

Table Talk: Confronting, Confounding, Converting!

(A study of Luke 14:1-24)

“Who Will Eat at the Feast in the Kingdom of God?” Here is a text from Luke, in which Jesus addressed this very important question . . .

15 One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, **“Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”**

16 Then Jesus said to him, “Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.*17* At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come; for everything is ready now.’

18 But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets.’*19* Another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets.’*20* Another said, ‘I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.’

21 So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, ‘Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’*22* And the slave said, ‘Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room.’*23* Then the master said to the slave, ‘Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled.

24 For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.’”
(Luke 14:15-24)

If you have ever encountered this parable before . . . studied it in a Bible Study, heard someone preach on it, read an interpretation of it . . . I’m pretty certain you have encountered an interpretation of it that goes something like this:

A man in Jesus’ company comments on the great blessedness awaiting those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. And Jesus responds by *describing that Kingdom feast* and those who will be guests at that banquet table . . . telling us, by means of this parable, *who* they are and *how* they got there.

Since we expect to be among those enjoying that great celebration, we must, of course, interpret the parable in such a way that we can see ourselves in those people who are enjoying the parable’s feast.

And of course it is quite easy for the parable to come that way. After all, God is about the business of inviting people to that great future feast, and to the life everlasting which it initiates. And we are among those who have heard the invitation. And we have responded to it. We’re planning to be there!

But unfortunately not everyone invited has responded as they should have. In fact some have flatly refused the invitation, making all sorts of unacceptable and to some extent ridiculous excuses for saying, “No.” What a shame, that they will miss God’s great banquet.

But God's table *will* be filled. If some refuse, many others will not. They will hear the invitation and they will respond, just as we have heard the great invitation and have responded by saying, "I'm coming!"

Those would be the basic lines of the traditional way this parable has been interpreted. It is a **comforting parable**, for we find in it reassurance that we are among the blessed, among those who "will eat bread in the Kingdom of God."

Now, depending on who was preaching or teaching, depending on which books you have read, or which interpretive methods you favor, the interpretation of this parable that you have previously encountered might well have been much more elaborate than what I just recounted.

Perhaps you've seen in the parable references to different *kinds* of people. The first ones invited could possibly stand for the critical religious people, like the ones who rejected Jesus. They had been invited, but they found all sorts of elaborate excuses for not saying "Yes" to the kingdom invitation . . . for not becoming followers of Jesus and thus future guests at the Kingdom banquet God will be hosting.

But God's plan will not be thwarted. God will fill the banquet hall. So after God's invitation is spurned by the Pharisees, the Scribes, the Priests and other intended converts, God sends out the invitation to a broader group of people . . . the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. These people never really expected an invitation to the great banquet hall. In fact they needed to be recruited, persuaded and cajoled. But they do in fact come and no doubt sit there in amazement that they too would be included at a banquet far more elaborate than anything in their previous experience!

But before the meal begins the host notices that not all the places have been filled. So the call goes out once more . . . to the country roads, to the out-of-the-way places. Perhaps we are to imagine here the lepers who are excluded from normal society and therefore gather outside the village. Perhaps these are the foreigners not truly integrated into the life of the village. But they are also invited. In fact they are *compelled* to come. The strong word indicates the strong desire of the host that they be present as well, and no doubt also indicates the reluctance of these people to accept such a grand invitation. *They* are being invited to such a fine banquet? "*There must be some mistake!*" "Oh, no!" the messenger assures them, "The Master explicitly told us to invite you . . . the outsiders, the ones even less likely to be there than the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.!"

Now, I can only guess what you've been told these various groups of people might stand for. I've heard people suggest that, just as the master went to the "common people", after the man's rich friends impolitely refused the invitation, so also Jesus went to the ordinary Jews after being rejected by the religious establishment. The invitation to God's banquet, thus, went out first to the religious leaders. After they refused it, the invitation was extended to ordinary Jews. Against all normal expectations, they come and take the seats intended for people far more worthy than themselves. I've heard the suggestion made that those in the lanes outside the village, the people who are outcasts from society in the parable, might well represent the Gentiles in the interpretation of the parable that Jesus or Luke had in mind. For after all, they were truly outsiders (and unclean at that), as far as 1st century Jews were concerned. Most Jews did not anticipate their presence at the final banquet God is preparing, though clearly Jesus himself did.

