

How to feast with God

Luke 14:1-24

I was once best man at a friend's wedding. At the wedding feast, everyone sits where the hosts of the wedding have assigned them. Sometimes that means sitting at a whole table of people you know really well. Other times, you end up sitting next to a bunch of complete strangers and making small talk for three hours.

But when you're the best man... Well, then you sit at the top table, right? Then, you take off your jacket and hang it on the back of the seat at the right hand of the groom - right? Well, that's what I did as I arrived at the reception venue. I was just settling in to my chair when my friend, the groom, came over and had a quiet word.

'Erm... actually, that's not your seat. That's for the mother of the bride. Your seat's down there.' He pointed to the end of the table. Now it was still top table - but it was a bit of a climb down. You might think, 'Wait a minute, Scott, you've been done over there! Of course the best man sits next to the groom!' (Thanks very much for your silent, assumed support there). But the point is, it wasn't for me to assume my position, or my right to anything. It was up to the host where his guests sat.

In Luke 14:1-24, Jesus is reclining at a table having a meal - as He often is in Luke's gospel. And whilst He's there, He tells some stories about God's take on feasting and how to do it. It's not the first time in Luke that Jesus uses the image of a feast at God's table to describe life with Him, now and especially beyond death. And it won't be the last time He talks like this either. But who's at the feast, and who isn't? Who's there but getting taken down a seat or two - like me at my friend's wedding?

First, a quick word on a passage we've skipped over since we were last in Luke. In 13:22-30, Jesus is asked, 'Are only a few people going to be saved?' And Jesus' answer is, 'Those who know God - people who don't just know *about* Him, but who *know* Him in relationship - *they* will be saved. There will be lots of them from all over the world, taking their place at God's feast. But lots more people who assumed they were safe because of who they were or where they came from are going to get a nasty, eternal surprise.'

Not everyone is going to live with God, either now or forever. Lots of people go through life without giving this a lot of thought, but they assume that, if there is such a thing as eternal life, God will probably give it to them if He's

the nice sort of guy that 'more religious' people think He is. That's not at all what God has said about it though. So it's time to listen to what the host of the feast says about who's coming.

At the dinner table in chapter 14, Jesus tells us what kind of people are going to feast with God. First of all, they are *people interested in human beings being released from what binds them*. In vv.1-6, Luke tells us yet again about Jesus healing a man on the Sabbath, in front of the religious authorities who insisted that this was unlawful.

Those who are coming to life with God now and to feast with Him forever are people who love what God loves - the release of human beings from what binds them. They are people who know that they themselves need to be set free from something - that they're not 'okay' under their own steam.

They need to be set free from sin, death, illness, poverty and exclusion; from the insatiable desire for acceptance, or money, or meaning, or love, or purpose, or power, or image, or status. They need to be set free from a consuming addiction to work, or family, or drugs, or a romantic partner, or alcohol, or shopping, or porn, or sport, or gaming, or social media, or whatever is filling the void, providing the distraction from emptiness and hollowness and fear.

People who realise their need to be set free by God also value that mission being expressed towards other people. They value compassion towards others in prayer and action for their release, more than they value rules about what you can do on a Sunday; or what is acceptable behaviour in our society. These kinds of people, you can expect to see sat at a table with their name on it at God's wedding feast.

Does it matter to you that you are 'set free' by God? Does it matter to you that other people are?

Secondly, those at God's table are people who are *humbly dependent on their host*. In vv.7-11, Jesus tells a parable not a million miles from my experience as a best man. I presumed what was due to me and exalted myself to the highest seat I could imagine for myself. So I got booted down.

But other friends of the bride and groom that day turned up at the door, not sure that they were supposed to have a seat. They were about to leave instead of make a fuss, when their hosts said, 'No, we want you here! Come in and have a seat up here!'

v.7 reports that Jesus is telling a parable here. That means, He's not just giving helpful advice for social engagements. He's telling us something about the Kingdom of God. At the feast that God is preparing, 'everyone who exalts themselves will be humbled, and whoever humbles themselves will be exalted.'

