

Lessons From a Feast

M.W. Bassford
8-27-06

Introduction.

- A. One of the most wonderful things about Jesus is the accessible way He taught when He was on the earth. Earthly libraries are full of the works of supposedly great human philosophers, books that describe the most daring adventures of the human mind. However, half of those books are written with such complexity and confusion that you need a PhD to understand them. By contrast, the awe-inspiring nature of the mind of Jesus is not revealed in the complexity of His teachings, but in the simplicity. Anybody can take a difficult topic and make it hard to understand, a true genius can take a difficult topic and make it easy to understand, but only Jesus could take the most profound topics of all and explain them in a way that anybody can understand.
- B. One of the primary tools that Jesus used to make spiritual matters so plain to His audience was His use of illustration. Throughout His ministry, He took the most difficult of moral abstractions and explained them, using simple, concrete examples that were part of the universal human experience. More impressively still, many of these illustrations weren't things that Jesus prepared beforehand. Instead, He took the things that were around Him as He was speaking and used those to make His points. During the Sermon on the Mount, He taught people about the providence of God using the birds that were flying by over His head and the flowers that were blooming around His feet. No one has ever used illustration as brilliantly as Jesus.
- C. Jesus' ability to make spiritual applications from the everyday wasn't limited to His outdoor sermons, either. Just as it is customary today for us to invite visiting preachers over for a meal, in Jesus' time, it was also customary for the religious leaders of the day to share meals with other religious notables. Because of His spiritual stature, Jesus was often included in these occasions, and we see one such gathering described in Luke 14. As He always did, Jesus used this opportunity to teach, to challenge His Pharisee hosts to see their duty to God in a way different than they'd ever seen it before. His teaching is preserved for us in Luke 14:1-14. Let's consider what Jesus says and does during this dinner, then, to see what lessons we can learn from a feast.

I. Do What Is Right.

- A. The first lesson that Jesus taught during this feast was that the true child of God will do what is right. We see this idea presented, not by what Jesus says, but by what He does in Luke 14:1-6. As is often true of the interactions of Jesus with the Pharisees, this passage doesn't make sense unless we know where the Pharisees were coming from. One of the interesting things about the Pharisaical approach to the Old Law is that even while the Pharisees ignored the moral framework behind the teachings of the Law, they added new lists of rules to the ones already given in Scripture. In this case, the rules concerned the keeping of the Sabbath.
- B. The Law of Moses commanded that no work be done on the Sabbath, but the Pharisees made applications of that principle and stretched it to places that Moses would never even have dreamed of. For example, some Pharisees argued that it was against the Law of Moses to walk across one's kitchen floor on the night of the Sabbath unless one owned a cat. Here's the theory: If one walks across one's kitchen floor on the night of the Sabbath, it is possible that one might step on a fish bone, get the fish bone stuck in one's foot, and do work pulling the fish bone out. However, this is not a problem if one owns a cat, because the Pharisees supposed that a cat would have eaten the fish bone, thus removing the possibility of work.
- C. Now into this irrational, ritualized religious world comes Jesus, who, much to the horror of the Pharisees, healed the sick on the Sabbath. Now, the fact that Jesus could only have healed by the power of God, therefore God must have approved of healing on the Sabbath, apparently never occurred to the Pharisees. Instead, all they care about is that Jesus has disobeyed their tradition. However, Jesus exposes their hypocrisy with one question. He wants to know what they do when some animal of theirs falls into a pit on the Sabbath. Jesus knows the answer: they rush over with a rope and some friends, and drag the animal out. However, the Pharisees don't want to tell Jesus the answer. It would make them look very bad for two reasons.
 1. In the first place, pulling an animal out of a ditch is much more work than either pulling a fish bone out of your foot or healing a man, yet the Pharisees were willing to do the one while condemning the other.
 2. The second reason, the reason why this difference existed, was even worse. The reason why the Pharisees were willing to see the animal saved but not to see the man healed was because they cared more about an animal that belonged to them than they did about a man who did not. In their pursuit of tradition, they had abandoned the greatest commandments of the Law of Moses, and they knew it.
- D. There are two applications that we should make from this story.
 1. First, we need to avoid being like the Pharisees. We need to make sure that we never allow our religious traditions to get in the way of serving God. If we consider the religious world around us, we quickly see that this is exactly what has happened to our denominational friends. They've let some tradition take precedence over the commandments of God. Exactly the same thing will happen to us if we aren't careful.

