

There's Room at the Table

Luke 14:16-24

CareerBuilder.com sends out an annual 'sick day survey,' asking hiring managers the most bizarre excuses they've heard for missing work. A few of the actual excuses employees have used to avoid going to work include the following:

- "Employee woke up in a good mood and didn't want to ruin it."
- "Employee had been at the casino all weekend and still had money left to play with on Monday morning."
- "Employee got stuck in the blood pressure machine at the grocery store and couldn't get out."
- "Employee needed a day off to hunt for another job." I believe you call that an employee.
- "Employee had a gall stone that they wanted to heal holistically."
- "Employee was arrested as a result of mistaken identity."
- "Employee accidentally got on a plane."
- "Employee wrote, 'Grandma tried to poison me. Again.'"

We come today to a parable Jesus tells about a great banquet with many guests invited, but many *missing* it because of the excuses they make. Luke chapter 14 is where it's found. Let me set it up for you.

The honor in being invited to dinner

Feasting and food are major themes throughout Luke's gospel. Virtually every chapter touches on food. As is still true, being invited to a meal and especially to a banquet was considered an honor. When someone cares enough to treat you to lunch, coffee, or even better to a banquet, they're demonstrably showing you that you matter to them. An invitation to eat and drink together says, "I want to spend time with you. I want to honor you."

Luke chapter 14 opens with Jesus saying yes to an invitation for him to eat in the home of a prominent Pharisee. Some who are also at the meal are closely watching Jesus to see if he will violate resting on the Sabbath according to their understanding. He does. Seeing an unhealthy man before him, Jesus challenges their misunderstanding, and heals the man—demonstrating that doing God's work on the Sabbath supersedes doing no work on the Sabbath.

Jesus goes on to speak about true hospitality, that genuine hospitality isn't handing out favors so that the other person will in turn honor you. It's about simply welcoming and honoring others regardless of what they can do for you.

Verse 15 sets up why Jesus tells the parable. Luke explains, "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.'"

In other words, what a blessing it will be to attend a banquet not so much here, but in the Kingdom of God yet to come! It will be an amazing honor! Jesus replies with this parable: **"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.'**

“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.’

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

“Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’

“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.’

“‘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. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

What prompts the parable is the acclamation, “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.” Through the parable Jesus affirms, “Indeed! God is throwing a party. Are you coming? And if you are, who are you inviting to come with you?”

Several of Jesus’ parables are hard to understand, but this one is very straightforward. I want to showcase three Kingdom secrets from this parable. Each one is very simple, and yet each one is hidden unless God opens your eyes to see it. The first Kingdom secret revealed in this parable is to RSVP to the banquet, because you’re invited!

There’s room at the table, so RSVP: you’re invited!

In ancient Middle Eastern culture, two invitations would be sent out for a banquet: one in advance to which guests would send their RSVPs, and then the second invitation would be to notify guests that the feast was prepared. All that remained was for them to come.

When I was in grad school I had the chance to visit an island in the South China Sea. The small village where I stayed had just one basic restaurant. And the only way to get dinner there was to go in person earlier in the day so that they know how many chickens to kill, how much to cook. Anyone who visited the village of Salang was welcome, but you had to RSVP if you were going to eat.

So it is, Jesus says, with his invitation to the coming feast in the Kingdom of God. You’re invited. So promptly RSVP. Say yes!

The whole Old Testament and especially the prophetic books can be summarized as God’s advance invitation, his first invitation to the banquet that he himself is even now preparing. Through the prophet Isaiah, for example, the Lord calls out...

*“Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost...
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,*

and you will delight in the richest of fare.” Isaiah 55:1-2

God is preparing a feast—and you’re invited! He’s done all the heavy lifting. He’s paid for it all. A few verses later, you hear the importance of giving your RSVP right away. Isaiah 55:6 beckons...

“Seek the Lord *while he may be found*;
call on him *while he is near.*”

Every invitation to a wedding reception includes a deadline. So it is with the feast in God’s Kingdom. You’re invited. RSVP now.

To be clear, who does Jesus invite to the feast? First, he invites the weary:

“Come to me, all you who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest.” Matthew 11:28

The Lord’s invitation extends to those who feel empty:

“Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” John 7:37-38

And Christ invites those who recognize their guilt due to sin:

“I have not come to call the righteous, but sinners.” Mark 2:17

Everyone is invited, *whoever* will RSVP. As John 3:16 famously declares, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.” *Whoever*. Anyone. You. God is throwing a party, and you’re invited. So RSVP!

How do you do that? John tells us early in his gospel, “He [Jesus] came to his own people, and even they rejected him. But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God.” John 1:11-12 NLT

Your RSVP can be as simple as praying, “Lord, I hear your invitation. I believe your invitation includes me. I want to RSVP! Even as I believe in you, Lord Jesus, I ask you to receive me into your Kingdom.”

If you make that your sincere prayer, here’s a promise from Jesus you can hang onto: “Whoever comes to me I will never drive away.” (John 6:37) God is throwing a party, and you’re invited! So RSVP.

The second Kingdom of God secret this parable reveals is the caution not to *miss out* on the feast.

There’s room at the table, so RSVP: don’t miss it!

