

One Mission

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[0 : 0 0] Yes, so the reading is from Luke chapter 14 and starting at verse 12. Then Jesus said to his host, When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives or your rich neighbours.

If you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.

Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.

Jesus replied, A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet, he sent his servants to tell those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, I have just bought a field and I must go and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I have just bought five yoke of oxen and I'm on my way to try them out.

[1 : 2 5] Please excuse me. Still another said, I have just got married so I can't come. The servant came back and reported this to his master.

Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

Sir, the servant said, what you ordered has been done, but there is still room. Then the master told his servant, go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in so that my house will be full.

I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet. Good morning. For those of you who don't know me, my name is Richard and I am part of the membership here at Arnold Baptist Church and have been for a few years now.

We're looking at the parable of the great banquet, which is a place Jesus stopped on his journey to the cross to have a meal.

[2 : 3 5] He was invited in by a Pharisee and lots of the Pharisees' friends. And in the version I read, the person exclaims partway through the passage, Blessed is he who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

And so I sort of thought that people tend to talk about pie in the sky when you die. And I'm thinking this is a bit facetiously, when you're dead you eat bread with God.

Before I go on to say what I think the parable says, just a couple of things. Horrible word spoilers. Someone asked me before the service, oh, what's your theme, Richard?

That's what I told them. I told them that it's about the invitation and the invitation to God's kingdom comes to everybody. Everybody, whether they want it or not, who turn it down.

People who feel they're not worthy. And people who don't even know there's a God out there who's inviting them at one point. Fortunately, that person hasn't gone home. So if you fall asleep and don't hear any of the rest of the sermon, that's what it's about.

[3 : 47] But also there's a part about those of us who do know and have accepted the invitation, our responsibility to go out and invite others. Just a small story that isn't about me that I heard about a week and a half ago.

Someone was talking about how they were at work and they really felt a strong sense from God saying, go and ask that colleague of yours, who he knew was an atheist, go and ask him to church for Easter Sunday, which was coming up.

And in the end, he felt he couldn't do anything but obey this sort of strong feeling. So he went into the office of this colleague and he talked to him and he asked him and he said, you know, you know, I'm a Christian. You know, I know you don't believe, but come along on Sunday and, you know, hear what we have to say, hear what we believe.

And on Sunday, he went to church and he looked out and he waited patiently and his colleague didn't turn up. And his colleague never turned up and his colleague never went to church. And four years later, this colleague was still an atheist.

But four years later, on a Sunday morning at Easter, someone came up to him and said, oh, you won't recognise me, but I know your voice. He said, four years ago, I was in that office when you asked your colleague to come to church.

[5 : 07] And I was kneeling on the floor behind the desk repairing the floor. And you didn't see me, but I heard what you said and something struck a chord. So I came along to church on the Sunday and now I know what it means to be a Christian.

So when you throw out your invitations, it may not necessarily be the person you're talking to who picks up on what you're saying. Right, back to the passage.

In our modern Bibles, we have different headings, different parts of the chapters. And in this part of Luke, the parable of the great banquet, the first few verses of the chapter, which weren't actually read to us and aren't part of the parable, but they do act as a lead into the parable.

The start of the chapter tells us that Jesus had been invited to dine at the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees. And the other guests were lawyers and fellow Pharisees.

People who you may recall from a sermon in the Encounters with Jesus series that we did at the beginning of the year, who were generally fairly ill-disposed towards Jesus because of his challenges to them on their legalism, their hypocrisy and somewhat oppressive teaching.

[6 : 26] However, we also know that there were some Pharisees, Nicodemus, for example, who weren't actually antagonised by Jesus. And although we do not know which side of the fence this particular Pharisee was sitting on, clearly he was interested enough in what Jesus had to say, whether out of a genuine desire to learn, or maybe he was looking for some slip-up or blasphemy on Jesus' part.

We don't know, we're not told. But whether this was a friendly or a cynical invitation does not seem to worry Jesus at all, who clearly knew that for whatever reason people would be paying close attention to his words.

And he's never afraid to say things that might stir up antagonism. In the first part of the chapter, Jesus starts by asking everyone, these lawyers, these lawyers, these Pharisees, these experts in the law, religious law and civil law, if it was legal and lawful to heal on the Sabbath.

And without there being an answer from any of them either way, because no doubt they were thinking, is this another trap? He goes ahead and heals the man anyway.

Now, I say we haven't read this part of the passage, but it's the well-known passage about the man who was healed of dropsy. Now, a well-read and educated bunch like you lot may already know what dropsy is.

[8 : 02] As a 14-year-old schoolboy in a religious education class, I didn't. So I asked. And everybody, including the teacher, laughed at me.

