

Real Lives - Sir Jeremy Cooke

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Date: 12 March 2019

Preacher: Roger Carswell/Sir Jeremy Cook

[0 : 00] So the reading today is Luke 14, starting at verse 15. When one of those who reclined at the 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've bought a field and I must go out 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.

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.

[1 : 19] And the servant said, Sir, what you 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.

For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. Excellent. Let's pray, shall we, and to ask the Lord to speak to us.

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

Amen. Amen. Well, it really is good to be here and I'm very grateful for the opportunity to share with you. I've loved fellowship, loved getting to know some of you. And yeah, it's a lovely area, isn't it? It's not quite Yorkshire, but it's pretty good, really. And I'm delighted to be here. My ministry is going around sharing the gospel with words, but I do like to try and get literature out as well.

[2 : 22] So I've brought one pile of books. Now, I don't know whether you're going to be mentioning the others, but there are a number there that we've been having throughout the week. But I've just brought some out just for today. I love biographies and I learn so much from biography and I'm always encouraged.

I don't know how many biographies I've read in my life, but I can genuinely say the most gripping one I've ever read is this particular one.

It's called Evidence Not Seen. It's totally unputdownable. Even if you're illiterate, if you start at page one, you'll carry on reading.

It's a great, great book. Billy Graham's wife said of this book, try this and see if you can put it down.

If you get to page eight, you will not go to bed tonight until you've finished it, I promise you.

And it's the story of an American lady who married and with her husband just six months after getting married. They went to the Dutch East Indies as missionaries and then the Japanese invaded.

[3 : 25] And you'll have to read the rest. It's a spiritual book. It's a Christian book, but it's really wonderful. Now, I think normally it's £8.99, but I get them for three pounds. So it's three pounds.

But I really, you'd love it. And if you're not a Christian, I think you'll find things here. You'll say, this is totally amazing. And if you are a Christian, it will really encourage you. So Evidence Not Seen, today's bargain book, which I think you will enjoy.

Actually, it went out of print and I pestered the publishers. I said, you can't do that to a book like this. And they said, give us a commendation. This is what I wrote at the back. I read a good few books, but few are as good as this.

It gripped me, moved me, brought tears to my eyes and led me to pray in a way that was to change my life. And it did. But anyway, if you were asked to sort of describe Christianity, or put it more biblically, the kingdom of God, I wonder what you'd say.

I think many people would say, well, yeah, we know what it's like. It's like a funeral. And we've seen people go into church. They're miserable. And we see them come out of church. They're even more miserable. And others would say it's like a famine.

[4 : 32] What has it got to offer compared with everything else that there is in society? Very interestingly, here in this parable, this story of the Lord Jesus, he said it's like a feast. Now, that is very different from the way most people think.

And he tells this story, doesn't he, about a man who has a great, well, in the ESV, the Bible, we read banquet. Other versions, supper. He puts on this vast meal.

And apparently the way things were done there, and it's not that different today. You know, invitations were sent out in advance. But in those days, when everything was ready, the servants would go and say, come on now.

And so the invitations were sent out. The servants went to the people who'd been invited. And they all began to make excuses. And one said, I just can't come.

I bought a field. And you ought to say, oh, come on. A field is not going to change dramatically over the course of a meal. And the next one says, no, no, no, I bought some yoke of oxen.

[5 : 32] And again, you think, this is ridiculous. You know, surely you saw the oxen before you were buying them. Otherwise, you perhaps were buying, I don't know, spare ribs, you know. The oxen are not going to change. And then the other one says, no, I can't come.

I've married a wife. I would like to say, look, if you've just got married and you're invited to a banquet, go for it. It'll be the last decent meal that's made for you for years.

But anyway, but no, no, he can't come. He's just got married, you see. And so the servants come back and they say, look, they've all made their excuses. So the master says, look, go out and find the poor people and the maimed and the lame and the blind and invite them and treat them to come.

And sure enough, they're willing to take up an offer like this. But the servants come back and say, there's still room. All right, go to the highways and the hedges. Find the big issue sellers.

