

## Parable of the Great Banquet.

OT: Isaiah 25v6-9 – God prepares a banquet.

NT: Luke 14:12-24 – Parable of the Great Banquet.

### Intro

Who likes to Party? Who likes being invited out to dinner? Have you ever refused an invite because you just don't want to go? What do you say - being too honest sounds impolite – Sorry but I don't like the sound of that and don't want to go – so what do you say? You probably say, I am sorry but I can't make it? The truth is - you could make it but you don't want to. Has anyone accepted an invite, then just not turned up? Its all too common for the parties I do, and although I know its going to happen, and plan for it numbers wise, it still hurts when friends do not respond, or say yes then don't show. Today's parable is about a banquet put on by a wealthy man, who was having trouble with his invited guests.

It's a parable about Salvation, about who gets the favour of God, and eternal life. To understand the Parable, we should understand what Jews at the time would be thinking.

### The Background for the Parable:

In the bible, the banquet is a symbol for Salvation, people finding forgiveness and acceptance by God despite the wrongs they have done. The imagery in the bible points toward a big banquet at the end of history – this is referred to as the 'messianic banquet'. A great meal with the Messiah at the end of time. Who will be at this feast? In other words, at the end of time, who will be saved?

Psalm 23v5 says that God himself prepares a banquet for the **one** who trusts him. This is picture of salvation being a personal thing. Then we have Isaiah's vision of this final banquet, and it is a fascinating one, to pluck from Jewish history, because it is clearly a universal one, where all are invited. In this vision of the end times from Isaiah (written c700BC), God has prepared a banquet, and it is for all people. The veil of sorrow that has kept the Gentiles ( the non-Jews i.e. us ) outside of Gods promises is eaten by God, is destroyed. As the people from all nations swallow the food, the sin and guilt and the death that it leads to, is also swallowed up at the banquet by God. They are saved. Earlier in the scriptures when non-Jews come to God, they must always bring gifts, but at the final banquet, they bring nothing. The food that is offered, is the rich food worthy of Kings, but it is all provided by pure Grace. It's a great picture of what is to come, and sets the scene for our parable.

However in later years this Jewish idea of the final banquet was changed. In the book of Enoch (an old Jewish book from between the testaments c300BC-100BC, and later referenced in the New Testament book of Jude – still part of the Canon in Aritrea & Ethiopia) the non-Jews are no longer invited, and the scrolls found from the Qumran communities (about Jesus' times) have a messianic banquet in their scrolls, this one rejects Gentiles, but also unrighteous Jews and imperfect ones i.e. the blind and cripples etc. People will be seated here in order of their importance. This may well have been the type of thinking in the minds of the Pharisees and important Jews living in Jesus'time. Their image of the great banquet.

### The Setting for the Parable:-

Jesus is eating a meal in the home of a leading Pharisee on the Sabbath. During the meal, a man comes to them with swollen arms and legs . He challenges them about healing on the Sabbath, but no-one will debate with him, and he heals the man. So the dinner guest does a miraculous healing in front of them, on the Sabbath. Jesus is in confident

and animated mood. He notices that some people are trying to get the best places at the table, and he teaches them about humility, then about giving to those that can-not repay you, the poor, the cripple, the lame and the blind. So he is laying down some expectations which are contrary to the current teachings and beliefs of at least the Qumran community, and probably much broader. Don't assume a place at the table based on your importance, let your host decide that. Put on a meal, people that can't invite you back. Don't ignore the blind, the lame, and the crippled (or maimed).

Then some-one at the meal declares out loud "How happy are those who will sit down at the Feast in the Kingdom of God'. In other words come the final day, happy are those who God will save. Jesus knows what they expect of this messianic banquet, that the righteous and privileged will be the ones in the elect, and expect themselves to be in very good seats at the banquet. He can 't resist putting across his message in an even stronger way and spontaneously comes out with this marvellous parable.

### **The Great Feast is planned and announced.**

In the parable is a wealthy Jewish man, who invites all his top colleagues and wealthy friends to a wonderful banquet. (i.e. those that could invite him back to a meal, which is what the Jews would expect). The invites had long since gone out and been accepted. In the Middle East, it was important to know the numbers in advance so you could select the right animal for the meal, depending on numbers You would take a chickens (up to 4), baby goat (up to 15) sheep (up to 35) or a calf (up to 75).The appropriate animal is killed and must be eaten that night. The person who has accepted the invitation is now duty bound to attend – that is the culture and it would be extremely rude to no-show. Then come the hour of the banquet, the animal is already killed and prepared, a second message goes out to the guests - come now the meal is prepared. Its time to come over for the great feast.

### **The excuses for not coming to the Feast**

Duty bound, may no difference and shockingly against the culture of the day, they made up excuses for not coming. But these weren't even valid excuses, they were same weak as to be deliberate insults.

