

I. Introduction

A. Here's something to think about this afternoon or the next time you are hanging out with long-time friend: what are the ten most memorable meals you've ever had? And I'm thinking here about "memorable" for good reasons. At a Sushi Bar in Tokyo I once ate a piece of raw horse. That was "memorable," but for the wrong reason. I do not want to do that again. (And, no, I didn't realize what I was eating until after I had eaten it.) I'm talking about memorable in a good light. I am talking about a wonderful evening with great food, great friends and a great conversation that goes on for hours. Perhaps it's a party, or a wedding banquet.

1. In the first weeks after my stroke, one of my biggest fears was that I would never be able to go out to eat with family and friends again. I was quite upset about this possibility, and I remember asking Sheri several times, "Why didn't I appreciate dinner with family and friends before?" The fact that this is what I was worrying about surprised me, because I didn't realize how much I valued those times until I thought they might be over.

2. Well as it turns out, eating with friends is one of the more prominent biblical metaphors for Heaven. Food, feasts and banquets come up a lot in the Bible – over a thousand times, which is what led Sheri and me to talk about our most memorable meals. And it also led her to reflect that apparently God is a foodie!

B. I think we can all agree that whoever is in charge of marketing for heaven should be replaced. We hardly hear about it anymore, and much of what we do hear makes us think: that sounds like it will be interesting for about thirty minutes, but after that I'll be ready to move on. We have a very odd, dis-embodied – and quite honestly, non –biblical – view of heaven.

C. Scripture doesn't tell us a lot about what it will be like, but what we are told suggests that it will be off the charts. Indeed, candidates for office make promises – that are generally unrealistic – but are small in contrast to what Jesus says about Heaven. They are going to cut waste or streamline bureaucracy, marginally improve security, etc. It's small change stuff compared to what Jesus talks about – i.e., a place where things as mundane as city streets are paved with gold; there is no danger; no darkness, no sorrow; that there is great joy, lots of music – and there is lots of food.

D. We are going to think about all of this today as we continue in our series about the parables with one entitled, The Great Banquet."

II. Last week I set up this series by making a number of points about parables – this unique literary genre that Jesus used a lot.

- A. I argued that the parables are not illustrations; they are not morality lessons; they are not Aesop’s Fables. Instead they are invitations to place yourself in a familiar setting so you can look around and see something you otherwise may not be able to see.
- B. I explained that Jesus used parables because sometimes a straight statement of fact lacked the color and texture that was needed;
- C. I noted that in order to understand a parable we have to do our homework because they have to be understood in context
- D. I noted that Jesus’s parables were unique in that they were on the Kingdom of God;
- E. And finally, I said that Jesus used them both to make things clearer for some people but to hide things from others.¹

III. In today’s parable of the Great Banquet we watch as Jesus continues to disrupt a meal. (This is one those meals that those attending will never forget, but it’s not because it was the best steak they ever had. It’s because everything went wrong!)

- A. Remember, the party was staged to catch Jesus violating the Sabbath so that they could expose him as a fraud and put an end to the threat he represented to them. Jesus did just what they hoped – He healed the man. He realized that it was a set up, but did it anyway, both because that is what he did. (He helped people.) And because he wanted to highlight the misguided and self-righteous energy that was driving the Pharisees.
- B. He then attacked the guests for jockeying for the good seats before criticizing the host for inviting the wrong people to the party. He asks: *Where is the single Mom? Where is the boy in the wheel chair? Where are all the poor people?*
- C. Remarkably, He is not done. He has more shots to fire. More things to say that you are not supposed to say in polite company. He is not done rocking their world or ours. Let’s work our way through the Parable of the Great Banquet. Luke 14:

IV. **V15: When one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”** There were a few things to note here:

- A. First, these kind of dinners were pretty common. When a traveling Rabbi rolled into town the religious leaders would sit down with him over a meal to put him through the paces. They wanted to be sure he was one of them, and they also probably pumped him for news. (They didn’t have access to Google News or ongoing updates via Twitter about what was happening outside of their village).
- B. One of the topics of conversation that was very likely to come up was the Great Banquet that Isaiah (one of the major Old Testament prophets) mentions in Isaiah 25:6.