Find the people who are living in Cardboard City, homeless, anybody ever. I want this place to be full. And so they go and, yes, they get this motley crew, really, of waifs and strays.

[6 : 40] Nobody else is interested in them. But he is. And they have this banquet. And his emotion, the words up there, towards those who were initially invited is, he's angry.

Why have they not come? They're not going to taste my supper. And, yes, disappointment, sadness, anger. It's a very powerful story. But you say, it's all right, Roger, you're saying, you know, it's like a feast.

What is the feast that the kingdom of God, that Christianity has to offer? Well, I think it's got some marvelous delicacies. I really do.

To be forgiven. We all know we've done wrong, don't we? And it's very easy to sort of brush our sins under the carpet and say, it doesn't really matter. Everybody's like this. And, yes, everybody is like that.

But sin with God is serious. Not to love him. Not to love others. To live as if number one is the most important God that we're to live for.

[7 : 38] It's sin. It's rebellion. And, of course, it leads to all sorts of other things that hit the headlines. Or just harden the heart. Sin cuts us off from God. It would keep us out of heaven. And it would condemn us to hell.

We need forgiveness. And the Lord Jesus Christ offers forgiveness. He offers new life. I often say that Jesus who not only died and was buried but rose.

This risen Jesus completely transforms a life and gives a new desire and a new power to do that which is right. He offers God's presence.

God going before us and beside us and behind us and below us and above us and even within us. It's God and us knowing each other reconciled because of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And then all the promises that there are in the Bible, they're there. And we can claim them. We can make them our own. And, yes, we have the Bible. God speaking to us morning by morning as we read the Scriptures.

[8 : 36] God teaching us and sort of tuning our hearts so that we can go and live for God and speak for God. And he gives us purpose contrasted to the meaninglessness that there is so often in society.

And then the promise of heaven. Somebody said it's not just sky in the pie when you die, but it's pie in the sky when you die. It's steak on the plate while you wait. And it is.

This is a great feast of blessings. And yet, strangely, there are people who are refusing it. And I don't know whether you notice, but if you look carefully at the parable, there are three categories of people.

And it's just as true today as it was in those days. First of all, there are those whom you would expect to come to respond to the invitation.

No doubt they're friends of this man. The invitation has been sent. You would expect them to look at it. Oh, good. You know, reserve that date. And then the servants go to them and say, come on.

[9 : 36] You would expect them to come. But they make these excuses. I don't know whether you know the name Billy Sunday.

He was an American preacher who was a baseball player. And he was a very well-known one. He was a sort of equivalent of David Beckham in baseball 80 years ago in the United States.

But then he was dramatically converted to Christ. And he became an evangelist. Now, he's pretty wild. I don't know how he'd go down in Dulwich. But if he was on a platform, he'd wander up and down.

And there might be a chair. And he'd pick it up and he'd smash it. But nobody ever fell asleep when Billy Sunday was preaching. He was a wild sort of character. And if you know your Frank Sinatra songs, you'll know that in the song, Chicago, Chicago, he says, the city Billy Sunday couldn't touch. So, you know, this big, big man, he had a wonderful definition of excuses. An excuse, he said, is the skin of a reason, blown up by lies, liable to go pop upon the pinprick of truth.

[10 : 40] Don't you wish you could come up with a sentence like that? The skin of a reason, blown up by lies, liable to go pop upon the pinprick of truth. They made excuses. Totally irrational excuses.

But each one hurts the person who sent the invitation by refusing this costly invitation that was given to them. And, you know, I said this is just as relevant to us today as it was in those days. How? Well, here is the Lord of all glory who's come from heaven to earth. And he's gone to that costly cross and suffered in an unimaginable way.

As he not only suffers the physical and emotional pain of the trauma of crucifixion, but the sin of the world, the vileness of the world, scooped up and laid on Jesus.

Not contaminating him, but he has made sin for us. And he carries this weight out of love for us. And he offers us forgiveness and, no, no, I'm too busy.

