

# The Invitation of a Lifetime

Luke 14:1-24

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 26 February 2006

## Familiarity breeds contempt

Familiarity breeds contempt. Would you agree? Last year I received an invitation to attend a lavish dinner party at a posh hotel in town. The occasion was the induction of several of this country's most successful businessmen into the New Zealand Business Hall of Fame. It was a strictly black-tie affair. The place was crawling with prominent people. The Governor-General, Dame Silvia Cartwright, was there. The Right Honourable John Banks was there. The television presenter Simon Dallow was there. Anybody who was anybody was there, shaking hands, networking, trying hard to make a good impression. You may be wondering why I was there, why I was invited. When I received the invitation, I wondered the same thing. It turns out that my grandfather, Sir Harvey Turner, was one of the businessmen being honoured that night. To me, growing up, grandpa was just a tired, sometimes grumpy, old man. No one that special. But at the banquet, listening to the record of his achievements, I realised that he was really quite an extraordinary man. Familiarity can breed contempt. I think it's true.

It's certainly true where religion is concerned. Have you ever noticed that some of the hardest people to talk to about the Christian faith are those people who've grown up familiar with Christianity? Maybe they've received a little dose of religion as a child. Went to Sunday School. Maybe they've been exposed to a few Christians whose lives didn't really conform to what they preached. And, like a measles vaccination, this exposure has built in them a resistance to the Christian faith. Familiarity can breed contempt. Jesus certainly experienced this. The people who he had the hardest trouble with were those people with the strongest religious backgrounds. Take a look at this story in Luke 14.

Jesus has been invited to have a meal at the home of "a prominent Pharisee." The scene is a little like that black-tie dinner party I attended. The Pharisee has invited a number of respectable or affluent guests. They're all trying hard to make a good impression, to exalt themselves. Noticing this, Jesus decides to offer some controversial advice on dinner party etiquette (Luke 14:8-14):

"When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Then Jesus said to his host, "When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; 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."

## The kingdom of God

These words of Jesus would have fallen like a lead balloon on this particular gathering. Outcasts and destitute people were probably conspicuous by their absence from this prominent Pharisee's respectable home. It was a bit like being reminded of the starving millions when you're just about to dive into your third helping of Black Forest gateau. No doubt there was an embarrassed silence. To ease the atmosphere, one of the guests picks up on Jesus' reference to the resurrection of the righteous and says, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the

kingdom of God" (Luke 14:15). Throughout the Old Testament period, prophets like Isaiah had likened the coming kingdom of God – heaven – to a huge feast, a celebration banquet laid on by God himself that would make even the most lavish dinner party look meagre in comparison (Isaiah 25:6-9). This man here is familiar with the Bible. He and his colleagues know about heaven, believe in it, and are quite sure they are going there. In response, Jesus tells a parable. Let's read it, and try to make sense of it as we go.

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests." (Luke 14:16)

Jesus' audience would have had no trouble decoding this. The great banquet is obviously a reference to the kingdom of God. The guests invited to enjoy this great feast are certainly the Jews, God's chosen people to whom the prophets like Isaiah had addressed their inspired words.

"At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready'" (Luke 14:17).

In the ancient world, a host would often invite guests several days before a feast so that he could determine how many to cater for. Then, when the food was prepared for the expected number, he would send out a second invitation summoning the guests to come without further delay. The implication here is that the kingdom of God, which the prophets of old had said would come at some future date, has already arrived. God has sent his servant – Jesus – to announce that the banquet is ready. The kingdom is here. It's time to respond. Before Jesus' audience can recover from this startling claim, Jesus makes another. He goes on to say of the guests (Luke 14:18-20):

"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. Please excuse me. Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'"

Can you imagine anybody buying a house without going to look at it first? Or buying some oxen without seeing whether or not any of them were sick or crippled? Or getting married at such short notice that they have to cancel a dinner engagement made just a day or two before so that they can go on their honeymoon? Every one of these excuses is a transparent fabrication, a deliberate slap in the face. Jesus is suggesting that some men and women turn their backs on the kingdom of God with the same contempt. For the sake of mere trivialities, material gain, or personal pleasure, they reject God's invitation. Don't they realise what they are missing? The implication of this story is that all too often familiarity breeds contempt. There are far too many other attractions bidding for the time and attention of these people.

One suspects at this point Jesus' story is starting to cut uncomfortably close to the bone for some in his audience. But Jesus hasn't finished with them yet. Listen to the final thrust:

"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 make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet' " (Luke 14:21-24).

Do you see the irony? Jesus is saying that the Jews, the religious people, the Bible-believing people who are familiar with the promise of heaven, and assumed they will make it into heaven, will miss out. But those who expect to be shut out because they are not good enough – the poor, the wretched, the Gentiles – they will be the ones to enjoy it.

## **A solemn warning**

What does this parable mean for you and me? Perhaps it depends on where we're coming from. Some of us, like the dinner guests at the Pharisees table, come from a religious background. We may have attended Sunday School or Youth Group. We may have been raised by believing parents. We may have heard the Christian message outlined dozens of times, and even responded at some point. And as a result, we think we're Christians. But are we? That's the question this parable puts to us. We may know how to pray before meals, and recite John 3:16, but Jesus is saying that the kingdom of God demands more of us than pious platitudes. It demands decision and commitment. The kingdom must take precedence over all our other interests and ambitions. Are you ready to accept such a radical reorientation of your priorities? The warning of this story is that many people aren't. For some people it's their career that takes first place. For others it might be their bank account. For others it might be a relationship. "I have bought a field." "I have purchased five yoke of oxen." "I have married a wife." The excuses may differ, but the result is the same. We exclude ourselves from God's kingdom. God doesn't condemn anyone to hell. We condemn ourselves.