*I must go and look at a field that I have just bought!*

Before a Jew bought a field, he would have looked over it so thoroughly that he would know every square foot of it. He know the stone walls, the trees, the paths, wells or springs, and the anticipated rain-fall. These details would be carefully included in the contract before he bought it. The purchaser would even know the history of the fields, previous owners and tell you how much money it made on different years. No-one bought a field without seeing it first. He stays civil though and offers apologies.

This is like, you saying I can't come round for your birthday, I've just a bought a house in Gloucester, over the phone. I don't know the neighbourhood or what the house looks like, so I'm going round tonight to have a look. A deliberate lie and insult.

*I have bought 5 yoke of oxen, and am on my way to try them out.*

Again a ludicrous excuse. Oxen are sold in yoked pairs and must be able to pull evenly together to pull a plough. If they were bought at market, at the edge of the market there was a small field where the potential buyers would test the oxen. In smaller villages, the farmer would announce a day on which he was ploughing with the oxen and invite prospective buyers to watch. They want to see the strength of the oxen and even-ness of pull, before they even start to negotiate a price.

Land was seen as Holy, but animals were seen as unclean, this is a worst insult. He's saying that animals are more important than my relationship with you. He stays civil though and offers apologies.

This is like saying, I have rung up a garage and bought cars over the phone by Visa, for myself, my wife and my three eldest children. I've only seen internet pictures of them, so I'm going over to the garage to try them out. No one would do that.

I have just got married and for that reason I cannot come.

If he had recently got married then it was not that day. You would not throw a feast on the same day as some-one else wedding. No village could stand two simultaneous grand occasions. Even if recently married, at most he would be away for a few hours, but his response would be crude to the hearer, because Jewish men did not talk openly about their women. What this man is actually saying is "I did say I would come, but today I am busy with a woman, and that's more important to me than your banquet. It would have been unprecedented and shocking for some-one to make such an excuse, and he did not even apologise like the others.

It might be like us saying – I can no longer come to your golden wedding anniversary meal because this lady I just has asked me round to her place to watch rerun of a soap opera on TV this evening. You then reply what – you don't even like those programmes?

### **The excuses for not eating with Jesus**

The Pharisee and his guests would be following the theological meaning of what Jesus was saying. The Messianic banquet has been announced, but more than that the 'hour has now come'. In the person of Jesus, the kingdom of God is in some sense already at hand. Jesus is implying that to taste of this banquet on the final day, you must taste of it now, today with him. The hour has come. But people are making up totally ridiculous excuses not to take up the invite from Jesus, to receive salvation from him.

I won't come to you, because you're from Nazareth, and nothing good comes out of Nazareth. I can't eat with you, because you like to eat with Tax Collectors and Prostitutes.

I can't believe in you, because you heal on the Sabbath.

### **Go and get the poor, blind, lame and crippled (maimed)**

When the master, gets the news that none of the guests will come, he is angry, but responds with Grace, and tells the servant to go out into the streets around the village and bring in the poor people, the blind, the lame and the crippled. These are the outcasts of the village. They are part of the community but they are the ignored, ostracized from normal community life. These are the types of people that have been most open to the ministry of Jesus, and benefited most from it, and those that are excluded from the Messianic banquet according to the teachings of the Qumran community, and possible common belief at the time of Jesus.

The cleverness of the parable now shines through – because..

- The **poor** don't get invited to banquets (they can never return the favour)
- The **blind** can't go out and look at a field in order to buy it.
- The **lame** can not test out a yoke of oxen, let alone five pairs.
- The **maimed** do not have girls wanting to marry them.

The original guests have refused to respond to the news that the banquet is ready. They are confident that a banquet can not go ahead without them, and it will be a humiliating defeat for the host. But this is now not the case, as unworthy guests are invited, those that could not return the favour. It is a dramatic & visible demonstration of love in humiliation. The news would stun the original guests, who in return would want to taunt the host – Look he can't get any proper guests so he has to bring in the riff-raff.

In Jesus case – This man eats with sinners, tax-collectors, prostitutes and outcasts. Jesus is showing a 'costly Grace' to the outcasts of Israel.

### **Still room – go to the highways and hedges**

The village outcasts come into the banquet room, but it is still not full, so the host sends the servant out again, to find more people from outside the village and compel them to come.

The highways are the main routes to the towns and villages, whilst the hedges border the smaller paths, that criss-cross between the main routes. So he goes out of town to find anyone, but they will find it hard to believe that the invite is genuine, it will sound too good to be true, so will need convincing to come.