¹ In Matthew 13 (parallel in Mark 4 and perhaps Luke 8) we see Jesus shift from a more didactic teaching style to parables. See Mt. 13:34f.

1. Seven hundred years earlier, Isaiah had dreamed of a banquet at the end of history during which the “Lord of hosts” prepares an amazing feast and the guest list includes peoples from all the Gentile Nations. Death will come to an end, tears are wiped away and it is a glorious day.

2. Once again, the suggestion is, when God shows up and things are going his way, there is a big party. By the way, this is why Jesus’s first miracle is turning water into wine at a wedding feast. Have you ever thought about that? Until you get the idea that the Kingdom of God is like a party or look ahead to the banquet that awaits us, this doesn’t make any sense. You might think, “Jesus, that first miracle was a bit frivolous don’t you think? Your first miracle should have been done at a church service or you should have called lightning down from heaven to zap people who were stepping out of line.”

a) There are lots of people whose idea of Christianity is a bunch of rules: don’t smile; don’t have fun; pass out bulletins; spend one day a month at a soup kitchen; keep your head down; do things you don’t like to do with people you don’t want to be around.

b) Jesus shows up as the King of the Feast. He says he comes to bring life and joy. Where my face turns the trees laugh and sing; where I gaze desert flowers bloom.

3. So, there is this ongoing idea of a banquet. It comes from Isaiah and in what Isaiah wrote, the Gentiles are invited. Well, the idea of God throwing a party in Jerusalem and allowing Gentiles to attend was so contrary to the way the Pharisees thought about things that they had modified it.

a) We have copies of various ancient documents in which they explain: “Yahweh of hosts will make for all peoples in this mountain a meal. And although they supposed it is an honor, it will be a shame for them and a great plague, plagues from which they will be unable to escape, plagues whereby they will come to their end.”²

b) In a separate document we find them saying that “no one who is smitten in the flesh, or paralyzed in his feet or hands, or lame or blind or deaf or dumb” will be allowed.

² See Kenneth Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans), p. 24. In this he explains how in the Targum (a translation of the Bible into Aramaic, which was used by the Jews during the Intertestamental period), words were added to the translation of Isaiah 25 to change it. He also notes how similar developments can be found in both The Book of Enoch and in the writings of the Essenes.

C. The statement this guy makes in verse 15 is an effort by him to sound out Jesus on this key issue. He says: “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” Jesus is expected to say something like, “Oh that we might all keep The Law (The Jewish Law) in such a precise fashion so that when that great day comes we will be counted worthy to sit with the Messiah and all the true believers at his banquet.” In other words, no Gentiles or any Jews who are not like me, will be allowed at that party.

D. Jesus does not follow his lead. Instead he tells another parable – one that suggests that not only will the banquet include Gentiles, but it will also include all the poor, broken, sick and lame that they want to exclude. And – and ! - it’s quiet unlikely that those in the room will get to attend.

V. V16: Jesus replied: “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’

A. Parties like this included two invitations, which is basically what happens today. Someone invites you over for dinner at 7. You show up at 7 at which point you head into the living room or out onto the back porch where you chat for twenty minutes until someone says, “Dinner is now served.” The first invitation was given a couple weeks before the meal. The second one comes when it’s time to sit down.

B. Something like that was happening here. It was different because throwing a party in the first century was a bigger deal. You couldn’t go to Cost Co to buy the jumbo box of burgers, after you got the RSVP list you had to kill and prepare the right number of animals. It was a lot of work. And don’t forget, this is not described as a dinner but as a banquet – which is code for lots of food.

C. So in the story Jesus is telling, the guests responded to the first RSVP and said they’d attend. The host spends a couple days getting ready, but then, just when it’s time to show up, they start making excuses.

VI. “A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. V17: At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, ‘Come, for everything is now ready.’ “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.’

