

KINGDOM OF INVITATION

Series: Stories Jesus Told

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Jesus, Parables, Kingdom of God, Banquet, Invitation

Luke 14:1-24

Jesus was a likable guy. In fact, the only people who really seemed to not like Jesus were those who had ulterior motives. People who wanted to grab power and fame and wealth saw Jesus as a threat to all that - especially the religious leaders. Just like we see here in Kenya today, there were religious leaders in Jesus' time who would do anything to hold on to their autocratic power, held firmly in one hand, while using the other to wield a threatening sword of wrath - self serving leaders wrapped in a cloak of faux religious piety.

To those guys, Jesus was a threat. To everyone else, he was a hero. Jesus understood this dynamic, but still, he would sometimes hang out with these religious guys. It's almost like he just wanted to give them a chance - to allow them to get to know him and decide for themselves if they really wanted to come up against him.

So, one day Jesus was having dinner at the home of this bigwig religious leader. Jesus did this sometimes, even though he seemed much more at home hanging out with the poor and powerless. He was always open to hanging out with religious leaders, it's just that most of them didn't want to be seen with him!

But he's hanging out at the home of this hot shot religious guy and notices this guy who is swollen all over - he's suffering from what used to be called dropsy. Today we call it edema, and it's this condition where excess fluid collects in your body, and parts of your body kind of swell up like a water balloon.

And so Jesus notices this guy, and because he's in the home of this powerful church guy, he asks a question: *"Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"*

The Sabbath, of course was this ancient idea of having a "day of rest" on Saturday, the seventh day of the week. And all the good religious people of Jesus' day had come up with this giant list of all the things you were and weren't allowed to do on the Sabbath - like, "Hey, you're supposed to be resting, so we're going to make your rest as strenuous as possible by imposing all these anxiety-inducing rules on *how* you're supposed to rest."

You know, like, you weren't allowed to carry water on the Sabbath. So, if you ran out of water and were thirsty, the Sabbath police were like, "I don't care if you're thirsty! You shall

rest!" (Come to think of it, that sounds like something I might say to my 5 year old at bedtime.)

So anyway, they had all these laws about what you were and weren't allowed to do on the Sabbath, and Jesus is eating at this religious guy's house on a Saturday, so trying to be respectful (and to be honest, he's also trying to stir the pot a bit), he asks the guy and his cohorts there, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath?"

Now, these guys were smart. When Jesus asked that question, they knew they were in trouble. If they said, "No, it's not lawful to heal on the Sabbath," Jesus would have lit into them about why they would willingly delay someone's healing an extra day. But if they said "Yes, it's lawful to heal on the Sabbath," then Jesus would have asked them why had been telling people it *wasn't* OK. Why had they made that kind of rule. You see, they were in trouble! And so, they remained silent.

And Jesus must have taken their silence as permission, because he took this guy's swollen hand, healed him, and sent him on his way. Then, before they really had time to react to that, he said, "OK, suppose one of you has a child or a donkey or an ox and it falls into a well on the Sabbath. Are you just going to let it stay down there until the next day, or are you going to pull it out?" Again, these guys had nothing to say.

Because, you see, they were in a hole just like that theoretical donkey. It was a hole they had dug for themselves. They made the mistake that many Christians still make today. They had said, "If you do this or this or that, you can't call yourself a child of God." But then Jesus pointed out that, in fact, they were doing or were willing to do the very things they railed against. So, either Jesus was right, and those things weren't what's most important *or* they were right, and *they* were failing to live up to their own standards. It was a catch-22 situation. So they stayed silent.

But you see, what they didn't recognize, and what Jesus would spend a lot of his time trying to explain to people, is that we *all* find ourselves in that hole. Sometimes we're thrown in the well, but often it's self-inflicted. Nevertheless, a hole is a hole, and once you're there, you need some help getting out. And Jesus came to offer that help to anyone and everyone who wanted it.

Jesus' primary message was one of invitation. He invited people of all varieties to follow him and to live life in this thing called the Kingdom of God. And this morning, we're going to continue our series called *Stories Jesus Told* by looking at a story he told to this group of dinner guests - a story about a Kingdom of Invitation.

But first, let me pray that God will open our eyes, ears, and hearts to what he has for us this morning.

Prayer

You know, Jesus was the kind of guy who really liked a good party. His first miracle was to turn water into wine at a wedding feast so the party could keep going. He was fond of attending parties in people's homes who were really considered untouchable by the religious elite. He was even accused of being a drunkard - a moniker you don't get by sitting at home watching videos of Billy Graham crusades.

Jesus liked to party. And my guess is that Jesus liked to party because it's one of the few times or places when people willingly invite you into their lives. You know? Like, at a party, you can meet a new person, and within a couple of hours, they've told you all about their lives. There's something about that kind of social setting that causes people to open up in a different way. The beverages don't hurt.

And so, Jesus did some of his most important work in the midst of these types of parties. He had a fondness for them.