In the Middle East, the unexpected invitation must be refused, especially if you are of lower rank than the host. Even if half-starving the deep cultural pressure would make you refuse. They must refuse for at least 15 minutes of conversation. If you know the story of the resurrected Jesus on the road to Emmaus, when they arrived the two travellers physically grabbed onto Jesus so that he would stay with them, and not travel further.

The implication here is that the invite is first taken to the wealthy Jews and religious leaders, but is rejected. This was true for Jesus. It is then taken to the Jewish outcasts who accepted him, now the invite is going out beyond the Jewish community to the Gentiles.

The parable sees the original invites refuse, and the outcasts come in, but after giving an instruction to go to those outside the community, the parable ends with it having not yet happened.

It is like the parable was a real-time picture of where the ministry of Jesus was. He had first go to the synagogues and Religious leaders with the message, most (not all) rejected it, with excuses that bordered on insults. He took his message to the outcasts, they did not excuse themselves and many were keen to eat from his table and be saved. But despite a few individual encounters he had not carried out any major outreach to the Gentiles. So at the time of telling the parable this was an unfinished part of getting the required guests to the table, of bringing in those that would find salvation.

### **A personal invite for all**

Jesus would though realise the prophetic words of Isaiah, who had Jews and Gentiles at the messianic banquet. When he died on the cross, the thick curtain in the temple was torn in two. This was the veil that in Jewish eyes separated God (in the Holy of Holies) from men. This symbolised that anybody can come to Jesus. – its like the veil in the Isaiah passage that kept out the Gentiles being eaten and destroyed. Enoch & the leaders of the Qumran community many have said to you " your names not down, your not coming in" but Jesus issues each of you with a personal invitation, to all the riches on his table that kingdom life brings. The fruits of the Spirit, the Gifts of the Spirit, Amazing love, total forgiveness, a deep joy and peace, healing, fellowship – the tables full and your invited.

### **Grace for all**

The Good News of Jesus Christ is so astounding that some people take a lot of convincing it's for real, they need reassuring, taking by the arm and being helped into that relationship with Jesus. The fact that we get all this, when we are completely undeserving of it, is amazing grace. But Grace is not a concept, it's a person, it's Jesus. When we accept this grace, forgiveness, salvation we are accepting Jesus. So when we enter into fellowship with Jesus, if you like, eat at his table, then we are being saved. Vice versa, when we accept salvation, when we initially ask him for forgiveness then we enter into fellowship with him. So through Jesus Christ, the messianic feast is not just a symbol of salvation, it is salvation. The two are the same thing.

### **What we must do**

The good news is that you have each been invited to the party, to the banquet, but it is a personal decision to go to Jesus and join him. You can **not** stay where you in life are and be a part of it. Having Christian friends is not enough, going to Church is not enough, having good head knowledge about Christianity is not enough. There is no take-away delivery service, you must go to his table. Also this is not a finger buffet with a doggy bag, or a fast food drive through. You can't wind the window down and say I'll take the Forgiveness with Peace Happy Meal, extra Joy, but don't put any commitment on that please. Oh and can you Supersize it. Take what you want and disappear back to your old life. No - you must go to his table. Jesus is your salvation, he is your Grace, so him you need.

In every age, there are people who make excuses for not going to Jesus, some that are so weak that they are insults. I'm not Religious (No nor am I, nor is Jesus). All faiths are ultimately the same. He never existed, he's a fairy tale like Jack in the Beanstalk. Bad things happen in the World, so there can't be a God. Nuns put me off when I was little!! What? Without proper consideration of Jesus, otherwise intelligent people tear up the invites, and exclude themselves from the party. Sometimes when faced with that you need to move on, Jesus said that don't throw your pearls to swine (Matthew 7v6). There are others that need to be invited.

Think of it as being in the reception room, with the most wonderful selection of canapés and welcoming drinks (Champagne, or if you prefer wonderfully blended non-alcoholic cocktails). But the main meal, the end-time banquet, can't start, because there are still spare seats at the table. The parable can not finish without your help, because those who are waiting by the hedges and the highways have not got their invite. They won't unless you go to them, hence the words of Jesus in the great commission, go and make disciples of all nations.

When you find them, the Grace of God is so incredible it will be hard for some of your friends to believe and some of them, even will intelligent enquiry, will still need convincing that you are not a nutter, and that this is the real deal, it's a genuine invitation, no matter who they are and what they have done. You may need to patiently persist with them, take hold of their arm and lead them towards Jesus.

If you are still holding your invite, and have never sat down at the table with Jesus, never asked him into your life, and experienced his Love and Grace, then please do it today, don't lose your place at the banquet. If you have accepted the invite, and are committed to living for Jesus now, then don't sit on the pile of invites that he has given you to distribute. Go out and help others take up their place at the banquet, and experience the Amazing Grace that is Jesus, and the salvation he brings. **Amen.**