which would be God’s gracious provision for the salvation of all who believe. Following his passion, sin-bearing and substitutionary death on the cross, Jesus cried in triumph, “It is finished!” (John 19:30). And then, with his resurrection and the descent of the Holy Spirit on the Day of Pentecost, all was made ready for living in the kingdom of God.

The idea is that of our heavenly Father’s preparing for us the restoration of his life in us. God created us for himself, to have an intimate love relationship with him, that he might enjoy us and that we might enjoy him forever. This is the feasting, banqueting relationship we see in the days of Adam and Eve, before the fall, when they walked with God in the Garden of Paradise. This love relationship, I believe, is poetically reflected in the Song of Songs:

“He has taken me to his banquet hall,
And his banner over me is love” (2:4).

The heavenly Father intensely desires that we know, share and enjoy his intimate love and caring, sustaining and joy-infusing presence. And through the

Christ of the cross and the empty tomb the Father has made everything ready for us to enter his banquet hall immediately. This is the invitation of the risen Christ who says to us,

“Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with him, and he with me” (Revelation 3:20).

Everything is ready for this present time banquet of love, which is but a foretaste of the messianic banquet of heaven, which we also read about in Revelation:

“Then the angel said to me, ‘Write: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!’ And he added, ‘These are the true words of God’” (19:9).

Heaven is the unspeakable paradise restored that will mean perfect joy and the perfect fulfillment of everything that life was intended to be. And the glory of this New Creation will be greater than that of the original paradise. It will be the home of God’s redeemed creatures, whereas the glory of the first paradise was the glory of God’s innocent creatures. Thus there will be the added dimension of everlasting gratitude for God’s amazing, restoring grace, as we worship forever the Lamb upon the throne in God’s great feast called heaven.

Perhaps when you host a banquet, on your invitations you write, “No gifts please.” I know Nancy has written on our Newcomers’ Lunch invitations, “No gifts please. Bring just yourselves.” It was customary for those who were invited to the banquet of a king to bring gifts for the king. But here at this great banquet it seems that no gifts are necessary. In fact, there is nothing these guests can bring but themselves because there is nothing we can do to earn our place at the King’s banquet.

Note with me that the heavenly Host has issued...

- *The invitation to consider, accept and participate*

As was customary in the Middle East, the host in Jesus’ parable sends out two invitations. The first invitation was the formal one to secure the assent of the guests that indeed they would be attending the feast on the announced date. Then the host would purchase the meat and all of the food and wine according to the number of guests who committed themselves to attend. If it was a relatively small number, then the host would purchase chickens or ducks for the main course. For larger groups there would be a lamb or even a calf or full grown beef cattle. Thus it was important for those who committed to attend to made good on their commitment, otherwise a lot of food would be wasted. The second invitation was issued on the evening of the feast when the servant was sent to the guests to say, “Soup’s on. Come and get it!” Then the guests would immediately drop what they were doing to come to the banquet while the food

was fresh and warm (See Kenneth Bailey, page 94, *Poet and Peasant/Through Peasant Eyes: a Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables in Luke*).

So, when the first invitation was issued a firm commitment was required. The invited guests would carefully check their schedules and previous commitments and make their decision. To be invited by an important person was no light thing. It was equivalent to being invited to be his close associate, to share in his prestige and honor. To refuse his invitation without an important reason was to risk insulting the host and losing out on an opportunity to become one within his inner circle of friends (See page 71, of *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery*, above citation). Once the initial invitation was accepted, those invited were obligated to attend. No excuses would be accepted.

We will see in the parable how that those who initially accepted the invitation began to renege on their commitment. Perhaps Jesus is alluding to the fact that some people accept the invitation to God's great banquet because it seems a good thing to do "down the road," as it were. Who wouldn't want to go to heaven when she/he dies? But Jesus is saying that the host/Father issues an invitation now that must be accepted now. His invitation allows no delay or postponement till after other commitments are met.