I was reading last weekend about Paddy Hill, one of the Birmingham Six, who spent sixteen years in jail for two IRA pub bombings he didn't commit. It was one of the world's worst miscarriages of justice. Today, Paddy Hill spends every waking moment of his life fighting against miscarriages of justice in the law courts of Great Britain. That's the driving passion of his life. Reading that article got me thinking. What is the driving passion of my life? Building a career? Making money? Winning the praise of people? Getting to the top of the table, like these religious guests at the Pharisee's party? But none of these things last. By contrast, Jesus is saying in this parable that we can use the one short life we've been given to prepare for a kingdom that will last forever. To lay our lives down in service for others. To use our career or our resources or our position to take as many people to heaven as possible. I want that to be the driving passion of my life. Don't you? But if you've been around Christian circles long enough, you'll know how easy it is over time to lose this passion. To live like everyone else.

So there is a solemn warning here in this parable for many of us who are who are familiar with the Christian faith: don't let that familiarity breed contempt. The people most in danger of refusing or forfeiting the invitation to God's kingdom are the people who are most familiar with it.

## **A strong encouragement**

But the parable also carries a very strong encouragement for people who don't have a religious background or who don't feel particularly righteous. God is planning a party for you. All the banquets and parties, laughter and celebration, of a thousand years of human history won't compare to the wonder, the glory, the joy of the celebration that the King of the universe has been planning from before the beginning of time. It will be an extraordinary occasion, beyond human imagination, the prelude to a whole new world. Who wouldn't want to be part of that celebration? Jesus tells us in this parable that you are invited to it. Perhaps for some of us, though, this is the problem. As the poor, the blind and the lame felt out of place at a respectable Pharisee's table, so you may sometimes feel a little out of place in church. If I'm honest, sometimes I think, "I don't really belong here in church. If these people knew what I'm really like, if they knew all the habits and sins and selfishness hidden beneath this respectable exterior of mine, they'd immediately show me the door. I don't deserve a place in Jesus' kingdom. The invitation can't be for me."

But Jesus, in fact, tells this story precisely to point out that we're wrong to feel excluded in that way. There is more room in the kingdom of God for people like this than for anybody else. Notice the word the host uses to command the servant: "Go out to the roads and country lanes and

*make them come in*" (Luke 14:23). The verb, "make" is a strong one. Some translations render it, "compel them to come in." This verse has occasionally been misunderstood. It was quoted, for example, to defend torturing people during the Spanish Inquisition. But what the master in this story means is that the people to whom he's sending the servant will be so utterly surprised when they receive the invitation that their immediate reaction will be: "You've got the wrong address; the banquet can't be for them. I'm too poor to be invited to a party in a great house like that" So the master says, "Make them come in." Persuade them. Convince them. Use all the means at your disposal to assure them that the invitation really does include them. That's why we can be so confident that God's invitation includes us. No matter how unworthy we may feel, the invitation is for us. You are invited. God wants you in his kingdom. "Come," he says. All you have to do is come. "For everything is now ready."

## **The invitation of a lifetime**

In 1990 the *Boston Globe* newspaper ran a story about a young woman who, accompanied by her fiancé, went to the Hyatt Hotel to make arrangements for their wedding banquet. They pored over the menu, made selections of fine china and silver. They both had expensive taste and the bill came to 13,000 dollars. After leaving a cheque for half that amount as a deposit, the couple went home to flip through books of wedding announcements. But the day the announcements were to hit the mailboxes, the groom gets cold feet and pulls out: "I'm just not sure anymore. It's too big a commitment." So the angry fiancé returns to the Hyatt to cancel the banquet. But the Events Manager says, "I'm afraid the contract is binding. You're only entitled to get 1,300 dollars back. You have two options: forfeit the rest of the deposit or go ahead with the rest of the banquet." It seemed crazy, but the more the rejected bride thought about it, the more she like the idea of going ahead with the party. Ten years before this the same woman had been living in a homeless shelter. She had got back on her feet, found a good job and set aside a sizeable nest egg. Now she had the wild notion of using her savings to treat the down and outs to a night like they'd never imagined. And so it was that in June 1990 the Hyatt Hotel in downtown Boston hosted a party such as it had never seen before. The hostess changed the menu to boneless chicken – "in honour of the groom," she said – and sent invitations to rescue missions and homeless shelters. That warm summer night, people who were used to peeling half-chewed pizza off cardboard boxes dined instead on chicken cordon bleu. Prostitutes, drug-addicts, and homeless bums took one night off from their hard life on the sidewalks outside, and instead sipped champagne, ate chocolate wedding cake and danced to big-band melodies late into the night. A party beyond their wildest dreams.

Today Jesus is saying to us, "You are invited to a party beyond your wildest dreams." Everything is now ready. The cost has been paid. You just need to come. No matter how unworthy you feel, the invitation is for you.

## **Questions**

1. What is the kingdom of God?
2. Jesus says in this parable, "Seek first the kingdom of God." What does that mean?
3. What is the driving passion of your life?
4. Would you consider yourself a status seeker or a humble servant?
5. Who are the equivalent of the "poor, blind and crippled" in your life?
6. What could we do to make newcomers feel welcome at church?
7. Do you ever doubt whether you are saved? How does this parable help?
8. God wants his house filled. What are you doing to see that desire fulfilled?