

A Taste for the Banquet

Luke 14

February 24, 2002

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We're calling this room The Banquet Hall. It seems like Jesus was constantly going to banquets or talking about them or making wine for them. That makes sense if He was the Messiah, for all the Jews of that day longed for the Great Messianic Banquet, which would inaugurate the new age.

Isaiah 25:6: "On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of good wine, of fat things full of marrow, of aged wine well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations."

A veil blinds all nations to this banquet.

In the temple on Mt. Zion the worshippers and priests were commanded to feast before the sanctuary and the veil which separated the people from the glory of God . . . all *except* for those with a blemish, like the maimed, blind, and lame: the *imperfect*.

Isaiah continues: "He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the Lord has spoken.

"It will be said on that day, 'Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the Lord; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.'"

So when will this Great Banquet be? — When people say, "This is our God. We waited for Him to save us, and now we rejoice in His salvation." When is *that*?

In Luke 14, 700 years later, Jesus goes to a banquet at a Pharisee's house. The first thing He does is heal a lame man, and the Pharisees get offended. Then all the religious leaders start jockeying for the places of honor at the banquet. Jesus says . . .

"Always chose the lowest place, for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and everyone who humbles himself will be exalted. And when you throw a banquet, invite the poor, maimed, lame, and blind, and you'll be blessed because they can't repay you.

That is, it will be a banquet of grace, a free gift.

Obviously uncomfortable and trying to sound all religious, one of the Pharisee pontificates, "Right! Well, blessed [happy] is he who shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." And Jesus tells a story.

“A man once gave a great banquet and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, ‘Come: for all is now ready.’ But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.’ And another said, ‘I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused. And another said, ‘I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.’”

The servant gets nothing but excuses from people who have already said they would come.

In that day when a host gave a banquet, he would send out invitations in advance. Based on the responses, he would slaughter the appropriate animal. The morning of the feast he would prepare the meal. When it was ready he would send his servant out into the village to all those invited, saying, “Come, for all is now ready!”

This servant says, “Come, for all is now ready! It is finished!” And they make excuses . . . *lame* excuses . . . *lies*.

- Nobody inspects a field *after* he buys it.
- Nobody tests oxen he already owns.
- And *so what* if you married a wife? So did most of us. Bring her with you.

The guests must be mentally maimed and blind to turn down such a great banquet! They have poor excuses—lame excuses.

Poor,
 Maimed,
 Blind,
 Lame . . .
 All their excuses are lies.

The truth is they don’t have an appetite for what’s being served.

Worship should be like a banquet. And we say things like:

“Well, I haven’t been to worship lately . . .”

“I took the kids skiing, because James Dobson says that’s important.”

“I had a real estate deal.”

“The dog ate my homework.”

Lame excuses. But I’m right there with you. When I’m on vacation I often don’t feel like going to worship. And they’re paying me to be here now.

A husband and wife awoke one Sunday morning, and the wife dressed for church. Her husband stayed in bed. Finally, she said, “Why aren’t you getting dressed for church?” He said, “I don’t want to go.” She said, “Why not?” He said, “First of all, that congregation is cold. Second, no one likes me. Third, I just *don’t want* to go.”

She replied, “Well, I have three reasons why you should go. First, the congregation isn’t all that cold; second, some people like you; third, you’re the pastor, so get out of bed!”

Sometimes it’s hard to think of worship in church as a banquet. But the Sabbath was always a day of commanded feasting (Leviticus 23), and it’s still one of the ten commandments.

Jesus is the Great Banquet Giver—the Messiah. He said, “Wherever two or three are gathered in my name, I am there.” He is here whether it looks like it or feels like it. (Like that stable in Bethlehem . . . a lot of folks only saw a stable and never tasted the banquet.)

You can go to a banquet hall and never eat the banquet.
Maybe that’s our problem.

