

Luke 14:15-24

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[0 : 0 0] The story is told of a petty thief in a small Andean community who appeared at chapel to confess his sins. He solemnly declared to the priest that he had stolen two sacks of potatoes and sought absolution. Now, the priest, who had his finger on the pulse of events in his parish, was intrigued and responded to the thief that he was sure that the man was guilty of stealing only one sack of potatoes. Well, to the priest's dismay, the response of the thief was, ah, yes, but seeing as I'm here, I thought I might as well just confess about the sack I'm going to steal tomorrow. Now, I also want to get my confession in in advance. Let me explain what I mean by that. This morning, we were considering the parable of the great banquet and focused on what we might call the big truth of the parable, the challenge to respond to the invitation extended by God to embrace the Messiah, King Jesus.

And in the interpretation of parables, it is a sound principle to identify and focus on the big truth and not fall into the trap of trying to find spiritual significance in every little detail.

There are, of course, commentaries and preachers who delight in that. Every detail is identified as having some profound spiritual significance, and I think that's the wrong way, generally, to interpret parables. Well, my confession in advance is that this evening I do want to draw from the parable what might be considered, indeed more than considered, may well be secondary lessons. It seems to me that the parable does provide some lessons for the church, for us, in the carrying out of our mission to the world. These lessons can be derived from one of the supporting actors in the cast in the parable, and I'm referring to the master's servant, and particularly the manner in which the servant fulfills his duties in inviting the guests to the banquet. Some interpreters suggest that the servant in the parable represents both the Old Testament prophets, particularly as he invites on the first occasion that's referred to in the parable those who had already been invited. So, presumably, the servant had previously invited them, and in that manifestation, if you wish, he's representing the Old Testament prophets. And when he extends the second invitation, the urgent on-the-day invitation, he represents the Lord himself. He represents Jesus. Some understand the parable in that way. One difficulty with this view is that the parallel passage, if we can call it a parallel passage, in Matthew's gospel, which is in chapter 22, and a light goes on. That's why I had Luke 22. I was mixing up the gospels. Anyway, in Matthew 22, we have, we could say, this same parable, a slightly different version of it. There's some debate as to whether it's the same parable, but slightly different, or a different parable, but very similar, if that doesn't sound too confusing. And in that parable, in Matthew 22, it's a king who has the banquet, and the banquet is for his son, and the son does there represent. Certainly, it's reasonable to presume that the son represents the Lord, Jesus. Consequently, the servant on that occasion would be difficult to identify as being Jesus also. Even this discussion, if we can call it a discussion, maybe illustrates the difficulty of trying to be too clever and trying to identify. It's possible we're not meant to be identifying in that way with such precision, each element as representing one or other individual.

On the matter of the parable that we've read in Luke's gospel, and the parable in Matthew 22, we won't read it now for reasons of time, but if you wish, you can do so later on and come to your own conclusions. But on the matter of whether they're the same parable with slight variations, or whether they're different parables, I prefer to imagine, and I suspect this is just a question of preference, that it's the same parable told on different occasions, and perhaps it's in a slightly different way. One of the reasons I'm drawn to the notion that it's essentially the same parable told by Jesus on different occasions is that it gives preachers a welcome excuse for preaching the same sermon twice. If Jesus did it, then surely we can do the same thing with necessary modifications as required. But as I say, even as we would tentatively try and identify the characters in the parable, in this case a servant, because it's a servant who is of interest to us this evening, we do see the difficulty, possibly the danger of over-analyzing and missing the big picture.

But what we can say with confidence concerning the servant, regardless of who he represents, if indeed he's intended to represent any given individual at all, regardless of that, what we can say is that the servant in the parable is serving his master. And if only for that reason can be viewed as representing you and me, for we too are servants called to serve our Lord.

