

Bearing Fruit

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Date: 04 August 2002

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[0 : 0 0] Father God, we give you thanks that you called each one of us here today. You called us by name and that you desire to bring us into the fullness of all the wonderful things you want to give us.

So would you give us hearts now ready to receive from you and wills ready to follow you. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior.

Amen. Please be seated. I'm going to be looking at this story from Luke chapter 14.

If you would keep your Bibles open there. Page 73, I believe it is. Luke chapter 14, the parable of the great banquet. I need to begin this talk with something of a confession.

And the confession is this. I was invited to have dinner with a friend yesterday. And I accepted the invitation. And then, well, I was quite busy and I've been very busy moving into my house and getting things ready.

[1 : 0 7] And I began to feel like I was burning the candle at both ends a little bit. So towards the end of the afternoon, I phoned my friend and said, look, I'm really sorry. I can't come.

And as the words were out of my mouth, I realized I was living the parable of the great banquet. Because this is the story of an invitation issued, accepted, and then at the last minute, for no good reason, refused.

And what Jesus is essentially describing here is the way in which God operates towards us and how we can operate towards Him.

And the way God operates is quite simply like this man who puts out an invitation, prepares a banquet, and goes out, and sends a servant out to greet the guests when everything is ready.

And all we're supposed to do is respond to the invitation and go to the party. That, in a nutshell, is everything. That's Christianity. That is how God operates.

[2 : 1 8] But there's a little twist in the story at the end, and it has to do with the guest list. So let's take a closer look at this story for a moment now. And I want to consider the parable under three headings.

The first is this, the invitation. The second is this, the reply. And finally, the guest list. First, the invitation. Verse 14.

When one of those who sat at table with Jesus heard this, he said to him, Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. But he said to him, And 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 all is now ready. Now, Jesus is telling this story.

He's at a dinner party at the house of a Pharisee. You can see that at the beginning of the chapter. And so Jesus is sitting amongst these religious leaders. He's sitting amongst the elite, the creme de la creme of Israel, and over the religious structure.

[3 : 23] And for these people, they knew their scriptures, they knew their law, their idea of righteousness with God, came by abiding by that law, living by regulations. They could walk the walk and talk the talk.

And right here at the beginning of this passage, with this statement from this man, you get the impression that perhaps as the dinner party is worn on, he had a little bit too much to drink, and he shoots off his mouth and says something very honest.

Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God. That's very telling. Because the only way for this guy to feel righteous and right before God is in his own virtue, in his own strength, in what he's managed to do with his life.

And this guy figures he's going to go right to the top of the line. He knows that when he goes knocking on those pearly gates, God is going to look at him, see his report card, and see that it has straight A's, and he's going to go right to the top table.

And Jesus comes along and says, are you sure about that? Actually, that's not how God operates.

[4 : 29] It's quite the opposite. Because the man giving the banquet represents God. The servant represents Jesus. And the invitation which is put out to the banquet is God calling his people to live life in a way that has total peace and harmony with him.

It is God calling his people to live life in relationship with him. And that's how it works.

That's how God operates. He invites. And then he sent Jesus to bring everybody into the party, into this great banquet. And do you see what a very attractive picture Jesus is painting here of what God offers to you and me, of what he is inviting us to?

God invites. He invites you and me. Some people think God is remote and distant and uninterested in our lives. But what Jesus is saying is that God is very interested in you and me.

That he loves us so much. He wants to offer us the best that he can offer. He wants to reach out to us and he invites us to come and live with him, to live his way, to live our lives in his presence here in this life and in eternity.

[5 : 53] Some people think of God as cold, as one who punishes, as one who is unloving. But Jesus uses the image of a banquet to describe what God has on offer for us.

And the Christian life is a banquet. When you become a Christian and go to that banquet, you are offered something lavish and wonderful. You get access to God.

You get total forgiveness of everything you've done wrong. You get clarity about how you stand with God. Complete certainty about what will happen to you in the next life.

You will be given a strength to deal with hard times. And because Jesus will be with you, you will never need to feel alone again. You will become part of a community of people who are all trying to grow together.

When you become a Christian and let the Spirit of God reside in you, you will find that your life, your character, your relationships, your thought life, your sexuality, everything will be enhanced.

