

Jesus, the Dinner Guest

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I think it's fair to say that a lot of Christians today struggle with obeying the Biblical command to practice hospitality. Sometimes, this is due to time constraints. At other times, it's due to financial constraints. Sometimes, though, we're fearful of inviting people into our homes because we're worried that they'll cause a scene. For example, when I was a teenager, one of the families I went to church with was a recently widowed mother with several children. One of those children, who was about 4, was a real terror. One day, there was a potluck dinner after services, and my dad was sitting on the deck of the house, minding his own business. This little kid came up to him with a full Solo cup of orange soda, and, with the sweetest, most angelic smile you can imagine, upended the entire cup of orange soda on my dad's lap. People understood and were very gracious to this family, but they still regarded them with wariness.

I don't think it really ever crosses our minds, but during Jesus' ministry, the people of His day probably regarded Him with the same kind of wariness. With Jesus, you could never be sure what outlandish thing He might do to make a spiritual point. This trait of His is particularly on display in the first part of Luke 14. Let's look at Jesus, the dinner guest.

Healing on the Sabbath

The first thing that Jesus does at what would probably have been a memorable dinner party indeed for the guests, was to violate tradition by healing on the Sabbath. Luke describes **THE SETTING** for this miracle in Luke 14:1-2. What Jesus encountered at this dinner wasn't coincidence. It was a setup. As Jesus and the Pharisees both knew, the Law of Moses forbade work on the Sabbath. The Pharisees, however, not content with that Scriptural prohibition, had spent a hundred years surrounding it with their own human traditions, which they required others to observe as strictly as if those traditions had been carried down from Mt. Sinai. When Jesus showed up and began to heal on the Sabbath, the Pharisees concluded that Jesus was sinning by violating those human traditions. Never mind that if Jesus were not doing God's will, He would not have been able to heal. He was transgressing against their rules, so He was in the wrong. The end.

When Jesus shows up at this Sabbath dinner, then, and sees the man with dropsy and all the Pharisees watching Him with gimlet eyes, He knows something is up. This whole thing has been set up as a test to confirm in front of this audience of the Pharisees whether Jesus actually is the bad guy they've all been hearing about.

In response to this trap, Jesus carries out two **ACTIONS**. They are recounted in Luke 14:3-4. The first action is a question, a question that seems much less pointed to us than it would have been to the original audience. Jesus doesn't ask them whether it is right to heal on the Sabbath. He asks whether it is lawful to heal on the Sabbath. He wants to talk about what the Law of Moses actually says. If His audience tells Him, "No, it's not lawful," He'll be able to reply "Really? Where does it say that?", and they won't be able to give Him a good answer. If they tell Him, "Yes, it's lawful," then they have no justification for condemning Him for healing. They see the counter-trap, and so they say nothing. When they say nothing, Jesus goes ahead and heals the man with dropsy, knowing full well His audience isn't going to like it.

There are two lessons we should draw from this. The first is that if we have a problem with some moral or religious practice, and somebody comes to us asking, "Is it lawful?", we had better have an answer for them from God's law. This doesn't mean that we have to supply a black-and-white thou-shalt-not that is precisely on point. Jesus' own example tells us that we must consider the logical implications of what is written too. However, if our argument for or against a particular practice isn't founded on the word, we are probably teaching as doctrine the commandments of men.

Second, if we are given the opportunity to do right, it is our responsibility to do right regardless of how others will view it. This situation may arise with our actions, but it is especially common with our words. God commands us to speak the truth in love. However, simply because we do this doesn't mean that our message will be well received. Some people are violently opposed to the truth. Their possible reaction, however, should not deter us from speaking.

This story concludes with **JESUS' TEACHING** on the subject. It appears in Luke 14:5-6. As is evident from His words here, the Pharisees actually have two problems. The first is that they have elevated their own traditions to the same level as the word of God. The second is that they aren't even consistent about keeping their own traditions. They are perfectly willing to condemn Jesus for working on the Sabbath because He healed a sick man. However, if they arrive home, and Lassie comes rushing up, and indicates that little Timmy Pharisee has fallen down the well again, they are going to grab their rope and haul little Timmy Pharisee out, free of concern about whether they're violating God's law. The only apparent difference was that the human being down the well was their son and the human being with dropsy wasn't. They were all kinds of compassionate when their personal interests were involved, but if the problem was somebody else's, well, other people needed to obey the traditions. The Pharisees were hypocrites, and Jesus called them on it.