[6 : 07] So taking the picture painted of the servant in the parable, what lessons can we draw for the mission of the church in the service, in service to the Lord, and for each of us as individual believers in our service for the Lord? Well, I think the servant in the parable does a number of things, or helps us in a number of ways. It helps us to identify who we are. It helps to identify what we do. It helps identify very particularly in the matter that the parable deals with, who we are to invite to the gospel banquet. And it also gives us some lessons or principles as to the manner in which we are to do that, the manner in which we are to invite men and women and boys and girls to the gospel banquet, if we can call it that. Jesus calls it my banquet there in verse 24. We noticed that this morning in the significance of that. So how are we to invite others to Jesus' banquet? I think the parable, and the servant in particular who was given that task of inviting, gives us some hints, some help, some instruction. Well, let's think about these matters then. First of all, who we are.

Well, we are, as believers, as Christians, we are servants. We are servants of our Master, just as the man spoken of in the parable was a servant of his Master. We are servants of God. We are disciples of Jesus Christ. And this is at the very heart of our identity, of who we are. And it's maybe good just to not dwell on this much, but just to ask ourselves the question, or I pose the question to you, how would you answer the question, who are you? It's a big question. How would you answer it? Who are you?

I imagine if we were able to pose that question to the servant in the parable, and of course he's a fictional character, so we can't do that. But if we were able to pose that question to the servant, I'm sure his answer would be, I am the servant of my Master. That was who he was. That was at the heart of his identity. I wonder if we have that same sense of our identity, or if we change the question just a little bit. If you're asked the question, a more likely question to be asked, it would be quite unusual for somebody to come up to you and say, who are you? Other than maybe wanting to know your name, but not in a more common way than that. But what do you do? That is a question that is quite often posed to us, perhaps in polite conversation or small talk. You know, what do you do? How do you answer that question? I wonder if any of us would answer that question, I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. I serve Jesus. What would that sound like? Would that sound weird if we were to answer in that way? But is that not what we are, above all other identity markers, be they where we come from, or what we do, or what profession we happen to have studied or prepared ourselves for? Well, the servant here helps us to focus on this very important question, who we are. We are servants, as he was a servant, so we are servants of our master. But moving on to what we do, what do we do?

The servant in the parable performs two related functions. First of all, we can say he represents his master. This in the parable and the task that he's given is a very significant role that he has. He represents his master. His master is not able to go to all the places that he needs to go to to invite the guests, and so the servant represents him. But he not only represents his master, he also, and this is very much intertwined, he obeys his master. That's what servants do. They obey the one who is over them. He obeys his master. The servant in the parable does not invite anybody on his own initiative. He does not have that authority. He simply represents his master. There's a real sense that when the servant speaks and invites, it is the master himself who is speaking or inviting, not literally or physically in front of the guest who is being invited, but in a very real sense.

It is the master who is speaking. And that is true of us as masters, sorry, as servants of our Lord. We, when we speak and when we invite, when we would commend Christ and the gospel to others, it is as though our master were speaking in us and through us. Of course, to say that, I think it reminds us of the words of the apostle Paul that we have recorded in his second letter to the Corinthians. And in chapter 5 and in verse 20 where we read, we are therefore Christ's ambassadors.

[11 : 21] And there Paul, when he says we, he's speaking of all the believers. We are therefore Christ's ambassadors as though God were making His appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf, be reconciled to God. What does Paul say? Paul says that when I speak, when you speak, when as a believer you speak and commend the gospel to others, urge others to be reconciled to God, it is as if God Himself were speaking through you. Now that's quite, in some ways, a very frightening thought, a very sobering thought. But that is the manner in which Paul describes matters. And I think it ties in with what we are saying concerning this servant who represents his master. And I wonder if we have that sense of representative authority as we invite others to the gospel banquet, if we want to describe it in that way. What I wonder is the absence of that appreciation of who we represent, the reason we are slow to invite others. We don't have that sense that we do indeed enjoy the authority of those who represent the King. And as we lack that sense of authority, so we are slow and tentative in inviting others. Well, the servant represents, but he also, as I suggested, he also obeys. And of course, he obeys unquestioningly. The indications of his master might have appeared strange to the servant, but it's not for the servant to quibble or question the instructions given. Servants obey. That's their job. That's the totality in a way of their job description. They are to obey their masters. Masters, of course, also have responsibilities to be reasonable and kind and gracious and all the rest of it.

