

Jesus Stories IV: The One About The Dinner Table

Reconnect – August 16, 2009

Text: Luke 14:1-24, I Peter 5:5-7

Key Thought: When we put God's agenda ahead of our own, he promises to look after ours for us.

One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat bread in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching him closely. There was a man there whose arms and legs were swollen. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in religious law, "Is it permitted in the law to heal people on the Sabbath day, or not?" When they refused to answer, Jesus touched the sick man and healed him and sent him away. Then he turned to them and said, "Which of you doesn't work on the Sabbath? If your son or your cow falls into a pit, don't you rush to get him out?" Again they could not answer. When Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honour near the head of the table, he gave them this advice: "When you are invited to a wedding feast, don't sit in the seat of honour. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? The host will come and say, 'Give this person your seat.' Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! "Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, 'Friend, we have a better place for you!' Then you will be honoured in front of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted." Then he turned to his host. "When you put on a luncheon or a banquet," he said, "don't invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbours. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you." Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, "What a blessing it will be to eat bread in the Kingdom of God!" Jesus replied with this story: "A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, 'Come, the banquet is ready.' But they all began making excuses. One said, 'I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I now have a wife, so I can't come.' "The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, 'Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.' After the servant had done this, he reported, 'There is still room for more.' So his master said, 'Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.'" (Luke 14:1-24, NLT)

Intro: "To-Do Lists"

- **[let people read the to-do list on screen]**
- I am a big to-do list guy
- Some people can remember things in their heads, or they keep track SOME other way – I don't know how – but I have to make a list
- Otherwise, I wake up in the middle of the night remembering stuff I haven't done yet
- So, each day at work, I have a list – I add things, cross things off, give some things away, get some things from my boss to do – normal stuff, right?
- **It serves as my agenda** – my list of priorities, the things that need to happen for me to be successful on any given day, or week, or month, or year
- The tighter I can stick to what is most important, the better – there are things that come that have to be done that I can't anticipate, but the more I can work my plan, the more likely I'm going to come away thinking that I've done my job well – and you're likely the same in whatever you do, too

Jesus' agenda (on the Sabbath)

- I know that sometimes when I read the biographies of Jesus' life, He seems so busy and it seems so fast-paced, that it's easy for me to wonder how much He planned ahead – did He get up each morning with a to-do list, or did He just kind of roll with it, as some people do?
- But there's one particular day where He encounters the "to-do" list of the people around Him, and finds it sorely lacking – that's what we've been hearing scenes from being read all morning
- Some quick background: it's the "Sabbath" for God' people – Saturday – the day of the week where, according to the rules of their culture, they are supposed to devote the day to God through following a strict list of guidelines as to what can and can't be done – you can't walk more than a certain distance, you can't do work, you have to make the food a certain way

- But they've gotten that turned around – because if you track what Jesus had to say about the observing of “Sabbath”, you find that God originally gives that day of the week for people to rest and reconnect with the relationships in their life – with God, with their friends and families – it is meant to be a day for doing and experiencing good – not to keep a set of rules
- They are now officially missing the point
- Something that started out as an effort to do what God wanted has now morphed into something that God never wanted – and so Jesus has an eye out to see what He can do about that – **that's His agenda** – and it starts with Him getting a lunch invitation

Read text: Luke 14:1-6

One Sabbath day Jesus went to eat bread in the home of a leader of the Pharisees, and the people were watching him closely. There was a man there whose arms and legs were swollen. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in religious law, “Is it permitted in the law to heal people on the Sabbath day, or not?”

- “Pharisees” – the spiritual ones, the “good guys”, the ones who knew what God wanted
- “arms and legs were swollen” – traditionally called *dropsy*, now we know it as *edema* – fluid, swelling, signifying a circulation problem or even organ failure
- Why is this man there? Is it token? Is he a hanger-on? Has he crashed the party? Or are they trying to set Jesus up by giving Him an obvious healing opportunity?
- Whether he's being set up or is taking a teachable moment, Jesus puts it right into the hands of the religious ones: am I “OK” to do this? Are you “interpreters of what God wants” going to give me the go-ahead? Can you tell me what God wants here?
- It seems obvious to us now, in hindsight, what the answer should be – and yet, the question at that time is very open as to whether healing someone is work – because God said we shouldn't work on the Sabbath – so if it's work, we can't do it – right?
- Of course, there's some hypocrisy going on – because they're actually trying to catch Him in a “gotcha” moment – it's not actually about WHAT God wants or doesn't want for them – they're completely ignoring all of that in their effort to try to trip up this popular young teacher – **that's their agenda**

When they refused to answer, Jesus touched the sick man and healed him and sent him away. Then he turned to them and said, “Which of you doesn't work on the Sabbath? If your son or your cow falls into a pit, don't you rush to get him out?” Again they could not answer.