A. This sounds a lot more reasonable today than it would have back then. We can come up with a scenario in which you bid on land you had not seen and the attorney calls and says, “The contract has to be signed by midnight tonight or the deal is off,” and so you have to leave. But that is not the way it happened then. In the first century you knew the land because: 1) there is not that much of it (Israel is a small area and most of it is desert, so you knew the areas you could farm); 2) you had grown up there (it’s not like you just transferred in from Los Angeles and don’t know the area; and 3) contract negotiations took months if not years. This is family land and everyone – including your cousin Lenny – was involved. You cannot do any of this quickly.

1. This is one of the reasons a first century listener is scandalized by the story of the Prodigal Son. Remember, the younger son demands his share of the inheritance – which essentially is a way of saying to his parents (please drop dead) and then he sells it right away, which means he got nothing for it.

2. Negotiations took a long time. I saw this in Ghana two weeks ago. Every time we would enter a village we needed to sit with the elders to tell them about who we were and why we were there. And there was a long protocol of checking in before we could talk about business. Our host – who was translating for us - would smile at Lee and me and say, “I know these long, slow introductions drive Americans crazy. But this is the way things are done here. I have asked about his family, his health and the wellbeing of his children. I need to ask about is goats next. This will take a few more minutes.”

B. All that to say, the person who says, I have to leave right now to finish an urgent real-estate transaction is making a pretty transparent excuse.

VII. V19: **“Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’**

A. This excuse is even more transparent than the last one. Oxen were big investments. Five yoke is a lot and, consequently, no one would buy them sight unseen. And even if they had, there is no reason they have to go inspect them at that moment. It would be like someone showing up for dinner – and sitting in your living room until the you are grilling for them is ready – and then suddenly saying, “I’m sorry to leave right now, but I really need to test drive my new truck.”

B. This is intended as an insult. Trust me, I know. Back in college I asked a girl out. She said she’d like to go but had to check on something and she’d get back to me. The next night I was out with some fraternity brothers and we ran into her and some of her friends at this play on campus. And in front of about ten people she said, “Mike, thanks for asking me out to the social next month. I’m sorry, but I can’t go. I’m going to be busy that night buying a battery for my car.” It was silent for about five awkward seconds while everyone processed what she had just said. And then one of my fraternity brothers said, “Ouch.” And we all turned and walked away. It was obvious what had just happened. That line was designed as an insult. And by the way, I heard it quite a bit over the next six months. The guys there would say to me, “Hey Woodruff, I can’t come to the meeting next week, I’ll be buying a car battery.”

C. In creating this this story (this parable), Jesus makes the excuses people are using very lame.

VIII. V20 – there is one more. **“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’**

A. Oh really? Two days ago you said you’d be here. But now that the food is on the table you suddenly remember that you just got married? You had somehow forgotten that 48 hours ago?

B. This is the most offensive response yet.³ And it's the third in a row. Something is up. The servant now realizes that there is some kind of orchestrated move being made against his master. They are trying to publicly ridicule him. There is a coordinated effort to humiliate him. The question now becomes, how will he respond? In this culture – one of honor and shame – you would expect some kind of retaliatory response. Some kind of threat. “I will not forget this.” Or, “You better watch your back.” Or, oh yeah, “Well two can shop for car batteries!”

C. What happens?

IX. V21: **“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.’**

A. Something quite unexpected happens. The owner says, “Let’s not waste the food. Invite others.” And he instructs his servant to go to the people the Pharisees believe are unworthy and invite them.⁴

B. So the servant does this.

X. V22: **“‘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 compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.**

A. Go to the back alleys and do not take no for an answer.⁵ This second call likely suggests that even the foreigners – it’s not just the unclean Jews, but even the Gentiles – are being invited.

XI. V24: **I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.”**

³ Bailey writes, “The third man’s excuse is unspeakably offensive. He says that (1) he has married a wife and (2) therefore cannot come. He does not even ask to be excused. Middle Eastern chivalry produces a dignified and respectful manner of talking about one’s wife. This third guest is very rudely saying, “I have a woman in the back of the house, and I am busy with her. Don’t expect me at your banquet. I am not coming.” In the Babylonian Talmud, Rabbi Hanan ben Raba is reported to have said, “All know for what purpose a bride enters the bridal canopy, yet whoever speaks obscenely [thereof], even if a sentence of seventy years happiness had been sealed for him, it is reversed for evil.” (Bailey, *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, p. 315f.)

