

Dinner Invitations

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[0 : 00] Right, right. Take my bowl of mussels. Friends, the scene was a dinner party and we were living in London and we were guests at the home of a school friend of our oldest son, Matthew.

We actually didn't really know these people very well at all. But we do like dinner parties and we were keen to make new friends having just recently settled in London. This was a pretty flash party. I mean, there was this big table and I think as I remembered, about another five couples were there as guests. The hostess had served a mussel soup for entree.

Well, I'd downed mine, but Cheryl was struggling. Her visitors, Cheryl's my wife. Right, take my mussels. And with what I thought was a minimum of commotion, I obliged.

I mean, the mussels, well, they seemed okay. The dinner party went on, the conversation became more lively, as it often does. I became strangely quiet. Something was happening in my abdominal quarters.

[1 : 19] By the time we got home, I was gaining a new appreciation for the pain of childbirth. I mean, I can't really properly describe this.

I mean, the pain was just excruciating. I was in serious trouble and I had a serious case of food poisoning. This was a dinner party to remember.

And this morning, I want us to look at another dinner party. And this dinner party would have also been remembered for a long, long time by the guests.

Remembered, however, not for food poisoning. So I want you to come with me to the house of a leading religious figure in Palestine. And we'll just simply call him Gershon.

And I want each of us to imagine that we're a kitchen hand. And we're just going to simply observe and hear this never-to-be-forgotten dinner party.

[2 : 20] Wow. I mean, this is amazing. I mean, Jesus has been invited to the dinner party. I just can't understand why Gershon, the Pharisee, would actually invite him.

I mean, Gershon just simply can't stand him. He's obviously got some little scheme. I mean, he's always just sort of trying to trap Jesus. Ah.

I think I see now what Gershon's up to. I guess the question's going to be, is Jesus going to heal old Shimon over there? You know, the one with that, oh, disgustingly, hideously bloated body.

I wonder if he's just going to do it on the Sabbath. Well, Jesus sure doesn't shrink away quietly. He's actually healed him. I mean, this is unbelievable.

Well, no, it's not really unbelievable. I mean, everything that I've heard about this Jesus has been that he's full of compassion and has these extraordinary powers of healing. And I remember what my cousin Zach, Zach from Galilee, reckons about Jesus.

[3 : 25] He says, look, I've never actually heard anyone who speaks with the authority of Jesus. Oh, Gershon, I mean, he really looks stunned.

This is going to be some dinner party. I mean, everyone's still in the hallway. They haven't even made it into the dining room. This is going to be something not to be missed.

You know, I'm actually pretty glad that I got this kitchen hand job from www.jewsforkitchenhands.com. I'm just going to take this plate of bread and follow them into the dining room.

Oh, wow. I mean, these guests, they are just something. I mean, they just about knocked me over trying to get to the seats up there next to Gershon.

I mean, what a scramble. And now that Jesus, he's speaking up. I mean, Zach, oh, cousin Zach, I mean, he was right. This man really does speak with authority.

[4 : 28] When you're invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honour in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host.

And the host you invited, both of you, may come and say to you, give this person your place. And then in disgrace, you would start to take the lowest place.

Wow. Boy. I mean, this is really something, isn't it? I mean, just like the whole room is just stunned. And the two blokes who rushed to get up there next to Gershon, you know, the ones who just about knocked me over.

I mean, their face has turned ashen white. Ashen white. And Jesus is still going. But when you're invited, go and sit down at the lowest place so that when your host comes, he may say to you, friend, move up higher.

And then you'll be honoured in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. For all who exalt themselves will be humbled. And those who humble themselves will be exalted.

[5 : 33] I tell you, the guests must be just squirming because Jesus' words convict me as well.

I mean, God's prophets have taught us, us, the nation of Israel, consistently down through the centuries that God destroys the proud. God. Well, I bet that Gershon is wishing that he hadn't tried to set up Jesus by inviting him to this dinner party.

