

No More Excuses

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- [0 : 00] The thanks be to God was not that definitive.
We need to pray. This is a hard text, dear Lord.
But we believe that when you speak, you always speak in order to change us, to heal us, to make us new, to move us on.
I thank you for your promise that you never let any word go forth from your mouth without it accomplishing the purpose for which you sent it.
So in your mercy and grace, will you fulfill the purpose you spoke these words in our lives as never before?
- [1 : 11] And we pray it for your glory. Amen. In this hard text, we find one of the most autobiographical parables Jesus ever spoke.
In the parable of the great banquet, as it is traditionally called, Jesus opens his heart to us in ways he does not in other parables.
Do you hear the joy in his voice? Come, everything is ready now. Do you hear the disappointment, the sadness in his voice?
But they all alike began to make excuses. Do you hear the passion, the unquenchable, inextinguishable, undying passion, that my house may be filled?
Jesus calls us into the grand adventure of discipleship. Come to me, he says. Come follow behind me.
- [2 : 24] It is a call to enter into a qualitatively different kind of life. It is a call to come with him into intimacy with God the Father.
It's the call to join him in the inner life of God. In the inner life of the Trinity, God as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. It's the call to join him in the kingdom of God, in the reign of God.
It's the call to go farther up and further in. It's a call to a very different kind of life. So full, so rich, so vibrant, so fresh, so lavish, so delicious, that the most appropriate descriptive image is that of a banquet.
Over and over again in both Old and New Testaments, the life the living God wants to give the world is spoken of in terms of a feast. Isaiah 25.
And the Lord of hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain, a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow. He will swallow up death for all time.
- [3 : 32] He will wipe away tears from their faces. As we have seen over the past weeks, many of Jesus' other parables take place around a meal. Someone throws a dinner party or a wedding feast.
And the great climax of the Bible, in the last book of the Bible, in the revelation of Jesus Christ, involves this joyous celebration of the marriage supper of the Lamb. The call to discipleship is the call to participate in a banquet.
Yes, it is also a call to challenge and sacrifice. And Jesus is very clear with us about that.

His disciples will experience much tribulation as they and we seek to obey Him in this world. We are, after all, following the one that Isaiah called a man of sorrows, well acquainted with grief.

We are, after all, following one who got Himself crucified and who tells us to carry our crosses every day. But all the tribulation, the suffering, the grief and the pain is unto living in the kingdom of God.

[4 : 36] Living a life so full, so rich, so lavish, that it can only be spoken of as a banquet. Can you hear the joy in Jesus' voice?

And can you hear the disappointment in His voice? There He is, the great host, God Himself, in our flesh and blood, inviting people with open arms.

Come. Come. And there they are. There we are. Making excuses.

It's important to emphasize that in this parable in Luke 14, Jesus is not speaking of those who are hearing this call for the first time.

He's speaking to people who have heard it many times and who understand it. The people to whom Jesus is speaking have already heard this invitation to the banquet and they have already said they would come when it was time.

[5 : 44] It's just that when the dinner bell actually rings, they begin to make excuses. We said we would follow Jesus wherever He leads us.

Right? We sang that in two songs already. Wherever you lead us, we'll follow you. And then, He leads us where we did not think He would lead us in ways that we had not planned.

Kenneth Bailey, missionary theologian, spent most of his adult life studying the Gospels in the Middle East, as I pointed out. And in his book, *Through Peasant Eyes*, he helps us understand some of the cultural dynamics going on in Jesus' parable.

He tells us that a village host must provide some sort of meat at the banquet. The amount of meat that he provides is determined by the number of guests.

That makes sense, does it not? The host sends out invitations and then people respond, yes, I can come, or no, I cannot come. The RSVPs will determine the kind of meat to prepare and how much of that meat to prepare.

[7 : 08] Father, once again, we pray your blessing on those EMT guys and on the people wherever you're going. So the amount of meat is going to be determined by how many people said they would come.

If two to four people say they'll come, then a chicken or two is going to be prepared. If five to eight people said they'll come, then a duck will be prepared. If ten to fifteen guests say they'll be coming, then a goat will be prepared.

Fifteen to thirty-five, a sheep, and thirty-five to seventy-five, a calf. So the decision on the kind of meat and the amount of meat is made mostly on the basis of who said they would come.