It was a bit humbling. But neither did they actually tell me what it was. So maybe they were just too embarrassed to admit that they didn't know either. So as an aside, if you are not sure what dropsy is, it's what nowadays we call edema, which is a build-up of fluid in the feet, ankles, and can accumulate all the way up to the legs and even affect the abdomen.

The usual causes are heart failure, kidney disease, although lung, liver and thyroid problems can also lead to this type of swelling, to quote the source I read.

We're not told what the cause was for this particular man that he healed. But also, slightly facetiously, we can probably rule out other causes, such as steroids, blood pressure tablets, and the contraceptive pill.

But that's a bit of a digression. Having thus silenced the guests and challenged their ideas of what constitutes a good way to spend the Sabbath, in other words, not just complete rest, Jesus follows it up with some thoughts on seating plans that may well have had some of them shuffling uncomfortably in their seats.

[9 : 27] He told them not to be presumptuous about their standing with the host, because whoever close you might be, someone closer or more important might come along, and you might have to make way for them instead.

So having challenged his guests' understanding of the law and pierced their sense of importance, Jesus now becomes more personal as he turns to the host.

And to his host, he says, in so many words, don't think you're so great for throwing a big party for your friends. You will get a great deal of kudos and many return invitations.

So what? Who really cares about that? If instead you hold a feast for the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, in other words, those who are ceremonially unclean and undesirables, they cannot repay you, but, as we read, your reward will come instead at the resurrection.

Now, I expect those people present were very likely to know their scriptures very well. I was going to say their Old Testament very well, but of course for them it wasn't the Old Testament, it was the only Testament. And for me, when I read this, and maybe some of them, he conjectured, picked up some echoes from the writings of the prophets.

[10 : 53] And although there's nothing explicit in the passage, I would like to suggest that there are some echoes of Micah's question and answer. What does the Lord require of you?

And it's a three-part answer. To act justly, to love mercy, to walk humbly with your God. And I hope it doesn't feel too shoehorned in to suggest that the Sabbath healing, a challenge to the right view of oneself, and a challenge to do good to those in need who cannot repay you, represent these three strands of justice, mercy, and humility.

So having dealt with all the verses we didn't read about that lead up in this passage to the parable, we can now look at that actual parable itself, which is prompted by this declaration, that, as I said in the version I read, the ESV, blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

And you might think that a fairly uncontroversial statement to make. And you may well have called it out as a sense of, oh, it's all a little bit uncomfortable here with what Jesus is saying to us and our host.

So maybe he thought that would be some way of relieving the tension. But rather than getting a well said from Jesus, and yes, you're absolutely right, that's true, Jesus launches, sorry, there, new teeth, Jesus launches into another of his stories with a message that challenged the attitudes and the presumptions and even their orthodoxy.

[12 : 36] I think it's probably fairly safe to say that those present, lawyers and Pharisees, probably felt pretty secure in their salvation and acceptance by God.

They were, after all, Jews of Israel. The people that they had been told were specifically and specially chosen by God to be his people. They knew the law and they stuck rigidly to it.

And probably they also saw their wealth, their education, their learning and standing in society as being signs of God's blessing upon them.

Now, Jesus speaks to their complacency and to a degree implicitly to their arrogance. Before going any further, just a brief discussion on one of the possible interpretations of this parable.

It's often used, and certainly I've heard it used in this way, as teaching that the gospel and the kingdom of God are not going to be restricted only to the Jews. But this parable talks about how the message of salvation will be preached to Gentiles as well, so that they too may become part of God's people.

[13 : 57] Of course, for this parable, Jesus doesn't give a specific interpretation. So we cannot be dogmatic about its meaning. However, the Greek words used here to describe those in the highways and the hedges aren't used anywhere else to signify the Gentiles.

So one can't presume that that's the case here. That said, even if we cannot say it definitely means Gentiles, I think it's not unreasonable to read that as an interpretation into it.

But in the parable itself, those who turned down the invitation initially didn't do so because of a clash of dates or something else was already in their diaries.

They had already accepted the invitation. They'd already said yes. And now the banquet was ready and they came up with reasons why they did not want to attend.

I need to check the field I've bought. You're pretty stupid not to check it beforehand. I need to examine the five yoke of oxygen, oxygen, sorry, oxen.

[15 : 09] Five yoke of oxen or even five tanks of oxygen. I need to examine them. Why did you buy them blind? Even more bizarrely, I've married a wife and therefore can't come.

Is he so under the thumb that he's not allowed to do what he wants to do and to fulfil a commitment to one of his friends? So the servants are sent instead to invite the people who didn't know to keep their diaries free for that day and who would have been considered undesirable and unclean guests.

And even after that, the servants go to find those who are beyond even the margins of society to bring them into the feast. Now, one of the ways we are encouraged to look at the parables is to consider the different characters and participants within the parable and see if any of the attitudes and behaviours or characteristics of those people resonate with us individually or as a group, whether positive or perhaps more even often negative traits.