I mean, everyone's just sort of, they're still just sort of sitting there staring at him. Maybe if I go and get the main course, it'll sort of break, break the tension. But, hang on, Jesus is now actually turning and he's directly addressing Gershon.

When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or your rich neighbours in case they might invite you in return and you would be repaid.

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. And you will be blessed because they cannot repay you for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

[6 : 48] Well, it's like cut the air with a knife. I think I'm sort of getting the drift of Jesus' words.

I mean, even as a kitchen hand. I mean, when Jesus spoke about the resurrection of the righteous, sort of the light went on in my head. I think this Jesus is speaking about what the rabbis used to teach me in the local synagogue when I was a kid.

They used to call it something like the Messianic banquet. I seem to remember that this was actually prophesied in the book of Isaiah, in Isaiah 25. And it actually sounds like a great, great party.

It sounds like a super celebration when Jesus brings in his kingdom. So I think I understand what Jesus is saying to these guests.

And if you think about it, I mean, he's actually very clever, isn't he? I mean, he's using this setting of sort of a dinner party to speak of that mother of all dinner parties, the heavenly banquet.

[7 : 54] I think he's also speaking about the characteristics of those who are in relationship with God, being humble before God, asking him for mercy, not being proud, being generous in spirit and action, not being self-serving, not being self-focused.

I mean, I don't know whether I should be laughing or not, but I mean, this is kind of amazing. I mean, everyone's just sitting there. They are stunned. There's just this stunned silence. They're sort of fidgeting with their plates.

There's all this tension in the air and it was Gershon who actually wanted to make Jesus uncomfortable and set him up. And the tables have turned. Well, anyway, maybe someone will try and smooth things over and just sort of get on with the dinner party.

In fact, the one three seats down from Gershon, it looks like he's going to sort of speak up and try and break the tension. Well, blessed is anyone who'll eat bread in the kingdom of God.

I mean, it's unbelievable. These Pharisees, I don't think they've heard anything that Jesus has said to them. I mean, they're certain that they're going to be there because they're big candlesticks.

[9 : 08] Well, I'm only a kitchen hand, but that's not what I heard about Jesus teaching as he's gone around the countryside and that's not what I think he's saying tonight. Well, friends, let's just jet back to 2006 and we can pick up the rest of this dinner party conversation as we turn to Luke 14 because we're reading God's very word.

This is what Jesus said at this never-to-be-forgotten dinner party and because it is God's word, we can be certain that the Holy Spirit is speaking to each of us today here in Doncaster 2006.

See, one of the guests has just basically declared something like this. I mean, aren't we just the lucky ones? We're the Pharisees. We're the religious leaders. We're on God's A-list for heaven.

The Pharisee, he's assuming that he's going to make it to heaven because he's in the inner circle. And he's likely expecting that Jesus is sort of going to turn to him, smile, sort of nod approvingly.

But Jesus turns and he totally undercuts his assumption that he will make it to heaven. So who really will share in God's banquet?

[10:40] Who is going to be at the greatest party that has ever been held? Jesus tells a story to make his point. Look with me at verse 16.

A certain man was preparing a great banquet. We need to appreciate, I think, the cultural background. I mean, banquets were a big deal in the society in Jesus' day. And they required lots of notice and lots and lots of preparation. Firstly, an initial invitation was given. It was given to ascertain if a person was free on that date and whether they would accept the host's offer.

But unlike today, the invitation wouldn't say something like 7.30 till late because there weren't any fridges, there were no microwaves and all the great food had to be served up and eaten as soon as it was ready.

So time just had to be somewhat flexible. call. And so on the evening of the banquet, a second invitation was given by a servant and then he sort of ran from home to home to each of the guests to let them know that dinner was ready.

[11:51] There was absolutely no expectation that the guest would say no at this point because it was simply a courtesy measure to ensure that those who'd agreed to come didn't have to sit around waiting while the food was still being prepared.

