

The Good News of the Kingdom
Table Talk of Jesus
Luke 16

Intro: Our vision of Jesus as a teacher is often thought of in terms of his sitting before large crowds, sharing with them His insights into the Law and God's purposes for the kingdom. But Jesus was teacher all the time; and he appears to have never missed the occasion to instruct those around them.

Luke tells us that Jesus was invited for a meal by one of the leaders of the Pharisees: *“AND it came about when He went into the house of one of the leaders of the Pharisees on the Sabbath to eat bread, that they were watching Him closely.”* (Luke 14:1)

Though the atmosphere was tense as the Pharisees were closely watching Jesus' actions, presumably using the occasion to find fault, Jesus used the occasion to teach them important lessons in parables.

Let's take a look at three parables Jesus spoke on this occasion and the lessons they teach.

Prideful self-seeking vs. humble submission

And He began speaking a parable to the invited guests when He noticed how they had been picking out the places of honor at the table; saying to them, “When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you may have been invited by him, and he who invited you both shall come and say to you, ‘Give place to this man,’ and then in disgrace you proceed to occupy the last place. But when you are invited, go and recline at the last place, so that when the one who has invited you comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will have honor in the sight of all who are at the table with you. For everyone who exalts himself shall be humbled, and he who humbles himself shall be exalted.” (Luke 14:7–11)

Jesus once characterized the Pharisees as a group as men who loved the chief seats.

Woe to you Pharisees! For you love the front seats in the synagogues, and the respectful greetings in the market places. (Luke 11:43)

They were men of prideful self-seeking. Apparently these guests were of similar disposition, many of whom may have been Pharisees. They were positioning themselves so as to be in the most honored place, presumably close to the host. Of course, what that indicated was their desire to be noticed and honored. And it reveals that they had a high estimation of themselves in comparison with others.

Jesus corrected the practice by urging them to take the lower position. It would avoid the embarrassment of being asked to move to another location; and it would open up the possibility of being moved up.

But Jesus was doing more than giving some pragmatic advice about how to conduct oneself at a banquet. The event itself could be a kingdom metaphor for how we see ourselves in our relationship to God and others.

The Pharisees had manifested the attitudes of arrogance that made them unsuitable for the kingdom and great critics of Jesus. But Jesus taught the opposite, namely, that the proper attitude is humility submission before God (and humble service to others).

We have every reason to be humble; and the keys to humility are revealed in this statement: *To know God is to understand both his infinite greatness and our own impotence and sinfulness*¹ When we see how small we are in comparison with God's greatness and we see how sinful we are in comparison with God's holiness, we cannot do anything but bow in humble submission before Him!

To claim God's approval as a right, on the grounds of one's position in the church, or one's reputation in the community, or even one's good opinion of oneself, is a positive disqualification. There is no entry through the narrow door for the one who is laden with status symbols and a sense of his own importance.²

Thus, Jesus' exhortation to the guest contains a parable to all who would enter the kingdom.

But if Jesus had a lesson for the guests, he also had one for the host and those who would be potential hosts of others.

Calculated reciprocity vs. God-like generosity

And He also went on to say to the one who had invited Him, "When you give a luncheon or a dinner, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return, and repayment come to you. But when you give a reception, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, since they do not have the means to repay you; for you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous." (Lk. 14:12–14)

A person who planned a luncheon or dinner would likely invite the people he liked (his friends), perhaps his relatives, and possibly some people with whom he might want to gain influence (those well-to-do). All these invitees would likely be the kind of people who would reciprocate the invitation. Thus, the luncheon just became the first of a series of exchanges where one would enjoy the provision of others after providing something for them. And thus one could see in the host's actions nothing more than calculated self-interest.

The Pharisees apparent approached life with this "what can others do for me" mentality and the poor, instead of being objects of their care, with victims of their power: *"who devour widows' houses, and for appearance's sake offer long prayers; these will receive greater condemnation."* (Luke 20:47, NASB)

¹ Stein, R. H. (1992). *Luke* (Vol. 24, p. 391). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.

² Wilcock, M. (1979). *The Savior of the world: the message of Luke's gospel* (p. 145). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Jesus taught a different approach, one that reflects true generosity, since it provides for those who no one would likely invite to a dinner, since they had no means reciprocate. Thus in this case, generosity is motivated not by expected human repayment, but rather by divine repayment at the judgment.

As Wilcock points out in his commentary: "...so much of what we do is colored by the hope, if not the intention, that it may in some way work out to our own benefit."³

To be generous with those who cannot repay is an act of trust that God will reward the act in the future; and it imitates the generosity of God who is gracious to the most unlikely of people.

In our acts of generosity we should act not merely to improve our image or to make others beholden to us, but only to seek the approval of God and His reward.

Pious platitudes vs. a ready response

And when one of those who were reclining at the table with Him heard this, he said to Him, "Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!" But He said to him, "A certain man was giving a big dinner, and he invited many; and at the dinner hour he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for everything is ready now.' "But they all alike began to make excuses. The first one said to him, 'I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.' "And another one said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.' "And another one said, 'I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.' "And the slave came back and reported this to his master. Then the head of the household became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the city and bring in here the poor and crippled and blind and lame.' "And the slave said, 'Master, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' "And the master said to the slave, 'Go out into the highways and along the hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled. 'For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste of my dinner.' " (Luke 14:15–24)

As the people sat around the table one of the guests made a comment indicating standard piety. Perhaps no one could have found fault with the sentiment it expressed. In fact, taken at face value, it would embody the kind of thinking that all people need to have, namely, to look forward with joyful anticipation to the unfolding kingdom of God. However Jesus used the occasion to distinguish between pious wishes and platitudes and real commitment to the kingdom.

In this case the "big dinner" becomes a metaphor for the invitation to enter the kingdom of God and to enjoy its provisions. Presumably the guests have accepted the invitation, but now, when the time arrives, they find various "reasons" for not going. Their reaction shows their lack of appreciation for their host and the opportunity of spending time with him.

³ Wilcock, M. (1979). *The Savior of the world: the message of Luke's gospel* (p. 146). Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.

Their rejection rightly angers the one who has provided these wonderful things for them. Those who reject the kingdom will be justly replaced by those least regarded to be worthy of it.

What Jesus makes clear is that pious platitudes are not enough! Good intentions pave the road to hell. We must move beyond these things to a ready response.

Excuses are deadly things. They poison the life of the Christian because they block the path to confession and forgiveness and rob faith of its vitality. The most dangerous excuses are those with which we fool ourselves. One of the unrecognized characteristics of excuses is that they accuse as well as excuse because they reveal our true priorities. The excuses we offer reveal the activities and commitments we hold to be of greater importance.⁴

And is it not true that people are often far more focused on their material interests than the prospect of being eternal with God?

But Jesus also makes clear that the kingdom belongs to those the world may consider least worthy of it.

Even today there are those who we expect to embrace the kingdom—those “raised in the church,” those who morally good. Yet these often refuse to respond, while those we might not expect to obey, surprisingly see the good news of the kingdom and embrace it readily!

Conclusion: So then, Jesus’ table conversation was filled with insight into the kingdom of God and makes clear not only the need to respond but also the attitudes of humility and generosity that salvation will produce.

Have we learned the lessons of Jesus’ table talk?

⁴ Culpepper, R. A. (1994–2004). The Gospel of Luke. In L. E. Keck (Ed.), *New Interpreter’s Bible* (Vol. 9, p. 291). Nashville: Abingdon Press.