[6 : 58] And God is inviting you to enjoy all of that. It's a banquet. And you're invited. We live in a society that's very eclectic spiritually.

I was discussing this with someone the other day. And we came up with a huge list of contemporary spiritualities. Things like feminist spirituality, Zen Buddhist spirituality, someone even described rock spirituality.

I'm not quite sure how satisfying that would be. Creation center spirituality, you name it. And people are free to develop spiritually any way they wish.

What's true for you is fine for you. What's true for me is fine for me. And that's okay. And actually, I think that's a very honest situation. And I don't have any problem with that. I think that's great.

You've got to grow in the way you want to grow. You've got to do what works for you. But let's be quite clear about what Jesus is saying here. Jesus is offering you access to God.

[7 : 58] And God, as described in this story, and in the Bible as a whole, is accessed through Jesus, the servant, who goes out and brings everybody into the banquet.

And Jesus doesn't mention any other way, but he's saying, this is what God wants to do for you. Come enjoy it. So if you may be wondering about how God operates towards human beings, then you don't need to look any further than this story.

Because it is quite clear. He invites. God takes the initiative. We don't take the initiative with God. He takes the initiative with us. And he invites us to a banquet to live with him.

That means every one of us here are here because God has invited us. You are here because God has invited you. You want to accept the invitation because it's God's invitation.

Second, the reply. Now, of course, if you get invited to a dinner party, it's only polite to reply. To send in your RSVP, you just have to say yes or no.

[9 : 07] And that's how it is with God. God invites. He takes the initiative. He invites you. And you just have to say yes or no. It's easy. Well, at least it should be. You read on.

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. I pray you, have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them.

I pray you, have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported this to his master.

Oh dear. Anybody here feel like that? You know, when you have that feeling that you should be taking God more seriously but you're too busy right now.

You want to start going to church a bit more regularly but there's other things to do on Sunday morning. It's an important day. If you look at the excuses these people are giving, they're terribly contemporary. Money, relationships, we're busy.

[10 : 07] People had other things to do. And what these people in the story are making quite clear is that they do not need to go to this banquet and they have more important things to do with their time.

They have other priorities. Thank you very much. But some other time. But the result is that they did not go to the banquet.

Is that quite clear? They missed out. They weren't there. What about you and me? It's interesting.

If you look at the story, there are two things that are required. First, the invitations are sent out and presumably these people accepted that. But then the servant representing Jesus goes out to bring everybody to the party and that's how it works.

We've got to accept God's invitation. We all have to do that. That's that moment of conversion. When you decide, I will be a follower of Jesus. I will make Jesus my number one.

[11 : 06] We all have to do that. But then you've got to go to the party. You've got to attend the banquet. Some people think they are Christians because they're baptized or because they believe in God.

Because they go to church sometimes or maybe at Christmas and Easter. Or just because they're good persons. Therefore, God will accept them. And if that's how you feel, that's okay.

That works for you. No problem. But again, let's be quite clear what Jesus is saying. Jesus is saying that to be religious is not intended to be a passive thing and nor is it intended to cramp your style.

So what he's saying is when you become a Christian, you need to actively go to that banquet. You've got to get into the whole thing. That means for us as Christians, if you are not reading your Bible, if you're not spending time with God in prayer, if you're not at the banquet, if you are not part of a Christian community, spending time with your brothers and sisters in the Lord, worshipping, growing as a Christian, you are not at the banquet.

And if you're fine with that, you know, if you feel okay, then okay. It's whatever works for you. But again, and let's be quite clear about this, according to what Jesus is saying, an invitation has been extended and the servant has come to bring you to the party.

[12 : 32] So if you don't want to go, no problem. Don't worry about it. It's up to you. But if you are not at the banquet, you are not at the banquet. You are not enjoying all the benefits that God wants to give you.

Either you're at God's banquet or you're not. Either you're a Christian or you're not. Now some of you here may be on a journey towards becoming a Christian. You're feeling your way forward and that's great because God wants you to come to his banquet.

Keep on. Go to the banquet. But let's not kid ourselves. It's about priorities. About making God part of your lifestyle.

These people in the story had other priorities and they didn't go to that banquet. What about you? Does God have any place in your list of priorities?

Maybe you'd like to go to church more often but there isn't a good one near you. Have you tried looking? Is God so important to you that it's worth driving, even a great distance to go to church?

