



Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church
Sanford, North Carolina

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God's Guest List
Luke 14:1-24

Have you hosted a banquet or a dinner or a party lately?

There's a lot you have to do to get ready for it, isn't there? You have to set the time, make all the arrangements, buy the food, decorate, and more.

And to do it right, you need to know who's coming, don't you? So what do you usually do? You make up a guest list, right? Then you send out invitations or call the people on the list and ask them to come. And most of the time you want to know very specifically who is planning to attend. That way you can have a better idea of what kind of preparations you need to make.

You don't want to run out of food, but you also don't want to be eating leftovers all the following week. And you don't want to get things mixed up like the M&Ms commercial that's been running on TV, where after the M&M characters have been rung up and put in the grocery bag, the peanut M&M picks up a list and says, "Look, we're on the guest list." And the regular M&M replies, "That's the menu . . ."

At the table . . .

Banquets and dinners were important events in the Jewish, Greek, and Roman cultures of the ancient world. Giving these dinners was often a matter of hospitality, but it was also a matter of pride of place and prestige. It was often the prominent people who gave these feasts, and they would usually invite other prominent people, along with their family and friends. And the social rules in Israel in Jesus' day dictated that people who were not invited could still come and observe the meal to see who was there and what they were having and such.

So here was Jesus at one of these meals. It was in the home of "a prominent Pharisee" (14:1; Luke says literally "a ruler of the Pharisees"),¹ and it was on a Sabbath day. It was sort of like our Sunday dinner.

Everyone there was watching Jesus carefully. They wanted to see what he would do and hear what he'd say. And the way Luke says it, he implies that they were doing this in order to find something to use against Jesus.

There was somebody else at the meal, too—a man with "dropsy" (14:2). Dropsy describes a condition that's really a symptom of some deeper disease or dysfunction of the body. It's the buildup of excess fluid in the flesh or in the body cavities or around the heart or in the lungs. It caused a lot of swelling. Medically speaking, the cause is often congestive heart failure or kidney failure.

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture quotations are from the *New International Version*.

Now Luke doesn't tell us whether the man was a guest at this meal or if he was one of those looking on. He could have been either, since dropsy was sometimes thought of as a rich man's disease, resulting from a luxurious lifestyle. People in Jesus' day also sometimes thought of the disease as an analogy of being rich. The person with dropsy often craved something more to drink, just like those who were rich often craved more and more money.² So this man could have been one of the guests, or he may have been one of those who were looking on. Whatever the case, Luke says that the man was "in front of" Jesus (14:2).

So Jesus asked the Pharisees and those who were experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" (14:3). They wouldn't answer. So Jesus took the man and healed him. Then he asked the host and his guests, "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on a Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?" (14:5). And they couldn't say anything.

To guests and hosts . . .

Now they were watching Jesus, but he was watching them too. One thing he noticed was how as the guests came in, they picked out the places of honor to sit down. You see, in that society, there was rank and order, and how people dressed and where they sat reflected that. Social protocol required that people be seated according to how important they were—the more important they were, the closer they sat to the host.³ So people liked to sit in the places of honor at banquets and other events. They were trying to enhance their social status. They were there for what they could get out of it, rather than as a grateful response to the generosity of a friend.

Luke says that Jesus told them a parable (12:7).

He told them that when someone invites them to a wedding feast, they should take the low place rather than the place of honor. If they take the place of honor and someone more important than them comes in, they'll be shamed in front of everybody when the host asks them to give up their seat to the more prominent person. But if they take the low place and the host comes to them and says, "Friend, move up to a better place," they'll be honored in the presence of the other guests.

Now this doesn't really sound like other parables Jesus told, but by referring to it as a parable, Luke raises it above the level of practical advice about social etiquette and protocol. Because you see, here's the point of the parable in v. 11: "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." Among the Jews, to avoid speaking the name of God, they often put what they were saying in the passive voice to show that it was something God was doing. God would humble those who exalt themselves, and he would exalt those who humble themselves.⁴ Better by far to be exalted by God than humbled!

Now Jesus didn't let his host off the hook, either. He told him that when he gives a banquet he shouldn't invite his family and friends and rich neighbors. He said that inviting them amounts to expecting a payback—that "they might invite you back and so you will be repaid" (14:12).

