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The Parable of the Great Supper

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Few parables have the ability to fire the imagination like the parable of the Great Banquet (Luke 14:15-24). This parable displays the unique ability of the Lord Jesus to spontaneously take simple, mundane events in order to weave a colorful, humorous tale, while conveying a somber and startling truth.

As a parable, it portrays in a simple, yet profound way, God's grace and man's responsibility in a way that reveals man's apathy and arrogance. Unfortunately, the message of this parable, which had incredible impact upon its original audience, has been rendered obscure by two millennia of cultural and linguistic distinctions. Nevertheless, this situation can be remedied, and the meaning of the parable can be rediscovered through careful study. In this article, the writer will attempt to do just that. This will be done first by examining the interpretative variations of the parable; secondly, the context, background and story of the parable will be studied to help bridge the time and cultural gaps between the first century hearers and the twentieth century readers. Thirdly, the central teaching of the parable will be considered, followed by a list of some of the parable's implications.

Interpretive Views of the Parable

The parabolic tradition of the Great Banquet is found in Matthew 22:1-14, Luke 14:14-24 and the apocryphal gospel of Thomas, 64.¹ As is the case with much synoptic materials, most of the differing views concerning this parable are based on some form of higher criticism, whether form, source, or redaction. Some representative statements concerning the origins and development of the parable are as such, "It is commonly recognized that the parables in Matthew and Luke do not come from a common source."² Another writer claims, "It has been widely recognized that the Matthean version is a complex adaptation or possibly based on a similar but different tradition [than the Lukan parable]."³ Since these claims impugn the authority of the scriptures, this writer will consider only those views which have made distinctions in their understanding of the purpose of the parable, the evaluation of the excuses, and the inclusion of gentiles.

The Purpose of the Parable

Among scholars who generally accept the veracity of the text, two purposes are discussed: Apologetical and Eschatological.

Apologetical View. Some commentators, emphasizing Christ's conflict with the religious leaders of his day, suggest that

¹For an English translation of this version of the parable, see Joachim Jeremias, *The Parables of Jesus* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972), 176.

²Robert W. Stein, *An Introduction to the Parables of Jesus* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1981), 83.

³Paul H. Ballard, "Reasons for Refusing the Great Supper" *Journal of Theological Studies* 23 (October 1972), 341-350.

the parable's major intent was apologetical.⁴ As such, the parable functions as a device for Christ to defend himself and his activities to the religious leaders who are present (14:1). This view assumes the identification of the poor, crippled, blind, and lame in the parable as groups to which Christ primarily ministered. These groups were generally despised by the leaders and excluded from temple worship (Lev. 21:18-20, 2 Sam 5:8).⁵ Similarly, the view of the parable would explain what appeared to be Christ's bias towards the poor because, "the rich were too committed to their pleasurable and profitable way of life to join Jesus' revolution; they excluded themselves from the feast."⁶ Thus, the parable not only defends Christ's actions within his ministry, but also attacks the Pharisees who had rejected him. Consequently, this parable, "becomes an interpretation of Jesus' own behavior in eating with tax collectors and sinners, and the point is basically the universal offer of the Gospel with a subsidiary warning not to refuse the offer."⁷

Eschatological View. The vast majority of commentators see this parable as being primarily eschatological. This is based primarily on the preceding context which speaks of the resurrection (vv. 12-14), the statement of the man at the dinner party with the immediate reference to the kingdom of God (v. 15), and the eschatological significance of the banqueting metaphor. Each of these elements will be considered later in the article.

⁴A major proponent of the view is David Wenham, *The Parables of Jesus: Pictures of Revolution* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1989), 136-139. Both Stein *Introduction to the Parables*, 87-88 and I. Howard Marshall *The Gospel of Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) also mention this view.

⁵Herman Hendrickx, *The Parables of Jesus* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1983), 118.

⁶Wenham, *Parables of Jesus*, 138.

⁷Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 385.

Evaluation of the Excuses

A great deal of discussion has ensued as to the essential quality of the excuses offered by the invited guests. While most everyone would admit to the overall inappropriateness of the excuses in light of the double invitation, the question still remains as to the validity of these excuses. Although many shades of variance exist, three basic schools of thought can be defined: the excuses are fundamentally valid, the excuses are based in Deuteronomic law, and the excuses are absurd.