[11 : 50] I've got other things to do. There are different priorities. I'm sorry, but, you know, I respect your faith, but for me... And they're excuses, aren't they? I've got a friend who was asked recently, who was Cain's wife?

You've heard that question. And the Bible tells us very clearly who it was. But who was Cain's wife? Do you know what he replied? He said, if I told you, and I can tell you, would you become a Christian?

Or is that just a red herring? It's an interesting point, isn't it? The excuses. And maybe, I don't know you folk, but I don't know, there may well be somebody here and you were brought up in a Christian home.

You were taught to read the Bible. Maybe you had family prayers. Maybe you went to church. You know these stories very, very well. And in some ways, we would expect you to have come to Christ, to have trusted Jesus Christ.

But for whatever reason, whatever excuse, you're saying, no, maybe later, maybe another day. Perhaps one day I will become a Christian, but not now. I've got other things to do. And the invitation has been given out.

[12 : 59] And yet, the Lord Jesus says about these people, they'll never taste my supper. You can say no to the Lord Jesus so many times that eventually it almost seems impossible to say yes.

There are those you'd expect to come. And I rub shoulders with them. I was standing in King's Cross railway station just recently, and there was quite a well-known politician standing there.

And I always think, well, if they're well-known, that means I'm invited to speak to them. And so I just went up to him, and I offered him a little Christian leaflet. I had a little chat with him.

And he said something. But as it happens, I knew it about him. He said, I was taught to go to church when I was a child. And it was a good church. And his wife even more so.

But not for him. He was polite. He was respectful. He said he'd read the booklet I gave him. But I wonder if you are in that category. You know, as a visitor, you know, I'm here.

[14:00] I'll be gone tomorrow. Let me say things that perhaps aren't very easy to say for the regulars who know you and love you so much. I would urge you not just to push away the claims of the Lord Jesus Christ when you're invited to come to this banquet, this feast, this supper.

What would keep you? What excuse will stand when you meet God? And then there's a second category of people. And those, these are those you have to persuade to come.

So the master sends out the servants. All right, go and find the poor and the maimed, et cetera.

Find these and tell them to come. And I can imagine. They go up to these people, you know, just sitting around, loafing around, nothing much to do.

And you almost want to give them a wide berth, but you can't. And they say, excuse me, but you're invited to come to a wonderful meal that's being put on just up there. What in that mansion up there?

Yes, you're invited. Come on, you're pulling my leg. No, no, no. Really, you are. You wouldn't want me. No, you are invited. And they come.

[15:11] And it's interesting. I have noticed sometimes in just doing Christian work that sometimes it's the most unlikely people who are willing to chat with me and talk about Christian things and are open to the gospel.

And those you think, yeah, well, they're respectable. Maybe they're even God-fearing. They don't want to know. But others do. I love the words of the Lord Jesus Christ who said, I came into the world not to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance.

And do you know, as sinners, we all qualify, don't we? Every one of us is included in that, surely.

And you sort of think, I don't know. Who would be interested in me?

Well, the Lord is interested in you. He created you. He gave you life. And his desire is that you should come to know him. An old Christian minister in Klanderno said to me years ago, and he said it with a twinkle in his eye.

Christopher, you would love this sort of comment. He said, well, I think of a twinkle in the eye and I think of you, you see. And he said, Roger, I have never been a disappointment to God.

[16:26] And I turned and I said, I beg your pardon? You've never been a disappointment to God? He said, no. He took me on as a poor, wretched, miserable sinner, and I've never been a disappointment to him. And do you know that is our qualification?

Archbishop William Temple said the only thing we contribute to our salvation is a load of sin. So God is not coming and saying, look, turn over a new leaf.

Try harder. Make better resolutions each new year. And keep to the... No, this isn't the Christian message. It's not about what I do. It's all about what he has done.

He's come from heaven. He's gone to a cross. He's carried our sin. He offers the gift of forgiveness and new life. And all we do is receive it.