From this, we must learn the importance of consistency in the way we read and apply the word. We can't use it to beat somebody else over the head about their sin, and then turn around and ignore what it says about the evil in our lives. We can't demand that others follow a standard that we ourselves aren't willing to keep. If we're in that situation, either the standard is wrong and our behavior is right, or the standard is right and our behavior is wrong, but we are

certainly wrong about something. We can't demand that a brother be loving and respectful in everything he says about us, and then turn around and assassinate his character before another brother. We can't throw a fit because we caught our husband looking at porn on the Internet, and then have a steamy online chat with somebody we met on Facebook. We need to learn what the word says and apply it impartially to everyone, ourselves included. That's what Jesus expects.

Banquet Etiquette

At this stage of the dinner, conversation has probably gotten a little awkward, but Jesus doesn't care. Instead, He uses the occasion to explain His own version of banquet etiquette. We're going to consider the import of His words before we partake of the Lord's Supper. Jesus' discussion of this subject breaks down into two main parts, the first of which explains what we should do **"WHEN WE ARE INVITED"**. Luke sets the stage for this discussion by explaining what Jesus saw of **THE JEWS' PRACTICE**. This explanation appears in Luke 14:7. Notice first of all that Luke tells us this is a parable. In other words, throughout the rest of this section, Jesus isn't actually talking about dinner parties. Instead, He's using the banquet as an illustration to explain a broader spiritual principle. He knows that this is necessary because He sees the other dinner guests going through this elaborate social ritual to determine who gets to sit in the seats of honor. As is often true, the mindset of the Jews in this specific instance revealed what their general mindset was. They were all interested in exalting themselves as highly in the eyes of others as they could.

Today, perhaps because of the influence of this story, we don't have a problem with people using church potlucks to exalt themselves. In fact, everybody is usually so concerned about not exalting themselves that they don't want to be the first in line. However, this doesn't mean that human nature has improved and today we don't have any problems with self-promotion. Maybe we don't care so much about seating arrangements, but culturally, we care a great deal about nice houses and nice cars and nice clothes and big salaries and all sorts of other things that show how important we are. Even in a church context, we often want other people to respect us. We want them to take us seriously. It has to be our point that carries the day in Bible class or the business meeting, because as our ideas are validated, so too are we. We may not angle for places of honor at dinner, but we are certainly still interested in places of honor in lots of other settings.

In this general area, Jesus tells us **WHAT NOT TO DO**. Let's read together from Luke 14:8-9. He paints a vivid picture here of some over-eager social climber who chooses a place that's just a little too prestigious for him, gets bumped in favor of somebody with better credentials, and ends up making the walk of shame over to the corner, where he will dine with the dogs. Even to us, this is a cringe-inducing story. To the Jews, it would have been horrifying.

Once again, though, Jesus is not concerned with banquet seating. He's concerned with spiritual matters. The master of the feast here is not some literal Jewish host. Instead, Jesus is talking about God. The wrong in question is not sitting too close to the head of the table. Instead, the wrong is living a life that is focused on the exaltation of self. When our lives are all about us, us, us, push, push, push, we might end up impressing the people around us, but we will certainly not impress God. God does not want to spend eternity with people who are full of themselves, and if that's the record we bring to the day of judgment, He will surely first humiliate us and then cast us out. This tells us, then, that we must constantly check our words, thoughts, and actions for signs of pride. Why am I having this argument with my spouse? Is it because the issue is really that important, or is it because being right is so important to me? Why do I spend so much time at work? Is it because I am trying to render service to my employer as to the Lord, or is it so that I can buy stuff to impress those around me? If we are looking to exalt ourselves now, that heart will surely lead to humiliation later.

