

The Great Banquet

The setting in which Jesus told the parable of the great banquet was a Sabbath meal that He was eating at the house of a prominent Pharisee. During the meal, He gave some instruction about invitations to banquets, noting that one shouldn't limit one's guests to only those who could reciprocate by later inviting the host to a meal. He said:

When you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just. (Luke 14:13-14)

Upon hearing this, someone at the table responded:

"Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" (Luke 14:15)



In saying this, the person at the table was opening the door for Jesus to explain His views about what was known as the “messianic banquet”—the Jewish understanding of what would occur at the end of time.

The book of Isaiah speaks about this banquet:

On this mountain the LORD Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine—the best of meats and the finest of wines. On this mountain he will destroy the



shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations; he will swallow up death forever. The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears from all faces; he will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. The LORD has spoken. (Isaiah 25:6-8)

While this passage refers to all people being at the feast and all people having their tears wiped away, by Jesus' time the common understanding among the Jewish people was that these verses excluded Gentiles (non-Jews). Jesus, however, had a different view of who would sit at the "messianic table." Rather than responding as would have been expected, by saying something about keeping the Mosaic law and how the law keepers would sit with the Messiah at the banquet, Jesus told them a story.



"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 have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' (Luke 14:16-20)

In those days, when someone was hosting a banquet, an initial invitation would be given informing those invited as to the day of the feast. At the time of this initial invitation, those invited would say whether they could come or not, and when agreeing to come they were making a commitment.

Everyone listening to the story understood that the refusal to come was a deliberate insult to the host. He was being publicly shamed in the eyes of his village. The excuses given for not honoring their commitment are lame and unacceptable.

The first guest's excuse is *'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it.'* Those listening to the parable know that this is a bold-faced lie. Buying property sight unseen was unheard of.



Another guest gives the excuse that he has bought five yoke of oxen, and *I go to examine them.* This is another lame excuse. Before purchasing a team of oxen, the buyer would go to the seller's land, yoke the oxen together, and do some plowing. He would need to test their strength and see if they will plow together, and if not, he wouldn't buy them.

The third guest says he has married a wife and therefore he can't come. He's telling the host that even though the meal is in the late afternoon and he will only be away from home for a few hours and will be back in the arms of his new



bride that evening, he won't come, as other activities have priority to him. He doesn't even bother to ask to be excused; he simply states that he can't come. This is extremely rude and offensive.

The beginning of the parable tells us that many were invited to the banquet, and also that they all alike began to make excuses. The three who refused to attend the banquet are representative, and the original listeners would have understood that others who originally committed to coming also made excuses in order to not attend.

When the master of the house recognizes that the guests' intent is to shame and humiliate him, he justifiably becomes angry. Under the circumstances, he could respond with verbal insults or even threaten some action which would punish those who have attacked his personal honor in public. However, though he is angry, he responds with grace instead of vengeance.

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.'

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.'" (Luke 14:22-24)

The host decides to invite those who could never reciprocate—the poor, maimed, blind, and lame. In framing the parable in this way, Jesus makes reference to the outcasts within Israel, the common people who were gladly receiving His message.



The banquet is not yet full, there is still room for others. The master then instructs him to go beyond the town to find outsiders, those not members of the community, and to compel them to come to the feast.

The idea of “compelling” these folks doesn’t mean that they are being forced to attend. Because of social customs, these outsiders must refuse the unexpected invitation, especially if they are of lower social status than the host. They are not relatives or even neighbors of the host; they are outsiders, and there is no way they can reciprocate, so according to society’s rules, they must refuse. Knowing this, the servant must take each one by the arm and gently guide him along, in order to demonstrate that the invitation is genuine.

The last phrase of the parable, *For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet*, may have been addressed to the Pharisees Jesus was dining with, rather than being part of the parable. The “you” in “for I tell you” is plural. In the parable, the master of the house was previously speaking to the servant, so if this last line was part of the parable directed to the servant, the “you” would have been singular. Therefore, many commentators agree that Jesus addressed this last line to those He was eating with.



The question put forth in the parable is: who will be present at the banquet? Jesus' answer was unexpected. The common Jewish belief was that anyone born of a Jewish mother was automatically going to be attending the “messianic banquet” by right of being Jewish. Jesus was making the point that those who assume they will be present at the endtime banquet may very well not be. In reality, attendance at the banquet is based on one's response to God's invitation.

Jesus taught this concept throughout the Gospels. He said:

I tell you, many will come from east and west and recline at table with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven, while the sons of the kingdom will be thrown into the outer darkness. (Matthew 8:11-12)

Many throughout the world take it for granted that they will be in attendance at the banquet, thinking that they have the right beliefs, belong to the right group, do charitable works, are favorably looked upon by others, etc. However, Jesus' teaching in this parable and elsewhere points out that those who expect to be there aren't necessarily included, and many who don't expect it are. We don't attend the banquet on *our* terms. The invitation is to all, including the social outcasts and those we may be uncomfortable with.

The message of the kingdom is grace. There is nothing anyone can do to merit the invitation to the banquet. We are simply invited, and must only accept. It is through grace that we are saved. But each one must make the decision of whether to receive grace; of whether they will come to the party or not.



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