[13 : 43] I had to come all the way from Wales to go to church this morning. Because God has invited you and he is offering you an attractive lifestyle.

lived with him. But you've got a reply. And you've got to go to that banquet. And it is either yes, I'm with you or no thank you.

But it's up to you. It's the reply. Finally, the guest list. I read a wonderful story in the paper a few years ago about a time when Nancy Reagan got herself, muscled herself onto the guest list of a reception at Buckingham Palace.

And when the queen found out about this, she was furious and called her something that I can't speak out in a pulpit. And it's, do you want to be on God's guest list?

How do you get on that guest list? Can you muscle your way on? Let's read on a little bit further. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.

[14 : 52] 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.

For I tell you, none of those men who are invited shall taste my banquet. You know, I think that we can easily make one of two or three mistakes when we think about who it is that God accepts and who it is that God rejects.

We can either be too exclusive or we can be too inclusive. The fellow talking to Jesus in the story was too exclusive. He figured that only basically himself and his friends the crème de la crème, the elite, the really good, would make it to the top table, the chosen few.

And the others, the outsiders, the great unwashed, wouldn't. And that's a very easy mistake to make. When we become comfortable in our own innate goodness, in our length of years of service, our knowledge of scriptures, we start subtly resting on our own righteousness.

And it's so simple to look at other people and think, well, they're not in. They're too sinful. Oh, they're not acceptable. No way. We've got to make big changes in their lives before they're going to get in.

[16 : 16] On the other hand, we can become way too inclusive. Everyone's welcome at the party. There's no entrance requirement. No dress code. Nothing. And anyways, if someone said to me, all roads lead to Rome.

I'm not sure if the Pope would agree with that. But that's the idea. Well, whatever. You know, everyone really gets in in the end. And, and the biggest mistake we can make is count our own selves out.

I'm not worthy. I'm too unlovable. I'm too weak. I'm too sinful to ever be accepted by God. But you see, that's the twist at the end of the story.

Because the people who did not turn up at the banquet are those who forgot that underneath, underneath their competence, their sophistication, their knowledge, underneath all that, they are in desperate need for God.

That underneath, they need God. No, the guests who made it to the banquet were the great unwashed, the wretched, the helpless, the outsider.

[17 : 19] Let us not make that mistake. Because the reality is that God wants his house to be filled to overflowing. people criticize us for saying that there are requirements for being a Christian, that you need to be a follower of Jesus.

They say that we are condemning people, excluding people, and that God would never do that. But that's not what Jesus is saying here. Jesus isn't saying that God wants to condemn people.

Jesus is saying God wants to win people. He wants to win people for heaven. He wants his house to be bursting to the seams with people. He wants everyone in there.

God wants to include everyone. And that's why he sent Jesus to bring everyone in. But, we live in a society that is all about the individual.

I am okay. I exercise, therefore I am okay. I have a house, a car, and a bank account, therefore I am okay. I have a great career, therefore I am okay.

[18 : 25] I am very good looking, therefore I am okay. I am highly educated, I am okay. Or maybe I don't actually underneath feel okay, but I am going to keep working for all those things, because then I am going to be okay.

Okay. And the result is that Jesus gets left out. Because what most of us essentially believe is that whatever my morals, whatever my lifestyle, or anything else, I am okay.

I am worthy. But the reality which Jesus is saying is that I am not worthy. But that God has invited me.

I am on that guest list. And Jesus has taken me by the hand and led me into that banqueting hall. No, it is not those who are sure within themselves who will ever have the humility to accept God's invitation.

It is those who know how powerless they are. those who have seen that underneath the clothes, the fit body, the nice apartment, the very comfortable West Coast lifestyle, we are all sinners, much in need of God.

[19 : 34] And we have all been invited. That's why Jesus came to bring us all in. It is God's guest list and he wants you on it. That brings me back to the dinner invitation I accepted only to refuse.

I missed out on what I'm sure would have been a lovely evening, but I'm sure my friend will forgive me and perhaps we'll have another opportunity soon to get together. But let it be the one overriding priority in your life to be at that banquet and not miss out on everything God wants to give you through Jesus Christ.

And let it be the one and only aim of our church that no one misses out on the opportunity to accept God's invitation to them expressed through Jesus Christ.

For it is God's banquet and more than that, it is his earnest desire.