Jesus seemed to be dealing here with situation a bit like Hyacinth Bucket on the British comedy *Keeping Up Appearances* that runs on public television on Saturday evenings. Though her married name is spelled like "bucket," she insists that it be pronounced like "bouquet." Hyacinth is always planning some kind of candlelight supper or special event or trying to make her way into situations that will help her climb the social ladder. It's always to impress

² Charles H. Talbert, *Reading Luke: A Literary and Theological Commentary on the Third Gospel*, rev. ed. (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2002), 172.

³ Malcolm Tolbert, "Luke," *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, Vol. 9 (Nashville: Broadman, 1970), 119.

⁴ Tolbert, *BBC*, 119.

somebody else. And it's always in the hope of getting some kind of self-advancement from it. And most of the time, it backfires. She tries to exalt herself, and she is humbled. She tries to advance herself, only to have it blow up in her face.

That's the kind of thing Jesus was warning the host about. So if the host is not to invite his family and friends and rich neighbors, whom is he to invite? Jesus said, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just" (14:13-14).

Now of course that's what *we* always do, right? We never, especially as a church, invite just those who can benefit us in some way, right? We're never guilty of having a tendency toward recruiting members who as we so delicately put it, "can be a real asset to our church," while giving little attention to or practically ignoring those around us who need far more from us than they're able to give, are we? We wouldn't do that, would we?

When Jesus gave these instructions to his host, somebody at the table, wanting to say something religious, apparently, piped up and said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (14:11).

And Jesus responded with another parable. You know the story he told.

A certain man was preparing to give a banquet and sent out the invitations to many people. As was the custom, when the banquet was almost ready, he sent his servant to go tell the guests that everything was ready. But they all began to offer excuses. One had just bought a field, and had to go look at it. Another had bought five yoke of oxen, and had to try them out. Another had just gotten married, and couldn't come.

Some excuses, huh?

I remember a story a preacher friend told years ago about a farmer whose neighbor was always borrowing something from him, and if he ever did return anything, it was only after a long, long time. One day the neighbor asked the farmer if he could borrow his rope. The farmer said, "Nope. I can't spare it. I'm using my rope to tie up my milk." The neighbor said, "To tie up your milk?" And the farmer said, "Yep. When you don't want to do something, one excuse is as good as another."

How was it one of my middle school teachers used to put it? She said her father always said that "an excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie."

Look at what Jesus said happened when the man's servant came back and reported what those he had invited said. He became angry and ordered his servant to go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the city, and bring the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame for the feast. The servant did that and there was still room, so the master told him, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full" (14:23).

And then Jesus said to all of them there (the "you" in v. 24 is plural in the Greek—"y'all") that "not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." He was talking about his messianic banquet in the kingdom of God.

You see, in this parable, Jesus traces the history of God's salvation. The Jewish leaders have rejected his call, so Jesus calls the "sinners" among the Jews. Their response doesn't fill the Father's house, so he invites the Gentiles (those outside the city). Those who respond to the invitation are those who will share in the banquet!

You see, *God's guest list includes the outcast, the hurting, the downtrodden, and the outsider as well as those who aren't.*

Did you notice that Jesus used this idea of inviting the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind *twice* in this passage? They weren't invited by the Pharisees, but they were on God's guest list!

What about our list?

Now when I look at this passage, I have to stop and ask myself: Am I more like those Pharisees or Jesus? Do I relate to people to advance myself, for what I can get out of them? Or do I try to relate to them in a way that honors them as human beings created in the image of God, and demonstrates God's love in Christ to them?

Am I relating to them out of a spirit of legalism or Christ-like kindness? Am I bent on self-promotion or living in genuine humility? Am I operating out of self-seeking motives or out of a spirit of genuine grace?

I could ask the same thing about us as a church. Are we like the Pharisees? Or are we like Jesus?

We worship in the midst of a community that's filled with both physical and spiritual need. God has given us beautiful facilities and a multitude of other resources. It's very tempting for us to use all these things to feather our own nest, to take care of our own, to promote ourselves and the institution of the Jonesboro Heights Baptist Church. It's tempting for us to try to attract people who are "like us," you know, "our kind of people," people who will advance our church as an institution.

But then we read this story from Jesus. And we have to ask ourselves a huge question, a question that can turn things completely upside down for us, a question that we don't dare not ask—**Is God's guest list *our* guest list?**

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