

### **No More Excuses**

(Series: Parables of Jesus: Posing the Scandal of His Gospel)

In this hard text we have one of the most autobiographical parables Jesus spoke. In “The Parable of the Great Banquet,” as it has traditionally been called, Jesus opens His heart to us more than in other of His parables.

Do you hear the joy in His voice? “Come, for everything is ready now” (14:17).

Do you hear the disappointment in His voice, the sadness? “But they all alike began to make excuses” (14:18).

Do you hear the passion in His voice; the unquenchable, inextinguishable, undying passion? “... that my house may be filled” (14:23).

Jesus calls us into the grand adventure of discipleship. “Come to Me,” He says. “Come, follow behind Me,” He says. It is the call to enter into a qualitatively different kind of life. It is the call to come with Him into the intimacy He enjoys with His Father. It is the call to join Him in the inner life of God, in the inner life of the Trinity, God as Father, Son and Holy Spirit. It is the call to join Him in the Kingdom of God. It is the call to come “farther up and further in.” It is the call to a very different kind of life, so full, so rich, so vibrant, so fresh, so lavish, so delicious that the most appropriate descriptive image is that of a banquet!

Over and over again in both the Old and New Testaments, the life the Living God wants to give the world is spoken of in terms of a feast. Isaiah 25:6-9: “And the Lord of Hosts will prepare a lavish banquet for all peoples on this mountain; a banquet of aged wine, choice pieces with marrow ... He will swallow up death for all time ... and wipe tears away from all faces.”

As we have seen over the past months, many of Jesus’ other parables involve a meal, someone throwing some a dinner party, or a wedding feast. The great climax of the last book of the Bible, of the Revelation of Jesus Christ, involves the joyous celebration of the Marriage Supper of the Lamb. The call to discipleship is a call to participate in a banquet!

Yes, it is also a call to challenge and sacrifice. Jesus is very clear with us about this. His disciples experience much tribulation as they, as we, seek to obey Him in the world. We are, after all, following One Whom Isaiah calls, “a man of sorrows,” well acquainted with grief. We are, after all, following One Who gets crucified, and Who calls us to daily take up the cross. But all the tribulation, suffering, grief, pain is unto living in the Kingdom of God. Living a life so full, so rich, so lavish it can only be spoken of as a great banquet.

Can you hear the joy in Jesus' voice? And can you hear the disappointment in His voice? There He is, the great Host, God Himself in our flesh and blood, inviting people with open arms. "Come ...." And there they are, there we are, making excuses.

It is important to emphasize that in this parable in Luke 14, Jesus is NOT speaking of those who are hearing the call for the first time. Jesus is speaking to those who have heard it and understand it. The people to whom Jesus is speaking have already heard the invitation to the banquet and already said they would come. It is just that when the dinner bell rings they begin to make excuses. We said we would follow Jesus wherever He leads us. But when He actually leads us, in directions we had not thought of ...

Kenneth Bailey, missionary-theologian, spent his whole adult life studying the Gospels in the Middle East. In his book, *Through Peasant Eyes*, he helps us understand some of the cultural dynamics at work in Jesus' parable. He tells us that a village host must provide some sort of meat at his banquet. The amount of meat he needs to cook is determined by the number of guests. Makes sense, right? The host sends out invitations. People then respond, "yes I can come," "no I cannot." The RSVPs will determine what kind of meat to prepare, and how much of that kind of meat to prepare. So:

if 2-4 people say they can come, a chicken or two will be prepared.

If 5-8 people reply they will be there, a duck will be prepared.

If 10-15 guests say they will be there, a goat will be prepared.

If 15-35, a sheep.

If 35-75, then a calf.

"The decision regarding the kind of meat and the amount is made mostly on the basis of the number of accepted invitations" (94).

Then, says, Bailey, "once the countdown starts it cannot be stopped. The appropriate animal is killed, because there is no refrigeration, (the meat) must be eaten that night" (ibid). The host works all day preparing the banquet. Then at "the hour of the banquet," sends out the message, "Come, everything is ready now." Meaning the meat is cooked, and we are ready for you to enjoy.

