

Luke 14:15-24

There is a sitcom on TV called "The Big Bang Theory". It's one of my favourite shows at the moment. One of the main characters, Sheldon, absolutely hates being given presents: he always feels like he has to give something back of absolutely equal value! It's not possible for him to receive a gift without giving something in return.

And although he's maybe an extreme example, I think something of that attitude works in our culture today. I think it's pretty rare for a British person to give or receive a gift without any thought of reciprocation. At Christmas time, sometimes I only send cards to people who I think will send me a card! We don't like to be debtors to anybody.

But I do wonder whether that clouds our relationship with God. Do we think of God as someone who's basically our equal, who we can repay - someone who even owes us something? Well Jesus' parable today was told to a group of people who thought something like that.

If you look back at **verse 1**, Jesus was eating at the house of a "prominent" Pharisee. Then in **verse 7**, Jesus notices that the people were taking the places of honour at the table. This was a culture which, perhaps even more than ours, was based on a system of honour and shame: in Israel at the time, inviting people to a grand meal like this was done in order to promote your own social status in the community. You would invite the social insiders and leave out the social outsiders.

But Jesus, in **verses 12-14**, turns all that on his head: he says when you give a banquet, don't invite all those who will repay you! Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind - so you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.

I think it's hard for us to imagine now the impact that these words would have had on those Pharisees Jesus was speaking to. This was completely turning over the social conventions of the day. So it's not surprising that, at the start of our passage in **verse 15**, someone still doesn't get it. He says, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God." In other words, "That's all very well for you to say, Jesus. But I'm going to eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God." The unspoken assumption behind his words is that he's "in", he's one of the privileged ones. It's almost as if God is lucky to have him.

But instead of answering this man directly, Jesus tells a story. A man was preparing a banquet, and so he invited all his guests, and sent out his servant when the time came to announce it was ready. But then, notice in **verses 18-20**, all of the guests alike make excuses as to why they can't come. The first has just bought a field; the second has bought five yoke of oxen. Note that both of these things indicate status in that society: five yoke of oxen was quite a substantial amount, as well as owning a field: these people had status and wealth.

And notice, too, that all of these three excuses are things which could have been foreseen! All the guests had been invited to the banquet, they knew when it was happening. And yet, they still chose to do those things. This is more than simply forgetfulness: this is a deliberate, calculated snub to shame the man who invited them to the banquet.

What Jesus is saying to the Pharisees, essentially, is that they have chosen to shame the God who sent Jesus. By rejecting God's Son, the Pharisees have rejected the one who sent him - and they are culpable. They should have known better.

So, in **verse 21**, the owner of the house hears this and gets angry. He says to his servant, "go out and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame." Do you notice, by the way, the link with **verse 13**: Jesus repeats the four words describing people who he said could not repay. All those who the Pharisees wouldn't have thought to invite to a banquet, these are the ones who the master of the house invites.

But then the servant comes back and says, **verse 22**, all these people have been brought in but there is still room! So the master says, go out even into the country lanes! In this society, he might have been talking about the lanes outside of town next to vineyards, where it was common for beggars to sit. The master says, go out and bring these people in! "I want a full house!"

And finally he says, **verse 24**, "not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." All those Pharisees Jesus was talking to, all those who thought they were automatically part of the Kingdom, it turns out, will not enter into it: they have rejected the invitation, by rejecting Jesus. In their own eyes the Pharisees were worthy of God, they thought they were like the guests who were invited to the banquet. But Jesus tells them here, they have rejected that invitation.

So what does this have to do with us? In the parable, God is the master of the house. We are all those who are poor, crippled, lame and blind. None of us deserve an invitation to God's banquet, none of us are able to expect anything of God. None of us have anything like the means to repay God. As Isaiah 64:6 puts it, "All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags."

And yet, graciously, God compels us to join him. This is what it means for God to be gracious: there is nothing in us which we can do to make God love us, and yet - filthy sinners that we are - he draws us in and invites us to his banquet. By God's grace, on the cross Christ took the punishment for our sins, and we are offered his righteousness in exchange.

Martin Luther grasped this concept well, he saw the Christian life as being like a wedding between Christ and the believer. This is a quote from his essay "On the Freedom of a Christian":

Who then can value highly enough these royal nuptials? Who can comprehend the riches of the glory of this grace? Christ, that rich and pious husband, takes as a wife a needy and impious harlot, redeeming her from all her evils, and supplying her with all his good things. It is impossible now that her sins should destroy her, since they have been laid upon Christ and swallowed up in Him, and since she has in her husband Christ a righteousness which she may claim as her own, and which she can set up with confidence against all her sins, against death and hell, saying: "If I have sinned, my Christ, in whom I believe, has not sinned; all mine is His, and all His is mine;"

So what does this mean for us today? I'd like to suggest two things for us to think about, as we come to the Lord's table. Firstly, it affects how we view other Christians. Remember that everyone else who gathers round this table has been saved by the same grace that you have. As the hymn puts it,

"Nothing in my hand I bring; simply to thy cross I cling." There is no room for looking down on anyone here - as it is said, 'the ground is level at the foot of the cross.'

Secondly, it affects how we view people outside the church. Jesus said that social order of the kingdom is turned upside down: the Kingdom of God is made up of people who do not deserve it, *just like us*. There is no type of person, no type of sin, nothing which excludes someone from the Kingdom of God. The only thing that matters is believing and trusting in Jesus Christ. As such we should go out of our way to be welcoming to all comers, not just people who conform to our own expectations of what a Christian should look like. To be saved by grace alone is to know that fundamentally there is no difference between two sinners, whatever those sins may be.

And notice in the story that the banquet wasn't postponed. The master of the house didn't stop the banquet from happening, he invited people in that very day. Today is the day of salvation. There is an urgency to our task. So let's be thankful to God that he has invited us in, the poor, lame, crippled and blind, and let's pray that he will use us to reach others in the same state.

Let's pray together.