It seems to me that this is the way the rich young man wanted eternal life, as an additional commodity and not as a life commitment and immediate priority (See Mark 10:17-31). We are all familiar with food as "carry out" as we say in my home country and as "take away" here in Flanders ("om mee te nemen," in Dutch). The Father doesn't offer his banquet of abundant and eternal life as something we can carry away with us and "cash in on" or activate when we've lived all our personal dreams, ambitions and priorities. The Father insists that we come in to his banquet hall, into a life-changing, priority-demanding relationship with him. The banquet of this abundant and eternal is free but not cheap. The host Father demands that we come to him and enter into a life-changing relationship with him. This means we take the way of costly discipleship that Jesus will describe in the verses immediately following today's text (Luke 14:25-35).

There are many who want to go to heaven when they die but seemingly have no interest in a life-changing love relationship with God in this life. That tells me that their interest is merely in escaping hell and having some kind of self-centered paradise in the afterlife, which is certainly not what heaven is about. Jesus' parable tells us that the host Father is inviting us to come to Jesus as Lord and to enter into the Father's love and to order our lives in a way that honors him and allows us to feast upon the riches of his grace and goodness.

And so the invitation is to consider the claims and demands of Christ upon our lives as Lord. And then we must accept the implications of his dinner invitation—to enter into a life-changing love relationship with God, whose purpose is to

shape us into the likeness of his Son and to enjoy us by intimate fellowship. His invitation is that we come into full participation with him in his kingdom and not that we try to receive his benefits from a distance. He offers no catering or take-away service for those unwilling to pay the price of an intimate love relationship with the feasting Father.

In this parable Jesus also teaches about...

➤ **The response of refusal (verses 18-21a)**

When the second invitation, the “Come and get it!” invitation, was sent out the invited guests began to make excuses. Picture this scene of a wealthy and generous landowner who has prepared an elaborate banquet, only to be met with sudden refusals which left him with a prepared feast and no one to eat it. No one likes to be “stood up,” as we say in my culture. As Near East scholar Kenneth Bailey notes, this last-minute refusal on the part of the invited guests would be rude in any culture, but in this ancient Middle Eastern one, where honor was so important, these responses were almost unthinkable (See Bailey, above citation, page 95).

Note how the host is greeted with...

- *Unanimous and inexcusable excuses*

Jesus says that when the “Come and get it!” invitation went out, “they *all alike* began to make excuses” (verse 18). Amazingly, those invited were unanimous in rejecting the invitation at the last minute, and their excuses were all inexcusable, without merit or credibility. American evangelist Billy Sunday is credited with saying that an excuse is “the skin of reason stuffed with a lie” (cited by Warren W Wiersbe in *Be Courageous: Luke 14-24*, page 15).

Indeed, none of the excuses offered by these three would have been acceptable. As Kenneth Bailey notes, these three excuses would have been “bold-faced lies” which everyone would have detected (See above citation, pages 95-97). The one who said he had just bought a field and needed to go see it is making a weak, even offensive excuse. Purchasing a field was usually a process of several years and the few hours of feasting in the nighttime would have been an inconsequential interruption. The testing of oxen was another fabricated and ludicrous excuse because no one would purchase teams of oxen without first testing them. As Bailey says, this would be like someone today calling and canceling an important engagement saying he had just made a bank transfer to buy five used cars over the phone and needed to see if they would start (after the fact of the purchase! See above citation, page 97). And the man who said he had just gotten married would have been particularly insulting. The Old Testament provision for new bridegrooms was to exempt them from a year of

military service and not for a few hours of an event such as a banquet. See Deuteronomy 24:5 and comments by Bailey, above citation). What each of these invited guests was saying in equally offensive and inexcusable ways was “Your banquet is not worth my personal interests and time.” Thus, these excuses were...

- *Offensive to the Host*

Each of us faces the choice of priorities vis-à-vis the call to follow Jesus and to enter his kingdom and enjoy his banquet. Like these three invitees, none of us would stand up before God and say “No!” when he invites us to seek him and enjoy him above all else. We would probably couch our refusal in the “skin” of a “reasonable” excuse. And our excuses have a tint of reasonableness to them, at least in our own eyes.