How does our world work? Everyone tries to make themselves bigger. To have a bigger house, a better car, a respectable career, a beautiful partner. At heart, everyone is trying to better themselves and beat those around them. It's in every 'I don't still want to be here in 5 years time' thought. Every 'our one isn't as new or big or shiny as theirs' comparison. Everyone in the world is trying to push themselves up to a better seat.

Those who are coming to life with God now and to feast with Him forever are people who stop trying to make themselves bigger, because when they become aware of the presence of God, they understand how little and humble they really are. They don't presume that they should be in any seat in life other than the one they are in. And they rest content in the trust that it's up to God whether and how He changes our circumstances and moves us up or down.

Self-exaltation says, 'Grab what you can in life, get in before the next guy.' Humility says, 'Lay down your rights and any sense of entitlement, and let God put you where He will.' Self-exaltation reaches for the good of self, and says about others, 'I'll leave that up to God.' Humility reaches for the good of others, and says about the self, 'I'll leave that up to God.'

Take a minute to think about these questions, and invite the Spirit of God to show you if there's something here that you haven't spotted before:

Is there something in your life that you haven't got that you're bitter about? Why are you bitter?

Have you had an experience recently where you assumed you were entitled to something, and you didn't receive it? Was your response to that rooted in humility or self-exaltation?

Where do you crave to be seen with respect? Why? Is that bigger to you than making yourself lower for God's glory?

Does it bother you that someone else is getting credit and congratulation when you're not? Why?

Do you believe that in the light of God's majesty, you're as small as the child in this picture? As poor as the dirt on his face? And do you trust that what He gives to you in life is marked with His love?

Prayer - Father we humble ourselves before you. We recognise that every one of us is very, very small in your presence. Yet we trust in your loving desire to lift us up. We trust you to have us where you want us to be in life. And we pray that we would be made lower, that you might be lifted higher in the eyes of the watching world. Amen.

Thirdly, the people welcomed to God's table are those who *generously host the humble*. In vv.12-14, Jesus challenges His host to invite someone else round next time. Not the local celebrity who is drawing the crowds, so he could say 'Guess who was round at *my* house?!' (which is probably why this Pharisee had invited Jesus). Not family or fellow middle class friends for the back-and-forth 'we had you last week so you come to ours this time' and 'we'd better bring them something because they always bring us something' social roundabout.

Darrell Bock commented: 'The best hospitality is that which is given, not exchanged.' There's nothing wrong with *exchanging* hospitality. It's a big part of many of our lives. But there's nothing remarkable or Kingdom-of-God-like about it, either. It's a rewarding life experience to share each others' meal tables in itself. But there's nothing of *eternal* reward in this.

Whereas, the alternative invitees that Jesus suggests to His host - the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind - the ones who couldn't repay this host's favour with so much as a cheap packet of rich teas from the shop round the corner - *they* are the ones to host if you want to do something of eternal significance and reward.

In Jesus' society, the poor, crippled, lame and blind were the forgotten people. What the world does, in every age and society, is to put the excluded, overlooked and forgotten people in the rear view mirror, driving away from them whilst it pursues the wealthy, significant and popular people. What Jesus would have God's people do is the opposite. Pursue the lost and left behind, and put 'arriving with the in crowd' in the rear view mirror. And that even shapes who we ask round for dinner.

Who gets overlooked and left behind in our society? In our church?

Who could you have to dinner in the next month that might not otherwise be asked? Or who could you ask that can't return the favour?

All of these things that Jesus has said and done at the table - healing someone to set them free from what binds them; declaring that the humble will be lifted up and the self-exalting knocked down; teaching generous hospitality towards people that cannot possibly pay you back - all of this reflects the character of God Himself. This is God sitting at a dinner table, pouring out who He is and what He loves over food and wine.

At the cross, Jesus set people free from what binds them. That was the whole point of it. Setting us free from the guilt and penalty of our sin, setting us free from the death that would claim us forever except that Jesus broke it in His victory over the cross. Setting us free from being defined by anything smaller in life than 'forgiven and made new in Christ.'

At the cross, Jesus humbled Himself completely. Whilst human beings kept trying to make themselves as god-like as they could, God made Himself a vulnerable human being. He even hung naked on a cross to die. He made Himself nothing for the benefit of you and me.

And at the cross, Jesus offered us something that we could never, ever pay back. This was hospitality of the greatest kind. Through this, God says, 'Welcome home with me. Welcome to the family. You belong. I have laid on everything you need to be able to come here, now and forever.'

