Feasting With the Pharisees:  
An Examination of Luke 14:1-24

The meal table is the main social centers of the home. Think of some of your warmest memories and many of them will be associated with meal-time. In our text, the entire passage is centered around and on a meal table. The great question discussed was who will sit around God’s table in the kingdom? The Pharisees had one idea and obviously, Jesus had another.

The Setting (v. 1a):
Following the Sabbath day activities at a local synagogue, Jesus “went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees” (v. 1a). Luke is the only gospel writer to include accounts of Jesus eating with Pharisees (cf. 7:36; 11:37). In each of these situations the motives for inviting Jesus were less than honorable. Rather than being occasions for friendly conversation and warm hospitality these meals were punctuated by hostility and contempt on the part of the Pharisees and this meal would be no different.

The Setup (vv. 1b-6):
As Jesus entered the home, the other invited guests, “were watching Him carefully” (v. 1b). With great emphasis Luke declares, “And behold, there was a man before Him who had dropsy” or as the NIV renders it, “abnormal swelling of his body” (v. 2). This is the only record of this disease in the New Testament and quite appropriate coming from the pen of the physician (ref. Colossians 4:14). This poor, pitiful man was not invited out of goodwill; rather, he was a pawn in the Pharisee’s game to entrap Jesus. On a previous occasion, “the scribes and Pharisees watched Him, to see whether He would heal on the Sabbath, so that they might find a reason to accuse Him” (Luke 6:7).

The Pharisees believed healing on the Sabbath violated the fourth commandment’s prohibition of not working on the seventh day (ref. Exodus 20:8-11). “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?” (v. 3; Luke 6:9) Jesus asked. Uninterested in a theological discussion, or coming to a proper understanding of God’s will for Sabbath keeping “they remained silent” (v. 4a). Their one and only goal was entrapping Jesus. Without waiting for the Pharisees to respond, Jesus graciously, took the man, “healed him and sent him away” (v. 4b).

With the man gone, our Lord asked a second question of the Pharisees, “Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on the Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?” (v. 5).ii The Lord defended Sabbath healings by showing the hypocrisy of the Pharisees’ own actions (cf. Luke 13:15-16). No matter what the Pharisees taught or demanded of others, they made exceptions for themselves. They believed it was permissible for them to help a fallen animal or family member on the Sabbath day. Therefore, should not the same principle be applied to all suffering people as well? Our Lord’s argument silenced the naysayers, “And they could not reply to these things” (v. 6; Luke 13:17). The apostle John reasoned, that because of Jesus’ Sabbath day healings the Jewish leaders, “were persecuting [him... and] were seeking all the more to kill him” (John 5:16, 18; cf. Luke 6:11).
Jesus Rebuked the Guest (vv. 7-11):
In this less than welcoming atmosphere, the guest clamored to “chose the places of honor” (v. 7) around the table. In the ancient Jewish world, where a person sat at a feast or in the synagogue was a public advertisement of one’s status or at least perceived status. Therefore, the matter of seating arrangements was carefully considered. One might presume to claim a more honorable seat with the hope that it (and the honor that went with it) might be granted.iii Kistmaker explains the scene noting,

“Couches at a feast were arranged in the shape of an elongated horseshoe consisting of a number of tables. The man receiving the highest honor was at the head table, with second and third places to the left and right of this person. Every couch accommodated three people, with the middle man receiving the highest honor. The couch to the left of the head table was next in order of priority, and after that the couch to the right. Consequently, Jewish guests were governed by the social etiquette of the day to find the correct place at the table. However, if the privilege of choosing seats was given to the invited guest, they could very well display selfishness, conceit and pride. And this is exactly what happened at the house of the prominent Pharisee to which Jesus was invited. Pharisees and experts of the Law had created a climate of haughtiness and arrogance, devoid of love and humility.”iv

It would take little imagination to picture which seat was left for our Lord. No doubt the lowest, least honorable place around the table would have been reserved for Him. On more than one occasion Jesus rebuked the Pharisee’s arrogant attitude regarding places of honor (ref. Luke 11:43; 20:46). This particular day was no different; taking note of the social jockeying, Jesus “told a parable” (v. 7) about humility to these haughty guest that was strikingly similar to the wisdom of Proverbs 25:6-7. His instruction took the form of two parallel lines contrasting what not to do and what to do when invited to a feast.