The Excuses Are Valid. This classification encompasses a large body of commentators who maintain that however weak the excuses may be, they are still fundamentally valid. Most of these writers attempt to explain away the apparent lameness of the excuses by injecting varying degrees of contingency into them. Marshall does so on the first excuse.

The first man has just bought a field . . . It may seem strange that a visit to the field should follow rather than precede the purchase, *but the purchase may well have been arranged on condition of later inspection and approval.*⁸ [emphasis mine]

Similarly, many commentators explain the purchase of the five yoke of oxen as contingent upon approval.⁹

Eta Linnemann offered a novel approach to validating these excuses in her work on the parables. Rather than considering them as excuses *from* the banquet, she sees them as excuses for *being late*.

⁸Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 589.

⁹For instance, B.T.D. Smith, *The Parables of the Synoptic Gospels* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1937), 204.

Since the excuses of the guests are not typical "weak excuses" nor bear the character of a deliberate slight, Jesus' listeners will hardly have understood them as refusals, but as excuses for coming late. The guests want first still to use the remaining hour or two of day for business before they come to the banquet.¹⁰

A major weakness to her perspective is the problematic third excuse. Since this excuse is inconsistent with her claim, she had resolved the inconsistency by claiming it to be a textual insertion interrupting the coherence of the argument.¹¹ Another weakness is the host's unreasonable anger to such a reasonable request as merely being late.

The Excuses Are Based on Deuteronomic Law. Several studies have been conducted connecting the three excuses to the exemptions for Israeli holy war (Deut. 20:5-7; 24:5).¹² In this view (which interprets the parable as a midrash based on the Old Testament texts mentioned above) the excuses are made in an attempt to be excused from the Messianic holy war in which the Lukan banquet is the victory feast.¹³ Indeed, there are circumstantial similarities between the excuses and the Deuteronomy passages. If one takes into account Mishnaic interpretation, these similarities appear even more viable.¹⁴ The overwhelming difficulty with this approach is that there is "nothing else in Luke's story to make us think of war. He casts

¹⁰Eta Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus* (London: SPCK, 1966), 89; Plummer also holds this view.

¹¹Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 89; 158-168.

¹²J.D.M. Derrett, *Law in the New Testament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1970), 126ff; Paul H. Ballard, "Reasons for Refusing the Great Supper," contra. Humphrey Palmer, "Just Married, Cannot Come," *Novum Testamentum* 18 (October 1976): 241-257.

¹³Derrett, *Law in the New Testament*, 126-155.

¹⁴Ballard, "Reasons for Refusing," 345.

his tale entirely in social terms."¹⁵ The war motif with a king and armies is found only in Matthew's account, where there are no true excuses offered, but merely a reporting of the invitees' alternate actions. Therefore, the difficulty in relating the Lukan account, which contains the three excuses without a war motif, to the Matthean account, which does contain the war motif but without the Deuteronomic excuses, seems to cancel itself out as a valid interpretation. In an effort to acknowledge the Deuteronomic allusion in Luke, but to keep from reinterpreting the entire parable by importing the Matthean theme, Palmer effectively argues that the allusion is deliberately framed by Christ to add humor and spice to the entire story.

The allusion to Deuteronomy, for those who catch it, adds an extra spice to an already lively story. For those who do not catch it, the excuses themselves convey the irony, for they seem inadequate and irrelevant . . . The allusion, however, can only add spice. It is too remote and recondite to be essential to a working parable.¹⁶

The Excuses Are Absurd. Contrary to the two views found above, there are several commentators who maintain that the excuses are totally absurd and are meant as a deliberate affront to the master's invitation.¹⁷ This view is general based on the anticipated response of the ancient near eastern mind as they would hear Christ's parable within the framework of their cultural mores. As such, the excuses are "meant to strike the hearer as

¹⁵Palmer, "Just Married," 244.

¹⁶Ibid., 248.

