

No More Excuses

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Date: 06 November 1994

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- [0 : 0 0] The scripture lesson this morning comes from the gospel according to Luke chapter 14 verses 15 through 24. Would you please, if you are able, stand for the reading of the gospel.
- Hear the word of God. And when one of those who were reclining at table with Jesus heard this, he said to Jesus, blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.
- But he said to them, a certain man was giving a big dinner and he invited many. And at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, come for everything is ready now.
- But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, I have bought a piece of land and need to go out and look at it. Please consider me excused.
- Another said to him, I have bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to try them out. Please consider me excused. Another said, I have married a wife and for that reason I cannot come.
- [1 : 1 0] And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and the crippled, the blind and lame.
- And the slave said, master, what you commanded has been done and there still is room. And the master said to the slave, go out into the highways and along the hedges and compel them to come in that my house may be filled.
- For I tell you, none of those who were invited shall taste of my dinner. Spirit of the living God, we believe that you called upon Luke, the physician, to write down these words long ago.
- And now we pray that in your mercy and grace, you will take these words off the page and make them come alive in our minds, in our hearts, and in our wills as never before.
- For we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Please be seated. The parable of the great banquet, as it is usually called, is one of the most autobiographical parables Jesus teaches.
- [2 : 3 6] Through this parable, he opens his heart up to us. And we find there great joy. Come, everything is ready now. And we find there great disappointment.
- But they all alike began to make excuses. Jesus calls us to the adventure of discipleship. Come to me.
- Come, follow me, he says. It is the call to enter into a qualitatively different kind of life. It is the call to follow him into the kingdom. It is the call to follow him into his intimacy with the Father.
- A different kind of life, so full, so rich, so vibrant, so fresh, so lavish, so delicious, that the only appropriate descriptive image is that of a banquet.

Sociologist Tony Campolo has rightly entitled his latest book on discipleship, *The Kingdom of God is a Party*. Over and over again, in both Old and New Testaments, the life that the living God gives to the world is spoken of in terms of a feast.

[3 : 47] Isaiah 25, for instance. The Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all the peoples on this mountain. A banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow.

He will swallow up death for all time, wipe tears away from all their faces. Many of Jesus' other parables are built around someone throwing lavish wedding feasts.

The great climax of the book of Revelation is the joyous celebration of the marriage supper of the Lamb. The call to discipleship is the call to enter a banquet. Yes, it is also a call to challenge and sacrifice.

Jesus makes that very clear. Disciples endure much tribulation in their obedience to Jesus. We are, after all, following one whom Isaiah says is a man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief.

We are, after all, following one who was crucified, who calls us to take up the cross. But, as Tony Campolo notes, the reason our Lord and those who became his followers endure all this grief is to create the kingdom.

[4 : 52] The pain, the suffering, the sacrifice are all means to an end. And the end is the kingdom of God. And that kingdom is a life so full, so rich, so lavish, it can only be spoken of as the great banquet.

Can you feel the disappointment, the sorrow, the pain? There he is, the host himself, God made flesh, inviting people with open arms, and there they are, making excuses.

Note well, in this parable, Jesus is not speaking of those who are hearing his call for the first time. He's not speaking to people who are hearing the call for the first time.

He is speaking to those who have heard it and who understand it. The people Jesus is speaking to have already said that they want to come to the party.

It's just that when the dinner bell finally rings, they begin to make excuses. Kenneth Bailey, a Presbyterian missionary theologian who has spent most of his life in the Middle East, reminds us of the first century cultural dynamics at play in this parable.

[6 : 11] Bailey tells us that a village host must provide meat for a banquet, must provide meat for the banquet. The amount of meat to be killed and cooked is determined by the number of guests.

The host will send out invitations and then receives the RSVPs, receives the acceptances. If there are two to four acceptances, then one or two chickens are going to be killed and baked.

If there are five to eight positive RSVPs, then a duck will be prepared. If 10 to 15 guests, a goat. If 15 to 35, a sheep. If 35 to 75, a calf.

That is, the decision regarding the kind of meat and the amount of meat is made on the basis of the number of accepted invitations.