If you like, it was something like a dinner's ready call. And when the guests heard it, they'd make their way to the party ready to enjoy their evening. That's the cultural background. A certain man was preparing a great banquet.

And I've just been off, as you know, in the last week. One of my little jobs that I ticked off on my work list was restraining the back patio and cleaning up the barbecue.

I mean, daylight savings approaching, I'm making preparations, not planning on a great banquet, but may be at least a big barbecue. The man sends out his invitations to come and eat at this great party.

And Jesus means for the people listening to this story to picture the idea of God being there in heaven, getting heaven ready for people to arrive.

[12:59] And so we read he invited many. I mean, this is a wide, this is a broad, this is a general invitation. He's inviting many guests.

He's not just inviting some little elite in a circle. So we read in 17, at the time for the dinner, he sent his slave to say to those who'd been invited, come for everything is ready now.

It's just going to be great, isn't it? I mean, it's going to be terrific to get together. It's going to be great fun. There's going to be lots of laughter. I mean, it's going to be great, isn't it?

Isn't it? Isn't it? But they all alike began to make excuses.

And friends, these are pathetic excuses. You see, no one sensible would go and see the block of land that they'd bought in the darkness, the time when the banquet would be taking place.

[14:07] I mean, who in their right mind would go and buy cattle without examining it first? I mean, would you go and buy a car without first test driving it? Why would the married man not bring along his new wife to the party?

You see, friends, when we say, I'm actually too busy to come to your party, what we're actually saying is, I'm not interested in a relationship with you.

That's what we're saying. And at this party at Gershon's house, there were people and they had sent back God's invitation to his party.

How had they done that? Was it sent back, bounced back on email, Australia Post? No, they had sent it back by their rejection of Jesus.

And that is so sadly true today. Too busy with everything else in life than to get right with God.

[15:08] If you like, enjoying the creator's gifts, but then absolutely dismissing the creator himself. If you think about it, that's actually insanity, isn't it?

But that's what sin is. It's insanity. I mean, it's sort of like shaking our puny little fists at the almighty God saying, I don't need you.

I don't want you. So let me ask you, I mean, what matters more to you than your relationship with the living God?

You see, we can put our jobs, we can put pursuit of money, sport, social life, so on and so on, way ahead of being at God's great party.

But this sort of response of rejecting, no, no, I'm not coming, this is not going to stop God's great party from going ahead. It's not even going to delay it. But God is, however, most unhappy at the rejections.

[16:18] Look with me at 21. So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry. And that's pretty understandable, isn't it?

I mean, God's gone to a lot of trouble and he's not about to let his party be a flop. No way. God's party is actually going to be chock-a-block with guests.

And amongst those guests, there's going to be lots and lots of surprises. See, rejection means that the invitation actually goes out to others and they will flock in.

They accept the invitation to the great banquet. They accept it because they're not proud. pride is such a deadly sin.

It stops us seeing anything greater than ourselves. Pride says, I am the centre of the universe. I wonder if you'd just try with me this little exercise and I suggest anyone with a slightly less than pristine neck just simply observes rather than takes part.

[17:34] So what I want you to do is just simply with me look down at your feet where you're sitting. Look down at your feet and with your head looking down at your feet, why don't you also just look up at the ceiling?

C.S. Lewis rightly commented, as long as you're proud, you can't know God. Because a proud man or a proud woman is always looking down on things, on people, and as long as you're looking down, you can't see what's above you.

Pride is an arrogant sin because it breeds the view, I'm actually good enough for God. I'm certainly better than others.

I know I'm better than my next door neighbour. And on most days, I'm probably better than my spouse. But the Christian, the follower of Jesus Christ, knows that he or she will never find acceptance with God based on their own merit.

Rejection means that this invitation goes out to others and they literally flock in. They accept the invitation to the great banquet because they are not proud.