2. Second, we need to be like Jesus here. Jesus was in a roomful of unfriendly people, but He didn't let them intimidate Him from teaching and doing what was right. That's easy to talk about, but it's tough to do. In the world outside the church-building doors, there's a lot of pressure on us to blend in, to not make a fuss. Inviting someone to worship is making a fuss, telling God's truth to someone who needs to hear it is making a fuss, so there's a subtle, yet immense pressure exerted on all of us not to do these things. We need to be better than that. We need to be willing to make a fuss. We need to be willing to be like Jesus.

II. Be Humble.

- A. After Jesus finishes shocking the Pharisees with His defiance of tradition, He next tells them to be humble. We see this teaching of Jesus recorded in Luke 14:7-11. When we read stories like this from the time of Jesus, it's important for us to remember the cultural context. Today, we're fairly unconcerned about who sits where, except at the most formal dinners. If we have a potluck and 20 people come, they can sit wherever they like. Not so for the Jews of the first century. They were much more hierarchical than we are today, that is to say, they had a much more rigid idea of social status than we do, and their seating patterns reflected that priority. The guy with the good seat wasn't just closest to the pot roast; instead, he looked the most important.
- B. However, Jesus is using this Jewish social custom to make a point not about where they literally should sit at feasts, but about something very different. To see what Jesus is driving at, we need to understand two things. First, we have to recognize that Jesus' advice here parallels the advice given by King Hezekiah in Proverbs 25:6-7. Same basic point, right? "Don't take a seat that's higher than you deserve." What's interesting, though, is what's missing from Jesus' teaching. Jesus' version doesn't explicitly include anything about a king, but to understand what Jesus is saying, we need to understand Jesus' audience. The Pharisees knew Hezekiah's proverb, and they would have recognized immediately that Jesus had left out the king. With that omission, Jesus may as well have been shouting His real point, a point about God. Here it is: whether you mention Him or not, the real King is always present at the feast, and He's always paying attention.
- C. Second, this is not just any kind of feast that Jesus is discussing. This is a WEDDING feast, and if Jesus is talking about a wedding feast, you can be sure that it's not an actual wedding. One of Jesus' favorite metaphors throughout His ministry was comparing Himself to a bridegroom and His call to the sinners of the world to an invitation to a wedding feast. Christ's church is composed of those who receive this invitation, and if you notice, in the parable, it's the one who invites—the bridegroom—who is doing the humbling and exalting.
- D. So then, here's what Jesus is actually saying: For all of you who have accepted an invitation into the kingdom of God, those of you who are Christians, when you're gathered together with other Christians, you don't need to be getting any ideas about how important you are. God does not appreciate the attempts of any of His people to exalt themselves over His other subjects. Indeed, those who attempt to do so will be humiliated. Instead, all the time, but especially within the church, all of us need to behave as humbly as we possibly can. The church is not our venue for trying to impress others. God is the one who lifts us up; indeed, God is the only one who can lift us up. Let's remember to be humble, and let God do the exalting.

III. Be Generous.

- A. The last portion of this context addresses Jesus' admonition to be generous. We see His words recorded in Luke 14:12-14. Once again, this is a place where we need to look under the surface to figure out what Jesus is actually saying, especially in our day and age. When He tells us to feed the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, I'd have trouble doing that literally because I don't know any poor, maimed, lame, or blind people. Even the people whom our country considers poor are rich by the standards of Jesus' day. I don't know that there's anybody in America today who literally can't come up with enough food to eat.
- B. What, then, are we supposed to get out of this commandment? To figure that out, we need to look not just at the words and details Jesus is using, but at the principle He's conveying. Underneath all the illnesses and feasts and food, Jesus is really saying, "Look around you. Recognize that the people you normally devote your time, attention, and resources to aren't necessarily the ones who most need your help. Instead, find the people who need what you have to offer, and share it with them too." Now, let me submit to you that the biggest needs in our country today aren't for food or money. They're for friendship and emotional connectedness. Today, the TV is the best friend a lot of Americans have because we're such an emotionally cut-off people. Look around us. Look at all the crazy things people do just to feel connected. There are thousands of people who dress up like Spock and go to Star Trek conventions just so they can feel accepted and loved. The Heaven's Gate cultists of a few years back were willing to die just to be a part of something.
- C. Friends, in the church, we ought to be the most accepting, loving, connecting people out there. Now, I don't mean "accepting" in the sense of accepting the sins of others, but in the sense of accepting them. Anybody who will come to God on God's terms should be able to come to us on those terms. We need to treat every brother in Christ, every sister in Christ, like a brother or sister in truth. This begins with everyone who worships here now, and it should spread to everyone who comes through those doors. That's being generous.

Conclusion. If you recognize that you've failed to live up to Christ's plan for your life, repent and return today.