Jesus concludes the parable by revealing **WHAT TO DO**. We find this in Luke 14:10-11. Here, Jesus depicts a man who is wise enough to let his honor come from others rather than from what he does for himself.

This may well have worked in the class-conscious Jewish society of Jesus' day, but it is certainly the only way that we today can find favor with God. What Jesus is advocating here is not a showy kind of humility. That's just pride under a cloak of lowliness. For instance, when I was going through undergrad at Mizzou, I worked with a girl named Heather, who was a Mennonite. Mennonites fall under the same heading of "plain people" that the Amish do. Among other things, they frown on gaudy displays of expensive clothing. Heather told me, though, that this prohibition only led to the young Mennonite women competing to see who could be the dowdiest and frumpiest. That's not what God wants either.

Instead, what pleases Him is genuine indifference to the regard in which others hold us. We don't have to carry the day in every marital argument. We don't have to have the fancy everything so everybody knows how much money we have. We don't have to insist on others treating us with respect. We are content to base our self-esteem on God's love, not man's love. Oddly enough, people who are this quiet and secure in themselves often do win the respect of others, simply because they aren't trying. However, that's not the point. When our hearts are set on God and not on ourselves, when we look to Him to lift us up instead of lifting ourselves up, that's when we become the people He will exalt.

Jesus' next parable concerns what we should do **"WHEN WE GIVE A DINNER"**. Here too, He begins by explaining **WHAT NOT TO DO**. The parable begins in Luke 14:12. Once again, as we are reading this, we must remember that this is a parable, in the midst of a series of three parables. Jesus is not literally forbidding us to have our friends over for dinner. The point here isn't about dinner, any more than the last point was about dinner. Instead, He's

telling us to look at our motives. It's a good work to be hospitable. However, why are we doing that good work? Why do we do any good work? If we are doing that work to win the regard of others or some other benefit for ourselves in this life, we're doing it for the wrong reason. Sometimes, we may accumulate earthly benefit for doing the right thing regardless of our intention. If I'm up here leading singing to glorify God, and people get impressed with my golden voice and start talking about what a good songleader I am, that's not my fault. God is still pleased with me, and I shouldn't quit songleading because I'm good at it. However, if I lead singing so everyone will notice, I will have my reward in full.

Instead, Jesus tells us what our heart should be when He tells us **WHAT TO DO**. This appears in Luke 14:13-14. This is still a parable. Jesus is not telling us to literally convert our homes into soup kitchens, although if we want to do that, it would be a worthy work. Instead, He is telling us that when we do any righteous thing, our eyes must be fixed on the heavenly reward, and not on the earthly reward. When we ask ourselves, "Why should I do this?" The answer must be, "Because it's the right thing to do," and not "Because it will win this earthly advantage," or "Because it will impress these people." After all, it's entirely possible for us to turn our homes into soup kitchens with the sole goal of showing others how righteous we are. True righteousness isn't calculating like that. True righteousness isn't concerned with earthly benefit, although earthly benefit is often the result. True righteousness only seeks repayment from God.

This is the way that Christ wants us to think. This is the kind of people that He wants us to be. He doesn't want us to be concerned with exalting ourselves or using our good works to win earthly reward. Instead, He wants us to seek our approval and reward from God. He wants us to follow Him. He didn't live and die as He did so that His contemporaries would be impressed with Him. Instead, He suffered to please God and redeem us. Do we live like that? Is His selflessness and focus on the spiritual evident in the way we live? Let's think about this as we partake.

The Parable of the Great Feast

As though His earlier critique of His tablemates' pride and concern for the things of this world were not enough, Jesus concludes the dinner with one more parable, the parable of the great feast. We find the **OPENING** portion of this story in Luke 14:15-17. As Luke makes clear, this discussion follows right on the heels of Jesus' advice about what kind of people to invite to dinner parties. In response to Jesus' comments, one of the other guests exclaims about how wonderful it would be to eat bread in the kingdom of God. This rejoinder doesn't make sense. Apparently, all the guest heard was the bit about the resurrection of the righteous, which the Pharisees certainly believed in, and he decided that was sufficient cause to celebrate. He may have had too much to drink; he may simply have been clueless. Regardless, he has proven immune to Jesus' criticism, and he's mindlessly anticipating the future kingdom, in which he thinks all present will share.