Now, once the countdown begins, nothing can stop it. The appropriate animal has been killed and because there is no refrigeration, this animal, all the meat, must be eaten that night.

[7 : 11] The host works all day to prepare the banquet, then at the hour of the banquet, sends out the traditional greeting, come, all is ready now, which means come because the meat has been cooked and prepared.

We're ready for you to come into the house. Which explains why in the parable, come is in the present tense, meaning keep coming, continue coming.

The guests have been in the process of coming since they first said yes to the initial invitation. They said they would come and they are simply now waiting for the dinner bell. I want to stress that come, this word come on Jesus' lips is sounded with great joy.

Jesus has the banquet giver say, compel them to come in that my house may be filled. Filled. Jesus is revealing here the living God's great desire to fill the dining hall.

This is the driving force behind all Christian mission and ministry. God's passion to fulfill. God will not be satisfied until the place is full.

[8 : 18] Thus, if those who were first on the guest list will not come, he will make up a new list. My refusal to come will not postpone the banquet.

He will fill the house with those who will come. All alike began to make excuses. Can you feel the disappointment in Jesus here?

Can you feel the pain in his voice? The savior of the world is throwing a party, a feast, and the guests who said they wanted to come make excuses. Can you feel what he feels?

You know the feeling if you have ever tried to give the gift of joy or the gift of hope to someone and they won't take it. You parents know the feeling.

You want to guide your children into the very best that God has to give them and they keep choosing less than the best. You who teach know the feeling. You who counsel know the feeling. Pastors certainly know the feeling. But none of us will ever be able to fully identify with Jesus' feelings.

[9 : 24] He is the creator of all life. He's the one who made us. He's the one who knows us. He's the one who knows what makes us tick. He is the recreator of life. He's the only one who can put Humpty Dumpty together again.

He knows that if we would just come to him every day, he knows that if we would just do what he tells us to do, we would experience a quality of life that can only be called a banquet.

But alas, most of those who are invited and said they would come do not end up coming. Jesus told this parable at a dinner party in the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees.

And it's a comment made by one of the Pharisees that triggers the telling of the parable. The man says to Jesus, Blessed is everyone who shall eat meat, shall eat bread, sorry, shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.

Blessed indeed. But, and this is the point of the parable, the only ones who will enjoy this feast are those who, when the call is sounded, actually get up and go to the banquet, actually come to Jesus and actually follow him.

[10 : 30] New Testament scholar T.W. Manson put it this way, The great feast is a feast and not a distribution of free rations. Those who wish to enjoy it must come in.

They cannot have portions sent out for them to enjoy while they busy themselves with other things. Can you feel the pain when Jesus says, But they all alike began to make excuses.

One guest says, I have bought a piece of land and I need to go and look at it. Please excuse me. Another guest says, I have bought five yoke of oxen. I'm going to try them out.

Please excuse me. Yet another says, I've married a wife and for that reason I cannot come. I cannot come. Or I will not come. What's your excuse?

I know mine. What's yours? When the dinner bell rings, what's your excuse? When he calls us to follow a different path than the one we laid out for ourselves, what's the excuse?

[11 : 42] It seems to me that there are three things that are true about most of the excuses Jesus hears in our time. Three things. First, the first is that none of the excuses offered is the real reason for not coming to the banquet.

Seldom are our spoken excuses the real issue for not coming to and following after Jesus Christ. The real issue goes much deeper. In the parable, for instance, the first guest says that he has to go inspect some land he has bought.

Now, think about that. I mean, don't people go and expect the property before buying it? One goes out and checks out nearly every square foot.

But this banquet host is supposed to believe that the guest has bought some land sight unseen? As Kenneth Bailey says, this person's excuse is a bold-faced lie and everybody knows it.

Bailey suggests that the Western civilization equivalent is canceling an important dinner date two hours before I was supposed to get there by saying, I just bought a new house over the phone and I must go and look at it and at the neighborhood.

[12 : 59] Who's going to believe that? In the parable, the second guest says he cannot come because he needs to go try out the five yoke of oxen he has just bought.