Then, says Bailey, once the countdown starts, it cannot be stopped. The appropriate animal is cooked, and because there's no refrigeration, the meat must be eaten that night.

The host works all day preparing this meat, and then at the hour of the banquet sends out the message, come, everything is ready now, meaning the meat is cooked and it is time to enjoy.

[8 : 18] This is why in Jesus' parable, the verb come is in the present tense, meaning keep coming, continue coming. The guests are in the process of coming.

Once they said they would come when it's time, they're in the process of coming. They said they would come, they're just waiting for the dinner bell to ring. Do you hear the joy in Jesus' voice?

Come! And do you hear the passion? Jesus has the banquet giver say, compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. Filled!

You see, the living God's great desire is that the banquet hall be filled. This is one of the driving forces of Christian mission and ministry. God's passion to fill. God will not be satisfied until the house is full.

Which means that if those who are first on the guest list choose not to come, He will make a new guest list.

[9 : 18] My refusal to come, your refusal to come, will not postpone the banquet. He will fill His house.

Can you hear the disappointment in Jesus' voice? And they all alike began to make excuses. The Savior of the world is throwing a party, a feast, and those who said they would like to come, that they would come, began to make excuses.

They're no longer coming. Can you feel His pain? If you've ever tried to offer somebody the gift of hope, or the gift of peace, or the gift of joy, and they won't take it, you know what Jesus is feeling.

You parents know this feeling. You want your children to choose the very best, and they keep choosing less than the best. You teachers know this feeling. You counselors know this feeling.

Pastors know the feeling. But none of us will ever know the depth of the feeling of Jesus. He's the creator come to earth. He's the one who made us. He's the one who knows us.

[10 : 30] He knows what makes us tick. He wants to give us life in all of its fullness. He's the recreator. He knows how to put it all together again. And He knows if we would just come.

He knows that if we would just come every day. He knows that if we would just follow Him every day, if we would just every day do what He tells us to do. If we would just come and go deeper into Him, we would experience a quality of life that could only be compared to a banquet.

But alas, many of us, most of us, who are invited and say yes we would come, do not come when it's time. Jesus tells the parable of the great banquet on a Sabbath day in the home of a Pharisee.

At this meal, Jesus does medicine. He heals a man with dropsy. And at this meal, Jesus delves into the issues of hospitality. He is offering healing to people's understanding of hospitality that are keeping the Pharisees from entering into the joy of the kingdom of God.

Apparently, one of the Pharisees gets it. One of the Pharisees understands what Jesus is saying and he wants in on what Jesus is offering. And so he says, blessed is everyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God.

[11 : 44] Blessed indeed. And then, and this is the point of Jesus' parable, the only ones who actually enjoy the feast are those who, when the bell is sounded, actually stop what they're doing, turn around and make their way to Jesus.

Those who actually get up and follow. Can you feel the sadness when Jesus says they all alike begin to make excuses?

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

Please consider me excused. Yet another says, I have married a wife and for that reason I cannot come. Cannot come or will not come.

What is your excuse? I know mine. What is yours? When the dinner bell rings, what is your excuse? When he calls us to follow him in ways we had not set out for ourselves, what is our excuse?

[13 : 05] Three things are true about most of the excuses Jesus hears in our time. The first is that most of the excuses offered are seldom the real reason for not coming.

Most of our spoken excuses are not the real issue for not following Jesus into the next step of discipleship. In the parable, the first guest says he has to inspect some land he has just bought.

Think about that. I mean, do not people go and expect the land before they buy it? Inspect the land before they buy it?

One goes out and measures the property and ideally walks on every square inch of the property before you buy it. The banquet host is supposed to believe that this guest bought some land sight unseen?

Kenneth Bailey says this person's excuse is a bald-faced lie and everybody knows it. Bailey suggests that the western civilization equivalent is canceling out on an important dinner just two hours before the dinner and saying I just bought a new house over the phone and I need to go look at it and see the neighborhood.

[14 : 27] Right. In the parable, the second guest says he cannot come because he has to go try out five yoke of oxen he just bought.

Really? He's going to go try out these oxen? Perspective buyers of oxen always tested them before purchasing them.

In fact, they would go work the animal. They would go out and test the animal on the property. The host is supposed to believe that this man has bought ten oxen without testing them?

It's like me calling Sharon on a Friday night, say about five o'clock, and saying to Sharon, sorry, I can't come to this dinner we planned for the folks in our strata at six o'clock because I just bought a used car and I'm going down to the used car dealer to see what color it is and whether it drives.

In the parable, the third guest says he cannot come to the banquet because he just got married. Notice, by the way, that unlike the other two, he doesn't ask to be excused.

[15 : 39] That's a great shame in the Middle East and bad taste in any culture. Apparently, he felt his excuse needed no apology. The first century had a practice that commends itself to us, at least in some variation.

In the book of Deuteronomy 24.5, it stipulates that when a man takes a wife, he is free from military duty and from all major responsibilities for one year.

Pretty cool. Free at home for one year to nurture this new marriage. Wow. So maybe this third guest felt that the law gave him the right to renege on any invitation to which he'd already said yes.

Even so, he could have gone if he wanted to because now he has all the time in the world. So, the fact is his excuse is a lie. He had not just gotten married.

If he had just gotten married, the host wouldn't, this man would not be putting on a big dinner party because the whole village would have invited to this village, to the wedding, and it would last a week.

[16 : 48] So, no. He didn't just get married. What he's saying is, I'm too busy now. Yes, I said I would come. But now, I'm too busy.

The party is no longer worth my time. Seldom are the excuses we verbalize the real reasons for not following after Jesus when he calls us to new steps of discipleship.

Am I right? For instance, many will say they have intellectual problems with Jesus' claims. That as inviting as his claims are, they simply cannot be sustained in our post-modern world.

Boy, I hear that and I understand that. But for many, not all, but for many who say this, the intellectual dimension is not the issue at all.

They understand the claim very well. It's just that they do not want to buy into the moral and ethical implications of the claim. The French existentialist philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre once said, belief in God makes my morality impossible.

[18 : 05] To which a Dutch pastor responded, Sartre's morality makes the non-existence of God a necessity. Many say, I like Jesus.

I really like Jesus. But I cannot affirm that he is Lord over all of life. And what is usually meant is, I cannot affirm that Jesus is Lord over all of life because there's areas of my life over which I still want to be Lord.

To say he's Lord over all of life means I have to change. And I don't want to change. Many say, Jesus is wonderful.

There's no one like him. But given all the suffering in the world and much of the suffering perpetuated in his name, I simply cannot follow him wholeheartedly. Boy, I hear that and I understand that.

But sometimes, not always, sometimes, that is not the real issue. The real issue is either some personal pain Jesus has not yet healed or the realization that we bring the pain of the world to Jesus, Jesus is going to call us to join him in bringing his comfort to the world.

[19 : 21] And we don't want to give up our comfort to bring his comfort. That's the real issue. So, the excuses we verbalize are seldom the reason for not doing what Jesus calls us to do.

The second thing about most excuses Jesus hears is that they reveal our first loves, our true loves. Our excuses reveal our true values and priorities.

In the parable, the invited guests' unspoken first loves kept them from the banquet, and so to us. If not surrendered to Jesus, our unspoken but deeply held values and priorities will keep us from enjoying the banquet life of the kingdom of God.

Let me put this second point a bit stronger. Our excuses for not following Jesus' leading, for not doing what he says to do, reveal our true sources of identity and security.

Our excuses reveal where we think we find significance and wholeness. So, for example, we say, I cannot spend any more time in worship and study of God's word because I'm just too busy with other things.

[20 : 41] Other things. Other things? Other things than taking time to be with Jesus? Other things than being with the great lover of our lives?

You see, too busy means my identity lies elsewhere than in Jesus. too busy means my security is found somewhere else than in Jesus.

Am I being too hard on us? The only person I'll let off on this one would be mothers of newborn children. The only ones who've got a good excuse. Or caring for someone who's very invalid.

Let me put this second point about excuses even stronger. Our excuses reveal our idols. We all have them. I submit to you that to be human is to be an idol worshiper.

Finite values given infinite weight. Good gifts of God given God-like power over our lives. So, for example, if I cannot make the time to be engaged in the kinds of activities that help me know and love Jesus Christ, it simply means I'm more in love with someone or something else.