These Pharisees are sitting at a banquet with the Messiah Himself. He’s just healed a lame man; he’s preaching good news, dispensing grace; they say they’ve received the invitation because they believe Moses and the prophets. Now the servant of God is with them, and they *won’t eat!*

The Pharisee blurts, “Happy are those who eat bread in the kingdom of God.” But Jesus *is* the King, and Jesus *is* the Bread. He’s already told them “the kingdom of God is at hand.”

They are sitting at the banquet;
they just won’t eat.
The truth is, they don’t have an appetite
for what’s being served.

Jesus continues His story: “*So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, ‘Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.’*”

Well, the poor, blind, and lame would *have* an appetite for the banquet. Maybe you have to admit you’re poor, blind, and lame to taste this banquet. But religious people competing for places of honor never admit they are poor, blind, or lame. A Pharisee works like crazy to deny the fact that he has any deficiency at all.

“*The servant said, ‘Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.’ And the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.’*”

“Go out to the highways and the hedges.” The “hedges” is where you might expect to find thieves and prostitutes. They *like* banquets and know they can’t pay. The “highway” is where

you would find Gentiles. The servant is going to go to the Gentiles and compel folks to come in, because this free banquet is so good it's unbelievable! Grace like that is unbelievable.

There are people driving down I-70 thinking, "Look — a church. Well, there's no way *I'd* be welcome there."

There are women thinking, "I aborted my baby. I think I *killed* my baby. There's no way God could forgive me for that."

There are businessmen sitting in big, empty houses. They are alone with a bottle of Scotch, staring at a pistol thinking, "I'm a piece of dirt. God hates me."

Maybe *you're* thinking the same thing. "God doesn't want me at His banquet."

Wrong! You are *especially* invited to the Great Banquet, for you have an appetite for what is being served:

Grace . . . "It's what's for dinner."

God is love, and love for any of us looks like grace. He will do and has done everything to compel you to receive it. You and I were made to taste something of God that nothing else in all creation (not angels, not demons, not anything else) can taste. We were made to taste the depths of His love in grace and then sit at His banquet forever, feasting on His love and telling the story of our redemption. It is your heart's deepest longing.

Every time you take a bite, drink a drink,
Scratch an itch, do a deed;
In the depths of your being
You're longing for His banquet of grace.

But in our fear and self-centeredness we deny our hunger (like the Pharisees), or we can't believe grace is true (like the Gentiles and sinners). Usually we do both; that is, we're too full of ourselves to taste His banquet of grace, saying, "I don't need it" or "I'm too bad to receive it." Trusting ourselves is pride.

In The Last Battle (the last book of C. S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia) there is a stable. The stable is the point where eternity touches time. The stable is like church, where we taste eternal food in this temporal world.

Some dwarfs enter the stable, having heard that Aslan is there. But these dwarfs are very proud and hence suspicious and trust no one. Aslan (The Lion of Judah—Jesus Himself) shakes His mane, and instantly a glorious feast appears on the dwarfs' knees. Lewis writes:

There were pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn't much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear that they couldn't taste it properly. They thought they were eating and

drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he had got a bit of an old turnip and a third said he'd found a raw cabbage leaf.

The dwarfs start fighting over who has the best bit of gruel or who has the best seat. They beat each other up, yet they all say, "Well, at any rate there's no Humbug here. We haven't let anyone take us in." Aslan says to the children:

"You see, they will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."

These proud dwarfs sit in church and cross their arms and say, "No Humbug for me! You're not fooling me! Just tell me what to do and I'll do it. I'll carry my own weight. I'm proud."

Yes, you are, and you can't taste the banquet, can you? You must lose yourself to taste it.

The banquet is grace: God's unmerited forgiveness in love. An appetite for God's banquet is called humility.

Jesus said it's the humble who will be exalted; it's the humble who will taste the great banquet; but how do we humble ourselves? How do we lose ourselves? (The harder you try to lose something the more you find the something.)

We religious folks are notorious for getting all arrogant about our humility. We think we save ourselves with our impressive good deeds of humility.