This is why in Jesus' parable, "come," is in the present tense, meaning, "keep coming," "continue to come." The guests have been in the process of coming ever since they said yes to the invitation. They said they would come ... and have just been waiting for the dinner bell to ring.

Do you hear the joy in Jesus' voice? "Come ..."

Do you hear the passion? Jesus has the banquet-giver say, "compel them to come in, that My house may be filled." FILLED! The Living God's desire is that the banquet hall be filled. This is one of the driving forces of Christian ministry and mission: God's passion to fill! God will not be satisfied until the place is full. This means if those who were first on the guest list choose not to come, He will make up a new list. My refusal to come, your refusal to come, will not postpone the banquet. He will fill His house!

Can you hear the disappointment in Jesus' voice? "And they all alike began to make excuses." The Saviour of the world is throwing a party, a feast. And those who said they would come ... begin to make excuses. They are no longer coming. Can you feel what He feels?

You know the feeling if you have ever tried to give someone the gift of peace or hope or joy ... but the person would not take it. You parents know the feeling very well: you want to lead your children into the very best, but they keep choosing less than the best. You teachers know the feeling. You counselors know the feeling. Pastors know the feeling.

But none of us will ever be able to feel what Jesus feels. He is the Creator come to His earth. He is the One Who made us, Who knows us, Who knows what makes us tick, Who wants us to be fully human, fully alive. He is the Re-Creator, the One Who can put us back together again. He knows that if we would just come; if we would just come to Him everyday; if we would just follow behind Him everyday, and just do what He tells us to do, if we would keep going deeper into Him we would experience a quality of life that can only be called a banquet. But, alas, most of us who are invited, and say “yes” to the invitation, do not come when He calls.

Jesus tells “The Parable of the Great Banquet” on a Sabbath day, at the home of a leading Pharisee. At the meal, Jesus does medicine; He heals a man with dropsy, edema. And at the meal, He speaks to issues of hospitality; He offers healing of distortions of hospitality that are keeping the Pharisees from entering the Kingdom of God.

Apparently one of the Pharisees at the dinner “gets it.” He sees what Jesus is doing and wants in on what Jesus is offering. He says, “Blessed is everyone who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God” (14:15). Blessed indeed!

But, and this is the point of Jesus’ parable, the only ones who enjoy the feast, are those who when the call is sounded, actually stop what they are doing, and make their way to Jesus, who actually get up and follow. Can you feel the sadness when Jesus says, “but they all alike began to make excuses”? They all.

One guest says, “I have bought a piece of land and I need to go out and look at it; please consider me excused.” Another guest says “I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please consider me excused.” Yet another says, “I have married a wife, and for that reason I cannot come.” Cannot? Or will not?

What is your excuse? I know mine. What is yours? When the dinner bell rings, what is your excuse? When he calls us to follow a different way than the one we have set for ourselves, what is the excuse?

Three things are true about most of the excuses Jesus hears in our time. The first is that the excuses offered are seldom the real reason for not coming to the banquet. Most of our spoken excuses are not the real issue for not coming to and following after Jesus.

In the parable the first guest says he has to go inspect some land he has just bought. Not think about that. I mean do not most people inspect the property before buying it? One goes out and checks nearly every square foot. The banquet host is supposed to believe that the guest bought some land sight-unseen? As Kenneth Bailey notes, this person’s excuse “is a bald-faced lie and everyone knows it” (p. 95). Bailey suggests that the Western civilization equivalent is cancelling an important dinner date two hours before it is about to start by saying, “I have just bought a new house over the phone and I must go and have a look at it and at the neighborhood.” Who is going to believe that?

In the parable, the second guest says he cannot come because he needs to try out the five yoke of oxen he just bought. Really? That is ten oxen, which means the fellow was very rich. If one owned even one yoke, that is two animals, one was considered well off. Did he need the extra oxen because he had a large farm? Or was buying oxen a hobby for him? Whatever the case, the excuse was flimsy, to say the least. Prospective buyers of oxen always tested them before making a purchase. They would watch the animal work; better yet they would drive the animals back and forth across the field themselves “to be assured of their strength and evenness of pull” (Bailey, p. 97). The host is supposed to believe that the guest bought ten oxen without testing them? That would be like me calling Sharon and saying, “I cannot make it home tonight for the dinner we planned for the folks in our strata because I just bought a used car over the phone, and I am on my way down to the used car lot to find out its age and model and see if it will start.” Right.

