

Luke 14:1-24

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[0 : 0 0] To be or not to be, that is the question. While allowing for a little poetic license, we can rephrase the opening words of Hamlet's soliloquy, to be or not to be a Christian, that is the question. What do you think? I reckon we can safely say that most of the good citizens of Aberdeen are of the opinion that to be a Christian is not for them.

I wonder why that is. I suspect that most have simply never given the possibility any even fleeting consideration. It's not so much a case of rejecting the possibility of being a Christian or becoming a Christian, but rather one, largely I imagine, of thoughtless indifference. It's just not on the radar. There are so many other things to consider and to think about that time is not given to even consider such a possibility. Of course, there are those who have given the matter some thought. Maybe you are among those who have given or are giving the matter some thought. Well, there are those who have and who have rejected that possibility. Some might consider that they've postponed that possibility, though in effect it really amounts to the same thing. And many do so on the grounds that being a Christian is a very unappealing prospect. The whole thou shalt not business is thought very unattractive and even oppressive. And it's not just the prohibitions themselves which seem to be manifold. The very idea of submission and non-negotiable obedience to God is best avoided.

To be a Christian, it is thought, is to lose your liberty, your liberty to live, behave, and even think as you see fit. What sane person would voluntarily put on such a moral and intellectual straitjacket?

And of course, non-negotiable obedience to the God of the Bible also requires holding a number of prudish, prejudiced, and downright nasty points of view. Be that the denial of a woman's right to choose, or of a person's right to a dignified death in the face of intolerable suffering, or, and this really is the lowest of the low, the bigoted homophobia that would deny two people in love the right to wedding bells. Who could want to hold such terrible points of view? In fact, I think I better just pause for a moment, because if I'm not careful, I might just convince myself that it's time to call it a day and break out of the shackles of superstitious prejudice that I, too, presumably, am a victim of.

The point is that for many, to be a Christian is a pretty miserable option for a number of reasons, a life of prohibitions, antiquated restrictions, and loss of liberty. Thanks, but no thanks.

[3 : 3 4] Jesus, not surprisingly, sees things rather differently. One of the ways in which Jesus communicated what is involved in being a Christian is by means of parables, and particularly those parables known as kingdom parables that describe aspects of the kingdom of God, sometimes called the kingdom of heaven, kingdom of God. The terms are used interchangeably. And these parables describe aspects of the kingdom and what is involved in being a member of or citizen of God's kingdom.

In other words, for ourselves today, the parables help us to understand what is involved in being a Christian, a follower or subject of King Jesus. And I want us to consider one of these parables this morning, where Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a feast or great banquet. The parable is about the invitation extended and the response of those invited, and we'll turn to that in a moment. But at the very outset, I want you to notice the picture that Jesus paints of kingdom life or of the Christian life.

It is a life of celebration and feasting, so far removed from the commonly understood perception of what it is to be a Christian. Jesus says, no, to be a Christian is to participate in a great feast.

It is to be invited to and to accept an invitation to a great banquet. And of course, we know that a feast or a banquet is a place of enjoyment, a place of friendship, of generous and bountiful provision, a place where our appetite can be fully satisfied. A feast satisfies. And Jesus wants his hearers to understand that the gospel, the good news of the kingdom of God, that he as the promised Messiah is bringing, his inaugurating, is like a feast. It satisfies. The gospel satisfies the deepest longings of the human spirit. We long for love. We long for hope. We long for peace. We long for acceptance. We long for purpose and direction. We long for security. And these longings cross borders and cultures and generations.

You can go wherever you please to go in this world today to people of different backgrounds and religions and cultures, and you will find that these longings exist across boundaries. You can travel back in time or travel forward in time, and you can be sure that these are commonly held longings that characterize men and women. The manner in which they find expression, the manner in which people may verbalize them, of course, may be very different, but these are shared longings of men and women. And what Jesus is saying is that the gospel delivers. It is like a feast. It satisfies our appetite. It satisfies our spiritual appetite. It does so generously and fully. It is a banquet for the soul. The gospel, the good news concerning Jesus, is soul food of the richest and most satisfying kind. And of course, that stands in stark contrast to what the world offers. This world in which we live promises much but delivers very little.