Now this interpretation, though rather widespread, is not without significant difficulties. Are we to believe that the only reason ordinary Jews got into the banquet was because the more worthy leaders of

Israel proved unworthy in the end? Good thing the religious leaders declined or nobody else would have gotten in (we imagine the parable saying). Are we to believe that including the *poor* was a kind of afterthought for God, when Plan A failed? And are we to believe that the only reason *Gentiles* got in was because not enough Jews said, “Yes”? Good thing there weren’t enough poor, crippled, blind and lame Jews around or the Gentiles would have been left on the outside (we imagine the parable saying). And *how does it feel* to you to be compared to “the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame” . . . or (assuming you are a Gentile as I am) . . . to a leper or an outcast of some other sort?

But interpreters of the text have always found ways around these difficulties . . . usually by quoting the over-used and the over-believed maxim: “*A parable can have only one point!*” That “One Point” would then be a warning against making shoddy excuses and missing out on the great banquet. All the rest of the details in the parable are thus declared irrelevant and thus not in need of interpretation.

I must confess that something seems fishy in the whole approach that I have just shared with you . . . one so widespread, that it is a pretty safe bet; it is the only one most of you have ever heard from a lectern or a pulpit.

I want to propose an alternative reading of this parable, and then end with what I think might be a provocative proposal: Maybe we can have it both ways!

This new reading is not my own. I first encountered it in a commentary by Joel Green and subsequently in other sources as well.

We want to begin our new reading by examining some of the cultural backgrounds that shed light on what is going on here, and then later we will look closer at the literary context in Luke’s Gospel.

First, the double invitation:

Did you ever puzzle about verse 17? The guest list had been completed long ago. The invitations had been sent out; the RSVP’s had been received. But now there seems to be a second invitation. “Come to the banquet!” Was the host somehow worried they might have forgotten or needed a bit of extra persuasion to actually come?

Not at all. The host is simply acting according to the typical first century protocols for hosting a banquet. There were *always* two invitations.

Now there were some fairly mundane and obvious reasons for this. The people did not carry watches, of course, nor beepers to remind them of events on their social calendar. Nor did the host’s oven have an automatic timer and a meat thermometer, safeguards against the embarrassment of a banquet not ready on time. Nor did they employ a caterer who guaranteed a lavish feast that would be piping hot at the precise moment the banquet was scheduled to begin.

The second invitation was needed simply to summon the guests whom the host already *knew* were coming. It was to inform them that the preparations were complete, the food had been prepared, and they should now come and find their place at the banquet table.

But of course a much earlier invitation had also been issued. People did not normally recruit guests to a banquet after preparing the food. The food was prepared for a very concrete list of people who had been previously invited and who had accepted the invitation.

Now in our day and age, an early invitation is absolutely crucial if we want people to make room in their over-crowded schedules for a special event. No doubt you have, as I have, scratched your head more than once, as you looked at your already filled day-timer, wondering how to adjust your schedule to accommodate an event you just didn't want to miss. So the more important the event, the earlier the invitations need to go out . . . or people will be unable to fit it into their schedules. That is how it is in our day and age.

Back then it was very different. Virtually every evening was available to develop social relations in the family and in the village. Back then early invitations were needed for a very different reason.

You see a typical first century banquet was usually designed to be so much more than merely a celebratory meal. Banquets were highly symbolic events designed to measure and to enhance one's social standing, one's degree of honor and prestige. *One did not invite just anyone to a feast.* If people lower on the social scale were to sit at my table, my own standing, my honor and prestige would be dragged down. The ideal would be to invite people just above me on the scale of social standing. That way my prestige would be pulled up. Of course, if I were to invite someone *too far* above me on the social scale, they would no doubt decline the invitation, and my own honor would take a beating.