“When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast,” Jesus said, do not assume you deserve to “sit... in a place of honor” it may be that “someone more distinguished than you” has been invited by the host (v. 8). How shamefully embarrassing it would be for the host to come “and say to you ‘Give your place to this person,'” and you are then forced to take the lowest place (v. 9). Instead, Jesus taught the wisdom of humility saying, “‘when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher.’ Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you’” (v. 10) rather than being shamed.

Our Lord was not focused on teaching table manners, or how to move up the social ladder. Rather, he used the guest’s haughty desire for seats of honor to teach a deep spiritual truth, “‘For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted’” (v. 11; cf. Luke 18:14; Matthew 23:12). As the parable showed, this could happen in temporal affairs; however, the main thrust of our Lord’s instruction was in spiritual matters. To exalt one’s self meant ultimate abasement; the way of true exaltation was, and still is, humility. What is most important to Jesus is not honor that is pursued or insisted upon, but honor that is graciously given.
Jesus Rebuked the Host (vv. 12-14): After rebuking the guest, our Lord turned His attention “to the man who had invited Him” (v. 12a). Just as the guest had sought to bring honor to themselves upon their arrival at the meal, so the host had followed similar conventions when putting together his guest list. The world of Jesus’ day revolved around the ethics of reciprocity. So, the host had invited people who would have boosted his social status by eating at his table and in return inviting him to their banquet as well. Jesus’ rebuke takes the same form of two parallel lines as in vv. 8-10 contrasting what not to do and what to do when inviting others to a banquet.

“When you give a banquet,” Jesus advised, “do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid” (v. 12b). Obviously, Jesus is not establishing an absolute prohibition against inviting friends or relatives to a meal. Rather, He is addressing the self-serving attitude that controlled His pharisaical host. His point being, by following the social practices of the day one would only be rewarded, or “repaid” with honor in this life.

Rather, Jesus said, “when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind” (v 13). In the social climate of the first century, the wealthy would not have invited those of lower social standing to their banquets because it would not have served their self-interest. The poor and infirmed were kept at arm’s length and only used to promote Pharisee’s agenda (ref. v. 1-2; cf. Matthew 6:1-4). Our Lord points out that true blessing, or honor, comes from inviting this class of people “because they cannot repay you” (v. 14a). That is, they cannot reciprocate the invitation or the honor given to them; nevertheless, God would repay the generous man “at the resurrection of the just” (v. 14b; cf. Proverbs 19:17; Matthew 25:40).

The Interruption (v. 15): The tension in the room must have been thick; the Savior had foiled their trap, He had rebuked the guest along with the host for their haughtiness. With the mention of the resurrection an unnamed guest, perhaps in an effort to lighten the mood, blurted out, “Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!” (v.15). No doubt, this man was referencing the prophetic image of God's coming kingdom as a banquet. The prophet Isaiah described it this way:

“On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well aged wine, of rich food full of morrow, of aged wine well refined. And He will swallow up on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death forever; and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of His people He will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.” (Isaiah 25:6-9)

Additionally, on a number of occasions in the gospels, our Lord also pictured the kingdom as a banquet (Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 12:37; 16:22; 22:18, 30) with “people... coming from east and west, and from north and south, and recline at table in the kingdom of God.” (Luke 13:29; cf. Matthew 8:11).

However, there was one thing greatly amiss with this man’s statement: he spoke from the vantage point of one who would be sitting at the table. He, along with the other Pharisees and lawyers reclining around the table that day, had an exclusivist view of who would feast at God’s table. Later in His ministry, Jesus
would rebuke the Pharisees for “shut[ting] the kingdom of heaven in people's faces” and not “allowing those who would enter to go in” (Matthew 23:13). Furthermore, he would rebuke the lawyers for “tak[ing] away the key of knowledge” and thus “hinder[ing] those who were entering” the kingdom (Luke 11:52). In the eyes of the religious establishment, they had reserved seats at the Lord’s table, while “the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind,” along with “tax collectors and sinners” and Gentiles would be excluded. In fact, the Pharisees’ and lawyers’ own tables reflected their perceptions of the Lord’s table. However, Jesus had something very different to say about the anticipated celebration.

