

THE SLIGHTED INVITATION

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When Jesus was on the earth he taught a great many things in parables. These parables are stories that seem never to lose their power. They come down through the centuries unimpaired, for in each one of these stories, not only was there meaning for the age in which Jesus lived, but also for all the ages that were yet to come. I have chosen one of these to read to you at this time. Listen as I read Luke 14:16-24, the parable of the slighted invitation.

“A certain man made a great supper; and he bade many: and he sent forth his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for [all] things are now ready. And they all with one [consent] began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a field, and I must needs go out and see it; I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them; I pray thee have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. And the servant came, and told his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor and maimed and blind and lame. And the servant said, Lord, what thou didst command is done, and yet there is room. And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and constrain [them] to come in, that my house may be filled. For I say unto you, that none of those men that were bidden shall taste of my supper.” This story is simple enough that any child who is old enough to go to school can understand it, yet it is profound enough that it has a meaningful application to many millions of lives in our land today.

Key Sentences

In looking back through the story there are certain phrases that stand out. For instance, in the seventeenth verse there is the expression, “Come, for all things are now ready.” Here is a clear-cut implication of a practice that would be considered unusual in our time. In Bible times they had two invitations for a banquet or supper. The first was sent out some days before the event announcing that on a certain day at a certain time there would be a feast. Then, because they did not have clocks, there came a second invitation when everything was prepared. The servant would go out through the streets and call the people who had been invited earlier and would say, “Come, for all things are now ready.”

It is interesting, by way of comparison, to remember that John the Baptist, as forerunner of Jesus, came and declared to all men that the kingdom of heaven was at hand. His was a preliminary announcement to the world that something great was about to take place. A little later Jesus came, died on the cross, and the church began. The kingdom was here.

In the eighteenth verse of our text we find a disappointing turn in the story, “They all with one consent began to make excuse.” The word excuse is a familiar word, but perhaps many of us do not know its origin. It comes from a Latin phrase *ex causa* which literally means “free from the charge,” the idea being that a person is charged or blamed for something that is wrong and he makes excuse. He tries to free himself from the charge through providing fictitious evidence.

Putting First Things Second

In our story the men who were invited made three excuses. The first one said, “I have bought a field.” That was certainly a legitimate thing. Property is necessary. Property is approved of God. The second man said, “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to prove them.” Again, it is a legitimate thing to have oxen. These are the means of production and it is proper and right for a man to be concerned about the means of making a living. The third man said, “I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come.” Again, marriage is certainly a legitimate, right thing. It was ordained of God. The law of Moses, back in Deut. 24:5, says a rather surprising thing to our modern ears. It allows a young married man a year of exemption from military service. If he is newly married he need not go to the army.

All of these are legitimate. Well, what is wrong then? The fact is that there was nothing wrong in any one of these activities--going out to examine property, going out to see that the means of production were sound, or going out to establish a home. The thing that is wrong is that even though they, in and of themselves are right, they are allowed to crowd out something else that is also important. In this instance they crowd out the Lord's invitation to a feast. Physical things are about to crowd out a spiritual feast. That is deep tragedy.

After these men had made their excuses, the master of the house became angry, closed his door against those who were not grateful enough to accept his invitation, and sent his servant out into the highways and byways to invite in whoever would come. After a while the house was filled with guests, but those who had been invited originally were shut out. At first this story had its application to the Jews. They were God's own race of people, chosen to be recipients of the greatest blessing that any race ever had. The Messiah would come through them. Yet in spite of the fact that God had singled them out for honor and blessing, they rejected Christ. They declined

the invitation. When they turned deaf ears, our Lord then turned to the Gentiles of the world. That includes us, for most of us are Gentiles. That is the original meaning of this message.

Why Did They Reject Jesus?

But this passage has other implications than this one. I have wondered sometimes, as I have tried to think of the Jews and their rejection of Christ, why they did it. For one reason they were so blinded by their preconceived ideas that they could not see that he was the Messiah. They misunderstood the fact that he was really the Son of God and the Savior of the world. Along with that fact they misunderstood the importance of accepting what he taught. They did not stop to realize that heaven and hell hung in the balances and that in rejecting Jesus of Nazareth they were actually choosing eternal condemnation for themselves.

There is a third thing that may be the real causative factor. They were so interested in their own affairs--so preoccupied with their own immediate wants that they did not seem to be very interested in the long-range eternal things that Jesus was offering. There is a sentence in Paul's letter to the Philippians which seems to describe them and many of our day as well. In Philippians 2:21, the apostle Paul writes, "They all seek their own and not the things of Jesus Christ." That seems to describe so many people of the world. Our own immediate, human, earthly wants crowd out the more meaningful, eternal, spiritual needs of our lives.

Cur Excuses

A few moments ago we said that these men in our story made excuses. Do we also in our day make excuses? Have you ever heard, for instance, a man say, "Well I got too much religion when I was a boy." What he really ought to say is, "Some aspects of my early training were unfortunate, and religion was not presented to me in its ideal or true form, and I became prejudiced against it. But I am going to come back now and let the Lord's teaching come into my life."