Isn't that wonderful? He wants us to respond to an invitation. And you may feel, it's all right, Roger, you say that. You've said already you don't know me if you did know me.

[17:24] Some of the things I've done, some of the places I've been, some of the things I got involved in, even the closest friends I have don't know. But God does. And he came for such as you.

The Apostle Paul said, this is a faithful saying. It's worthy of everybody accepting that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And then he added, of whom I'm the chief, the worst of all.

And I often think, well, if he could save the worst of sinners, then he can save me as well. And he can save you. You're invited to come. But the servants go back and say, well, they're here. But there's still some room.

So out they go. And I'd say these are the people you have to compel to come. They really are the rag ends of society. Come on, you know.

No, he wouldn't want me. Yes, come on. Let me help you. You're compelling these people to come. They're under the hedges and they're sleeping on the highways. Come on. What a wonderful

message that Christ came into the world.

[18:27] Sometimes for the underdogs. He came for all. And everyone is invited. And it's a lovely, lovely truth. It's interesting because the invitation was come for all things are now ready.

They're all, everything's prepared for you. This is not a bring and buy sale. You know. It's not, I don't know whether they do it around here. But where we live these days, you're getting people putting a post in their front garden that's facing the pavement with a big sort of glass-fronted box.

And it's just books. And they say, give one, take one. And it's a nice idea, you know. But Christianity is not like that. It's just saying, take one. It's all there for you.

It's all ready. Do you remember the words of the Lord Jesus on the cross? We have seven statements that he made. And there he is. He's taken all the sin of the world on himself.

He's paid for it. And then he cries out. Well, in our translations, three words. It is finished. I understand in the original, finished. Just one word.

[19:38] And it wasn't a whimper. It wasn't a cry of dispel. I'm about to die. No, he finished, he'd accomplished the work he was born to do. He paid for sin once and for all.

There's no more sacrifice for sin. And because of what he accomplished on the cross, he invites us to come. Come for all things are now ready. I deliberately mentioned that some older translations, other translations, have the word supper.

And I understand that the Greek, I don't know Greek, but I understand that the Greek word can be translated in different ways, whether it's a banquet, a meal, a feast, a supper. I suppose I like the idea of supper because it's the last meal, isn't it?

I don't know quite how you describe your meals south of Sheffield, but in the north, it's breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper. And 11 o'clock at night, you go to your fish and chip shop and you get ready for the night and supper.

It's the final meal. And I wonder whether there's an implication here that perhaps it's later than you think. We all assume, don't we, that we'll have plenty of time.

[20:57] You know, maybe tomorrow I can consider these things. When I'm retired. Well, when I've enjoyed my retirement, then. But it may be later than we think. The Bible always says today, if you'll hear my voice, don't harden your heart.

Now is the accepted time. Now is the day of salvation. There is a sense of urgency. And you get it in the passage. Go out quickly to the streets. You know, there's something urgent here.

If I can tell a story, it's a little bit of a tearjerker, but this is what drove home the urgency of it to me. I mentioned that school in Batley in West Yorkshire where I taught for eight years.

And it was a tough school in many ways. And there was an attitude that really, as long as you can keep everybody, you know, in an orderly class, then you carry on.

And I was teaching one Tuesday afternoon a group of 14-year-old boys. And I quite liked this class. They were mischievous, but they were great fun to teach. And I enjoyed it. And I was doing an RE lesson.

[22:01] And we were teaching another parable, actually, the one about the fool who was doing very well. And he said, I'm going to pull down my barns and build bigger barns. I'm going to eat and drink and be merry.

And God spoke and said, you fool. For tonight your soul will be required. Tonight you'll die. And where will all those things be then, said Jesus. And we read it. And we talked about it.

And we took questions on it. Of course, they always know if you ask lots of questions, there's less work. So there were lots of questions. And eventually, some real academic work for them to do. I drew on, do you remember the word blackboard?

Yeah, I drew on the blackboard with chalk a page. And I divided it into eight sections. And they had to draw eight cartoon pictures to illustrate this parable.