¹⁷Two major proponents of the view are Craig L. Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990), 233-237; and Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 88-113; also Leon Morris *The Gospel According to St. Luke* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974), 233; contra Robert F. Capon, *Parables of Grace* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 131.

ridiculous and to point out the absurdity of any excuse for rejecting God's call into his kingdom.¹⁸ In reference to the excuse of buying the field, Bailey comments,

The statement is a bold-faced lie and everyone knows it. No one buys a field in the Middle East without knowing every square foot of it like the palm of his hand. The springs, wells, stone walls, trees, paths, and anticipated rainfall are all well-known long before a discussion of the purchase is even begun . . . The purchaser will also know the human history of the field. He will be able to tell you who has owned it for generations and to recite the profits of that field for an amazing number of past years.¹⁹

Bailey then cites the purchase contract between Abraham and Ephron of the cave at Machpelah (Genesis 24:17-18), observing that the field, cave, trees, and borders are all carefully noted.²⁰ The two other excuses are similarly dismissed as absurd.²¹ Thus these commentators interpret the parables with a greater cultural sensitivity than other writers generally maintain.

The Inclusion of the Gentiles

Commentators are divided over the significance of the double invitation to the poor (v. 23). Generally, they either interpret this as an allegorical reference to the reception of Gentiles²² or as an added element to highlight the folly of the initial invitees and the finality of their rejection. Those who

¹⁸Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 234.

¹⁹Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 95-96.

²⁰*Ibid.*, 96.

²¹*Ibid.*, 97-99.

²²Hendrickx, *Parables of Jesus*, 119. Hendrickx's otherwise excellent commentary often indicates differing positions, but fails to espouse any of them.

support the allegorical use justify it by identifying the invitation as going to wider and wider audiences, thus paralleling it to either the ministry of Christ or the activities of the early church.²³ Those who deny this view, do so on the basis that it is anachronistic and results from reading the church back into a mainly Jewish context. Blomberg contends that,

There is nothing in the parable's imagery to suggest that any non-Israelites are in view. The servants simply move further afield within Israel in their quest for guests—from the streets of the city to the highways of the countryside.²⁴

It is this writers position that while it is entirely possible that Jesus (and Luke) may have intended for Gentiles to be alluded to by this second call,²⁵ it is doubtful that the original recipients understood it as such.

The Context of the Parable

Preceding Context

The preceding context begins with a consideration of 14:1. Jesus was invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee, perhaps a member of the Sanhedrin.²⁶ It was the Sabbath and Jesus' enemies were present in full force waiting for him to slip up (v.

²³Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 590; C.H. Dodd *The Parables of the Kingdom* (London: Nisbet & Co., 1935), 52; also Smith, *Parables*, 205; Morris, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 235; Walter L. Liefeld, "Luke," in *The Expositors Bible Commentary*, vol. 8, ed. Frank E. Gaebelein (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984), 978f.

²⁴Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 234.

²⁵Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 101-109 discusses this probability by pointing out the various Gentile references throughout Luke and the fact that Luke was penned by a Greek to a Roman audience.

²⁶Morris, *Gospel according to St. Luke*, 229.

1). Before the meal (cf. v. 7) a man with dropsy was recognized. It is possible that the man was purposefully planted as a means to ensnare Jesus. Christ, as was his practice (vv. 6:6ff; 13:10-17), disarmed the observers by asking if it was lawful to heal on the Sabbath (v. 3). In response to their silence, Christ heals the man and takes the offensive with a classic *a fortiori* argument (cf. Matt. 12:10) to justify his healing (v. 5). To this, they had no response (v. 6). As the meal began, Christ noted how the guests vied for the best seats of honor around the table. Christ then told a parable with immediate application to their situation, teaching humility (vv. 8-10). But Jesus was not merely giving a piece of worldly advice, as shown by v. 11. On the contrary, he is presenting a moral principle which goes far beyond table manners to God's ultimate dealing with mankind (Luke 18:14; Matt 18:4; 23:12; James 4:10; 1 Pet 5:6). In so doing, he begins to set the stage for this parable.

Christ then focuses on the host, advising him that "he should not restrict his guests to friends, relations, and rich neighbors."²⁷ Christ is not forbidding normal socializing, for he uses a common Semitic idiom. "What is stated as a plain 'not X . . . but Y' really means in Semitic idiom 'Not so much X . . . as rather Y . . .'"²⁸ In other words, there is no generosity exercised in feasting with friends; consequently, there is no eternal reward (v. 14).

Christ's remark concerning the end-time resurrection in the context of banqueting struck a cord with one of the listeners (v. 15). Some view this man's declaration as a contradiction to Christ's previous statement. One writer paraphrases this anonymous man's declaration as saying, "Inviting the poor and beggars is not grounds for reward at the resurrection . . . rather, blessed is he who will actually participate in the meal of the

²⁷Ibid., 232.