- They don't answer him, because they're trying to catch Him slipping up – so Jesus heals him anyway from this very painful condition
- And then he starts to unpack with them this idea that they're so confident as to what God wants on this particular day – “God doesn't want us to work on the Sabbath”
- And it seems that what it has become, at least for some, is “God doesn't want us to work at anything that doesn't help US on the Sabbath!” – because there is provision for urgent work to be done
- But they've been using that very selectively, to benefit themselves and their own agendas
- And then, nothing to say – so on to the next scene in Jesus' day, as He continues at this dinner party

Read text: Luke 14:7-14

When Jesus noticed that all who had come to the dinner were trying to sit in the seats of honour near the head of the table, he gave them this advice: “When you are invited to a wedding feast, don’t sit in the seat of honour. What if someone who is more distinguished than you has also been invited? The host will come and say, ‘Give this person your seat.’ Then you will be embarrassed, and you will have to take whatever seat is left at the foot of the table! “Instead, take the lowest place at the foot of the table. Then when your host sees you, he will come and say, ‘Friend, we have a better place for you!’ Then you will be honoured in front of all the other guests. For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”

- Seems like good advice, doesn’t it? But at first glance, it doesn’t seem very spiritual – just a little tip to improve your networking and social climbing
- And yet, that phrase “he gave them this advice” in the original is actually, “he told them this parable” – meaning that he’s trying to get something bigger across than just an etiquette lesson – there’s a greater message in here to find
- It’s interesting how the Bible affects us today in ways we don’t even know – because of course, it would almost be unheard of today to get an invitation to a wedding reception and there NOT be a seating chart – it would be a statement in itself, right? Can you imagine all the guests wandering around looking for table cards, or a poster somewhere?
- We’d be all Canadian, apologizing to each other and standing around trying to make sure we didn’t offend anyone by where we sat!
- But in that culture, it could become a free for all – maybe not with elbows flying, but enough that people could notice the pecking order being established
- Face time with important people was just as good then as it is now – it could lead to a business opportunity, some good “intelligence for your life”, maybe a new friendship, or even finding a wife from a good family for your son – the stakes were high, especially if you didn’t have a lot of money but you were able to score an invite like this, in a culture that was all about who you were related to and who you knew – you would figure that you needed to “take your shot”
- After all – **if you didn’t promote your own agenda, who would?**
- We need to take a close look at the very last thing that Jesus says in this section, because it’s going to wind up being the key to everything that Jesus is trying to get across to his audience today – **“for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves [literally, “the one who humbles themselves”] will be exalted”**
- So hold onto that – see if you can figure out how this goes across all these different stories – we’ll come back to it

Then he turned to his host. “When you put on a luncheon or a banquet,” he said, “don’t invite your friends, brothers, relatives, and rich neighbours. For they will invite you back, and that will be your only reward. Instead, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Then at the resurrection of the righteous, God will reward you for inviting those who could not repay you.”

- It seems like Jesus is just rolling with it now – it’s all good stuff, but it seems like it doesn’t fit together at all – now he’s talking about who your invitation list should be?
- And now talk about something that Jesus said to do that’s rarely, if ever, done today?!?
- But you’ve got to look at the context – what’s just happened at this party? The neediest person we’ve encountered was the one who WASN’T invited to the party – the person suffering from edema – because Jesus heals them and then they go on their way
- That phrase “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” – is a representative list for all those who are lower on the social scale in that culture
 - In that culture, if you had a physical challenge or if you were in poverty, it was viewed as a sign of God’s displeasure with you – and the answer, in true right-wing religious fashion, was to get right with God, stop doing bad things, and then He would fix you – and THEN you can come to my party, and won’t that be nice?
 - But Jesus says that’s a load of hooey - **instead of seeing people and passing judgement on them, and viewing them as people who can’t advance your own agenda, that you needed to recognize that they were God’s agenda – and kindness to them would be directly viewed by God as kindness to Him?!?**
- God is always looking for ways to reward us thinking of others, not just ourselves
- And now the conversation takes another turn...