In the parable the third guest says he cannot come to the banquet he already agreed to attend because he just got married. Notice, by the way, that unlike the other two, this guy does not request to be excused. A great insult in that culture, and bad taste in any culture! Apparently he felt his excuse needed no apology. The first century Jews practiced a custom which has much to commend itself (or at least some variation of it). In the book of Deuteronomy 24:5, it stipulates that when a man takes a wife he is free from military duty and other major responsibilities for one year. “Free at home” for one year... to nurture and strengthen the marriage. Wow! So maybe this third guest felt the law gave him the right to renege on any invitation of any kind. Even so, he could have gone if he had really wanted to go, for he had all the time in the world!

The fact is, his excuse was a lie. The wedding had not just taken place. had there been a wedding in the village in the recent past the host would not have scheduled a big (14:16) dinner party. Everyone in the village would have been obligated to attend the wedding, which can last for a week. What the fellow is saying is “I am too busy now. Yes, I said I would come to your party, but now I am busy with a woman.” The party is no longer worth the effort.

Seldom are the excuses we verbalize the real reason for not following after Jesus as He calls us to new steps of discipleship. For instance, many say they have intellectual problems with Jesus’ claims. As inviting as His claims are, they simply cannot be sustained in our post-modern world. I hear that ... and understand. But, for many (not all) who say this, that is not the issue at all. They understand His claims very well. It is just that they do not want to face the moral and ethical implications of Jesus’ claims. The French existentialist philosopher Jean Paul Sartre once said, “belief in God would make my morality impossible.” To which a Dutch pastor replied, “Sartre’s morality makes the non-existence of God a necessity.”

Many say, “I like Jesus ... but I cannot affirm that He is Lord over all of life.” And what they mean is, “I will not affirm that Jesus is Lord of all of life, because there are areas of my life where I want to be my own lord.” To say “He is Lord over all of life” calls me to change. And I cannot say it because I do not want to change.

Many say, “Jesus is wonderful. There is no one like Him. But given all the suffering in the world, some of it perpetuated in His name, I simply cannot follow Him unreservedly.” I hear that ... and understand it too. But sometimes (not always) that is not the real issue. The real issue is either some personal pain which Jesus has not yet healed, or the realization that when we bring the pain of the world to Jesus, He calls us to join Him in bringing His comfort; and I am not ready to give up my comfort.

So the excuses we verbalize are seldom the real reason for not doing what Jesus is calling us to do.

The second thing about most excuses Jesus hears is that they reveal our first loves. Our excuses reveal our true values and priorities. In the parable the invited guest's unspoken "first loves" kept them from the party. So too with us. If not surrendered to Jesus, our unspoken, but deeply held values and priorities will keep us from enjoying "the banquet-life" of the Kingdom of God.

Let me put this second point a bit stronger. Our excuses for not following Jesus' leading, for not doing what He says to do, reveal our true sources of identity and security. Our excuses reveal what we think makes for significance and wholeness. So for example, we say, "I cannot spend any more time in worship and study of God's Word ... I am just too busy with other things." Other things. Other things? Other things than taking time to be with Jesus? Other things than being with the great Lover of our lives? You see? "Too busy ..." means my identity lies elsewhere than in Jesus. "Too busy ..." means my security is found in other than Jesus. Am I being too hard on us?

Let me put this second point about excuses even stronger. Our excuses reveal our idols. We all have them. To be human is to be an idol-worshipper. Finite values given infinite weight. Good gifts of God given god-like power.

So, for example, if I cannot make the time to be engaged in the kinds of activities that help me know and love the Risen Lord, it simply reveals that I am more in love with someone or something else. Everything else I am engaged in may be perfectly good. It is just that everything else is more important than the One Who loves more than anyone else. Have you ever noticed that in one breath we can say, "I do not have time for Jesus," and in the next tell about the latest sitcom we watched, or the latest film we saw, or the latest shopping spree? It is all a matter of values, priorities, allegiances. Our excuses give us away.

