

The Parable of the Great Supper

A sermon by Rev. Michael Gladish
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“A certain man gave a great supper and invited many, and sent his servant at supper time to say to those who were invited, ‘Come, for all things are now ready.’ But they all with one accord began to make excuses” (Luke 14:16-18).

In the Gospels there are two parables about the Lord’s invitation to the kingdom of heaven, the one in Matthew 22 about a wedding feast, and the one in Luke 14 about “a great supper.” And of course the reason heaven is compared to a feast is that in heaven we can be filled to all eternity with the spiritual food – the goods and truths – that nourish our souls just as our natural bodies are nourished by food in this world.

Central to both stories in the Gospels, however, is the fact that those who were invited refused to come. They either spurned and rejected the invitation, killing the servants who offered it, or they made all sorts of excuses for why they wouldn’t, or felt they couldn’t come. Today we’re going to be focusing on the parable with all the excuses.

Now it’s important to note that the service today will include the holy supper, and this topic is not intended as a lecture on why you should partake. Rather it is a review of the conditions that can take us away from the spiritual nourishment that the Lord offers us in His Word. Still, there is a correspondence between the goods and truths of the Word and the bread and wine of the holy supper, and while we shouldn’t confuse natural things with spiritual things we can often learn useful things about ourselves by following the correspondences.

In Luke’s story if we begin at the beginning of chapter 14 we can see the whole context of the parable. Evidently the Lord is one of many who have been invited to “eat bread” (idiomatic for a whole meal) on the Sabbath at the house of one of the rulers of the Pharisees. This may have been Nicodemus, though it doesn’t say so explicitly. In any case there were others there, too, who at least *thought* they were important, since the Lord noticed how they jockeyed for position at the dinner – and that prompted Him to lecture them about a better way to be recognized, that is, take a lower seat in the hope of being called higher, rather than taking the best seat and then possibly having to give it up. Still, the real point was about genuine humility, which He stressed by saying “whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.”

Finally, He addressed His host directly, saying even he should not be giving a dinner with the hope of an invitation in return, but that he should consider himself blessed to be able to serve others *without thought of reward*. It was at this point that someone at the dinner said, “Blessed is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God!” And that was when the Lord told the parable of the invitation to heaven: in effect, He is *the ultimate Host*, and *we* are all invited to His feast of good things even though we couldn’t possibly repay Him for the invitation. What a gift! And yet what happened? “They all with one accord began to make excuses.”

So let’s have a close look at these excuses and see what they are really about. “The first said to [the man who invited him], ‘I have bought a piece of ground, and I must go and see it. I ask you to have me excused’” (v. 19). It may not seem significant at first, but this piece of ground more

specifically in the original language is a *field*, that is, a portion of land suitable for growing a crop. And the Writings explain that it represents the church, either the church as to its states of good where the seeds of truth *can be* sown, or the church as to its doctrine, which would be the same field where the seeds *have been* sown, filling it with a crop of wheat or barley.

But the purchase of *this* field is an excuse for not accepting the invitation to a heavenly feast, so it carries a negative connotation. The Writings don't explain this in detail but they do note that it represents the religious Jews at the time of the Lord rejecting Him, having already "bought into" their own ideas of what was true and good. And so it may, as well, represent our own unwillingness to enter into the true delights of heaven on account of our pre-occupation with our own ideas of what is true and good. Examples of this are everywhere, as we bring the thinking of the world into our reading of the doctrines rather than applying the doctrines to our thinking about the world. It's true that we can gain useful, valuable perspectives on what the Lord has revealed from every life experience, but when we question what the Lord has said based on some social or even scientific theory it's as if we are telling the Lord we can't come to His feast because we have already bought a field and we must go and see that field. So we ask to be excused from accepting His invitation.

Another who was invited to the feast said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to test them. I ask you to have me excused" (v. 19). This is really interesting, and it *is* explained in the heavenly doctrines where we read in several passages about the spiritual significance of the number, five, and also about oxen. Literally, five represents "a handful," and so *some* or *a little*. But it is also half of ten, which represents all the remains of good and truth that the Lord provides for our spiritual life and growth. So it signifies something of good, or something of truth, but not everything, and in this case the natural good apart from the spiritual.

Oxen, because of their characteristics of great strength and usefulness in primitive societies, represent the good of natural life, the good work we do in the fields of human endeavor, whether in the church or in the world generally. It might be physical or philosophical or political or social work, but it is all about the service we offer to others in our communities.

But again, if this service detracts from our attentiveness to what the Lord teaches in His Word then it can be an excuse that actually draws us away from heaven. So we read in the *Apocalypse Explained* #548:5,

"Oxen in the Word signify *natural* affections, and 'five yoke of oxen' signify all those affections or desires that lead away from heaven; heaven and the church in regard to *spiritual* nourishment or instruction being signified by the great supper to which they were invited."