Now, I doubt any of us would reflect that we are the master of the house as this is probably meant to be a type of what God is, giving out invitations to people to come into his house and to share meals and fellowship with him.

But the parable does refer back to the challenge Jesus gave to his host to invite people who actually want to come even if they weren't originally considered.

[16 : 49] More naturally, we might look to see if we are of those who received the original invitation but are now making excuses not to turn up. to see if we are one of those who were not originally considered good enough to be invited or maybe even one of those at the extremes who may not even have known there was a banquet that we could be invited to.

For those who originally accepted the invitation but now don't want to attend, I'm reminded of the parable of the sower and the seed that fell amongst thorns.

And people like this fell away because of their cares and concerns for wealth and comfort. Maybe that feels a bit like where you are this morning.

You know God loves you. You have repented of your sins. You've made a declaration of faith in the past. Maybe even publicly or at baptism. But somewhere along the way, what happens between Sundays has become more important than the meaning of Sunday itself.

Maybe your time and energy are now spent on work or career progression which are not necessarily bad things in themselves or money making to spend on accumulating worldly goods. Or maybe your focus on a relationship or relationships with others has squeezed out time for your relationship with Jesus.

[18 : 19] Maybe chasing success in a sport or pastime has led to less time to commit to worship and fellowship at any time but especially on a Sunday.

But with God, it is always possible to renew your commitment to him, to re-establish contact with him at any time and to pick up your relationship with him wherever you were when you left off with him.

Maybe you identify more with those who know the invitation is there but don't actually consider yourself to be good enough to be accepted by God. Or perhaps even worse, other people, even other Christians maybe, have made you feel worthless or useless.

Maybe you have done things in your life of which you are deeply ashamed and don't feel they can be forgiven or ignored. But the Bible teaches us that God cleanses us from every sin and that once we accept his invitation to repent and be baptised, those sins are dealt with completely.

And please note that the blind and the poor and the crippled and the lame did not have to be healed, made whole or make money before they could accept the invitation.

[19 : 46] They were invited to come just as they were. Likewise, God says to you, come as you are. Don't wait until you have got it all together because either that's an excuse because you know you will never have it all together or it's pride because you think I can get it all together without God.

The final group of invited people were those who possibly weren't even trying to be part of mainstream society anymore. But the invitation goes to them too because it is not about how good you are, how involved you are or even how desperate you are to be invited.

Sometimes it's just about God wanting to bless everyone, even those who aren't specifically seeking him or even maybe know of his existence.

I think this morning in here it's unlikely that there is anyone who has never heard of the Christian God or his son Jesus. But maybe you've never realised that there is an invitation to accept and this invitation is to come to him and it's one I would urge you to accept.

Let's say a short story. This may or may not be helpful. I hadn't thought about it before this morning but this morning seemed right to put it in. When I was at primary school there was this for want of a better way of describing her little old lady who lived in one of the houses that we used to walk past on our way home from school in the afternoon.

[21 : 30] And those who knew could go and knock on her door and she would come to the door with a bag of boiled sweets and chewy sweets and you were allowed to take a couple free.

There was an open invitation to go and knock on her door and to accept sweets but you could only do that if you knew there was an invitation and people would encourage people let's go and get some sweets today.

I remember one particular occasion when I joined with those who went to knock on the door and the door was answered by this little old lady and with her bag of sweets and a small group of us there and she held out the bag of the sweets and then she looked at me and she said come in Richard why do you come to this door and not the front door?

Because it was my grandmother. And because I was part of the family I could receive a greater blessing than just sweets.

God seeks to bless every one of us whether you know him or not but if you're part of his family he will be able to bless you even more. So that's the parable as it deals with the people who are being invited to this banquet but of course there's another group of people to consider the servants the ones who went out with the invitations.

[23 : 02] These are people who already knew the master were already working for him and were there to follow his orders and be obedient to his commands. For those of us who have already accepted God's invitation and have become Christians and entered into his service here is a reminder for us to tell others about the invitation to his kingdom the one that we have accepted and to invite people and let them know they too can become part of it.

Some of the people we talk to may come up with excuses and not be bothered but at least we've asked them. Some may not think themselves worthy enough.

We should reassure them that actually no, you're not because nobody is and that really is an important part of the story of Jesus coming to die on the cross for us.

Some we go to may be hearing about Jesus for the very first time and we must be ready for an explanation of why we have come with this invitation for them and why it is not only worth accepting but important to accept.

As we go from here or maybe even talk to people in here I trust that all of us will know that as Jesus has said God will give us the right words to speak to those that we are inviting to know him.

[24 : 39] Thank you. Thank you.