For example, none of these excuses centered on evil things. The field purchase was a matter of personal property and we know we are to be careful stewards and managers of our wealth. The oxen were important to this individual’s work and business, and all of us want to be good providers for our families and even be able to contribute financially to the kingdom of God. Marriage, we all know, is an important calling and responsibility. But all of these enterprises and responsibilities can become idols and excuses that keep us from following Jesus and seeking God first and his kingdom (Matthew 6:33).

When we offer our excuses to God, he sees right through to our hearts and to him our excuses must appear as ludicrous and offensive as these did to the host in the parable. We are in effect saying, “You, God, are not as important to me as the things you have given and entrusted to me. I want to spend my time seeking ‘these other things’ and right now I don’t have time for you.” The sad thing about these lame excuses we offer to God, besides their offensiveness to him, is that our inverted and distorted priorities damage these “other things” that we chose over God. If we took time to come to God’s banquet of eternal and abundant life, we would be better managers of our wealth and business and better leaders and providers for our spouses and children. The whole idea of behind this banquet is to picture the true enjoyment of the life that God offers, which is far better than the life we can “carve out” for ourselves. By refusing the Host’s invitation, we are saying, “I can live my life better without you.” This is highly offensive to the one who made us for himself and through Christ purchased us wayward sinners back for his pleasure and glory.

No wonder the writer of Hebrews asked, “how shall we escape if we ignore such a great salvation?” (2:3). When we treat God’s call to his banquet as something to be ignored or to be treated as a “carry out,” a “take-away” for our own personal convenience instead of the priority of our lives, we are insulting the Host, the Lord of glory who wants to bless and enrich us beyond our comprehension. Our Host went to a lot of trouble and expense to give us his banquet—the gift of his

Son. And we cannot ignore this gift and opportunity with impunity. To act like these invited guests is to ignore and disregard the authority of the Host of all hosts. It is to insult his intelligence by our foolish attempts to convince him that we really do have a credible reason to refuse his call and claim upon our lives and priorities.

But note that these refusals do not frustrate this host's purpose of having a full banquet room. He offers next...

➤ **The expanded invitation (verses 21b-24)**

Although the shunned host is angry over these refusals, he is not obsessed with rage and condemnation to which he would certainly have been entitled. Instead, he issues an expanded invitation to reach out to other potential guests. Notice that he is...

- *A gracious and determined Host*

This parable had an immediate historical application to Jesus' audience—those reclining around the banquet table of their fellow-Pharisee. Jesus' Good News of salvation indeed was preached and offered first to the house of Israel, the people of the Old Covenant. But their refusal would mean the fulfillment of Isaiah's and Jeremiah's prophecies about a New Covenant that would include the Gentiles, those outside the pale of the original covenant institution. As John writes in the prologue of his gospel, "He (The Word, Jesus) came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him" (John 1:11). But that wasn't the end of the story. There would be the New Israel, the new people of God, who would receive him and receive "the right to become children of God" (John 1:12).

God is destined and determined to fulfill his purpose to be glorified by those who will glorify and enjoy him forever. The full number of his elect will gather at his heavenly feast before his throne, and that will mean...

- *The inclusion of the rejected and of the outsiders*

The host in the parable was a wealthy man who had invited his privileged guests, who subsequently refused his invitation. Now he turns to the poor, crippled, blind and lame and extends his invitation to them. These broken and neglected people were ostracized from temple worship and considered unclean. This host, however, considers them worthy of his banquet. And Jesus had announced this "great reversal" of the kingdom of God. Outsiders would be welcomed by God (Luke 4:18). The broken are the ones most likely to realize their need for God's salvation. The wounded realize their need for healing. The blind realize their need to see God. The lame are looking for his power to walk and to live with God.