The invitation goes out to many, Jesus says. Verse 18 he continues, “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.’

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

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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.'

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In his generosity and graciousness, God extends his invitation far and wide. Many are invited, but many shut themselves out through lame excuses. Short-sightedness bars them from ever making it to the feast. What was true then is still so today. Human nature has not changed. The cost of discipleship seems too high for many. They make excuses, and miss the window of opportunity.

What's behind all three excuses given in the parable is the wrong-headed belief that "I've got better offers elsewhere. I don't see the banquet in God's Kingdom as of greater value than anything else—possessions, money, and family.

The excuses put out here are similar to ground Jesus has already covered:

- In Luke chapter nine, people make three similar excuses not to follow him.
- In Luke chapter 17, Jesus warns about similar priorities people were giving themselves to right up to the moment the flood of Noah's time came—and destroyed them all.

God's Kingdom is missed through short-sighted excuses

The secret revealed here is sobering and clear: God's Kingdom is *missed* through short-sighted excuses.

No excuse is worth it that causes you to miss out on the greatest invitation to ever come your way. God is preparing a feast, and you're invited! So RSVP. Don't miss it.

- Anyone can find reasons *not* to come to Christ;
- *Not* to come to church;
- *Not* to connect and contribute.

Excuses are easy to find. They're easy to fall for. But when they bar you from jumping at the chance to be reconciled to God, they're worthless.

Here's a list of lame excuses. See if any hit home for you.

Top 10 Reasons Not to Wash

10. I'm too busy to wash.

9. People who make soap are only after your money.

8. When bathrooms tailor to me, maybe then I'll consider washing.

7. I was forced to wash as a child.

6. I believe I'm clean, so I am.

5. There are so many different kinds of soap that I can't decide which one is best.

4. I haven't found a bathroom that has everything I want.

3. I'll start washing when I get older and dirtier.

2. People who wash think they're cleaner than everyone else.

1. I used to wash. But it got boring, so I stopped.

Pretty lame, don't you think? So it is with excuses for not responding to *God's* invitation to be cleansed, renewed, and welcomed into his Kingdom.

Excuses are the cradle that Satan rocks men off to sleep in.

Back in the 1800s, Dwight Moody cautioned that "Excuses are the cradle ... that Satan rocks men off to sleep in." Don't *miss* God's Kingdom due to excuses in the rush and crush of the moment. Hear his invitation. Weigh its value. And RSVP—personally and promptly.

The third Kingdom of God secret in this parable is that...

There's room at the table, so RSVP: you'll be so glad you came!

Those who ultimately say yes and follow through on God's invitation are a delightfully surprising lot. They encompass those unlikely to be invited to much of anything this side of eternity: "*the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.*" Again, who will be at heaven's great banquet? *Everyone who RSVPs* to the Lord's invitation.

Every once in a great while, we get a taste of what a diverse bunch heaven's guests will be. If you're looking for a place to hold a high-end wedding banquet in Sacramento, California, you probably can't do much better than the four-star restaurant located within Sacramento's Citizen Hotel.

Five days before her big day and reception at the Citizen, Quinn Duane's fiancée broke the engagement and called off the wedding. He wasn't going through with it. Quinn's parents had booked the place months in advance. There's no way they'd get a refund at such a late date.

So they contacted a group who provides services to help people transition out of homelessness. That organization in turn started inviting homeless singles, families and the elderly to the already-paid-for, top-notch dinner, complete with bus passes to bring them.

The food, originally intended for the wedding's 120 guests, included salmon and steak as well as appetizers, salad and gnocchi. The cost, including the paid-for honeymoon, totaled \$35,000.

Quinn's Mom and Dad met arriving guests and got to hear their stories throughout the evening. "As a family," he said, "we took away something good from this."

Source: Cathy Locke, "El Dorado Hills Family Turns Canceled Wedding Into Banquet For People In Need," The Sacramento Bee (10-20-15)

You hear a true story like this and it causes a deep sense to well up of how *good* this is. *Gracious and generous*, turning what was a terrible situation into something beautiful.

This, Jesus says, is what God is up to right now. Even today, there is room at the table. The cost of admittance has been paid in full. So come. Like those guests in Sacramento who never expected to be invited, you'll be so glad you said yes.

In the end, Jesus says, those who will be at the great banquet of God will come from far-flung places, and they will include the seemingly least likely — among them the the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

The *great gladness* at the feast in God's Kingdom is going to be *greater because of who is there*.

- Those who come to God knowing they're *poor*, but then the Lord blesses them with spiritually *riches*, will be *thrilled*.
- Those who come to the Lord *sick* who are then *healed* will express *gratitude unrestrained*.
- Those who come through Christ having been *blind and lame* will see things unseen by many and walk confidently on ground they never could have so much as *imagined*.
- Those who come to Christ aware of their *guilt* will be *relieved* to experience that Christ's death on the cross was enough *for them* to be granted entrance into God's Kingdom with all the rights and privileges of a deeply loved son or daughter.

From where we stand, it's hard to envision the overwhelming sense of happiness, joy, gratitude, thankfulness, praise and celebration that will be found at that banquet. But it's coming, and soon. God is giving a party. Are you coming? And who are you inviting to join you? There's still room at the table!