[19:00] They know they don't deserve to be at God's party. They know that they've been invited. They've been invited quite undeservingly because of God's extraordinary grace.

grace. And friends, let me say, this is not some cheap invitation that's made. You see, in order for God to invite us to this great banquet, it cost him.

God in Christ paid the price for the invitation. He paid the price for our sins. He took our punishment. He did it by dying as a perfect once for all sacrifice on the cross.

You know, I said, well, yeah, but I hear that, but why was that so necessary? The Bible just simply says because all of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory.

All of us, all of us outside of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, put ourselves ahead of God. We don't put him in first place.

[20:07] And of course, that's where he must be. He's the creator. He's the sovereign Lord, if you like. He's the ruling monarch of this whole shebang. And I know this morning that I'm speaking to many, indeed, probably the vast majority of people who have accepted God's invitation to his great party.

The invitation that comes through Jesus and comes only through Jesus. And the blessings that he offers are for now and on and on into the future.

Into the new heaven and the new earth. And when I think about that, the thought that always comes to my mind is that our current feeble minds cannot even begin to grasp the greatness of that eternal existence.

Tragically, though, there are those who don't accept the invitation. They're too busy. They're too self-centered. They're not interested in a personal relationship with the host, God the Father.

They are just sort of ridiculing, just completely dismissive that to have such a relationship, Jesus Christ is the only mediator.

[21:29] That he must be their saviour and Lord. Completely dismissive. And if God isn't our priority, if we refuse Jesus' free invitation, then the outcome's very simple.

Simple but tragic. We actually don't get a seat at the table. And that's what verse 24 tells us.

Verse 24 is just a tragic description of opportunity missed. No one can enter God's great banquet.

No one can enter his kingdom without God making the invitation. The invitation comes through Jesus and it is an invitation to all. So nothing in our life should get in the way of responding to what God is doing through Jesus.

When we think about this chapter, perhaps you're saying in your mind, but what about those who remain outside? What about them?

[22 : 49] And the answer is simply they remain outside by their deliberate choice. So friends, this morning, maybe I'm just speaking to even one person who's never accepted God's invitation to his heavenly banquet.

The mother of all parties. Friends, if you've never accepted it, perhaps you've heard it in the past, you haven't accepted it. Can I plead with you, don't assume that after this invitation, which is being offered this morning, you'll just simply get lots of other opportunities in the future to respond. Don't make that assumption. Because you see, the longer that we refuse God's offer, the more likely it is that we'll actually develop a real hardness of heart.

A hardness of heart that acts as an impenetrable barrier to God's invitation. Come.

That is God's call. That's his invitation. Come, for everything is ready now.

[24 : 04] And I'm going to just pray for us. And I'm going to invite, if there is such a person who recognises this morning that they haven't accepted that invitation in the past, and you know by the conviction of the Holy Spirit that that's what you desperately need to do, then I'm going to invite you, just as I go through this simple prayer, just as we simply talk to the Lord, to simply pray this prayer in your heart as your prayer.

And friends, for the vast majority, who have accepted the invitation, can I invite you, just as I make this prayer, simply to express in your heart your great praise and thankfulness that God in his mercy gave you this invitation.

And just praise him and thank him for just the extraordinary future that awaits us with the great banquet. So let's pray. Dear God, I do acknowledge your call to come.

Dear God, I know that I don't deserve a place at your banquet table. I know that sin acts as a barrier to being at the party.

Dear God, thank you that Jesus died for me. Thank you that he died for my sins. Dear God, I repent of my sins, of my rebellion to you.

[26 : 01] And I trust in Jesus as my saviour and Lord. Lord, please forgive me.

And in your mercy, please give me a seat at the heavenly banquet. And I ask this in Jesus' name. Amen. And friends, if you happen to have prayed that prayer this morning, it would be a delight if you were to share that with one of us on the staff or maybe someone else that you know in the congregation so that we can encourage you and pray for you as you embark on what is just a life changing journey with this extraordinary future of being part of God's great banquet. Amen.