It's amazing how easily the broken people can be overlooked and omitted even in the very religion that supposedly worships God. That was true in first century Judaism and it's true in the church today. How easily power, control and privilege is seized by those wanting to have their way and influence in the church, which is totally at odds with the spirit of Jesus, which is the spirit of servanthood and humility. But the Host is seeking, not the mighty and influential, but rather the weak and lowly and if the church omits and overlooks these we are betraying the Host of the banquet, who seeks them out. We need to be aware that there are in this nation thousands who have ignored and shunned by the church or even hurt by the laws and distorted teachings of the traditional church.

The reputation of the host in our parable would have been totally "ruined" by his inviting these "riffraff" to his banquet. He violated all proper social convention to go beneath his status in society. And this is a fitting picture of the God of our Lord Jesus, who stooped to the lowest level to reach us sinners. Jesus the eternal Son laid aside his glory and took the way of suffering and death on a shameful cross in order to rescue us (Philippians 2:6-8). Jesus was insulted as a friend of sinners, who "ruined his reputation" in order to rescue us lost sinners (Luke 15:1-2). And the only way we can be rescued is by the shameful cross on which Jesus died. And we are called to share his reproach in joining him at his banquet table. You are likely to "ruin" your reputation with your friends, family and colleagues who think of the Christian life as one for weaklings and social misfits. But the invitation comes from the God who seeks after the "riffraff" and whose Son died as a "riffraff" on a scandalous cross and calls us to follow him in the way of the cross.

And there are the outsiders, those who have yet to hear the Good News, the news that there indeed is a banquet and that they are welcome to the salvation feast of God. Right in our own communities there are those who have yet to hear the Good News in a way they can understand. And here in Brussels, Belgium, we of all people have an unreached world at our doorstep. How hopeful we should be that God would use us at IBC to reach the nations that have come to Belgium and to our very neighborhoods and places of business and government. Jesus spoke of how "the gospel must first be preached to all nations" before his glorious return (Mark 13:10). His Great Commission will be fulfilled and there will be the full inclusion of representatives from "every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and in front of the lamb," whose feast we will enjoy (Matthew 28:19-20; Revelation 7:9; 19:9). Our responsibility to be God's messengers and invitation-givers is not only to support those we send out as missionaries, but to accept our missionary responsibility to reach those God has placed in our personal sphere of influence.

And the parable shows a vivid distinction between those who will be gathered at the Great Banquet and those who refuse the invitation. All of the invited will be...

- *Compelled by love or condemned by refusal*

The NIV gives us an unfortunate translation with the command of the host saying “make them come in.” The word is better translated “compel” (as in ESV, NRSV, etc.). In dark periods of church history, this mistranslated and misunderstood verse justified the forced “conversions” of the Inquisition, for example. The God of perfect love will not force anyone to accept his love, which would not be love at all. He woos us by his grace and compelling invitation. Paul speaks of how the love of Christ constrains us (2 Corinthians 5:14).

Again it is Near Eastern scholar Kenneth Bailey who helps us once again to understand this parable in its cultural context. In this culture, if someone were invited by a host who belonged to a higher social class, it was impolite and presumptuous to immediately accept (This reminds me of my Southern [USA] cultural heritage! Even though you may have wanted to accept a second serving of food at a meal, you at first politely said something like, “Oh, no. I really shouldn’t.”).

In this Near Eastern culture first you would say, “Oh, no. I’m afraid you can’t mean to invite me.” And then the host or his servant/messenger would continue to insist for about 15 minutes, with your replies, “Oh, surely not me. You must be mistaken.” And finally, when this back and forth was over, you would say, “OK, since you insist.” The messenger would be instructed by the host to not take “no” for an answer. This is what “compel” means. The messenger would have his arm around you and as you are saying, “No, certainly not me. This is too good to be true,” he is gently guiding you to the host’s banquet. (See Bailey, page 111, above citation). This custom of “back and forth” is seen in the visit of the messengers to Abraham, in Genesis 19:3).