So, here he is at this party full of religious guys (which is not necessarily his favorite kind of party), and he's healed this guy on the Sabbath, he's got the religious uppity folks backed into a corner of their own making, and he starts giving advice to the attendees on where to sit at a banquet - he tells them to take the worst seat, instead of assuming the seat of honor. Then he starts giving advice to the host - telling him that instead of inviting the really rich, important people to parties, that he should invite, like, poor people and handicapped people.

It's like once Jesus silenced these guys with his first question, he just decided to keep going until somebody shut him down...or at least spoke up.

And so he's telling his host to invite these poor and handicapped and, sort of, outcast people to his next party, and somebody - probably someone who has had a bit too much to drink, says, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God."

Now, it's worth understanding that this was not really a religious statement at all. You know, where I come from, people will say, "God bless America!" And that's really a statement more about America than about God, right? Or in England, they'll say "God save the Queen!" Again, it's a cry of allegiance to the queen, not really anything about God. These are nationalistic sentiments, not spiritual ones.

And the same is true with this guy dining with Jesus. When he says, "Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the Kingdom of God," what he's saying is, "Blessed are the Jews!" "Blessed are *we*, the people of Israel!" "God bless *us* and no one else." It's a nationalistic statement.

Of course, this is not what Jesus meant at all. In fact, it's exactly the opposite of what he meant. And so, I imagine Jesus just sitting there - pausing for a moment - and then he tells a story. This is found in the bible in the book of Luke, chapter 14, starting in verse 16. He tells this story. He says:

"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'

[Let me pause here. You should probably know that this was the way people got invited to banquets and parties in those days. There was an initial invitation that went out to say, "Hey, sometime in the next couple of weeks, we're having a party for XYZ, and you are invited." Then, once all the preparations had been made, another invitation would go out to say, "OK, we're ready now. The party is starting." And because it was such a social culture, and because people's every minute wasn't planned out and packed with activities, most people would just sort of stop what they were doing and go join the party. But that's not what happens here. When that second invitation goes out to all the people who said they would be at the banquet, they respond in an odd way. Verse 18:]

"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

[In other words, "I bought some property sight unseen, now I need to go see what I bought." A highly unlikely story. Verse 19:]

"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

[Again, kind of ridiculous. "Yeah, I just bought 10 giant beasts of burden without knowing if they were worth what I was paying for them. Now I need to take them for a test drive." Yeah, sure you did. Verse 20:]

"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.'

[Because, you know, newlyweds, like, never eat food with other people! Do you see how ridiculous these excuses are? Verse 21:]

"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.'

"Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.'

“Then the master told his servant, ‘Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”

Luke 14:16-24

There’s no indication here by the author or by anyone else what the reaction to Jesus’ little story might have been. Certainly, it probably hit pretty close to home as these people were gathered for a banquet served by a powerful guy. I just wonder if, like, the party shut down right then. Or maybe Jesus’ story was followed with one of those awkward transitions - you know, until the band starts back up.

But I kind of like to imagine this as a mic drop moment for Jesus. Like, he starts telling this story as he’s getting up from the table. And everybody’s looking at him. And he’s talking about the people who were invited but chose not to come and then the people who had no business at the banquet, but who were brought in anyway. And then he gets to the climax of his story and he’s like, “I tell you, not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.” [BOOM.] And he just walks out of the room. If I was making a movie, that’s how I would block this scene.

Jesus dropped a bomb. Jesus left these guys with a really thinly veiled criticism against their own actions and ways of thinking. He responded to a nationalistic outburst of “God bless Israel,” by saying, “He tried. You rejected him. So, God bless everyone else! God will party with everyone else. You guys can stay outside. You made a choice and now you’re stuck with it.”

This was a strong statement against nationalism. It was a statement against the “God bless us” mentality prevalent in Israel at the time, and prevalent in many societies around the world today. It was a statement of inclusion, of welcome. Jesus was saying, “There’s no difference between us and them. They *are* us and we *are* them!”

You know, the guests don’t get to decide who comes to the party. Only the host gets to do that. And if God’s the host of this kingdom party, Jesus says, he can invite anyone he wants! And in the time just after Jesus’ death, that is exactly what would happen. Some of the Jewish followers of Jesus would discover that God had actually invited non-Jews to the party - a *lot* of non-Jews - *all* of them, actually. There are no favored nations in God’s kingdom. There are no national borders at all. It’s a Kingdom of Welcome - a Kingdom with an open door - a Kingdom of Invitation.

Look, I don’t know if I can say it more plainly - if you’re part of an exclusionary group - a group of people seeking to keep others out - then you aren’t following the way of Jesus. Period. “Sorry, this is a Kikuyu church!” No it’s not. Not if it’s a church of Jesus. “Sorry, this is a mzungu church!” Oh no it’s not! “I wish *those* people wouldn’t come here. This church is for

people like *us!*” Oh yeah? If that’s how you feel, then leave. The Kingdom of God is tough place for nationalists, exclusionists, and bigots. Everybody is invited, and if you have a problem with that, you can leave.

Jesus, in this story, extends an invitation to everyone - even the people considered most vile by the religious folks. And I think it’s important to understand that this isn’t just some one-off order. Even the pious religious leaders might have been able to deal with that. They could have made a law about it.