[7 : 38] We think of wealth. We think of success. We think of pleasure. We think of the so-called freedom that we can enjoy, loose from the shackles of faith and religion. And they all sparkle and glitter, but ultimately prove impotent to quench our spiritual hunger and thirst. I don't know if you've heard of Jack Higgins, an author. It's actually a pseudonym. His real name is Harry Patterson. He's the author of 60-plus novels, including his breakthrough novel, *The Eagle Has Landed*. It's been made into a film. You may have seen the film, even if you haven't read the book. Well, he is, as you might imagine, given his success, spectacularly wealthy. He was asked on one occasion what he wished that someone had told him when he was younger. He was being interviewed, yeah, as a successful man. And this intriguing question was posed to him. And he replied in this way, I wish someone had told me that when you get to the top, there's nothing there. Now, you might want to think about that before you reach your own particular summit and discover that for yourself. Or what about Lance Armstrong, who has been on the news so much in these past days? I wonder if, as he dreamed of that first Tour de France yellow jersey, he imagined that such a victory, whatever the cost, and we know that a high cost was paid, but whatever the cost, that victory would satisfy. All his life revolved around this epic competition. And to win the Tour de France, what greater satisfaction could there possibly be?

He could die a happy man. But one victory just didn't quite do the business. And so he needed two victories, and then three, and then five, and then seven at great cost, as we now know.

And in the end, well, he lost them all, again, for reasons that we know. Jesus wants you to know this morning that the gospel satisfies. It is a feast that satisfies, that satisfies your deepest longings. But a reasonable question that we would pose, or perhaps should pose, is can we take our place at the banquet table? Is this feast for me? Can I enjoy of it? Am I invited?

And of course, that is the question. Are you invited? And if you are invited, how do you respond to the invitation that is made? In the parable, Jesus identifies three groups of invitees. And I want to quickly notice who he has in mind as being represented by these three groups before focusing on one group in particular. Firstly, you have the original invitation list. There in verse 17, we can notice this first group of individuals who were invited. We read in verse 17, at the time of the banquet, he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, come, for everything is now ready. It's very clear from the language of the parable that these folks had a prior knowledge, indeed a prior invitation. And when the servant was sent, this was a reminder, if you wish, or a second invitation. Everything is ready. You've already been invited. You are the privileged ones on the original invitation list. You know about it.

Perhaps you'd even indicated an intention to come. Well, everything's ready. It's time to come. This is the first group that the parable speaks of. And it would seem that very especially given who Jesus is speaking to. We read the verses leading up to this parable, and it's very clear that he is at the home of a prominent Pharisee, and no doubt those who were there were of that mind or of that grouping.

[11 : 59] They were religious Jews who thought themselves very respectable and very religious. And it is clear that in this parable, this first group of those invited represent these religious Jews, privileged and honored in being given this invitation. They are those who, like the guest in verse 15, had no doubt that they belonged to the in crowd and had a place assured at the top table. Notice then in verse 15, just as we come to the beginning of Jesus relating the parable, we read, when one of those at the table with him heard this, he said to Jesus, blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. Jesus had already been speaking on the subject, and this man, one of the guests, no doubt also a very religious man, presumably also a Pharisee, he said, yes, isn't it wonderful to be part of that honored group? Folks like me, good people, respectable religious people, and we're going to be at that table. Isn't that a wonderful thing? And Jesus has these folks in mind as they are represented in this first group of those invited. We're going to come back to them. They're the ones we're going to focus on. But there's a second group in the parable, and they're the ones who are to be found in the streets and alleys. We've read the parable. We've mentioned it to the children. We know that those who were first invited make their excuses. And so, as a result, there is a second group who are invited, and we're told that they were found in the streets and alleys. In verse 21, the master says to the servant, go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Now, these folks are still within the city, but they are the marginalized and the despised. And it seems reasonable to imagine that who Jesus has in mind are those who, within the city, they are Jews, but they are those who suffer in the way that's described and so are thought to be second-class citizens. Yes, they're citizens, but second-class citizens, not the kind of people you really want to associate with. They also are invited, a second group of those invited to the banquet. But then finally, there's a third group. As the parable develops, yes, many of those in the second group do respond. They come to the banquet, but there's still room. And so then, what do we read in verse 23? Then the master told his servant, go out to the roads and country lanes, and make them come in, so that my house will be full. So now you're beyond the boundaries of the city. You're into the country lanes and roads. And it seems reasonable to imagine that what Jesus has in mind here, those he is representing in this way, are the Gentiles, those outwith the city, those outwith the nation of Israel. They too are to receive an invitation to the banquet. So, three distinct groups.