That was it. And they'd got ten minutes to start. What they didn't finish in school, they did at home. And a boy, I remember his name. I can picture him to this day, though it's, what, 40-odd years ago now.

[22:59] A boy who came from a very, very poor family. He came up to me. And I can't quite remember what he said. But it was something like, Sir, how can I know I'm going to heaven when I die?

But you're a teacher. You've got to be careful. You don't abuse the privilege. And yet this particular boy used to come to a daily Bible class that I ran for ten minutes at the beginning of every lunch

hour.

And he used to come every day. And we did little Bible studies. And I just turned to him. And we always talked in terms of their surname.

And I'll say Smith. It wasn't Smith. But I said, Smith, why don't you go home and ask the Lord Jesus to forgive you and become your Lord and Savior? A few minutes later, the bell went.

As far as our staff were concerned, it was like a Grand Prix start. We all shot away from school. And we gave it no more thought. And I gave it no more thought. The next morning, I arrived at school.

[24 : 00] And the school was high up on a hill in the town in the valley below. And I heard the sound of sirens. And at lunch, sorry, at break time, I used to help in the tuck shop.

You can probably see. And I used to help in the tuck shop. And a boy just came up to me. And I'll use that name again, but I'll give you the way he said it. He said, sir, he said, Smith's dead.

Smith is dead. And I said, what happened? And he didn't know the details. But it turned out he was just walking along the path, the pavement at the bottom of the hill.

And a lorry, its brakes failed. And it crashed into another lorry and pushed it up onto the pavement and crushed this boy between the wall and the lorry.

Do you know what his last words on earth were? My mum will kill me when she sees I've torn my new trousers. But he died. When they removed the lorry, he died of internal bleeding.

[25 : 06] And I thought, oh, why didn't I say to him, should we just have a chat after school? Why didn't I urge him then and there to trust the Lord Jesus? Why did I say go home?

There is an urgency. Come, for all things are now ready. If God has taken such an initiative to come to earth, to die that we might be forgiven and reconciled to God, if he offers us this feast of blessings, heaven, heaven is not a reward for doing good.

Heaven is a gift which Jesus purchased and offers to us. Why would we make excuses? Come. It's the great invitation word of the Bible.

All other religions and philosophies say, go and do and try and be and become. Jesus says, come. And if I can quote a little chorus, I used to sing as children.

C stands for children. They're invited to come. O stands for older people. They're invited to come. M stands for the middle age. They're invited to come. And E stands for everyone.

[26 : 17] Everyone's invited to come. All right, it's quaint. But it is true. And I would just encourage you, if you've never yet, for whatever reason or excuse, never yet responded to this great invitation to feast with the master, not just for life, but through death and into eternity, what would stop you just responding to that RSVP and saying, yes, I want to come?

You say, how do I do it? Well, as I mentioned when I was being questioned earlier, I just prayed a prayer and asked him to become my Lord and my Saviour. And I'd like to close this part before we have the break and the refreshments with a very definite, deliberate prayer of saying, yes, I want to come.

I want to RSVP in a positive way. I want Jesus to become my Lord and Saviour, to forgive me, to become my Lord. And yes, I'll feast. It may sometimes be very costly to be a Christian, but I will feast with him, not just for time, but for all eternity.

I'm going to pray and invite you, well, not just invite, if I'm going to be honest, I'm going to be urging you to pray this prayer with me, not out loud, but in your heart and mind, in a very deliberate, definite way of saying to the Lord Jesus, yes, I want to come and I'd like you to come to me.

Let's pray. So if you can pray this prayer with me, please just pray in your heart and mind, dear God, you know all that there is to know about me.

[27 : 58] So I do want to say I'm sorry for my sin. I want to turn from it. I repent of it. I believe that Jesus died for me and rose from the dead.

Please forgive me. Come and live within me. Make me yours. Please become my Lord and Saviour and help me to follow you and enjoy you.

for I pray in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen.