

(1) An offer you can refuse

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[0 : 00] The reading this morning is Luke chapter 14 and verses 15 to 24, which you'll find on page 105.3 in the Church Bibles.

When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

But he said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I have bought a field and I must go out and see it. Please excuse me.

And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen and I am going to examine them. Please excuse me. And another said, I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come.

[1 : 09] So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

And the servant said, Sir, what you have commanded has been done and there is still room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled.

For I tell you, none of those men who are invited shall taste my banquet. James, thanks very much indeed for reading for us.

Please do keep the Bibles open at Luke chapter 14 on page 1053. Now the popular view of heaven is hardly encouraging, is it, as we begin the first of these three talks entitled, Who Gets to Heaven? Images perhaps of floating around on a cloud, playing a harp, wearing a nightie. Sure, Jesus spoke about eternal life. But certainly in the popular imagination, it sounds more like eternal tedium.

[2 : 33] Well, in that passage which we just had read to us, Jesus is at a party. Have a look at Luke chapter 14, verse 1. And what are we told one Sabbath?

When he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. Here is Jesus being watched carefully by the religious establishment, when all of a sudden that familiar dinner party moment arrives, when every conversation seems to die at once, except the most embarrassing one, which in this case is about heaven.

Jesus describes heaven as a wonderful banquet. It's a picture which would have been familiar to his first century Jewish audience, because it's a picture which the Old Testament, the first part of the Bible, uses.

But not just a dinner party, but a banquet so lavish that the grandest state occasion would look stingy by comparison. But it's a banquet with a difference.

It's a banquet in which death itself will be destroyed. So if you just turn to the outline on the reverse side of the service sheet, you'll see there, I put down there on the outline, one of the ways in which one of the Old Testament prophets, the scribes, heaven, the prophet Isaiah.

[3 : 59] And just see with me what it is he writes. On this mountain, the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine, a rich food full of marrow, of aged wine, well-refined.

And he will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever.

And the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces. And the reproach of all his people he will take away from the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

Now I take it it's obvious, isn't it, that whatever we live for in this world ends in death. The covering, the veil of death, casts its shadow over all of us.

Last week, the playboy property tycoon Paul Raymond died at the age of 82. A man who once certainly was a symbol of success, wealth and power, died a recluse in a hotel bedroom.

[5 : 13] But here is a banquet at which not only will the food be swallowed, but death itself will be swallowed up. No more pain, no more suffering, no more death, no more tears.

Here is the promise of a wonderful new world. It's far removed, isn't it, from sitting on a cloud wearing a nightie. And now all the attention in Luke chapter 14 is focused on this one conversation. So notice verse 15, someone with a gift for small talk chips in. When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

It's what often happens, isn't it, at a dinner party, when the conversation turns to God, someone kind of attempts to jolly things along a bit before it all gets too serious. I wonder if you can see what he's saying.

Well, you don't need to worry about me, Jesus, as we think about heaven. You don't need to worry about me. He believes in heaven and he thinks he will get there, just like many people in London.

[6 : 29] Along with all the other respectable people at the dinner party, he quite assumes he will be at the heavenly banquet. And so Jesus tells this parable, which we just had read for us.

Yes, it will be wonderful, says Jesus, but what on earth makes you think you will be there. In fact, two things become abundantly clear as Jesus tells the parable.

I put them both on the outline. Let's look at the first of them. Some people who think they're going to heaven won't be there. Some people who think they're going to heaven won't be there.

Have a look at verses 16 and 17. But Jesus said to him, a man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, come, for everything is now ready.

Now, in the first century, it was customary to issue two invitations to a dinner party. The first was the invitation itself, which he issued to see who was coming so the host could determine how many people to cater for.

[7 : 41] And then when the food itself was ready, a second invitation would be sent out to summon the guests and to say, now you can come. In a culture where time was elastic and where there were no microwave meals, it was the protocol of the day.

Now, notice that Jesus' story here starts with the preparations for this dinner party well underway. The guests have already received that first invitation. And as the parable develops, it's clear that the host is God himself.

And Jesus' first century audience would have had no problems at all in decoding, so to speak, what Jesus is saying in the parable. They would have grasped that the first invitation, which had already been sent out, was a reference to the preparatory work of the Old Testament prophets, who had given preliminary notification, so to speak, of the arrival of God's kingdom.

As for those who had been invited, they were the Jews, God's chosen people, to whom the Old Testament prophets had spoken. But now, verse 17, the second invitation is being issued.

Come, everything is now ready, says the host. And it's at this point that Jesus writes himself into the story, just as Alfred Hitchcock always gave himself a walk-on part in his films.

[9 : 12] Because just as it's clear that the host is God himself, so it becomes clear that the servant who is sent to summon the guests is Jesus. Because in the coming of Jesus Christ, everything is now ready for people to be invited into his heavenly kingdom.

God plays the generous host to the last. Jesus came to die, and it's through his death that he unlocks the gates to the heavenly party.

By dying in our place, Jesus Christ took the penalty for all the wrong things we've ever done, so that those things need no longer keep us from God.

Jesus died so that we can be forgiven and join him in the heavenly banquet that is being put on on the final day. All we need to do is to reply to Jesus, to reply to the invitation.

And follow him. Which is why in the previous two chapters of Luke's gospel, if we had time to read them, we'd see that Jesus is urging, pleading with the people of his day to respond to the invitation.

[10 : 33] But did you notice how in the parable, one by one, the people who have been invited make their excuses? Have a look at verse 18. But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him, I've bought a field and I must go and see it. Please excuse me. And another said, I've bought five yoke of oxen and I'm going to examine them. Please excuse me. And another said, I've married a wife and therefore I cannot come. Now the point is that these are feeble excuses. In fact, they are the worst excuses you will ever hear. If you're invited to a party, please don't use them yourself. Your host will see through them immediately. And imagine, in the first century, you wouldn't have dreamt of buying a field without, first of all, seeing it.

It'd be rather like buying a house on eBay with no pictures and only the briefest of write-ups, parting with half a million pounds and then deciding, once the cheque has cleared, oh, perhaps I shall go and see the house I've bought.

[11 : 38] And the first century farmer wouldn't dream of buying some oxen without, first of all, going to examine them. It'd be as ridiculous as buying a car over the phone, not knowing how many miles it had done, what state it was in, parting with your cash and only then thinking, oh, I'd better go and take it for a test drive.

As for the third excuse, that is the most contrived of all. Remember, the first invitation has gone out already. This is a culture Jesus is speaking to where wedding plans took months, not days. It is inconceivable that someone would arrange a wedding in the space of a couple of days. You see, these don't even pretend to be genuine excuses, which is why I've called this talk an offer you can refuse.

And so it's not surprising, is it, that our host is angry. Have a look at verse 21. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry.

I take it, it is a right and proper indignation. These guests have treated him with contempt, deceit, and indifference. All three of them could have come if they'd wanted to, but they choose not to.

[12 : 57] The party is apparently not good enough for them. What do you say? Why does Jesus tell this parable? Well, he wants to expose people's reasons for rejecting him.

He wants to see that they're just as feeble and just as offensive to God as the lies which are told in the parable. And they are just as laughable when set against the wonder of the invitation which has been received.

Will you consider the claims of Jesus? Well, I can't at that moment. I've just taken out membership at the gym. I've just been promoted. Life's just so busy. What do you think about following Jesus? Well, I really can't. I'll do it when I'm older. Full well knowing that that day will never come. The excuses that people come up with today for rejecting Jesus Christ and turning down God's invitation are just as offensive to God as those in this parable.

And if there wasn't so much at stake, why they'd be just as laughable. The Christian author C.S. Lewis writing 50 years ago likened it to children contentedly messing around playing with mud pies in the back streets of a slum while all along rejecting the holiday of a lifetime by the seaside.

[14 : 27] All because they simply have no conception as to what is meant by a holiday. And to reject Jesus Christ and to reject his invitation to a world without death and a world without tears and instead simply to live for this life and for the next house purchase or the career move or whatever it is is just as tragic.

Perhaps there are some here today, perhaps there are one or two here today who treat Jesus in just the same way as the man in verse 15.

We make a bit of a show of our commitment to God. We go along to the school carol service or we go to church occasionally but the one thing we won't do is to accept Jesus' offer of eternal life.

We've never actually begun to follow him. Well, if that is you, well, I'm delighted you're here but can you see what Jesus is saying to you if that describes you?

Don't be fooled into thinking that you'll be in heaven and Jesus wants to expose our excuses for what they are so that we won't delay following him any longer.

[15 : 48] That's the first thing that Jesus wants us to grasp this morning. Some people who think they're going to heaven won't be there. But then the second thing is this. Some people who'd never dream of going to heaven will be there.

Have a look at verses 21 to 23. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

And the servant said, Sir, what you have commanded has been done and still there is room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled.

Now once again we see here the wonderful generosity of our hosts. The wonderful generosity of God as he longs that people come in to his heavenly banquet.

And once again Jesus' listeners would have no problem at all in working out who the people in verse 21 represents. They are the ones at the bottom of the pile who never dream in a thousand years that such an invitation could come their way.

[17:07] In fact, they are the very people the religious establishment of Jesus' day looked down on and despised. We can see that if you just look over the page to chapter 15 verse 1.

What are we told? Now the tax collectors and sinners, in other words those at the bottom of the pile, were all drawing near to hear Jesus. And the Pharisees and the scribes grumbled saying this man receives sinners and eats with them.

Jesus, you really shouldn't be mixing with people like this. Yet the invitation in our parable has now been thrown open to precisely such as these.

Indeed, as we read through Luke's gospel the next two people who put their trust in Jesus Christ and decide to follow him are a blind beggar and a tax collector.

Those who would have been considered the very bottom of the pile. But notice verse 23, there's still more room at the banquet. So the servant is sent beyond the city gates to those who no doubt hadn't even heard that there was a party going on.

[18:18] Well, it defies belief, doesn't it, to think that these people will say no to the invitation.

Sure, they may need to be persuaded that the invitation is genuine, that it's actually for them, which is why no doubt the servant is told to compel them to come in in verse 23, lest they think that the offer is no more genuine than the offer of a free holiday that lands on your doorstep.

It anticipates the fact, you see, that the invitation to God's kingdom was not simply restricted in the first century to those who were Jews, to those who had been fortunate enough to have been brought up with the Old Testament.

So Jesus himself made it clear that he came for people from all nations. Indeed, after his death, the message of Jesus Christ was proclaimed across the known world.

The invitation to be part of his heavenly banquet reached everyone. Now, I wonder if you've ever been to something and having sort of looked around to see who else was there and who else was at the event, you rather decided there must have been some mistake in you having been invited to be there in the first place.

I remember thinking that when I went to university, I looked around at all the other students who seemed to be much brighter than I was and I quite assume the only reason I'd been given an offer of a place was because of some kind of administrative error.

[19:49] Or perhaps you started a new job and after a few days you wonder whether the job offer was sent to the right person. You suddenly feel so hopelessly underqualified to do the job.

Well, that is the situation in which these other guests are now in, isn't it? Except, of course, they're not being invited because there's been an administrative error. They're being invited because of the unceasing generosity of the host of God himself.

And therefore, of course, the irony couldn't be more complete. Those who were expecting to enter into God's kingdom because they had received advanced invitations through the prophets, why they all miss out?

But those who quite assumed that they would be shut out because they weren't good enough or those who had never even heard of the banquet, why they will be the ones to enjoy it.

You see, I imagine there will be one or two of us here this morning who don't regard ourselves by any stretch of the imagination as members of the religious establishment, so to speak.

[21:02] In which case, Jesus wants you to know this morning that God has planned a party for you. All the jubilees, carnivals, fiestas, banquets, laughter and festivity of a thousand years of human history won't compare with the wonder and the joy and the glory of the celebration which the King of the universe has planned.

It will be a wonderful occasion, magnificent, beyond all human imagination, the prelude to a whole new world in which death itself will be defeated.

And everything is ready. Jesus has died to secure you an invitation. Died so that on that day you can stand before God, forgive him.

Admission is free to anyone who will accept the invitation. Now perhaps for one or two people that's a bit of a problem. Just as the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, no doubt felt rather out of place at that dinner party, so we may feel the same.

Well, you don't know what I'm like. I'm just not good enough. If you knew what a mess I've made of my life, if you knew what I was really like underneath my kind of respectable exterior, why, you'd know that I could never become a Christian.

[22 : 25] This invitation could never be for me. Alternatively, perhaps like those in the fields and country roads, we don't even know the banquet has been arranged.

Some of us may feel completely bewildered as we hear about this invitation this morning. Perhaps we're from a culture that is totally alien to Christianity or a totally different religion altogether. The invitation can't be for me, we say. But Jesus tells this story precisely to point out that no one is excluded from the invitation.

Some people, if you'd never dream of going to heaven, will be there. Well, how does Jesus conclude his parable?

Have a look at verse 24. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. it's not a story with a happy ending.

[23 : 28] Jesus tells the parable to warn us against being like the man in verse 15. Those who get to heaven are not those who talk in fine-sounding platitudes, not those who assume they'll get there and so do nothing about it.

Quite the reverse. Only those who accept the invitation will be there. It's a very powerful parable, isn't it?

We can't save ourselves, we can't get to heaven by ourselves, we are all entirely dependent upon God's gracious invitation, but we can exclude ourselves by doing nothing about it.

These first guests, while they could have tasted the banquet, they've been invited by a wonderfully generous host and all is ready. but they exclude themselves and so they won't taste the banquet which is on offer.

I don't know about you but I think we tend to read this parable and we're quick to think, aren't we? Well, who on earth would be mad enough to turn down an invitation like that and with such hopeless excuses?

[24 : 44] But of course it's just what we do, isn't it? the statistics certainly show that by far the majority of people in this country believe in God, they believe in heaven and they assume they will get there.

But they've never responded to the invitation. So let me ask, what is stopping you from accepting God's invitation for yourself? Just listen to a former bishop of Liverpool speaking precisely on this parable, speaking of why it is that people reject Jesus.

He writes this, it is not avowed dislike of the gospel which is so much to be feared. It is that procrastinating, excuse-making spirit which is always ready with a reason why Christ cannot be served today.

He goes on, let the words of our Lord on this subject sink down into our hearts. infidelity and immorality no doubt slay their thousands but decent, plausible, smooth-spoken excuses slay their tens of thousands.

No excuse can justify a man refusing God's invitation and not coming to Christ. Christ. Well we're going to take a pause in just a moment.

[26 : 13] Before we do that, let me say that if you're someone here today who has never really accepted God's invitation, I'd love you to take a copy of this booklet called The Real Jesus. You'll see copies of it by the welcome table just at the door over there.

It goes over the invitation again and if you're someone who thinks I've never taken Jesus up on this invitation, I've never accepted, then there's a prayer you can pray at the back to do that, to do it today.