In typical first century fashion, the host in Jesus' story issues two "invitations." People needed time to decide whether to accept or decline. They would normally accept, if doing so were likely to enhance their own social standing, and they would decline if the opposite were the case. Moreover, accepting an invitation would obligate them to reciprocate, and they would have to think carefully about their own ability to respond with a banquet at least as fancy as they were considering attending.

Besides, each guest would want to watch closely to see who else is being invited, and who is planning to come. One would only want to come if he (or she, though in that culture these would be mostly male gatherings) were likely to gain social status by associating with the other guests (and especially with the host).

So that is why the *guests* needed plenty of advance notice of an upcoming feast. But the *host* also needed advance notice as to who would be coming. When all the RSVP's were in, the host would decide whether to kill a fatted calf (if many are coming), a goat or a lamb (if fewer are coming) or perhaps a chicken (if the whole thing is falling flat).

When the food is ready, the second invitation is given. "Come to the banquet!" At that point it would be *unthinkable* for guests to change their response and not come. Yet, in Jesus' story that is precisely what *every* guest does, every one from the first to the last. And they offer shoddy excuses to justify their last minute change of plan. There is *clearly* a conspiracy at work here, and that, it seems to me, is one of the keys that unlocks this parable. But before we use that key, let's look at all this in a larger literary context.

Luke begins chapter 14 of his Gospel with an indication of the setting in which the parable of the banquet was told. It is at a special meal at the home of a leading Pharisee. During the meal a controversy develops when Jesus heals a man with "dropsy." The problem is that it is the Sabbath and Jesus' enemies do not think Jesus should be doing work like that on the day of rest. I remember wondering as a child whether "dropsy" was the sort of disease that makes people clumsy, "butter-fingers" . . . likely to drop things. In fact it is a disease where people become bloated because of their insatiable thirst. They would try desperately to quench their thirst by drinking more and more and more

. . . but to no avail. And what I subsequently learned was that “d Dropsy” was also used symbolically for those who loved money or honor so much they could never get enough! So Jesus heals a man with physical dropsy, but knows that, seated around the table at this meal, are those whose spiritual malady is far worse. They compete for status and honor, and the more they get, the more they want. It is a destructive cycle, both for those who are trampled in the rush to the top of the status game, and for those whose craving is never satisfied.

Now Jesus has a cure for *this kind* of dropsy as well . . . but it only works if people will receive it. He begins to prescribe the needed medicine in his ironic advice to his fellow guests. Listen to Jesus' advice:

Advice for Guests

7 When he noticed how the guests chose the places of honor, he told them a parable. 8 “When you are invited by someone to a wedding banquet, do not sit down at the place of honor, in case someone more distinguished than you has been invited by your host; 9 and the host who invited both of you may come and say to you, ‘Give this person your place,’ and then in disgrace you would start to take the lowest place. 10 But when you are invited, go and sit down at the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he may say to you, ‘Friend, move up higher’; then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at the table with you. 11 For all who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.” (Luke 14:7-11)

Now, taken quite literally, Jesus appears to be giving them strategies for milking their own system for all it is worth! But surely we can detect his tongue-in-cheek strategy. Clearly Jesus is not endorsing their status-seeking agenda and letting them in on secret strategies to make them even more successful. On one level Jesus is obviously being sarcastic, using dramatic irony.

And yet Jesus' words are not *only* ironic advice for achieving a goal he does not endorse. There is also an ironic truth behind the principle he is highlighting. True honor is not gained by clawing one's way to the top. True honor is a gift, bestowed freely by the one who invites us to his feast.

And that sets the stage for Jesus' next contribution to this dinner conversation.

Having addressed his fellow guests about how to find a proper seat at the table, he turns to the host and advises him on how to put on a banquet.