Jesus, however, does not agree with the other guest's supposition, so He begins this final parable. This time, the meaning is not as subtle as with the first two. The other guest already brought up eating in the kingdom, so the banquet obviously refers to the time when that kingdom would be established. The parable works equally well with respect to Christ's kingdom on earth, the church, or God's eternal kingdom in heaven. The master is God Himself, and his dinner invitations are the invitations that God issues to mankind to share in the joys of His kingdom.

However, in the parable, these invitations meet with **EXCUSES**. Jesus explains in Luke 14:18-20. All of these people who had earlier said they would attend the dinner are backing out. They all have better things to do.

From this point, there are two diverging meanings we're going to explore: the first-century meaning for Jesus' audience, and the application for us. It's obvious what first-century group Jesus is talking about here. Those who are going to refuse the invitation to dine in God's kingdom are none other than the dinner guests who are eating around Him now. The scribes and lawyers and Pharisees were the first group God invited, but by their own free will, they didn't come. Jesus here is describing in parable form what He had seen happen and what would continue to happen. The Pharisees got so caught up in their own traditions and their own righteousness and their own expectations about God's kingdom that they rejected the real thing when it finally did appear. They had no use for Jesus, His teaching, or His salvation.

This ought to be a warning for us too. All of us here, I think, would profess a love for God and a zeal for His word, but 2000 years ago, the Pharisees would have professed the same thing. In reality, most of them didn't love God. They loved themselves. They didn't have a zeal for the word. They had a zeal for their own traditions, and they got so caught up in the rightness of those traditions that they didn't listen when God Himself told them they were wrong. Brethren, what we think on a particular subject doesn't matter. What the Bible says matters. If we prefer to listen to what we already know instead of to the Scripture, we are refusing our invitation to God's kingdom just like the Pharisees.

In the parable, because of this underwhelming response, the master sends his servant out to find **NEW GUESTS**. Jesus tells the story in Luke 14:21-23. First, the servant rounds up the urban poor, and then, when even those aren't enough to fill the banqueting hall, he goes out to the countryside and grabs every soul he can find.

Here too, the meaning is clear. In the first century, the first group of people whom God summoned to replace the prideful Pharisees were the sinners, the irreligious Jews of Jesus' day. The kingdom of God began to fill up with tax collectors and prostitutes rather than scribes and lawyers, because the tax collectors were willing to listen to Jesus and the

scribes weren't. As though that were not enough, after Jesus ascended, at His direction, His apostles brought even the Gentiles into the kingdom, the very thought of which incited the Pharisees to jealousy, rage, and persecution.

Today, we must remember that there ain't nothing special about us. If we won't obey God's word, God will use that word to call to Himself people who will. This is true on a national as well as a personal level. Today, there are probably more first-century Christians in the U.S. than there are in the rest of the world put together. 200 years from now, the center of Christianity may well be in Nigeria or the Philippines, and all the people here may be unbelievers. God doesn't care who we are or where we're from. All He cares about is obedience.

We learn **THE RESULT** of the master's new strategy in Luke 14:24. The only people who would appear at his dinner table would be those who had not originally been invited. God's kingdom was going to be filled with repentant sinners and repentant Gentiles, not with the self-appointed spiritual elite of the scribes and Pharisees. In a sense, Jesus is telling the talkative dinner guest that he's half-right, but he's right about the wrong half. Yes, those who would dine in God's kingdom would be blessed, but that guest list wasn't going to include any of the people the man had in mind.

Even today, friends, we must make sure that we aren't right about the wrong half. On what do we base our confidence? Do we rely on the fact that we were "raised in the church", and that we attend services once or twice a week in a church building with "church of Christ" on the sign outside? Or do we place our trust in Jesus, in His word, and in His promise that those who seek Him will find Him? I fear that some brethren would be confused by the notion that there is a difference between those two things, but the difference could not be more real and more important. We can go through all the motions without ever once having a genuine heart for God.