⁴ The fact that the invitation is extended to the maimed and downtrodden is important. These were the types of people that the Pharisees considered “unclean” and under God’s curse (cf. John 9:1-2, 34). Jesus, however, taught that the kingdom was available even to those considered “unclean” (cf. Acts 10). His involvement with tax collectors and sinners brought condemnation from the Pharisees, yet it showed the extent of God’s grace (Matthew 9:10-11).

⁵ Note: The “compel them to come” part of this verse has been horribly misused over the centuries. Augustine or North Africa invited the Latin military to force the Donatist churches into the Latin fold on the basis of this mandate “to compel them.” And the Spanish Inquisition used this text to justify its brutalities. The point of the text is something quite different. When the master says, “compel them,” he says this because he understands that the people on the highways and byways are not going to believe that they are being invited to an event like this banquet. (Bailey, p. 317.)

XII. So what's the point? Jesus doesn't interpret this parable for us as He does with some others. And if you read all of the commentaries you realize that not everyone agrees on every point. But much of this is quite clear.⁶

- A. First, we need to start by understanding how the Pharisees would have heard this.
 - 1. The statement that prompts the parable is key: The man mentioned in verse 15 is clearly looking for Jesus to affirm that only righteous Jews were going to be invited to the party. And Jesus is clearly on record saying, "No. You are wrong." In fact, it's clear that he is saying:
 - a) I am the Messiah. It is my banquet we are talking about.
 - b) Your attendance is unlikely because although you were invited and RSVPed, you are now offering lame excuses. You need to know, I will fill the party. God will fill heaven, but if you reject me you will not be among those who get in."⁷
- B. Second, we need to see God's heart for the poor. This comes up over and over. The very people the Pharisees are writing off – the poor, the weak, the Gentiles and the sinners (the prostitutes and tax collectors) – are the ones Jesus is inviting in. He is throwing open the gates of heaven to everyone who wants in and who will ask – who will humble themselves and ask.⁸
- C. And third: we need to see this parable as both an invitation to heaven and as a call to avoid lame excuses.
 - 1. We need to see here how anxious God is to invite everyone to the party – so we get into the act of inviting others. That is the plan.
 - 2. And we need to see that while nothing is expected of those who humbly ask to be invited in, those who sign up are expected to follow through.
 - 3. In the section that immediately follows - Luke 14:25-35 – Jesus shares some tough words about what it means to follow him. He talks about our love for our family appearing to be hate in contrast to our devotion to him; he talks about carrying our cross and counting the cost.

⁶ I do not subscribe to the idea that there is only one point in a parable. However I do believe we are wise to not read too much into any of them. (Our interpretation needs to be simple and not thickly layered). But there can be more than one precise point.

⁷ There is a lot in play here – and a lot of debate in theological circles – about how we understand and relate to the Jewish people today. To say that books has been written on this topic is an understatement. Libraries have been filled. But I am not prepared to entertain this topic here. Instead, let's keep it simple. Jesus says to the religious leaders of his day, "I am the Messiah. It's my party. Your excuses for not following me are lame. And you need to know, I'm moving on and you will not be invited."

⁸ See John 9:1-2; 34; Acts 10, Hosea 2:23; Rom. 10:13

4. I feel like I complain about this, for which I apologize. But one of the challenges here is to help you hold two ideas in tension: The first is, people who do not deserve to be invited to the party get invited. In the parable the master tells his servant “compel them to come.” Why does he say this, because they can’t believe they would be invited! Men and women, you are invited. You. I don’t care who you are or what you’ve done or not done. You are invited to the party. The invitation has been extended. All you need to do is show up.

5. But it doesn’t stop there. God will meet us wherever we are, but he doesn’t leave us there. We are called to take all of this seriously. To be humble and to lean in. It’s not life as normal. The banquet does disrupt normal life.

XIII. So, let me leave you with this question: Have you accepted the invitation or are you making lame excuses?