²⁸Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 583.

kingdom of God."²⁹ Although this is possible, it more likely that it was an attempt to deflect the conversation to a more positive and benign topic, since Jesus had systematically critiqued both the hostile guests and the host of this dinner party. The man's proclamation would then be a standard pious Jewish exclamation of the hope of participating in the heavenly banquet at the end of the age. Rather than being induced to following his lead, Jesus uses the occasion as an opportunity to reveal the truth of God's kingdom using a masterful parable.

Following Context

The following context further identifies the cost of discipleship (vv. 25-34). Just as the guests of the parable were unwilling to accept the invitation, so others may be tempted to underestimate the costs of true discipleship.³⁰ Discipleship demands prioritizing loyalties: God above even family (v. 26). It involves bearing a cross: an analogy to self-denial and total commitment (v. 27; cf. 9:23). Christ then relates two illustrations of counting the cost: building a tower (vv. 28-30) and going to war (vv. 31-33), both costly endeavors. Christ concludes this theme with the analogy of salt. Just like salt may lose its flavoring ability and hence become useless, so a disciple without these fundamental qualities of sacrifice and commitment is not fit for the kingdom of God (v. 34a). Those who are wise will be admonished not merely by hearing, but by understanding and applying what they hear (v. 34b).

²⁹Hendrickx, *Parables of Jesus*, 114.

³⁰Marshall, *Gospel of Luke*, 591.

The Background of the Parable

A proper understanding of the background to the parable of the Great Supper is both essential and enriching to a proper interpretation of it within its context.

Banquets were common among the more wealthy circles. Consequently, all those present would be familiar with the operations of a banquet. Invitations would generally be sent out in advance, and then the food would be prepared on the basis of the people's acceptance.³¹ Once the food was in preparation, people were honor-bound to come, for the host had no means of holding the meal. At the appointed time a servant would be sent out with the message, "Come, for everything is now ready (v. 17)." Etiquette allowed for late arrivals; customarily there was a sign set up at the entrance of the host's house that was removed after the banquet was underway, signifying that latecomers were no longer welcome.³²

That the excuses were absurd is highlighted by the fact that Jews generally ate two meals a day, breakfast at about 10 a.m. and the main evening meal after sundown.³³ Similarly, a banquet of this nature would generally start in the late afternoon to early evening. Thus, no significant amount of business could possibly have been transacted in the remaining part of the work day. Further highlighting the lameness of the excuses is the ancient Near Eastern stress on the importance of relationships.³⁴ In a culture where relationships were of extreme importance, the deliberate shunning of a friendship for the inspection of land or

³¹Bailey provides interesting statistics relating the size and type of animal prepared in relation to the amount of expected guest; *Through Peasant Eyes*, 94.

³²Linnemann, *Parables of Jesus*, 89.

³³Stein, *Introduction to the Parables*, 84.

³⁴Hendrickx, *Parables of Jesus*, 116 and Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*,

examining the worth of livestock was an unheard of breach in etiquette.

The second excuse relates to the purchase of five sets of oxen (v. 19). Jeremias rightly suggests that this made the invitee very wealthy because, "in general a farmer owned as much land as 1-2 yoke of oxen could plough."³⁵ The transparency of the excuse is highlighted by the fact that the man is going to δοκιμάσαι them. This indicates, "to try to learn the genuineness of something by examination and testing"³⁶ Thus, the host is expected to believe that the invitee has purchased oxen sight unseen and is now, after the sale, examining the integrity of his purchase.

The third excuse of having married a wife is likewise inadequate. Even while there may be an allusion to Deuteronomic law (see above), such is merely circumstantial for the man has *already accepted* the invitation; no wars are mentioned, and he will not be called on to leave the community.³⁷ Thus, the third invitee is deliberately scorning a previously accepted invitation in favor of the comforts of a new bride when the banquet would have required but a few hours of his time. This would be particularly reprehensible in a formal Middle Eastern setting.³⁸

The deliberately vindictive and descending nature of the excuses is emphasized when one examines the Greek text.

³⁵Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 177.

³⁶"δοκιμάζω," Louw, Johannes P. and Eugene A. Nida, ed. *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*. Vol. 1 (New York: United Bible Societies, 1988), 332.

³⁷Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 99.