People who know the Son of God who did these things, are people who live out the family likeness more and more - prioritising setting people free, humbling themselves, and showing 'don't pay me back' hospitality. This is how the people round God's meal table roll.

You know when someone says something controversial at the dinner table? After a brief awkward silence, someone says something to try to lighten the mood. 'The food's delicious!' or 'Crazy weather we've been having, eh?' In v. 15, someone at the dinner table gets uncomfortable with all the challenging words Jesus has been speaking to guests picking the best seats and a host who was out to look impressive. So he pipes up, 'It'll be nice when we're all eating together in Heaven one day.'

But Jesus tells another parable in vv.16-24 to challenge this guy, too! In the parable, not everyone *is* there at God's feast - a reminder of what He had said in chapter 13. And it's because of this: They were invited, but they said 'not now.'

Last week, I asked us all to go and invite someone to come to church with you. How are you getting on with that, by the way? Some of us have gone for it, others of us are going to! But that's the starting point here in the story. The host of the feast (representing God) tells His servants to invite people to *come*.

And what God and His servants get in response are excuses. 'I can't, I need to check out a field I've just bought.' 'I can't, I've bought some oxen, need to see how well they work.' 'I can't, I've just got married - need to give some time to my spouse.' All new things that are getting in the way of eternal things. There's nothing here that can't wait until they've come and tasted what God has to offer them. But they'd rather carry on with what they've made themselves busy with in life. It's not so much 'no thanks' as 'not now.'

It's not too hard to see how this works in the suburbs of Inverness. 'Church? I can't come, at least not now - just a bit busy with the new house / new baby / new job / new car / new hobby. Thinking about what God has to say to me? I can't just now - my mind's too full of what my friends have to say to me, or my kids, or my partner, or my boss, or what I have to say to myself.'

Life's full of voices competing for attention, and new things to keep us from eternal things. When the servants return to tell the master, 'Sorry, everyone's saying they're too busy for you,' God doesn't say, 'Oh well, fair enough. Another time perhaps.' He gets angry. 'Not now,' it turns out, isn't an acceptable reply to God. He's already 'put the food out.'

Or to put it another way, He's already taken the trouble of coming to this world, suffering pain, torture and death on our behalf, and conquering a grave. That's been served up on a plate for people. And they're too busy to receive it. God's offended by that rejection, and the story ends with Him saying, 'Not one of those people who refused me will be present at the eternal feast.'

We've got to give people a chance to 'come.' To ask the question, as we talked about last week. But the reality is, a tragic number of comfortable suburbanites filling their lives with new fields, oxen and wives - or rather, new

houses, cars, relationships, gadgets, jobs, holidays and patios - will say, 'sorry, too busy.' So here's what God tells His servants to do next...

The word changes from *come* to *go*. 'Go... quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame (that's the forgotten people in society, remember?)' Now the servants report that this has actually already been done, but there's still room. If we went to where the forgotten people in our community actually are, many more of them would come and share life with God with us than the 'sorry, too busy' brigade.

The challenge for us is - can we say, as God's servants do in the story, 'Yes, Lord, it's been done?' I think our church has a very long way to go on this - me included. Let's pray that a year from now, we can say this with honesty, and see God's house made fuller.

But even then, the servants say, there's more room! And God says 'go!' again. This time it's 'Go... out to the roads and country lanes and *make* them come in!' Go as far as you have to go, and do what you've got to do, to bring people to share this life with God together with us - why? Because *God wants His house to be full*, v.23 says.

We're soon going to be constructing a physical building for people to worship God in, amongst other things. And as we do that, we need to keep in mind this 'come' and 'go' that God instructs His servants with. This is not a church building just for us to come to. Every one of us will be called to invite others to 'come' and experience life with God together with us, too. Some will. Many won't.

But then every one of us is called to *go*, as far and wide and long as we have to, to bring in the forgotten and the far off, to fill this house with the worship of God, and the sharing of the feast of life with Him together. Let's go and live with the compassion, humility and generosity of Jesus - experiencing that ourselves, and sharing that with others - so that every name place at the table is filled with the person that God wants to be sitting there.