There is a third thing about most excuses Jesus hears. It is the flip-side of the second: Our excuses reveal what we think about the Host and His banquet. Our excuses reveal our assessment of the relative worth of Jesus. Some of our excuses say, that in the final analysis, Jesus and His kingdom are not all that inviting. Oh, we would never say that out-loud. But it is what we are saying. The excuse says, "Thank You Jesus ... but there are better offers ... life can be fulfilling without doing what You call me to do." Again, we do not say that out-loud. But it is what we are saying. Or, "Jesus Your offer is not all the Bible cracks it up to be. I like You and all, I really do. But right now what you offer, well... let's just say it is not a lot better than what the world offers." We may not say that out-loud. But it is what our actions say.

Am I being too hard here too? I do not think so. Our excuses tell us how much or how little Jesus means to us. In the Middle East one insults the host by having accepted the invitation but then not coming when the dinner bells rings. Do you see what an insult it is to turn down Jesus when He says, "Come ..."? We may never verbalize it in insulting language. But when we turn Him down, when He calls us to follow Him in a new way and we do not go, we are telling Him He is not worth the effort. He is not worthy of the risk.

Some of our excuses insult Him by calling His character into question. "Sorry, Jesus, I am not sure I can count on You. Even if You claim that Your banquet is more fulfilling, I am not sure You can deliver." We may not put it in those exact words, but it is what we mean.

Some of our excuses reveal that we think Jesus is naïve. “Your way of life is so .... what can I say? It is so ‘out of touch.’ Yes, that is it Jesus. Your way of life is out of touch with the way things ‘really are’ in ‘the real world.’

Blessed are the meek, the gentle ... come on Jesus, give me a break.

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice ... like Jesus, You need to realize that it is those who hunger and thirst for power and wealth who get the blessing.

Love your enemies ... are You kidding? Jesus, do You know what happens to people who love their enemies? Be real Jesus.

Forgive those who hurt you ... right.

Lose your life to find it ... are You serious? Lose your life and you lose.

Again, we may not actually verbalize it in such words ... but our excuses are saying something like that.

Excuses reveal our assessment of the relative worth of the banquet host. “Jesus, You have claimed more about Yourself than You should. You have overstated Your claims. You are very bright, but You simply do not see things correctly.” Again, we may not put it in such blunt ways. But it is what we are really saying to Him.

Maybe we should verbalize it in such terms. He knows it all already anyway. Maybe we should be upfront. “the life you offer is not as good as You make it out to be, Jesus.” Or, “You simply cannot be trusted with my life and my needs.” Or, “Your call to discipleship simply does not cut it in Vancouver.”

Have you ever done that? Try it. Right now. Stand beneath the cross, where He is giving His life so we can live, and say, “You are not worth the hassle.” Take the communion bread or cup in your hands, and say, “following You wholeheartedly just is not worth the changes I would have to make.”

I hear in the sadness of Jesus’ voice in His parable God’s question to Israel through the prophet Jeremiah. “What injustice did your ancestors find in Me that they went far from Me and walked after emptiness and became empty?” (2:5). What did I do to make you think I do not love you? What did I do to make you think I cannot give you life? What did I do to make you think I cannot take care of you and your loved ones if you go all out for Me?

“Come ... everything is ready now.” His passion is to FILL the house. So He keeps calling: come ... keep coming. My refusal to come will not postpone the party. Your refusal to come will not postpone the party. The party will go on without with or without us.

It is a new day. In the midst of all the chaos in the world, the Holy Spirit is moving in our world in new and wonderful ways, calling us beyond what we have known, calling us beyond where we have been . I do not want to be left out. And neither do you.

“Come... everything is ready.” What is holding you back? What is your excuse? Tell Him. Come to the Table. Tell Him. And watch Him melt it away in His relentless love!

“Blessed is everyone who eats bread in the kingdom of God.”

Blessed indeed.