Like, “One day each year, we’ll allow the filthy Gentiles and the poor and crippled to take part in a festival.” They could have probably gotten on board with that.

But I want you to look at verse 22. After the master says, “Go invite the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.” Look at verse 22:

“Sir,’ the servant said, ‘what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.’”
Luke 14:22

Did you catch that? The master said, “Hey, go invite all these outcast people to the party,” and the servant says, “Yeah, we already did that.”

That’s one of those little details that’s easy to skim over but it’s kind of a big deal! It means the servant knew to do that. It means that there was an understanding - a standing order - that if there was room left at the party, you go invite people from the streets to come in. That’s pretty awesome! The servant understood the heart of the master and had already invited these less-desirable people to the party.

As servants in the Kingdom of God, we have to recognize this standing order. We are instructed to invite without discrimination. Invite and keep inviting.

I talk to people all the time who are really perplexed by me because I genuinely want anyone and everyone to come and be a part of this church community. I’ve had people tell me that if I reach out to Kenyans that I’ll lose the international crowd. I’ve had people say that if I invite too many English folks, the Americans won’t come. If I have too many “wild children” then the committed Christians will leave.

You know what? Fine. If our desire to do church like heaven - to be radically inclusive - if that results in some people declining the invitation to the party, then fine. That’s on them. We’re still going to party. We’re going to have a blast! And we’re going to need those seats for other people who want to be here. Because my master has a standing order to go out and invite *everyone* into this house...into *his* house.

Around 300BC, a monument was erected in the Greek city of Rhodes. It was a giant statue of the god Helios, erected after the people of Rhodes, aided by an Egyptian army, defeated Cyprus and its ruler Antigonus. The statue stood at the entrance to the harbor in Rhodes as a symbol of victory and a warning to those entering their waters. The dedication read:

To you, o Sun, the people of Dorian Rhodes set up this bronze statue reaching to Olympus, when they had pacified the waves of war and crowned their city with the spoils taken from the enemy. Not only over the seas but also on land did they kindle the lovely torch of freedom and independence. For to the descendants of Herakles belongs dominion over sea and land.

It was a nationalistic statue - a way of saying, "God bless *us* and no one else. You stay out. To *us* belongs the power over land and sea."

2000 years later, in 1863, a 34 year old American poet, Emma Lazarus penned a sonnet called "The New Colossus," which recalled the Colossus of Rhodes, but imagined a new kind of symbol. She wrote:

*Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame,
With conquering limbs astride from land to land;
Here at our sea-washed, sunset gates shall stand
A mighty woman with a torch, whose flame
Is the imprisoned lightning, and her name
Mother of Exiles. From her beacon-hand
Glows world-wide welcome; her mild eyes command
The air-bridged harbor that twin cities frame.*

*"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!" cries she
With silent lips. "Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!"*

I was born and raised in a land where these words stand at the gateway to a harbor that welcomed the tired, poor, and outcast from all over the world. It is a call of welcome directed at ships full of people daring to make their way in a brave new world, engraved on a bronze statue of a woman that rises above the harbor in New York City - the Statue of Liberty.

Sadly, many in my country now want to refuse entry to anyone not like them. They want to shout *God bless America* while ignoring or turning away those whom God seeks to bless.

Let the church not make the same mistake. Let us take up the mantle of “The New Colossus.” Let us say, recalling the words of Emma Lazarus:

*"Keep, ancient lands, your storied pomp!"
"Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me,*

They are welcome here...in this Kingdom of Invitation.

Lets pray

Prayer

We're going to move now into a time of personal response. And there several ways to respond:

1. Singing

We're going to sing some songs together that help us reflect on some of these things.

While that singing is taking place, you will also have the opportunity for prayer.

2. Prayer

If you need prayer for anything at all, we have people here who are eager to do that.

Also, while that is going on, you'll have a chance to take communion

3. Communion

Communion is a symbolic act, instituted by Jesus as a way for us to remember the way he willingly died for us. The unleavened bread serves as a symbol of Jesus' body broken on the cross. The wine or juice symbolize his blood that was spilled for us.

We have people ready to serve you communion. Juice is on your left, wine is on your right. Feel free to partake of either, as it fits with your tradition. Just break off a piece of the bread, dip it in the cup, and eat.

We offer communion each week for *anyone* who wants to take it. There's no membership requirement or hoops to jump through. You are guests at this symbolic table of Jesus, so please feel free to partake.

4. Giving

Lastly, during this time, you will have an opportunity to give financially to the work of this church. If you're a guest with us today, we don't expect you to give anything. However, for those who consider this your church home, and for those who believe in what we're trying to do here, this is our chance to give back to God a portion of what he has given us, and to support the work he has called this church to in Nakuru.

There is a tall box at the back with a slot in it. You can place your gifts in that box at any time as we are singing together.

So those are the four ways to respond: Singing, Prayer, Communion, and Giving. All will be happening simultaneously. There's no order you have to do them in. You don't have to do them all. You don't have to do any of them. This is your time to respond in whatever way you desire.

At the end of that time, I'll pray a prayer of blessing over you before you go.

Closing Prayer