It is particularly significant that the man using this excuse said that he had to go and "test" these oxen, or in the old translation "prove" them. Let's think about that. Isn't it true that we are constantly tempted to plan our lives around what makes sense or what is expedient in our natural lives? The real test, we often say, is whether it works. And yet the Lord asks us to consider spiritual values first of all, whether they provide for worldly success or not. Jesus said, "Do not think that I came to bring peace on earth. I did not come to bring peace but a sword" (Matt. 10:34). And again, "My peace I give to you, not as the world gives..." (John 14:27), for "In the world you will have tribulation; but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world" (John 16:33).

Now of course there is nothing wrong with useful service of any kind! But remember Martha, serving while Mary sat at the Lord's feet listening to Him teach. She complained because Mary wasn't helping her, but in response the Lord noted that she was "worried and troubled about many things, but *one thing is needed*, and Mary has chosen that good part, which will not be taken away from her" (Luke 10:41-42). In effect Mary had accepted the Lord's invitation to a spiritual feast, but Martha was pre-occupied about the natural feast.

We can't ignore the needs of our natural lives, and the Lord often spoke about how important it is that we humble ourselves in service to one another, but if we neglect the more important needs of our own spiritual lives we risk "gaining the world and losing our souls" (Matt 16:26). So we need to take the time to sit quietly and read the Word and reflect on our lives in relation to its teaching; we need to come to church and support one another in *learning* and *prayer* and *thanksgiving* so that *when* we go out to do our external work we can do it with wisdom and integrity.

The third excuse in the parable was offered by "Still another [who] said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I *cannot* come'" (v. 20). Notice that this man doesn't even ask to be excused, he just flatly says he can't come.

There are various words in the original languages for wives and women; here the literal meaning is "a woman," and as such, like Martha she represents the affections of natural life that can draw us away from heavenly things. And the thing is, here, the man has not just "bought into" them ideologically, or thought about them to see if they work, but he's actually *confirmed* them in the marriage of his will and understanding. At this point there is no way he's going to take time to sit at the Lord's table and so he simply says, "No, thanks," at which point the master of the feast instructs his servants to go out "into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in . . . the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind" (v. 21) and then in addition to "go into the highways and hedges, and *compel* them to come in, that [his] house may be filled" (v. 22).

Now of course the Lord never compels anyone in spiritual things, so a better translation may be a word like "constrain" or "persuade," as by the force of argument or reason. For the Lord does appeal to our rationality in urging us to attend to His Word. He does try to *convince* us by all possible means that we need to pay attention to what He offers us. But in the end it is up to us to decide how we will respond.

We are all very familiar with the Lord's instruction about "the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind." As in the parable of the sheep and the goats (in Matt. 25, AC 4955-56) these are all the people who recognize and acknowledge their needs in spiritual life, and who therefore eagerly receive and accept the Lord's invitation to provide for those needs. Their being in the streets and lanes of the city, and the highways and hedges of the country refers to their being on their spiritual paths, limping and halting as they go, not sure where their next real meal is going to come from.

But now, here's the thing. We are all a mix of those who do and don't acknowledge their need, of those who do and don't make excuses. We all have to confront our own tendencies not to take the Lord's invitation to His great supper seriously, but willingly engage in the battle to overcome the worldly inclinations that pull us away from His table, lest we be among those who were invited but who will not taste of it – either in this life or the next.

“The Word,” as it says in the Epistle to the Hebrews, “is living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the division of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart” (Heb 2:14). By means of it we are urged to “fight the good fight” for what is truly important in our lives – our spiritual lives, including justice and mercy, patience, understanding, humility, faith, hope, repentance, forgiveness and so on. We are all lame and blind. We all need the Lord’s instruction. We are all in the streets and lanes and highways and hedges of our spiritual lives groping our way toward our own ideas of fulfillment. Yet wonderfully, there is a great supper of heavenly goods and truths prepared for us in the Word; all we have to do is accept the invitation to partake.

In conclusion, last night, as you all know, a ghastly tragedy played out in Paris. Perpetrated by zealots who may or may not have had a point of principle in their hearts, the shocking horror of their actions reveals the awful consequences of the love of one’s own ideology and the unwillingness to recognize the fundamental laws of Divine Providence concerning human freedom and rationality.

This tragedy is *not our fault*. But it is not possible to come and worship the Lord without acknowledging that it has happened, and without praying that in *our own* fight for what is right and good we will ever be mindful that the Lord alone knows best, and that His commandments, His teachings, His infinite love and wisdom are our only reliable guides to a truly rewarding life in heaven and on earth.

A Christian response to the murders in France may very well include pre-emptive action to prevent even worse crimes. But in the end our most important responsibility is to receive the goods and truths of the Word into our own lives and act – patiently, confidently, persistently – according to them, inwardly and in our relations with others. Only in that way can the cycles of violence be interrupted and the sphere of heaven prevail anywhere. We know that the Lord can bring good out of every imaginable evil if we co-operate with Him. So let’s do our best, and, despite the evils of “offenses that must come” let’s enjoy the feast of love and wisdom that He has put before us.

“The Lord God is a sun and shield; The Lord will give grace and glory; no good thing will He withhold from those who walk uprightly” (Psalm 84:11).

Amen.

Lessons: *Deuteronomy* 20:1-14
 Children’s Talk on Good or Bad Excuses

Luke 14:15-24
Apocalypse Explained, either #252:1-2 or #617:4-5