An example or something similar to this is the case of Bruce Barton who was at one time a congressman from New York, and through most of his life an advertising executive in a major New York advertising firm. As a little boy he was made to go to Sunday school, made to be religious, so to speak. When he got big enough he decided that he would quit it all. He spoke of Sunday school as his weekly hour of rebellion. For a number of years he did not darken a church door. Later, as a mature man he went back and studied the whole matter of religion and wrote the very meaningful book, *The Man Nobody Knows*, in tribute to Jesus Christ. I am sure that many a man has grown up with few happy memories of church going and of religion in general, but he must not let this situation blind him to the salvation that Christ offers through his church.

Sometimes we hear a person say, "I am too tired when Sunday comes." I am sure that many of us are tired at the end of the week, or at the beginning of the week, or in the middle of the week. However, it is a tragedy to shut out the greatest blessing there is in life because we are physically tired. Some other things can be left off, but the religion of Christ cannot be left off. The man who says, "I work hard all week and I am too tired to go to church on Sunday" is simply crowding out the thing he needs most. It would be like a man getting up in the morning and saying, "I am too tired to go to the table to eat; I am going to miss all my meals today; I am just too tired to eat." It is even more tragic, because Spiritual food he must have.

Sometimes we hear the old, old, old excuse, "There are too many hypocrites in the church." Where would you rather have the hypocrites than in the church? Maybe, if they come often enough and hear enough, they will change and not be hypocrites. Or, where in this world can you go where there are no hypocrites? Certainly not into business or the professions, because they are there. Name a field and hypocrites are there. While I am sure that many have stumbled because of the examples of some who were not really, deeply Christian, it is just an excuse. Seeing the thinness of the excuses that these men made in the long ago might just possibly help us see that we also rationalize and make excuses, trying to free ourselves from blame. These men shut themselves off from salvation and so does modern man when he makes excuses.

But--Not Everyone Rejected Jesus

But I would say something else. While there were many who rejected the invitation of Christ there were also many who accepted it. It is this that I would emphasize even more than the rejection of Jesus. Do you get a thrill when you read the second chapter of Acts about the beginning of the church? Peter stood up and preached a sermon about Christ, and after a while people began to be deeply concerned about their souls. Before the day was over 3,000 people had responded to Peter's instructions, "Repent ye, and be baptized, every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ unto the remission of your sins." (Acts 2:38). Three thousand people accepted the invitation; they did not reject it. That is just the beginning. A few weeks later, the gospel was preached in Samaria. Simon the sorcerer and others turned the direction of their lives and became Christians.

Think of that chariot ride from Jerusalem to Gaza when a man from Ethiopia heard the gospel. He did not reject the invitation. That very day he asked, "Behold, here is water; What doth hinder me to be baptized?" (Acts 8:36). They stopped the chariot and he was baptized. Do you feel a deep rejoicing when you read of Saul of Tarsus on the road to Damascus changing the whole direction of his life? He had been outstanding as a persecutor of Christians and then suddenly he accepted the Lord's invitation. A few days later, after

he was more fully instructed in the city of Damascus, he, too, was baptized. These are people who accepted the invitation and this is just the beginning. On and on it goes.

In Philippi a little later we find a businesswoman by the name of Lydia accepting the invitation. She and those who worked with her were baptized. Then a Roman jailor accepted the invitation. It was between midnight and dawn, under rather unusual circumstances, but here was a man who reversed everything that he had been taught religiously to accept Christ. Think also of the Roman centurion at Caesarea, Cornelius, and how that everything in his educational background was given up in order that he might worship Jehovah and be a Christian. While we do lament that some tragically did turn from Christ and did not accept his invitation, I want to emphasize that Christ reached into all kinds of homes and hearts and that thousands of people have accepted his invitation.

I have only begun to trace the ones listed in the Bible. When Paul moved on from Philippi there were those at Thessalonica who accepted him. There were those at Berea. Some of their names are given. When he got to Athens he stood on Mars Hill in the Areopagus and when he had finished preaching, Dionysius, the Areopagite, a member of the senate of ancient Athens, and a woman named Damaris believed. Later, he moved on to Corinth and some there believed, and a church was started from among people who before had been pagans. The power of the invitation of Christ is a very great power and the Lord has not gone unnoticed. Only some of the people have rejected him.

I get a particular thrill when I read the final portion of the book of Philippians. There we find Paul, while a prisoner in Rome, sending greetings from those "that are of Caesar's household." The gospel had been preached even in Rome, the invitation had been heard and there were Christians in Caesar's household.

The Greatest Mistake

In this little while we have talked about people who have made the greatest mistake that man can make. They turned away from the salvation provided by the Lord. In this little while we have also talked about those who have accepted Christ. I want to plead with you, do not make the tragic mistake of rejecting the invitation of your Lord. Do not put it off to some later time. There is nothing in life that is as important as this. You need to do it now while you are sure that you have opportunity. Believe in Christ as God's Son, repent of your past sins, confess the name of Jesus before men, and then be buried with your Lord in baptism, the glorious act which symbolizes the Lord's death, burial and resurrection. Rise from that grave of water to walk in newness of life. The invitation of our Lord is extended to you. Will you accept it?