The Rebuttal or the Parable of the Great Banquet (vv. 16-24):

It is often the case in Luke’s gospel that someone’s interruption becomes the launching pad for the Lord’s teaching (ref. Luke 11:27, 45; 12:13; 13:1, 23, 31). The case of the parable of the Great Banquet was no different. The unnamed man’s interruption was the springboard for our Lord teaching that challenged the religious elite’s supposed acceptance of God’s invitation and their conception of who would really sit at the Lord’s table.

“A man once gave a great banquet” Jesus began, “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'” (vv. 16-17). A great banquet is hosted by a great man who would have naturally invited his social peers. A two-fold or double invitation is to be understood as being in view. Sometime before the appointed day, the host would have sent his servant out to invite the guest to his banquet that would be held on such-and-such a day. The guest would then either accept or reject the invitation. Those who accepted the invitation thus committed themselves to be available on the appointed day to immediately come to the feast. Early on the selected day, preparations were started for the feast: animals butchered, breads baked, dishes mixed, couches and tables prepared. Once the preparations were started the countdown began and cannot be stopped. The appropriate food was being prepared and must be eaten that night. The guests who accepted the first invitation were duty-bound to appear. When “all things were ready” the call to “come” was issued and the guests were expected to immediately come to the host’s home, but shockingly, “they all alike began to make excuses” (v. 18a). Everyone who had given their word to come to the noble banquet suddenly began to make excuses for why they would not be there.

Even though the host “invited many” people (v. 16b), only three excuses are recorded. While each was offered individually, surprisingly it seems the guest have conspired against the host. The KJV even alludes to this by rendering v. 18a as, “And they all with one consent began to make excuses.” All three excuses follow the same formula (the third varied slightly): (A) I did _____, (B) therefore I must do _____, (C) please excuse me.

The first man the servant encountered said, “I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused” (v. 18b). As incredible as it sounds, this man stated he has bought a field site unseen. Unapologetically, he asked to be excused because he must go inspect his purchase. His choice of land over his relationship with the host gives the appearance that he publicly wished to insult the nobleman.

Moving on, the servant summoned another guest, who in like manner said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them. Please have me excused” (v. 19). Again, the excuse offered was hardly to be
believed. No self-respecting farmer procured oxen without first testing them. How did he know if they could actually pull a plow, or pull together, or even if they were alive or not? Unashamedly, he asked to be excused because he was in the process of going to test them. His choice of oxen over the host also implied he too desired to publicly humiliate the nobleman.

Finally, the servant called on a third guest to “Come, for everything is now ready” (v. 17b). However, this one said, “I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come” (v. 20). If the first two excuses were unbelievable, the third is comical, especially in a male dominated society. In the original, “cannot” is the Greek word, *dunamai* which means *power.*x The guest is therefore saying, “I have married a wife, and therefore I [do not have the power to] come.” In colloquial terms this man was *henpecked.* Shamelessly, he did not ask to be excused but declared himself powerless to attend. Together these three men represented the “many” guest who were invited but rejected the nobleman’s call to come. In essence the guests had exalted themselves above the nobleman and were saying, “We don’t need you.”

By this point, the progression of the parable is quite evident. The messianic banquet has been announced and many have stated their intent to be a part of the festivities. Now, in Jesus Christ, the hour for the kingdom banquet has come and all things are ready (ref. Luke 4:43). However, suddenly there is a stream of excuses from the invited guest. The three excuses need not stand for any particular type of reason for rejecting the kingdom. What all three shared was an extraordinary lameness. They are meant to strike the hearer as ridiculous and to the point of absurdity of any excuse for rejecting God’s call into his kingdom.x The religious rulers complained when He eats with “tax collectors and sinners” (Luke 7:34; 15:1-2), and when He does not keep the Sabbath in a strict fashion (Luke 6:1-11). They despised His teachings (Luke 16:14) and belittle His miracles (Luke 11:14-23). The Lord Jesus did not fulfill their theological and nationalistic expectations of the Messiah. The parable says that as they were rejecting Jesus with their ridiculous excuses, therefore, they were also rejecting the great banquet promised by God.xi

Returning to the parable, after being rejected by the first guest, the servant “reported these things to his mater” (v. 21a). Understandably, “the master of the house” was very “angry” (v. 21b). He had made expensive preparations for his “great banquet” and he would not let his efforts go to waste. He desired his house to filled with guest, therefore, “he said to servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame’” (v. 21c). These are the very people Jesus’ pharisaical host had barred from his table and by extension God’s table. However these are the ones who most readily accept an invitation to set at the banquet table of God (cf. 1 Corinthians 1:26-31). It was the “humble” Jesus said, who would be “exalted” (v. 11).