Now, such distinctions were, of course, relevant for the audience that Jesus was addressing. Whether they understood or not what Jesus was implying, that's another matter. But the distinctions were relevant. But they might appear to be rather anachronistic for us today. What possible lesson can there be for us? You know, we're not first-century Jews. We're in a different situation.

Well, I think it's reasonable in seeking to apply this parable to ourselves, as we surely must, is to recognize that most of us, perhaps all of us, would fall into the first category of those invited. The simple fact that you are in church this morning pretty much places you in the category of the religious, even recognizing that there may be a broad spectrum of beliefs and convictions represented here this morning. But the very fact that you're here at all would, I suggest, place you in that first category of guests. Well, even if you might protest or quibble with my guests, just bear with me as we consider some elements of the invitation to the banquet to these guests and their response to it, and as we would draw out some spiritual lessons that we are intended to draw out. We can think, first of all, of the invitation itself that they are given, and then how they respond to it, and then finally and very briefly, the consequences of their response. And we're thinking here of this first group of those invited. We are leaving to one side for this morning the others who subsequently were invited. First of all, then, the invitation itself. Now, in the invitation, or sorry, in the parable, the invitation is to a banquet, and that banquet represents the kingdom of God. It's interesting, in Matthew's gospel, in chapter 22, you have, it's arguable, whether it's the same parable, or in any case, a very similar parable, where Jesus introduces it with the words, the kingdom of God is like a banquet. But I think the words he uses are, the kingdom of heaven is like a banquet. So, very explicitly, he says, what I'm teaching you about here is what the kingdom of God is like, and certainly that's what he's doing. He's saying the kingdom of God is like a banquet to which men and women are invited. Well, what kind of invitation is it that is extended to us that we would participate in the kingdom of God, that we would become part of that kingdom, followers of Jesus? What kind of invitation? Well, from the parable, we can certainly draw out this truth that it is a gracious invitation. The man who prepared this banquet was under no obligation to organize a banquet, and certainly under no obligation concerning those whom he might invite.

When you have a party, you invite who you please. You don't have, you're not obliged to invite one or other, it's up to you. It's your party, it's your banquet, you invite who you please. And so, your invitation is a gracious one. It's on the grounds of your own gracious choice. And this is true of the invitation that is made to you to put your trust in Jesus as your Savior. It is a gracious invitation.

Those invited are honored on the sole grounds of the kindness and generosity of the one doing the inviting. And so it is with each and every one of us. God graciously deals with us and invites us to enjoy of His goodness. He deals with us graciously in so many ways. The very life that we live is a gift of God. Every breath that we take is evidence of God's grace. Your presence here this morning is the gracious means that God is using to extend to you this gracious invitation. Come to my house, come to my table, eat and be satisfied. What if we can remind ourselves of the prophet Isaiah speaking in a similar manner in chapter 55 of Isaiah, the very beginning of the chapter, Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters, and you who have no money, come buy and eat. Come buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of food. This is a gracious invitation that is extended to you. But from the parable, we notice that the invitation to those first invited was a repeated invitation. We've already noticed how in verse 17 it's said that those who had been invited were reminded or invited a second time. One presumes that when they were first invited, they had either accepted or in any case had not rejected the invitation.