But servants as servants are to obey. In the case of the servant, in the parable that we've read and are thinking about, the job that he was given was to invite the guests to the banquet. And we are given a similar task. We are to invite men and women to the gospel banquet. And as the task was difficult, we can be sure, for the servant, many didn't want to come. He had to go to faraway places, difficult places, dangerous places. It was a big ask that he had been given, or a big task, certainly that he had been given by his master. And the task for us also can be difficult. It can be disheartening, perhaps for some, maybe not for us, where we are, where God has placed us, but for many, it can be dangerous. It can be seemingly fruitless. But if the master orders, the servant obeys.

So that's a little, or some thoughts regarding what we do, but moving on to who we are to invite. And here maybe the parable gives us a little bit more of help in answering that question. Who are we to invite? Who are we to direct our invitation to? This morning, and I don't want to repeat what was said this morning, but just to place this in some context, this morning we commented on what would seem to be a reasonable interpretation of who the three distinct groups invited in the parable represent. You remember, if you were able to be here this morning, that we spoke of the religious Jews who were first invited, or rather, we spoke of those who were first invited as representing religious Jews, those who thought that they were already a part of the in crowd who had a right to sit at the top table. So the first group of those invited, those who refused the invitation, representing religious Jews. But then we noticed how Jesus instructs, or the master instructs the servant to invite those within the city, but who were marginalized and despised. There in verse 21, those in the streets and alleys of the towns, the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.

And we suggested that they represented those within the community, within the nation of Israel, but very much those who were despised within that nation or that community. And then finally, when in the parable, Jesus, or sorry, the master instructs his servant to go out beyond the city walls into the roads and the lanes in the country, well, there, it would seem to be reasonable to conclude that the reference was to the Gentiles, that they too were to be invited to Jesus' banquet.

Now, given what we've already said about parables generally, even if only fleetingly, we would have to recognize that today we are in different circumstances, and it would be unwise to try and establish direct 21st century parallels to these three groups that it would appear Jesus is referring to in the parable. But though we wouldn't want to draw direct parallels and say, well, this group today would be such and such, and this group would be this group of people, though we don't want to do that, I think we can draw more general principles concerning who we are to invite to the gospel banquet. And I'll say a couple of things about this. First of all, I think we can draw from the parable this, that we are to invite everybody. So, we don't need to be too clever about identifying one group or another, because the whole idea, the whole emphasis of the parable, ultimately, is that everybody is to be invited. In the parable, yes, there's an order of events, as it were, in an order in which those invited are invited, but when you see the big picture and you put together all those who ultimately are invited, they are everybody. Nobody is excluded, be they religious Jews, be they the marginalized in society, be they the Gentiles, the nations, all ultimately are to be invited to the gospel banquet. And that is a truth that maybe is an obvious one. I hope that for us it would be deemed an obvious one, but one that we do well to consider and take on board.

[18:28] That is who we are to invite. We are to invite everybody. But developing that a little bit more, or with a little bit more thought, I suppose, we could say this. It's a similar statement, but a slightly different one, and is that we are to invite all kinds of people. So, not just everybody in that very broad sense, but all kinds of people, all different kinds of people.

If you are inviting everybody, then necessarily you will be inviting all kinds of people, because everybody includes all different kinds of people. But it still remains, I think, a valid and important point to stress. Nobody, however different to us, however strange they might appear to us, however bad they are, or we may perceive them to be, or others may think them to be bad, however hostile somebody or a group of people might be to us or to the gospel. Regardless of any of these differences, no one, no group of people, indeed no individual is to be excluded from our invitation. Now, when we think of the city where God has placed us here in Aberdeen, we live in a very diverse city. Indeed, the very neighborhood where God has been pleased to place us is a very diverse neighborhood. And within this city, within this neighborhood, there is no group of people or indeed individual on the demographic kaleidoscope that is Aberdeen that is to be excluded from our guest list, from those that we are to invite, rich or poor, wealth addict or crack addict, gay or straight or somewhat in between, religious or pagan from Poland or Portleth and we could go on. I think you get the idea. Nobody, whatever group, whatever background, whatever circumstance is to be excluded. This is, I think, a very clear and powerful principle that the parable presents without a need to overanalyze. But the big picture is this, everybody is invited and all kinds of people, all kinds of people are invited to Jesus' banquet.