Advice for Hosts

12 He said also 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, in case they may invite you in return, and you would be repaid. 13 But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. 14 And you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for *you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*” (Verses 12-14)

Jesus has clearly finished speaking tongue-in-cheek. Jesus knows all about their system of patronage and benefaction. He knows the normal (i.e. the worldly) protocols for giving a dinner and for accepting an invitation to it. He knows the host and the guests will be striving for increased honor – striving to play up to important people. And he rejects the entire system as utterly inconsistent with the values of the Kingdom of God. Yes, Jesus has a cure for their kind of dropsy. But it is bitter medicine for those whose taste buds are shaped by this world's values.

In addressing the host, Jesus is about as confrontational as he could be: “You, sir, host of this dinner: You have invited all the wrong people to the dinner! You invited your friends, your relatives, your rich neighbors. You invited people who can pay you back. You invited people of your own social class. You invited people whose presence increases your status and standing in the village. Your guest list should have included ‘the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind.’ They would never be able to repay you, not with an earthly banquet as grand. But then you will qualify for God’s great banquet. You will feast at the table in the kingdom of God. You will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.”

Jesus is clearly drawing as stark a contrast as possible between the normal status-seeking ways of the world . . . and the radically counter-cultural way of God’s kingdom. In this world we seek to preserve and enhance our status by hobnobbing with important people. In God’s kingdom we break down social and economic barriers, joyfully awaiting the final reward that will more than repay us for anything we may sacrifice in this world’s currency. While Jesus’ words are sending shock waves around the banquet table . . . while the host (no doubt) seethes and his guests (no doubt) wait with bated breath to see how the conversation will proceed, one of the guests utters those words that lead into Jesus’ parable of the banquet:

“Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!”

And *that* is the occasion for Jesus’ parable. So who is that blessed person who will eat bread in the kingdom of God? Who will be invited to the great banquet in heaven’s banquet halls? Traditionally we’ve jumped into the middle of Jesus’ parable to look for the answer . . . It’s the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame who will be there . . . It’s those invited in from the highways and byways who will be there . . . It’s all those who say “yes” instead of coming up with shoddy excuses and staying away.

So what’s wrong with this traditional interpretation? What’s wrong is that one does not qualify for heaven by being poor and crippled and blind and lame . . . nor by being a social outcast. Indeed I expect to look around that heavenly banquet table and not label anyone as poor, crippled, blind and lame. They will all be sinners saved by grace, people who have said “Yes” to Jesus and learned from him to trade in the ways of this world for the values of the kingdom.

But then why does Jesus tell the parable the way he does? Here’s where I hope that at least a few people experience the “Aha” moment.

Let me again read Jesus’ final word to his host, and then the dinner guest’s response!

“When you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you, for *you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.*”

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, “*Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!*”

It is the sort of *host* who invites the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who will be blessed, this sort of person who will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous, this sort of person who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

If the question is: Who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God?

Then Jesus' answer by means of this parable is . . .

- NOT: the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame
- NOR: all those who do not come up with shoddy excuses for staying away.
- BUT RATHER: "The Host" in the story told here.

And then Jesus tells the story of a host who will indeed qualify for the heavenly banquet, because he meets the very condition Jesus has just stipulated – that is, inviting the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. He tells the story of a host who begins with all the values of the world: He invites his rich neighbors and anyone else whose presence at the banquet will increase his own status.

But he learns through bitter experience that the worldly game of status-seeking can just as easily work against him. For whatever reason, a conspiracy among the guests leads them all to shame him by refusing to come at the last minute, making him a laughingstock with a prepared dinner and nobody coming to honor him with their presence.

He decides to opt out of the status-seeking system of his world. He says "Yes" to the way of the Kingdom, "Yes" to the Lord who proclaims its presence. And he symbolizes his conversion by doing precisely what Jesus has just taught. He invites the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the outcast . . . all those who could never repay him. What can he now expect? Precisely what Jesus promised: He will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. He will eat bread in the Kingdom of God.