[20 : 34] But now the banquet was ready, and the invitation is once again extended. Now, in the original telling of the parable, Jesus may well be referring to the manner in which the Old Testament prophets had prepared the way for Messiah in announcing His coming. But now that Messiah has arrived, well, the time has come to respond to the invitation, to receive and to recognize, to embrace the Messiah, promised of old and now in their very presence. Well, we live in a different moment of God's redemptive history, but the experience of a repeated invitation is relevant to many. What about you? How many times have you been invited to put your trust in Jesus Christ, the Messiah, as your Lord and Savior? Perhaps you consider that you've never definitively rejected the invitation, but equally you have yet to accept the invitation.

Now, such a stance is, to use the most generous language possible, is anomalous. We certainly could use stronger language to such a position. It's a gracious invitation, it's a repeated invitation, but very clearly in the language of the parable, it is a very urgent invitation. Now, in the case of the parable, the urgency resides in the rather obvious point that the banquet is ready, and any delay will result in missing the banquet. Now, it may well be if the ideas of the banquets that were common in those days, maybe it was going to be a banquet that would last for many days, but had one of the guests said, well, I'll come next week. That would have been utter folly. Everything would have been over. No point in coming next week. The banquet was now. The language is very dramatic. Come, everything is ready.

And so, it would obviously have been a foolish thing to postpone your response. It was now or never, as it were, for those being invited. For the Jews listening to Jesus as He first tells this parable, the urgency resides in the fact that the time of anticipation for the coming of Messiah has ended.

He is here. He is before them. Now is the time to celebrate His arrival and presence in their very midst. To delay is to miss the boat altogether. And for you today, the words of invitation conveyed by the servant point in only one direction. These words of invitation come, for everything is now ready.

They point, as I say, in only one direction, to the finished and sufficient work of Jesus Christ, the Savior of the world. Come, for everything is now ready. Jesus came to die on the cross in the place of sinners. His death is an atoning death where He endured the punishment for sin that we deserve, each and every one of us. He paid the price that we could not pay. He came to secure forgiveness and new life and a welcome into the family of God for all who would put their trust in Him and in His finished work. And on the cross, as He was about to die, He cried out, It is finished. This was not a cry of defeat, but of victory. We might paraphrase these words, Mission accomplished. His victory was a one that of victory for the Lord of His way. He was a happy one of His hard to die, and He was a happy one of His things that had been tested, and His atoning death vindicated by His Father on the third day by raising Him from the grave. And so today, as a servant of the Lord of the gospel banquet, I can say to you, Come, for everything is now ready. Come. Everything is now ready. Your deepest longings can be satisfied. The gospel is now ready.

[24 : 53] is now ready. Your deepest longings can be satisfied. The gospel is fitted to meet and to satisfy the longings that we spoke of just a few moments ago. You will find no greater love than the love poured out at Calvary. You can experience no richer peace than the peace secured at Calvary. You will harbor no greater hope than the resurrection hope granted by the one who died at Calvary and rose again triumphant on the third day. God's work of salvation is a finished work. Everything is now ready, and all you have to do is come. Which brings us to the response of those first invited in the parable. How did they respond? Well, we don't need to overanalyze the response of those invited. We've read the verses already on two occasions, first of all with the children, and then in our reading. But maybe we could just read them again without great commentary, because they speak for themselves. The response of those invited, of that first group invited, what is their response? Verse 18, but they all alike began to make excuses. The first said,

I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me. Still another said, I have just got married, so I can't come. The folly of their response is so evident.