Really? That's ten oxen, by the way, which means this fellow is very rich. If one owned even one yoke, two animals, he was considered well off. Did this man need more oxen because he had a large farm or was he into a hobby of buying oxen?

Whatever the case, this excuse is flimsy, to say the least. Prospective buyers of oxen always test them out before the purchase. They would watch the animal work, or better yet, they would ride upon the animal themselves.

In order to be assured of the strength and the evenness of pull, the host is supposed to believe that this banquet guest bought ten oxen without testing them. Bailey suggests it's like me calling Sharon and saying, Honey, I'm sorry I can't make it home tonight for dinner because I just signed a check for five used cars, which I bought over the phone.

I'm on my way down to the used car lot to find out their age and model and see if they'll start. Right. Right. In the parable, the third guest says he cannot come to the banquet because he agreed to attend because he just got married.

[14 : 23] Notice, by the way, that unlike the other two guests, this guy does not request to be excused. Apparently, he felt his excuse, that he did not need to apologize for his excuse.

In the first century, the Jews practiced a custom which has much to commend itself, at least in some variation. In the book of Deuteronomy, it stipulates that when a man takes a wife, he is free from military duty and other major responsibilities for one year.

What do you think about that, Barry? Wouldn't that have been great? They were married two weeks ago? Free at home for one year. You don't have to go to work to nurture and strengthen the marriage. So maybe this third guest thought that the law had given him the right to renege on any invitation of any kind.

Even so, he could have gone if he had really wanted to, for he had all the time in the world now. But the fact is, his excuse was a lie. He's not telling the truth here.

The wedding had not just taken place. Had there been a wedding in that village in the recent past, this host would not have thrown a big dinner party. Because everyone in the village would have been obligated to go to that wedding feast, and the wedding feast can last as long as a week.

[15 : 39] What this fellow is saying is, I'm just simply too busy now. Yes, I said I would come to the party, but now I am busy with a woman. Seldom are our excuses the real reason for not following Jesus Christ.

For instance, many say that they have intellectual problems with Jesus' claim. That his claims simply cannot be sustained in a modern world.

Boy, I hear that. But, for many, not all, but for many who say this, that's not the real issue at all. They understand the claims very well.

It's just that they do not want to face the moral and ethical implications of owning the claim. The French existential philosopher, Jean-Paul Sartre, once said, Belief in God would make morality impossible.

To which a Dutch pastor responded, Sartre's morality makes the non-existence of God a necessity. That's what was behind the reimagining conference.

[16 : 46] The justification of a way of life that God does not please. We have to reimagine God then in an image that allows us to adopt the morality we have chosen.

I know people who, when they say, I cannot affirm that Jesus is Lord over all of life, really mean, I will not affirm that he is Lord over all of life because it means I have to change.

The real reason behind the philosophical excuse is stubbornness or fear or both. Am I being too hard on us here? Seldom is the excuse we verbalize, the real reason for not doing what Jesus tells us to do.

The second thing about most excuses Jesus hears is that they reveal our true loves. Our excuses reveal our true loves. We need to listen very carefully to our excuses because they reveal our real values and priorities.

In the parable, the guest, usually unspoken values, kept them from the dinner party, and so too with us. If not surrendered, our unspoken but deeply loved values will keep us from enjoying the banquet life of the kingdom of God.

[18 : 08] Let me put this second point a bit stronger. Our excuses for not following, for not doing what he says to do, reveal our true sources of identity and security.

Our excuses reveal what we think makes for significance and wholeness. So, for example, we say, I cannot spend much time in study and worship.

I'm too busy with other things. Other things. Other things. Other things than Jesus Christ and his kingdom.

You see, too busy means my identity lies elsewhere. Too busy means I am finding my security elsewhere.

May I put this second point even stronger? Our excuses reveal our idols. We all have them. Finite values given infinite weight.

[19 : 12] Good gifts given God-like power. And we all automatically act out our allegiance to our idols. So, for example, if we do not make time to know and follow the risen Lord, it simply reveals that I'm still living for someone else.

Everything else I am doing may be perfectly good. It's just that everything else now has become more important than this one who loves me more than anyone else ever will.