He no longer orients himself around the status-seeking people of this world. No longer will they be the only guests he would ever consider inviting; nor does he expect to be invited to their fancy dinners ever again. In fact he himself says, "The former guests will never taste of my banquet." He has opted out of their world and their worldly way. Indeed, he has destroyed even their attempts to shame him, by rejecting the whole worldview that makes their rejection an act of shaming in the first place.

This man is not now a new sort of benefactor, to whom a new set of people owe their allegiance and their honor. He has stepped out of that worldly system. He initiates a new community grounded in gracious and uncalculating hospitality.

Jesus' parable is not a story about the poor and the outcast eating bread in the *heavenly banquet*. It is the story of the poor and the outcast eating bread at *our tables* . . . at the tables of all those who are willing to say "yes" to Jesus and the ways of the kingdom . . . at the tables of all those who will no longer use table fellowship as a strategy to enhance personal prestige and honor and will rather make it a context for freely bestowing honor and acceptance on those who, in *this* world, could neither deserve it, nor repay us for showering it upon them.

Perhaps that was a bit too fast. Let me re-word this alternative interpretation and play it back once more:

Jesus has just said,

"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 righteous." (14:13, 14)

Jesus seems to be saying, "Don't play the earthly status game. Don't play up to important people. True status is a gift, God-given and passed on freely, not something fought for and earned." Associating with

those of little earthly standing may not enhance our earthly reputations, but the heavenly banquet will more than repay us for our choice to follow Jesus' way.

In *this* context one of Jesus' hearers exclaims, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!" I think that means, "How blessed will be the kind of host Jesus has just described. He will be a participant in God's heavenly feast." And so Jesus tells his story.

It is not a story about God's heavenly feast. It is the story of a person who learned to be the kind of host Jesus has just described. He starts out as the typical worldly host Jesus challenged. He invites all the high status people who will later pay him back. But this time his would-be guests conspire to embarrass and shame him, offering shoddy excuses and leaving him high and dry with a prepared banquet and no guests. He learns that the status game is not only contrary to the way of Jesus. It is also a risky game that can easily backfire. He decides to listen to Jesus. He expresses his newfound commitment by doing precisely what Jesus had just said his followers should do. He invites the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.

What can he expect? Precisely the reward Jesus promised – repayment at the resurrection of the righteous (v.14), or (as a guest at the table re-worded it) the blessing of eating bread in the Kingdom of God (v.15).

Luke 14:15-24 is really about an *earthly host* who learns that it pays to follow Jesus. It pays because it is a sure way to gain the only kind of honor that really matters, the honor of being invited to God's banquet.

I have now proposed two ways of reading this text. I've described the traditional way, in which we hear a *comforting* story assuring us: *we will be there!* And I've shared another one, one that, in my opinion, takes more seriously the context in which Luke passed on the parable, and behind that, the context in which Jesus originally told the parable in the first place. This one is a bit less comforting! It is a *challenging* interpretation that urges us to live the radically counter-cultural way of the Kingdom of God.

But what if we are not quite convinced that we should give up the traditional interpretation? After all, it has a long history of acceptance and there is a sort of logic to it as well.

Can we perhaps have it *both ways*?

Perhaps we can. Perhaps Jesus told his story just ambiguously enough that we can apply it twice. First it pictures God's way of offering heaven's blessings . . . inviting all, and gladly opening the doors of the banquet to all who will come. *And at the same time*, at another level, it pictures an appropriate response to that kind of generous God. It is precisely because God is the kind of host who invites not only the prestigious, but the humble to his banquet, that God expects those who feast with him also to welcome the lowly. We are challenged to invest ourselves in service and generosity to all God's children, trusting God to make it all worthwhile in this life, and especially in the next.

Questions for discussion:

1. What are the pros and cons of the “traditional way” of interpreting this parable?
2. What are the pros and cons of the “alternative way” of interpreting this parable that were proposed tonight?
3. Can we have it both ways? Why or why not?
4. How have I experienced “table fellowship” as a way of breaking down social barriers and creating an inclusive community that does not perpetuate this world’s ways of dividing people along lines of social standing?
5. How can we do more to break down those social barriers, around our tables or in other ways?