And so we too must take that on board as we would invite others. We are to invite people who are like us, but mostly people who are very different to us, because most people are different to us. And we do find this, I think if we're honest with ourselves and with each other, we do find this difficult. We are so much more comfortable in the company of people who are like us. That's the way we are. That's the way we're made or certainly the way we are. And I think everybody is like that. And so this is a challenge. It's not easy. If you just think of the parable, and it is a parable. It's not describing events that actually took place.

But nonetheless, if you think of the parable, what a strange gathering of people at that banquet. A very strange gathering of people. You know, the crippled, the blind, the lame, the poor, those from out with the city, Gentiles, Jews. It really was a very strange gathering and very difficult to find such a gathering because that doesn't generally happen. People tend to congregate around those who are like them in some way or another. And we do that as well. And so, though it is not a simple task, though we find it a difficult task, nonetheless, it is one that I think we need to grapple with.

So we invite all kinds of people. But I think we can also say a further thing concerning those we invite, and that is that we invite those who have not yet been invited. If there is a priority, if we can, if it's right to establish some kind of priority. You know, you could say on a practical level, yes, okay, that's fine. We're to invite everybody. But realistically, we can't do that.

[22 : 44] In principle, yes, everybody to be invited. But we can't do that by ourselves, invite everybody. So we need to establish some kind of priority. That would seem a reasonable point to make. Well, is there some kind of priority that we could establish, or some kind of bias that would be legitimate? Well, if there is, I would say that it is to invite those who as yet have not been invited.

Well, we think of the parable. There were those who were invited, first of all. They were privileged in that regard. They'd been given a prior invitation or a prior indication that this banquet was to take place. As the day approached, they were given a further invitation, and yet they chose to reject that invitation. And because of that, it was seen necessary by the Master to give the opportunity to those who had not been invited. They too should be given an opportunity. And I think there is a principle there that we too must be careful that we are not inequitable in that regard in excluding from the invitation those who have never had the opportunity, those who have never been invited to hear who Jesus is and what He has done and what it is that He would offer to them.

Now, in saying that, we do need to be careful. The parable is not intended to be. It is not a model for mission or evangelism. That is not its purpose. And it would be quite wrong to conclude from the parable that we are to abandon any concern for those who have heard the gospel, maybe on many opportunities, and has yet have not responded. We're not to say, oh, well, we can just forget about such folk. That would be wrong. That would be a wrong inference to take. That said, even justice and equity would suggest that a bias toward those as yet uninvited is to inform our mission and evangelism.

So, we invite everybody. We invite all kinds of people. And we are particularly concerned to invite those who as yet have not had the opportunity to come. But moving on to a final thing that I want us to just notice or draw from the parable, and particularly the servant, as he fulfills his duties. And it is, how are we to do so? How are we to invite others? I'm not talking here about strategies or evangelistic techniques, but rather the manner in which we are to invite. There's three things I just want to notice that I think we can legitimately draw from the parable. One thing that I think we can say in this regard is this, that it's important in this matter of the manner in which we invite, it's important that we have a conviction concerning what or who we are inviting to, and the enthusiasm that will accompany such a conviction. In the case of the parable, the servant was well aware of what he was inviting to. He had been involved, I would imagine, in preparing this great banquet. He knew what a great occasion it would be, and what an honor it was to receive an invitation.

And there was no doubt in his mind that it was a good thing for those invited to come. He knew what he was inviting them to, and I would imagine that that was reflected in the manner in which he invited, in the manner in which, as we see a little bit later on, and we'll touch on this, how he would urge and compel those invited to come, even if at first, in first instance, they were unwilling to do so. Why?