³⁸*Ibid.*

Excuse #1

I have bought a field (ACTION)

I must go out and see it (REACTION)

I ask you, have me excused (EXCUSE)

Excuse #2

I have bought five oxen (ACTION)

I am going to test them (REACTION)

I ask you, have me excused (EXCUSE)

Excuse #3

I married a wife (ACTION)

therefore . . . (REACTION)

I cannot come (EXCUSE)

Notice that there is a subtle shift between the excuses. The first guest "was pleading his case as he said, 'I must go and see it.' This second guest says literally, 'I am going to test them.' He does not state an intention but announces an action in progress."³⁹ The third guest abandons this formula entirely and bluntly states, "I cannot come." Clearly the anger of the host is entirely justified (v. 21).

The response of the master is indeed remarkable. The securing of replacement guests from the downcast of society is as extraordinary as the chances of all the initial guests refusing to come. Jeremias traces this incident to a rabbinic story of a rich tax collector named Bar Ma'jan whose similar activity was in response to his banquet invitation being snubbed by the elite of society.⁴⁰ Although there are incidental parallels, importing

³⁹ibid., 98.

⁴⁰Jeremias, *Parables of Jesus*, 179.

the motives and responses of Bar Ma'jan's into the text clearly violates the context. The compelling of the beggarly elements is two-fold. First the servant goes out into the streets and alleys. "Streets" refers to the broad, well-traveled village roads, while "alleys" refer to side lanes where society's outcasts were more likely to congregate.⁴¹ The second sending extends beyond the village to the countryside, which many commentators believe is where the Gentiles would live. "To compel" does not mean to force, but rather is required by the Middle Eastern culture. Bailey comments that,

In the Middle East the unexpected invitation must be refused. The refusal is all the more required if the guest is of lower social rank than the host.⁴²

Therefore, in order for the master to convince the beggarly people of his sincerity, it was necessary to compel them.

The reiteration of the first guest's exclusion (v. 24) is not merely a formal imprecation, but may refer to an ancient banqueting practice of sending a small portion of food to those who were unable to attend.⁴³ Thus, due to their insulting treatment of the host, the former guests excluded themselves from even a courteous token of the meal.

Understanding the Story

Taking into consideration the previous discussion, this writer's understanding of the story of the parable is as follows:

A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. All of the guests accepted the invitation and decided to come. When the meal was prepared and the guests

⁴¹Liefeld, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, 8:978.

⁴²Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes*, 108.

⁴³Blomberg, *Interpreting the Parables*, 235.

were summoned, however, they all made ridiculous excuses, insulting the host. The host became very angry and invited the underclass of the village to participate in the meal. All were assembled and still there was room, so the servant was instructed to go outside the community and bring anyone available to participate in the banquet. The festivities would go on without those initially invited, and they would not receive so much as a taste of the banquet.

Understanding the Significance⁴⁴

In light of the context and rich background of the parable of the Great Supper, the following central truths are suggested. They reflect the triadic form of the parable: the máster, the first group of invitees, and the second group of guests. Following these main points, a list of auxiliary truths are also given which may be induced from this parable within its context.

Central Truths

1. Christ unfailingly invites all manner of people to participate in his kingdom, but the day will come when it will be too late to respond to his grace.
2. There are no adequate excuses for refusing God's grace—entrance into God's kingdom must take precedence over all earthly concerns.
3. God's generosity is not frustrated by man's willful rejection of him. He extends an invitation even to those who are destitute and therefore more inclined to respond.

⁴⁴The following assertions are a synthesis of all the sources cited; they are by no means original.

Auxiliary Truths Implied by this Parable

1. Some individuals who expect to be present in the kingdom will be excluded due to their insincerity.
2. Those who by their own choice exclude themselves from the kingdom have no one to blame but themselves.
3. Guests must be invited; no one "storms the party."
4. If the invitation for the kingdom is to reach all people, someone must take the message to them.
5. All invitations are the grace of God.
6. God's anger is stimulated towards those who reject his invitation.
7. The invitation to enter God's kingdom is ongoing . . . enter while you may.

A. M. Hunter offers an insightful comment to consider in closing.

God's invitation, through Christ into his kingdom is always going out; and we are all even now writing our answers. Either it is, "please make my apologies," which is only another way of saying "I have more important things to do." Or else it is, "I know my heart's need. I am weary of my sins and need forgiveness."⁴⁵

⁴⁵A.M. Hunter, *The Parables Then and Now* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1971), 96.