

## Parables Session 10

### Introductory Comments

1. Three versions of this parable appear in the gospel tradition, but Matthew's is so divergent that we will not be considering it here. Some scholars believe that while the writers all had the same original source for the parable, Matthew reworked it to include some of the harsher themes associated with his gospel.
2. This parable is really part of the same scene as what appears immediately before it in 14:1-14. Jesus is still at the table with his foes; he has finished rebuking them for their practices concerning choosing seats and inviting guests, reminding them that the kingdom holds them to a higher standard. The transition to our section is made by the exclamation by one of the Pharisees concerning the "happiness" of those who participate in the eschatological banquet. Rather than confirm that judgment, Jesus turns it into another parable of rejection. Nothing at this meal can go right for the Pharisees!
3. It is very sobering for 21<sup>st</sup> century Christians to realize that we lack all historical or geographical context for this story (and any of Jesus' stories, really). We don't have a clue where Jesus was when he originally told this story. Likewise, we aren't sure the setting his original story had. Was it originally a wedding feast (Matthew)? Or was it a banquet thrown by a rich man (Luke)? Or did the historical Jesus say that it was just a dinner (Thomas)? We have three different authors pulling from the same Jesus story each with different contexts. Surely by the time each wrote they were all somewhere distant and removed from Jesus' Galilean setting.

### Questions

Read Luke 14:16-24; Thomas 64, the Dinner Party

1. **What are the similarities and differences of the Thomas and Luke versions?** Both of them involve two movements: inviting the upright/wealthy, and then inviting others. Aside from that, there are certain differences. For example, Thomas has reworked the excuses of those first invited, while Luke has modified the invitation to others. Thomas has four excuses, while Luke has three. All of Thomas' excuses have something to do with business management (which relate to his final warning). Luke's focus is more on those who are invited after the first rejection.
2. **There is a sense of insult that Luke conveys in this parable. Where do you notice it?** As soon as the initial guests start coming up with excuses. Each one is "plausible," but presented in a way that is ridiculous enough (buying real estate and cattle, sight unseen; getting married – the planning for which most certainly would have predated the initial invitation. They had been invited; they had agreed to come; now the feast is ready, and they beg off. Not for reasons of compelling urgency, but because they are looking to their own interests rather than the call from the Other.
3. **Are the excuses simply random, or do they exhibit some historical or intertextual connection?** Many scholars have noted the apparent connection between these excuses and Holy War in Israel. According to Deuteronomy 20:5-7, those who had just planted a vineyard or built a house or married a bride were excused from participation in a holy war. The nature of the excuses is that they reveal an entanglement in one's own possessions and relationships that closes one even to a prophetic imperative. It is also noteworthy that the ones who are invited second – "the poor, crippled, blind, and lame" – are also specifically excluded from participation

in a Holy War... not to mention that in some sources (including the Qumran writings) these same categories are excluded from the “eschatological banquet” as well.

4. **Scholars view Luke’s three-fold invitation as an allegory that fits his greater narrative. Whom does each invitation represent?** The first invitation goes out to the “righteous” or “upstanding” ones of the people. This is the expected invitation. But it turns out they have their own pursuits that are more important than the prophet’s call. The second invitation goes out to the “outcast of the people” – the same blind, lame, crippled and poor people that Jesus has identified previously as special targets of the proclamation of the Good News. This is the unexpected, “never-in-my-wildest-dreams” invitation (notice, they had to be “brought” in, not “allowed” in.” They weren’t expecting an invite). But there is still room, so the invitation goes beyond “the city” to the byways of a wider region. By this we must understand it to refer to the Gentiles, and their invitation to be a part of God’s people (Acts is all about this). Thus, will the banquet be made full. **Who are the ones cast out?** The ones first invited, who will not taste the banquet, are the Pharisees and lawyers who actively reject Jesus. *This is not a parable of the rejection of the Jews as a whole* – because the “poor and outcast” who come to the banquet are themselves Jews, however much they have been marginalized. It is a parable of rejection told to the leaders and intended for the leaders.
5. **Of the three different groups of people invited to the dinner – the original guests, the “poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame,” and the people in the roads and lanes – who do we feel closest to? Why? Who would feel most blessed at the dinner, do we think? Why?**
6. **What does the parable of the banquet provoke? What is it about?** The call of God issued by Jesus must relativize all other claims on life. The parable shows how entanglement with persons and things can in effect be a refusal of the invitation. And as the rest of Luke 14 indicates, a choice needs to be made – the call of God or the call of possessions and/or people? The parable of the banquet burlesques the messianic banquet just as the Mustard Seed burlesques the great cedars of Lebanon. The banquet proposed by the man might be a fitting model for the messianic banquet but the actual banquet is something else. It also points to the here and now as the place of the banquet, and to life on the streets among the peasants as the appropriate model for the banquet, not the world of the elites. Just as the parable of the Unforgiving Slave rejects the imperial model for the messiah, so this parable rejects the banquets of the elites as the model for the messianic banquet. God’s banquet is something else; it’s not a table that serves the ways of this world.

There is little that is gentle or reassuring in this. But as the parable warns, no one enters apart from God’s invitation; no one is excluded except by his/her own choice. And as the final saying of the section suggests (Lk 14:34-35), any mode of discipleship that tries to eat with both sides of the mouth, that is, be consumed both by possessions and by Jesus’ call, will be like salt without savor, fit for nothing much. “It is tossed out.”

*\*\*\*For next session, read Matthew 20:1-16, “The Laborers in the Vineyard”*

*Upcoming topics:*

*Session 12: The Widow and the Judge, Luke 18:1-8*

*Session 13: The Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31*