In the same way, God seeks to draw us lovingly to faith. This is the convincing of the Holy Spirit Jesus speaks about (John 16:8-11) and the imploring Paul mentions (2 Corinthians 5:20). God honors us with free will and does not force his love upon us or force us to love him. And there ought to be this sense of humility and unworthiness before the amazing grace of God that causes us to say, “This is too good to be true.” And there is no mechanical predestination in this parable, but it does show that God must do the inviting. He always takes the initiative. We have no hope unless God issues the invitation. But we must do the accepting. We cannot save ourselves but we can certainly condemn ourselves by our refusal of grace.

And we who have already been enjoying the Master’s Table are sent as his inviters of others. Our evangelism is to be winsomely persuasive and kindly and patiently persistent, especially toward those for whom this is not just Good News but *new* news.

Conclusion:

The Host has sent out his invitation to all. Many are called but few are chosen (Matthew 22:14). All have received or will receive this invitation to know God and to be part of his banqueting table of love, forgiveness, joy, peace and everlasting purpose. We will either be compelled by his love or condemned by our own refusal. And your refusal may not be a flagrant “in your face” defiance, but more an excuse, a strategy of delay until your priorities are accomplished and the banquet of God is more convenient to you. But time eventually runs out for all of us, and sooner or later the last invitation and final opportunity has come and gone. No one will be judged on the basis of not having an invitation. One of the last verses in the Bible is “Whoever is thirsty, let him come” (Revelation 22:17).

In the final statement of Jesus about this parable he seems to turn from the story to his fellow guest around the banquet table of the Pharisee. He warns them that they are on the verge of being excluded forever from the Great Banquet by their refusal to accept the Messenger, Jesus, invitation. This morning in this place Jesus turns from this parable to you real people who are here today. You today are making your own story, deciding your own fate.

This morning we will partake of the Lord’s Supper, one that is a reminder of the Great Banquet to come. In fact, when Jesus instituted this Communion meal with us his disciples he said he would not eat and drink it again until he would do so with us in the kingdom of God (Luke 22:18). To participate in this meal now, let’s examine ourselves to be certain that we have already accepted his invitation and come to the Father to feast upon his loving presence and grace. And as we partake, may we pray to be deeper into the feast of his love and goodness and to have a stronger hope of our sharing with him the Great Feast of the Lamb.

To me it is a matter of incredible, amazing grace that the Father, the great Host, should want us, in the words of Henri Nouwen, to “sit at his side at the heavenly banquet.” As Nouwen articulates so beautifully in his interpretation of Jesus’ parable of the Prodigal Son, the banquet host is none other than the Father of the Prodigal Son and the Elder Brother, who yearns for both of them to come into the fullness of his loving presence. God the Host invites us, says Nouwen, to the celebration that belongs to the kingdom of God, who offers forgiveness, reconciliation and healing. God wants to share his joy with us forever, a joy that we strangely resist, with our preoccupation with lesser things (See Henri Nouwen, *The Return of the Prodigal Son: A Story of Homecoming*, Image Books, Doubleday, 1994, pages 86, 113, 117).

“Come, for everything is now ready” and “there is still room.”

Questions and thoughts for personal reflection and/or group discussion:

1. Jesus often, as in our text, uses the image of a banquet or feast to describe life in the kingdom. What are some of the images that come to your mind that make “a great banquet” a fitting symbol of life in the kingdom of God (both in this life and the next)?
2. In what ways does our accepting God's invitation to his banquet reorder our priorities?
3. What are some excuses we might give to God to postpone our full entrance into life in the kingdom of God?
4. How can good things, such as our livelihood and our family life, keep us from fully entering God's kingdom service and fellowship?
5. What people today would you say Jesus is referring to as “the poor, crippled, blind and lame”? Who are these people in your sphere of life?
6. Who are those “out in the roads and country lanes”? What is your responsibility to issue them an invitation to God's Great Banquet?
7. Are you this day feasting at the table of God's full fellowship and blessing? Are you growing in your enjoyment of God's presence?

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