[26 : 34] Because of his conviction concerning what it was he was inviting to. Now, for us, that's obviously important to have a conviction concerning who Jesus is and conviction concerning his capacity to respond to men and women's manifold and multiple needs. We don't present Jesus as some kind of simplistic panacea, but we do believe that he is the eternal Son of God, the one who is able to answer and to satisfy men and women's deepest longings. And if we have that conviction, then that should be reflected in the enthusiasm with which we extend the invitation. So, that's one thing I think we can draw in terms of the manner that we invite, but I think there's something else that we can say, and that is that as we invite, there ought to be a desire to see the one we represent honored and glorified. In terms of the parable, it's interesting to notice one concern of the servant that is identified by Jesus as he relates the parable in verse 22. The point at which this happens is the first group have been invited, they've refused. The servant has then been sent into the streets and the alleys. It would seem that a goodly number have responded, they've made their way to the banquet. But then notice what the servant says, Sir, the servant said, what you ordered has been done, but there is still room. The impression is that the servant is concerned. He wants the banqueting hall to be full. He's actually done what he was told. He was told to invite the first group, he did, they didn't come. He was then told to invite others, he fulfilled his duty, and many of them came.

But of his own initiative, as it were, he identifies this problem. He sees it as a problem. There is still room. You could say, well, there's no concern of his. He does what he's told, and if the banqueting hall is full or half full or a third full, what concern is that of his? But no, he is concerned that the banqueting hall be full. Why is that? Well, presumably it's because the honor in which he holds his master. If his master has created this great banquet, then it is only right that the banqueting hall be full. It would be improper if there were empty seats at such a wonderful occasion.

So, he's concerned. There is still room. What can we do to ensure that the banquet hall is full and filled to overflowing? The servant is conscious of the efforts of his master and the desire of his master that the banquet hall be filled with guests, and in this way his master be honored. And we too must share something of that burden, that the one we serve might receive the honor that he is due, the glory that he is due, as men and women bow down before him as he is worthy of. So, a conviction regarding who we are inviting to, a desire to see our master honored. But then we can notice one final thing, and that is that in the manner that we are to invite, there ought to be a willingness to urge and persuade until the invitation is accepted. Notice what we read there in verse 23. Just towards the end of the parable, we read, then the master told his servant, go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in. I think in the authorized version, the word compel is used, if I'm not mistaken. Make them come in.

Compel them to come in. Indeed, the language that Jesus uses has caused some concern for some as they read the parable, as if it might suggest that what is being proposed by the master is that by violent means, against people's will, they be compelled, they be forced, they be obliged to participate, even when they don't actually want to. But I don't think that is what is being suggested at all. The language is strong language, but it's not to be understood as sanctioning anything that would go against the will of the one being invited. But what we can draw from the language is the importance of persuading the unconvinced, of urging the reluctant. We must not give up too easily. I think that's something, if we're honest with ourselves, we are prone to do. On some occasion, at some opportunity, allows us to, we perhaps invite somebody, whether it be to a service, or perhaps we have an opportunity to speak with somebody concerning the gospel, and there's little interest, or seemingly little interest, perhaps there's apathy, or disinterest, or maybe even hostility, and we quickly give up.

And yet, the master here to his servant, he is encouraging him not to give up. He's saying, no, people won't come, maybe straight away. You'll need to persuade them. You'll need to urge them. You'll need to compel them that they might be persuaded, and that they might come, and as they come, discover what awaits them at the banquet. So, some encouragements, I suppose, some direction for us regarding how we are to fulfill this task that we have as servants of our master. Well, let me draw things to a close and close with a challenge. In this week that has begun, who will you invite to Jesus' banquet? Who will you invite to Jesus' banquet? Our orders were given long ago. We are commanded to go to the streets and alleys, to the roads and country lanes, and we go bearing a royal invitation.

[32 : 38] Let us pray.