

## A Commentary for Tellers of Jesus' Tales: The Parable of the Great Feast (Luke 14:15-24)

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One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him,  
"Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God."  
Then Jesus said to him, "A certain person gave a great banquet and invited many  
and he sent his slave at the time of the banquet to say to those who had been invited,  
'Come; for everything is already prepared.'  
But they all alike began to make excuses.

The first said to him,  
'I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it;  
I pray you, have me excused.'

Another said,  
'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out.  
I pray you, have me excused.'

Another said,  
'I have just married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.'  
So the slave returned and reported these things to his master.

Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave,  
'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town  
and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.'  
And the slave said,  
'Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.'

Then the master said to the slave,  
'Go out into the roads and alleys, and compel people to come in,  
so that my house may be filled.  
For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my banquet.'

The learning of this story for telling is relatively easy because of the mnemonic structures built into the story that can be observed on the sound map. Jesus and his followers who told his stories made this one easy to remember. It has the classic structure of many jokes on the contemporary oral tradition circuit: a threefold repetition with a surprise reversal at the end. In this case, however, the surprise reversal of the master's growing anger is not exactly funny.

The introduction of the parable is a long period with three cola or breath units that builds up to the grand invitation. All of the performative clues indicate that Jesus told this in an expansive, celebrative manner. The short climactic colon summarizing the excuses that ends the episode is a surprise, quieter and much slower.

The two opening episodes of excuses each begin with the same phrase, "I have bought. . ." The first two episodes end with a formula conclusion: "I pray you, have me excused." Each of the first three episodes ends with "excuses." The third excuse is a variation on the theme, probably told with a smile, best translated as, "I have just married

a wife and I cannot come.” The implied unspoken words that follow, especially in the last episode, are: “I have more important business to tend to.” The twofold repetition of the master’s slave reporting the results of the invitations to those invited and to the command to bring in the poor, crippled, blind and lame are another easy to remember verbal formula that concludes the episodes in the middle of the parable.

Also notice that the first period in each episode of the parable has more than one colon and is more complex than the second shorter colon that ends the episode. As a result, there is a climactic impact in each of the conclusions.

The two concluding episodes begin with the command to the slave: “Go out. . .” The first command is to go out to the streets and lanes and bring in the dregs of society who would not normally be invited to a great feast. The tone is made explicit: anger. And the tone of the second command is even more angry. The best translation of the places to find the invitees is even lower on the social scale: “the roads and the alleys.” There is then a crescendo of anger that concludes with the final declaration of exclusion of those who made excuses. It is ambiguous whether he means that they have passed up their chance at the Kingdom banquet once and for all or whether there might be another banquet. My inclination is to hear it as maximum shock for the listeners.

The setting for this parable in Luke’s story is the favored time for storytelling, a dinner on the Sabbath. A leading Pharisee invited good and faithful people. Pharisees were earnest “laymen” who faithfully sought to observe the ways of Israel. It would be analogous to a Sunday dinner for the regular, faithful members of a church after the morning worship. Jesus provides kingdom teaching to the guests during this dinner: a lesson about sitting in the lower rather than the higher seats and a recommendation to the host that he invite people who would not return the favor. But the climax of the dinner conversation is a story about another feast that Jesus tells in response to an appropriately pious statement by one of the guests. The assumption of Jesus and all of those present at the Sabbath dinner is that those present would be invited to the great banquet of the righteous at the inauguration of the new age. And the guest’s comment is an appropriate statement of joyful blessing for those who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God. The implied topic of the parable is the responses of those around the table to Jesus’ proclamation of the Kingdom of God with its implicit invitation to repent, believe, and follow him.

The beginning of the parable is a big beginning. It is probably impossible to overdo the initial invitation: “Come for everything is ready.” An alternative translation is: “Come for it is already prepared.” The time has come and the word “already” implies that there is no further waiting for the future kingdom. It is already present. And Jesus is the messenger of this great good news.

But the great reversal of expectations is immediate. They all “from the first” began to make excuses and not to come. Is this a probable response to an invitation to a great banquet? No way. One of the favorite occasions of life in the culture of Israel was a great

banquet. Nothing was more popular or captured the dream of an ecstatic future more fully.

So what does it mean that the invited guests would make excuses and not come to a great banquet? There are two basic clues that a Jesus story about a typical day in Galilee is a parable: hyperbole, like a harvest of a hundred fold (ten times more than a normal good harvest) or a reversal of expectations like a banquet to which none of the invited guests come. It is as if a bell rings: “Kingdom of God” story. This reversal of expectations immediately frames this parable as a story about the hesitations and excuses of Jesus’ listeners.

This parable is a classic Jesus story about the kingdom of God. The hook for Jesus’ listeners is established in the first episode. The hope for the coming of the kingdom of God is described in Israel as of a great banquet. At the end of the old age, the heroes of Israel’s history such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob would be raised to life so that they could participate in the great banquet that would inaugurate the new age of God’s government. All of the righteous Israelites, both the living and the dead, would be included in the great banquet of celebration.

The recital of excuses is a series of symbolic reasons for not responding to Jesus’ teaching with enthusiasm and commitment. The third excuse of the young Galilean man who has just gotten married is based on a long tradition that an Israelite would be exempt from military duty for a year in order to enjoy his new wife and married life. All of Jesus’ listeners would have responded to this excuse with a smile.

Jesus’ listeners—at the original dinner by a good Pharisee, those hearing the story in the midst of Luke’s Gospel in the late first century, and listeners who are hearing the story now—are invited by the parable to reflect on their responses to Jesus’ teaching and deeds. What are your excuses for not responding wholeheartedly to Jesus and his proclamation? An implication of the parable is that Jesus is not getting a great response from the “religious” members of the Galilean community and that this is the reason for his going to those “outside” the law-keeping community: the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame.

But the parable is addressed to the audience as the guests at the Pharisee’s dinner. In the story event now, Jesus addresses us as his dialogue partners who are uncertain about our response to the invitation implicit in Jesus’ teaching about the Kingdom of God. The impact? The parable is an invitation to examine your excuses and assess whether you really have more important business that takes priority over acting on Jesus’ invitation. The expectation of Jesus’ audiences then and now is that there is always time. In this parable, there is no time, no room for procrastination. Rejection now is final. Those who are invited and find excuses not to come now will never taste the banquet of the Kingdom.