And of course, that's the point of the parable. The whole point of the parable is for somebody to heed it and to say, well, that's ridiculous. That makes no sense. And then hopefully to ponder, well, hang on a minute. Am I guilty of the same? It's intended to be obvious. It's intended to be something that anybody, even a child, would heed it and say, well, that doesn't make any sense.

Why would you reject such an invitation? And so while we don't need to overanalyze it because it is so clear, we can maybe just fleetingly note some of the features of their response or rejection of the invitation. It is, as we've already alluded to, it was a bizarre rejection. To be invited was a great honor. The occasion was a glorious one. What awaited them was a seriously good time. There was no downside.

What is there not to want in this invitation to the banquet? Why would you reject such an invitation? Why indeed? Why indeed? And so I would say to you this morning, why would you reject God's gracious invitation to the gospel banquet? To enjoy forgiveness of sins and new life in Jesus Christ. To enjoy reconciliation with God and to be adopted into God's family. Why? What possible reason could you have to reject such an invitation? It's bizarre. It makes no sense. But it's not only bizarre. That in itself would be something to ponder on. It's disrespectful. We think of the case of the parable. These folks had been invited previously. It would seem that they had indicated some intention to go along. Great effort had been made. Great expense had been invested in preparing the banquet. And they simply say, well, we're not going. They make their excuses and say, it's not for me. It's not surprising that the man was angry at their response. He had been dishonored by their response. They had lacked respect towards him and his generosity. And I leave it to you to apply that to your own circumstances with regard to God's invitation. And of course, and these things all come together, the rejection of these men invited to the banquet, it was senseless. The reasons given are almost comical. We've read through them. They hold no water the excuses. They're rightly described by Jesus as excuses. They're not reasons. They're excuses.

[29 : 26] And so, without further ado, I simply ask you, what are your reasons? What are your excuses for not trusting in Jesus as your Lord and Savior? What are your excuses for not becoming a disciple of Jesus Christ and a subject in His kingdom? And without wishing to be disrespectful to the reasons you might have, might I suggest that whatever they are, they make no sense. In the light of the big picture, they can make no sense. Such a gracious and generous invitation. There can be no good reason. There can be many reasons, but no good reason to reject such an invitation. Which brings us finally to the consequences for those who reject the invitation. At the very end of the passage, and I say the end of the passage, not really the end of the parable. Because in verse 24, Jesus does something very significant, very intriguing, and poignant, we might say. Notice in verse 24, as He deals with the matter of the consequences of rejecting the invitation, notice what He says there.

I tell you, not one of those men, those men clearly is referring to those in the parable who reject the invitation, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of, and then notice what He says, will get a taste of my banquet. You see, if He had been following the idea of a parable, what He should have said, will get a taste of the banquet. He's been talking about a parable.

He's been giving them this story that involves somebody who invites, and guests who reject, and others who come. It's something separate from Himself in a sense. But then, as He closes, He says, those who reject will not get a taste of my banquet. So, it becomes so clear what it is that He's saying, the lesson that He is getting across. He's saying, those who reject me, those who reject me as the one who invites to the banquet, those who reject me as the one who is provided as a Savior, Messiah, those who reject will not get a taste of my banquet. The guests were invited. The opportunity was provided to them, and they turned it down. No subsequent opportunity would be available. Not even a taste. Even the manner in which Jesus describes it is very telling.

They will not get a taste, not even a taste of my banquet. They were invited. They had ample opportunity. They rejected the invitation. Well, the time will come, and the doors will be closed, and there will be no way of coming in. Not a taste for those who reject the invitation.

What about you? Do you recognize your need of a Savior? Do you recognize that you are a sinner who needs forgiveness? Do you recognize in the person of Jesus Christ, the eternal Son of God, the one who is able to forgive you, the one who has done all that is necessary to secure your salvation?

[32 : 50] And will you come to Him? Will you come to Jesus in repentance and faith and ask Him to be your Savior? And in that way, gladly and joyfully accept the invitation that He extends to you this morning.

Let us pray. Heavenly Father, we pray.