Read text: Luke 14:15-24

Hearing this, a man sitting at the table with Jesus exclaimed, “What a blessing it will be to eat bread in the Kingdom of God!” Jesus replied with this story: “A man prepared a great feast and sent out many invitations. When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests, ‘Come, the banquet is ready.’

- One of the others at the dinner tries to change the subject to safer topics – a nice, spiritual piece of fluff that everyone can agree on
- But Jesus isn’t ready to let them up off the mat yet, and he’s got one more thing to say
- Cultural note: in that culture, when it was a really big shindig, you would get two invitations – the first one would be the RSVP, like we have today – can you make it, it’s at this time, please let me know
- But the second would be the escorted invitation – that when it was ready, you would be personally invited and welcomed to the dinner
- You knew it was going to be a big deal when you had that – sort of like “open bar” today, or a limo ride, or getting to eat at a place that is normally members-only

But they all began making excuses. One said, ‘I have just bought a field and must inspect it. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I want to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Another said, ‘I now have a wife, so I can’t come.’

- These excuses sound a bit lame as reasons not to come to something that you’ve already agreed to attend, right? Because none of them are unexpected occurrences – they’re things that people chose to do, knowing that the banquet was coming
- But there’s a deeper reason that Jesus told the story this way, with these particular excuses, to this very religious, rules-obsessed group of people – and they would have known it as soon as they heard Him say it
- To know that, you’ve got to go back to the first five sections of the Bible, known as the *Torah* in Jesus’ Jewish culture – “the teaching” or “the instruction” – we sometimes call it “the Law”
- The section that Jesus is referencing has to do with military service exemptions – back in the days when they HAD a military (now they’re under Roman occupation and disarmed), God had given exemptions to going to war – here it is:

“Then the officers of the army must address the troops and say, ‘Has anyone here just built a new house but not yet dedicated it? If so, you may go home! You might be killed in the battle, and someone else would dedicate your house. Has anyone here just planted a vineyard but not yet eaten any of its fruit? If so, you may go home! You might die in battle, and someone else would eat the first fruit. Has anyone here just become engaged to a woman but not yet married her? Well, you may go home and get married! You might die in the battle, and someone else would marry her.’ **(Deuteronomy 20:5-7)**

- The idea behind this seems to be that if you’re in the middle of a major life experience – if you going into battle runs the risk of affecting the rest of your life – then you don’t have to go – everyone else will pick up the slack for you this time, and you for someone else at another point (imagine community working together that way! Revolutionary at that time and now, too)
- Let’s compare the reasons that Jesus gives with the ones from this section of the teaching, because they seem to be somewhat similar:

Newly built house	↔	Newly bought field
Newly planted vineyard	↔	Newly bought oxen
Engaged to be married	↔	Newly/now married

- Similar, but not quite, right? Because there’s a subtle shift that’s taken place
- What’s clearly cut in the OT – major parts of your life left undone – has turned into blanket, spiritual-sounding excuses to get out of just about anything and **fulfill your own agenda instead!**

- A newly built house – the dream of a lifetime, when you normally lived with your parents until you got married – and then you STILL lived with your parents – has now been stretched into “well, I bought a new field and I need to look at it” – one more business transaction
- A newly planted vineyard – again, something that would be passed down from generation to generation, something that was viewed as “God-given” (remember last week?) – has now been stretched into “well, I upgraded my company fleet of oxen, and I’d like to take them for a spin” – again, just one more thing on their to-do list
- And finally, engaged to be married – the beginning of the rest of your life – has now been stretched into... “I’m married now, and, well... my wife doesn’t do parties or whatever...”
- They’ve been working the system just like this – stretching what the Bible said as far as they needed to, and it’s just as lame as the made up excuses in Jesus’ story – and they know it!!!