This is the season of Lent when Christians around the world fast before Easter in order to get humble. It's not required by Scripture; it's a religious tradition. In fact, Paul wrote in Colossians 2:22, "These things have no value in checking the indulgence of the flesh": that is, making us humble. That's not to say fasting has no purpose . . . it *does* . . . but anything *we do* tends to feed our own arrogance—our flesh.

Remember Jesus' story in Luke 18 about a tax collector and a Pharisee. They each pray in the temple. The tax collector cries, "God, I'm a sinner! Save me!" The Pharisee says, "Thank you, God, that I'm not like this man. I fast twice a week." Jesus said the tax collector left justified. He received the banquet. The Pharisee did not. He was starving and didn't even know it.

How do we get an appetite for the banquet?

- The harder I try to be humble the more proud I am of my humility.
- The more I try to forget myself the more I remember myself.
- How can I debase myself with myself? It's just more of myself.
- I try to confess my sin . . . get all weepy and pitiful . . . grovel . . . but I'm blind. I can't even see my sin.
- I try to convict myself of sin, and myself *is* the sin.

It's the Spirit of God who must convict me, and when the Spirit of God does, it's less like groveling in the silly, little sins I can see, and more like getting bathed in the tears of Jesus over the rot in the depths of my soul. I weep . . . but they're not *my* tears, and I can't tell if the tears are joy or sorrow. I don't want to run away but run into His arms.

It's not my fasting that leads me to repentance;
it's something else.

Have you ever noticed how many people repent at feasts in the Bible?

- It was at a banquet where the prostitute from the city fell at Jesus' feet weeping and anointing his feet with oil.
- It was at Simon the Leper's banquet where Mary did the same thing.
- It was when Jesus said "Zacheus, come down. It's time for dinner." At that banquet Zacheus stood up and gave away one-half of his possessions.
- Read the story of the prodigal son carefully. It was when the father received him with a banquet of grace that the boy repented. Before that he was just like his older brother, the Pharisee.

It's with His banquet of grace
In the midst of this wilderness world
That the Father melts our icy hearts
And calls us home

I once counted, and there were something like *eighty days* of commanded feasting in the Old Testament each year in Israel (much of that in the presence of the veil in the temple).

80 days of commanded feasting
1 day of commanded fasting

That one day of fasting was the Day of Atonement when the High Priest entered behind the veil to sacrifice for the sins of the people.

As Jesus died on the cross for our sins (atonement), he called out, "It is finished." At that moment the veil in the temple ripped from top to bottom.

Now we celebrate atonement with feasting. We call it Easter. His feast of grace is so amazingly sweet it's what breaks our arrogant hearts, exposing the wretchedness inside and our hunger for grace.

The movie Chocolat is a chick flick. But last week I watched it anyway. It's about a small, French town run by a very religious mayor who controls the town church by controlling the young priest . . . but he can't control his own wife. She has left him; he won't admit it; he says she's on holiday. He won't look at the wound—his sin or her sin—but he's desperate to retain his place of honor.

It is Lent, and everyone is fasting until Easter.

A woman comes to town and sets up a chocolate shop. The mayor does everything to shut her down. But she throws a banquet for the town *during Lent*.

When he has lost his battle to close the chocolate shop . . . when he can't avoid the fact his wife is not coming back . . . the night before Easter he goes to the church building and falls before the crucifix, begging God for help.

[Movie clip: Mayor takes his knife and breaks into the chocolate shop at night. He enters the display window and begins furiously chopping up the chocolates until one piece lands on his lip. He tastes the chocolate and starts stuffing himself with it, laughing. All at once, as if the truth is suddenly exposed, he stops laughing and begins to weep.]

He cries himself to sleep in the chocolate shop window, and he wakes on Easter morning a new man.