[22 : 00] everything else I might be engaged in might be perfectly good. It's just that everything else now is more important than the one who loves me more than anyone else.

Have you ever noticed that we can say in one breath, I just don't have time for Jesus, and in the next breath go on about the latest sitcom we watched or movie we saw or shopping spree we had.

It's all a matter of values and priorities and allegiance. Our excuses give away our true loves. There's a third thing about excuses that Jesus hears, and it's the flip side of the second.

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

Jesus. Some of our excuses say that in the final analysis, Jesus and his kingdom are not all that inviting. Oh, none of us would say that out loud, but it is what we're saying.

[23 : 10] The excuse says, thank you, Jesus. There are better offers. I can find fulfillment without doing what you're telling me to do. Again, we'd never say that out loud, but it is what we're saying.

Or, Jesus, your offer is not all the Bible cranks it up to be. I like you in all. I really do. I really do like you. But right now, what you are offering me, well, let's just say, it is not a whole lot better than what the world is offering right now.

We would never say that out loud, but it is what we're saying. Am I being too hard here? I do not think so. Our excuses reveal how much or how little Jesus means to us.

In the Middle East, one insults the host by accepting the invitation and then not coming when the bell is rung. Do you see what an insult it is to turn down Jesus when he says, come, in this new way?

We never may use insulting language, but when we turn him down, when he calls us to move in a new way and we do not go, we are telling him he is not worth the effort, that he's not worth the risk.

[24 : 39] Some of our excuses insult him by calling his character into question. Sorry, Jesus, I don't think I can count on you right now, even if your offer of the banquet is more fulfilling.

I do not think you can deliver in my case. No, we never put it that way, but it is what we're saying. Some of our excuses reveal that we think Jesus is naive.

You've heard me say before, I think that most of evangelical Christianity in our time thinks Jesus is naive. Your way of life is so, what can I say?

It's so out of touch. Ah, that's it, Jesus. Your way of life is out of touch with the way things are in the real world. Blessed are the meek and gentle.

Come on, Jesus, give me a break. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for right relationship, for justice. like Jesus. Don't you realize that in our world it's those who hunger and thirst for power and for wealth who get the blessing.

[25 : 52] Love your enemies? You're kidding. I mean, Jesus, do you know what happens to those who love their enemies? Be real. Forgive those who hurt me?

Come on. Lose your life to find it? Are you, are you, Jesus, are you awake? You lose your life and you lose it.

Now, again, we might not actually put it in such words, but our excuses are saying something like that. Our excuses reveal our assessment of the relative worth of the banquet host.

Jesus, your claims you've made about yourself, well, they're more than you should have made.

You've overstated yourself, Jesus. You're very bright. I know that, Jesus. You're very, very bright, but you just don't seem to understand what it's like in my world.

[27 : 00] Again, we would never say that out loud. But it is what we're saying to him when we turn him down. Maybe we should actually verbalize it in such terms.

He knows it anyway. Maybe we should be up front. The life you offer is not as good as you think it is, Jesus.

Or, you simply cannot be trusted to take care of me and my family if I step out in obedience. Or, your call to discipleship just won't make it in Vancouver.

Have you ever done that? Try it. Right now. Stand beneath the cross where he is giving his life for you and for me and say, you are not worth the hassle to change my life.

Say it. Or, take the communion cup or bread in your hand and say, following you wholeheartedly simply isn't worth it.

[28 : 24] the change I have to make to follow you is not worth it. I hear in the sadness in Jesus' voice in this parable the question God asked through the prophet Jeremiah.

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

What did I do to make you think that I cannot give you life? What did I do to make you think that if you follow me wholeheartedly I'm going to let you down? Come.

Everything is ready now. You know that it is a new day. That in the midst of all the chaos in the world today, the Holy Spirit is moving in fresh and powerful ways.

He's calling us beyond what we have known. He's calling us beyond where we have been. I do not want to be left out and I do not think you want to be left out either. Come.

[29 : 37] Everything is ready now. What is holding you back? What is your excuse? Tell him.

Come to this table and tell him and then watch him melt your excuse in his relentless love for you.

Blessed is everyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God. Blessed indeed. Indeed. Indeed. Indeed. Indeed. Indeed.