“The servant returned and told his master what they had said. His master was furious and said, ‘Go quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and invite the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’ After the servant had done this, he reported, ‘There is still room for more.’ So his master said, ‘Go out into the country lanes and behind the hedges and urge anyone you find to come, so that the house will be full. For none of those I first invited will get even the smallest taste of my banquet.’”

- Because “the invited people” – the ones on the list – have refused the invitation, it’s now open to all the others who didn’t make the first cut – the excluded from society, the “unimportant”, and even those who are just passing through, including people that the master didn’t even know – because the feast is just that great and that important – **and the master’s agenda is to have a full house to appreciate the banquet**
- If you’re assigning roles to Jesus’ parable, well, don’t – but the idea is that God has all of this love to give and He wants people to be in relationship with Him – and what better way to express that than in a great feast? What better way to get together with old friends than to have something to eat?
- If you reject the invitation that God gives, ultimately you won’t get to be with Him, no matter how much you think you deserve it – because it’s not about who deserves it – there IS no deserving it – it’s just about taking Him up on His undeserved invitation

Pulling It All Together

- Jesus made that dinner pretty interesting that day – with all of his **agenda talk** –
- Remember how I said that one section was the key to everything? Because it is – Luke has pulled together the story that way, with it in the middle, for a reason

- After all – **if you didn’t promote your own agenda, who would?**
- We need to take a close look at the very last thing that Jesus says in this section, because it’s going to wind up being the key to everything that Jesus is trying to get across to his audience today – **“for those who exalt themselves will be humbled, but those who humble themselves [literally, “the one who humbles themselves”] will be exalted”**
- Great proverb in itself, and it’s true in many contexts – including the SYTYCDC clip from last week

- Emmanuel Sandhu was the Canadian champion men’s figure skater for years, and one of the top skaters in the world – and you saw how he’s humbled himself, taken the advice of judges and come back even stronger – we don’t know how this story’s going to end, but he’s there because of humility
- Switch over to your life with God:
- “Those who put their own agenda first will see it fail, but the one that puts God’s agenda first will see themselves succeed” – counterintuitive, it flies in the face of a me-first culture – if I don’t look after myself, who will? How can I be expected to trust God?
- The answer is, it takes **humility**
- From the Latin *humus*, meaning “fertile ground”
- Richard Foster on humility:

“Humility has received such bad press in our day that we must correct at least a few of the distortions before we are able to assess if we want to take one step into it... Put in simple terms, humility means to live as close to the truth as possible: the truth about ourselves, the truth about others, the truth about the world in which we live. It has nothing whatever to do with a Casper Milquetoast kind of personality. It does not mean grovelling or finding the worst possible things to say about ourselves” (Prayer 60-61)

- “To live as close to the truth as possible” – to see things honestly and clearly, as they really are
- That starts in our lives with God – because we were made for this connection to Him – and if He really is greater than we are, if He really is loving, if He really has a plan for us – then we need to learn to trust that, and roll with that – and do what He wants us to do
- Then we see ourselves clearly – our failings, our flaws, the moments when we feel that if we don’t promote ourselves or accomplish things on our own that no-one else will – and we see that it comes out of a lack of trust – a lack of “humility”, a lack of seeing things clearly and truthfully
- And we see others clearly, and instead of seeing them as competition, or “means to an end”, or background noise – we see them as created by God, and loved by God, and valued by God – and hurting, and with needs, and fascinating, and worth knowing more and having in your life
- And what seems counterintuitive, or useless to everyone else, suddenly becomes crystal clear:

Key Thought:

When we put God’s agenda ahead of our own, he promises to look after ours for us.

“And all of you, serve each other in humility, for *God sets himself against the proud, but he shows favour to the humble*. So humble yourselves under the mighty power of God, and in his good time he will honour you. Give all your worries and cares to God, for he cares about what happens to you.” (1 Peter 5:5-7, *Proverbs 3:34*, NLT)

Conclusion: What's God's agenda for you? What's He leading you towards?

(talk about personal, talk about Reconnect – big crowd here last week)

**When God puts something on our hearts to do for Him, we need to make sure that we do it

What's It Going To Take?

- 1) People before things
- 2) Others ahead of us
- 3) Special care and concern for those in need
- 4) Responding when God acts

Response: Everything Glorious