This *world* is a fast, ever since the Garden when God placed an angel with a flaming sword at the gate . . . ever since God erected the veil. Hebrews says the veil is Jesus' flesh. And it's ripped, broken, finished . . . time for dinner.

It's God's kindness that leads us to repentance.
God's kindness is Jesus.

Come and worship each week whether you want to or not. Don't make excuses; just tell the truth:

“Jesus, I'm not hungry.”

“Oh God, I don't love you, I don't even want to love you, but I want to want to love you”
(in the words of St. Teresa of Avila).

“Jesus, I don't feel sorry.”

Then stare at His cross. And the banquet of grace will expose the hunger from which you hide in fear, and convince you the banquet is no joke.

Take a nibble of sweet grace.
The more you eat,
 the hungrier you'll get;
 the more wretchedness you'll see;
 the sweeter the banquet will get;
 the more you will enjoy eating;
 the hungrier and more satisfied you'll be . . .
 and you'll eat yourself into ecstasy . . .
It's called the kingdom of God.

All other banquets have diminishing returns. The more chocolate you eat the less sweet it will taste. If you keep eating and eating, trying to recapture that first bite, it's gluttony, addiction, and sin.

It's the same with possessions you obtain, sex you consume, impressive deeds you do, and wine you drink.

But Jesus saves the best wine for last.
Jesus *is* the Best Wine that keeps getting better and better.
His Banquet does not have diminishing returns.

So eat, eat, eat until you're lost and then found. "Don't be drunk with wine but filled with the Spirit." You were made for His Banquet—communion with God who is love and tastes like grace.

That day the Pharisees didn't want what was being served. So they took the knife and cut up the Servant—the Banquet—and crucified Him on the highway. But that *is* the Great Banquet. It's how He compels us to come in. It can even melt the hearts of Pharisees . . . like Nicodemus, like Paul, like me.

The Master Servant slaughtered the appropriate animal: a Lion . . . and a Lamb. What's the Master serving at His Banquet?

Lamb slaughtered
Bread broken
Wine poured out . . .

He's serving *Himself*.

There is only one place in the Gospels where Jesus acquires a building. It was a banquet hall. For at the end of His life Jesus gave a feast and invited the poor, the blind, and the lame. Their names were Peter, James, John . . . Sam, Gary, Aram, Susan . . . and *you*.

Eternity touches time now.

At the Great Banquet Jesus took bread and broke it saying, "This is my body given for you. Do this in remembrance of me." In the same way He took the cup saying, "This cup which is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood for the forgiveness of sins. As often as you drink it do it in remembrance of me."

The Lion of Judah is shaking His mane. It's not just bread and not just juice. It's the body and blood; the price paid to convince you of His love and to atone for your sin.

And what does He want from you? — That you'd come to His Banquet and eat forever. Amen.

At the Great Banquet there was an argument at the start. The disciples argued over who would have the dirty job of washing people's feet. The Master of the banquet put on a towel and knelt in front of people like Peter, James, and John, and He washed their feet. Then He said, "How I have longed to eat this supper with you!" And He broke His body and shed His blood.

That's the kind of God you serve.

It's in moments of worship I think to myself, "He's washing my feet." And I believe who He is. He hands me His body and blood.

If you keep tasting this banquet, there will come a time of worship when you'll find yourself saying, "God, it would be a *privilege* to die for you." That's what you were made for. That communion is not sorrow but joy beyond belief, laughter at His banquet forevermore.

He says, "Come. Dinner is served. Eat, O friends, and drink deep, O lovers." You're the Bride of the Living God.

In Jesus' name, amen.

Further Reading

And the LORD said to Moses, "Say to Aaron, None of your descendants throughout their generations who has a blemish may approach to offer the bread of his God. For no one who has a blemish shall draw near, a man blind or lame . . . He may eat the bread of his God, both of the most holy and of the holy things, but he shall not come near the veil or approach the altar, because he has a blemish, that he may not profane my sanctuaries; for I am the LORD who sanctify them."