Have you ever noticed that in one breath we can say, oh, I don't have time for that. And then in the very next breath, tell about the restaurant in which we spent an evening or a movie we saw or a novel we read or the store in which we spent hours browsing?

It's a matter of values and priorities and allegiances. Our excuses give us away. The third thing about our excuses is the flip side of the second.

Namely, our excuses reveal what we think about the host and his banquet. Our excuses reveal our assessment of the relative worth of the banquet giver.

[20 : 23] Some of our excuses say that in the final analysis, Jesus and his kingdom are not that wonderful. Oh, we would never say that out loud, would we? We would never put that in words, but our actions say that's what we mean.

The excuse says, thank you, Jesus, but there are better offers. Life can be just as fulfilling without you or you really aren't all that the Bible cranks you up to be.

You simply don't compare with what the world has to offer at this point. We'd never say that. But that's what the excuse is doing. Am I being too harsh on us here? Don't answer.

I don't think so. Our excuses tell us how much or how little he means to us. In the Middle Eastern culture, one insults the host by having accepted the invitation and that not coming when the dinner bell rings.

Do you see what an insult it is to turn down Jesus Christ when he comes calling? We may never verbalize it in insulting language, but when we turn him down, when we do not do what he says to do, we are telling him that he does not have first place in our lives.

[21 : 43] Some of our excuses call into question his character. Sorry, Jesus, I can't count on you. Even if you do claim that your banquet is more fulfilling, I'm not sure that you can deliver.

Now, we would never use those words, but that's what we're saying. Some of our excuses reveal that we think Jesus is naive.

That we think he's naive. Your way of life, what can I say, Jesus? Your way of life is so out of touch. That's it, Jesus.

It's out of touch with the way things really are. Blessed are the meek. Get real, Jesus. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice. Come on, Jesus.

You know that it's those who hunger and thirst for power and wealth and status who get the blessing. Love your enemies? You're kidding. Do you know what happens to people who love their enemies?

[22 : 43] Forgive those who hurt you? Get real, Jesus. Lose your life to find it. Are you serious? You lose your life, you lose it. Now, again, we would not actually verbalize it in such words.

But our excuses are saying something like that. Excuses reveal our assessment of the relative worth of the banquet giver.

No, Lord, I have to disagree with your claim. You're not as good as you appear. You simply do not see things correctly. We would never actually say it so bluntly.

But it is what we're saying. You know, maybe we should verbalize it in just such blunt words. He knows it already anyway.

Maybe we should just be up front. Maybe we should just say, your offer is not that good, Jesus, or you simply cannot be trusted, or your call to discipleship is not that relevant, Jesus.

[23 : 49] Have you ever done that? Set it straight out. Try it. Today. Stand beneath the cross of Jesus and say, you're not worth the hassle.

Take the communion bread or cup in your hands and say, following you in the difficult way just isn't worth it. You know what will happen?

The excuses will just melt. Jesus Christ not worth changing my lifestyle. Jesus Christ not worth the hassle.

Jesus Christ not worth my all. Jesus Christ not relevant today. I hear behind the pain in this parable God's question to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah.

God says, what injustice did your ancestors find in me? that they went away from me and walked after emptiness and became empty. God is asking, what did I do to make you think that I do not love you?

[25 : 05] What did I do to make you think that I cannot give you everything you need? What did I do to make you think that I won't take care of you and your family if you go all out for me? Come.

Everything is ready now. His passion is to fill the house and so he keeps calling, come, continue coming, continue coming, come. But he will not do so forever.

For this parable teaches that in the words of Lloyd Ogilvie, God will bypass people who equivocate and will fill his banquet with people who recognize their need and desire to be with him.

My refusal to come will not postpone the party. Your refusal to come will not postpone the party. The party will go on without us. Discipleship is now.

The time is now. A new day is dawning. The Holy Spirit is moving in a new and powerful way all over the world calling us beyond what we have known before, calling us beyond where we have been before.

[26 : 18] And I do not want to be left out and neither do you. What's holding you back? What's your excuse?

Tell him. And then come to the table and watch him melt it away. All right. Okay.

All right.