Dutifully, the servant carried out his master’s command reporting, “Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room” (v. 22).xii In an effort to fill every seat and have his house overflowing with guest the host instructed his servant to go out a third, “Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled” (v. 23). Moving beyond the boundaries of his community, the servant was instructed to “urge” (NLT, NET) otherwise reluctant guest to accept the host’s gracious invitation. Obviously, the attendees would not be as homogeneous as the Pharisees would picture the great banquet. Both Jew and Gentile would come. Both rich and poor, educated and uneducated, male and female, slave and free would be welcomed at the Lord’s Table (cf. Galatians 3:28).xiii This is in keeping with
the original image of God’s great banquet from Isaiah 25:6-9, “the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast.”

Jesus concludes the parable with the master saying, “For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet” (v. 24). The first guest who had “exalted” themselves were now “humbled” (v. 11). It was a common practice in Jesus’ day for a host to send a small portion of food to excused guest. However, this act of grace would not be extended to those who excused themselves from God’s banquet table. Jesus is thus stating to those who would like to “eat bread in the kingdom of God” (v. 15) they had better hurry and accept his invitation for table fellowship, because they will not be able to participate at a distance.

The lesson of the parable of the Great Banquet is just as powerful for us today as it was for its original audience. God has sent forth His servants with the message that the kingdom of God has come. Those who hear the message are invited to share in God’s banquet. They should accept, not making excuses, or delaying, lest they eventually be barred from entering the hall and their seat given to another. “Behold, now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2). If you ignore God’s call, someone else will take your place and you will receive nothing but a “too late” from behind the closed doors of the banquet-hall.
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The NKJV translates v. 5 as, “Which of you, having a donkey or an ox that has fallen into a pit, will not immediately pull him out on the Sabbath day?” (cf. Deuteronomy 22:4; Luke 13:15; Matthew 12:11-12).


Another parable, the parable of the Wedding Feast (Matthew 22:1-14) shares some thematic similarities, though with striking differences in details, with the parable of the Great Banquet.

For a discussion on the Messianic Banquet from the perspectives of the Targum, the book of 1 Enoch and writings from the Qumran community, see Bailey, Kenneth. Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes: Cultural Studies In The Gospels. Downers Groove: IVP Academic, 2008. pp. 310-11. In all three instances, those of lower social status are excluded and Gentiles, who think they are invited, are viciously slain.

For a more in-depth discussion on the Middle Eastern custom of the double invitation see Bailey, Kenneth. Poet & Peasant and Through Peasant Eyes: A Literary-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Luke Combined Edition. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans Publishing Com., 1983. pp. 94-95. He also points out that the command to “come” literally means, keep on coming. The guest had already started to come by accepting the first invitation now they must continue to come since all things were ready.

Bailey argues in Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes (pp. 314-315) that this man’s excuse is a bold-face lie since land purchases took a very long time to complete and inspections were extremely detailed.


Perhaps the most stirring commentary on this passage is from Albert Barnes who stated, “He went out and invited all he found in the lanes, and yet the table was not full. This he also reported to his master. “There is room!” What a glorious declaration is this in regard to the gospel! There yet is room. Millions have been saved, but there yet is room. Millions have been invited, and have come, and have gone to heaven, but heaven is not yet full. There is a banquet there which no number can exhaust; there are fountains which no number can drink dry; there are harps there which other hands may strike; and there are seats there which others may occupy. Heaven is not full, and there yet is room. The Sunday school teacher may say to his class, there yet is room; the parent may say to his children, there yet is room; the minister of the gospel may go and say to the wide world, there yet is room. The mercy of God is not exhausted; the blood of the atonement has not lost its efficacy; heaven is not full. What a sad message it “would” be if we were compelled to go and say, “There is no more room – heaven is full – not another one can be saved. No matter what their prayers, or tears, or sighs, they cannot be saved. Every place is filled; every seat is occupied.” But, thanks be to God, this is not the message which we are to bear; and if there yet is room, come, sinners, young and old, and enter into heaven. Fill up that room, that heaven may be full of the happy and the blessed. If any part of the universe is to be vacant, O let it be the dark world of woe!” From Barnes, Albert. Barnes’ Notes On The New Testament. Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1962. pp. 226-227