-Leviticus 21:16-18a, 22-23

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of fat things, a feast of wine on the lees, of fat things full of marrow, of wine on the lees well refined. And he will destroy on this mountain the covering that is cast over all peoples, the veil that is spread over all nations. He will swallow up death for ever, and the Lord GOD will wipe away tears from all faces, and the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth; for the LORD has spoken. It will be said on that day, "Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, that he might save us. This is the LORD; we have waited for him; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."

-Isaiah 25:6-9

But he said to him, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many; and at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, 'Come; for all is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, 'I have bought a field, and I must go out and see it; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to examine them; I pray you, have me excused.' And another said, 'I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.' So the servant came and reported this to his master. Then the householder in anger said to his servant, 'Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in the poor and maimed and blind and lame.' And the servant said, 'Sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.' And the master said to the servant, 'Go out to the highways and hedges, and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet.'"

-Luke 14:16-24

And Jesus cried out with a loud voice, and breathed His last. Then the veil of the temple was torn in two from top to bottom. So when the centurion, who stood opposite Him, saw that He cried out like this and breathed His last, he said, "Truly this Man was the Son of God!"

-Mark 15:37-39

So Jesus said to them, "Truly, truly, I say to you, unless you eat the flesh of the Son of man and drink his blood, you have no life in you; he who eats my flesh and drinks my blood has eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day. For my flesh is food indeed, and my blood is drink indeed. . . ." Many of his disciples, when they heard it, said, "This is a hard saying; who can listen to it?"

-John 6:53-55, 60

Aslan raised his head and shook his mane. Instantly a glorious feast appeared on the Dwarfs' knees: pies and tongues and pigeons and trifles and ices, and each Dwarf had a goblet of good wine in his right hand. But it wasn't much use. They began eating and drinking greedily enough, but it was clear that they couldn't taste it properly. They thought they were eating and drinking only the sort of things you might find in a stable. One said he was trying to eat hay and another said he had got a bit of an old turnip and a third said he'd found a raw cabbage leaf. . . .

"You see," said Aslan. "They will not let us help them. They have chosen cunning instead of belief. Their prison is only in their own minds, yet they are in that prison; and so afraid of being taken in that they cannot be taken out."

-C. S. Lewis, The Last Battle

People are prepared for everything except for the fact that beyond the darkness of their blindness there is a great light. They are prepared to go on breaking their backs plowing the same old field until the cows come home without seeing, until they stub their toes on it, that there is a treasure buried in that field rich enough to buy Texas. They are prepared for a God who strikes hard bargains but not for a God who gives as much for an hour's work as for a day's. They are prepared for a mustard-seed kingdom of God no bigger than the eye of a newt but not for the great banyan

it becomes with birds in its branches singing Mozart. They are prepared for the potluck supper at First Presbyterian but not for the marriage supper of the lamb. . . .

-Frederick Buechner, quoted in
What's So Amazing About Grace? by Philip Yancey

We are afraid that heaven is a bribe, and that if we make it our goal we shall no longer be disinterested. It is not so. Heaven offers nothing that a mercenary soul can desire. It is safe to tell the pure in heart that they shall see God, for only the pure in heart want to.

-C. S. Lewis

"Therefore, behold, I will allure her, and bring her into the wilderness, and speak tenderly to her. And there I will give her her vineyards, and make the Valley of Achor a door of hope. And there she shall answer as in the days of her youth, as at the time when she came out of the land of Egypt."

-Hosea 2:14-15

"Yet I will remember my covenant with you in the days of your youth, and I will establish with you an everlasting covenant. . . . I will establish my covenant with you, and you shall know that I am the LORD, that you may remember and be confounded, and never open your mouth again because of your shame, when I forgive you all that you have done, says the Lord GOD."

-Ezekiel 16:60, 62-63

Do you not know that God's kindness is meant to lead you to repentance?

-Romans 2:4

"Blessed [happy] are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the lamb."

-Revelation 19:9