

The Parable of the Wedding Banquet

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Keywords

Christianity, practices and traditions, sacred meals, salvation, invitation, discipleship

Notes for teachers

There seem to be two versions of this story in the New Testament: this one in Luke's Gospel and the other in Matthew's Gospel (22.1-13). There are significant differences between them, however, and it has been written of Matthew's version that it is "enough to make any interpreter go weak in the knees",¹ and so we will focus on Luke's slightly more straightforward telling of the story.

In Luke's Gospel, eating together is a common theme. Jesus invites surprising people to eat with him (such as Zacchaeus the tax collector in 19.10), and he uses meal times to teach those who are sitting at the table with him, as he does earlier in chapter 14 when he heals the man with the disease in his limbs.

In the Christian tradition, Jesus's final meal with his followers before he was crucified, often called the Last Supper, is hugely important. For Luke's version of events, see 22.7-23. Jesus identifies the wine and the bread of the Passover meal with his blood and his body, and tells his followers to remember him when they share the bread and wine together. This tradition itself looks back to the places in the Hebrew Bible where God promises to prepare a banquet for all people: "Here on Mount Zion the Lord Almighty will prepare a banquet for all the nations of the world—a banquet of the richest food and the finest wine" (Isaiah 25.6- and see Luke's echoing of this promise in the chapter before the parable- 13.28-30). The Last Supper anticipates the heavenly banquet promised by God, and many readers have associated the banquet in this parable with these similarly significant meals: the meal is ready and awaiting the response of those invited.

In Roman society too, banquets had great significance. Often laid on by the wealthy,

¹ Klyne Snodgrass, *Stories with Intent*, (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), p. 299.

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they were ways in which status was affirmed or denied and society was organised. The invitations would be sent out to those people the host wanted to impress, and the seating plan would be carefully constructed so that everyone knew their place. A meal such as this would be filled with expectation and importance.

Given the importance of such a meal, it is all the more surprising that the first set of people who are invited find excuses not to come. They provoke the anger of the host, who extends the invitation to those least likely to have been on the original invitation list of those seeking social enhancement - the poverty stricken and the disabled. When it becomes clear that there is still room at the table, the servant is told to scour the highways to gather people in, as the master wants a full house.

As with all of Jesus' parables, the meaning changes depending on whose perspective we choose to take as readers. An obvious way to read the story is to identify the host with God or with Jesus, who has prepared everything for a heavenly banquet in his presence and has extended an invitation to many. But the invitation to discipleship is rejected because other, worldly activities are too pressing. There are close parallels here with Jesus' teaching on discipleship in Luke 9. 57-62, where going back to bury the dead or even say farewell to family members is not allowed.

An alternative reading is one which sees in this story a message about the Church's mission to the Gentiles, to whom an invitation into God's presence is extended because Jesus' message has been rejected by those originally invited, the Jewish people. Such a reading has been popular at times in the history of the Church, although the context in which the story is set does not support it.

However, if the parable is read not from the perspective of the guests, but from the changing point of view of the host, a different meaning might be arrived at. When the host's plans for a socially acceptable dinner are snubbed, it could be suggested that he has a change of heart and rejects the system of which he had been a part. He shifts his attention away from those who might have advanced his social standing to those who are in need. From this perspective, the story might sit well in the context of the community to which Luke was writing. If wealthier Christians were snubbing those in the church who were less well-off, perhaps because of disability, this parable might have been told to convince them to change their ways. Jesus' teaching immediately before the parable (verses 12-14) has made this point very clearly.

Like the parable of the Prodigal Son which appears in the next chapter, the importance of the image of the banquet or party as a place of resolution, community and, for some readers at least, acceptance by God, is an element in the story not to be overlooked.

Questions for Discussion

Comprehension of the story

Describe what happens when the host sends out his invitations.

What is the role of the servant in the story?

How convincing are the excuses the first people to be invited make? How would you feel if you were the host?

Why does the host want people to come to his dinner?

Application to other contexts

In many religious traditions, having a meal with other believers is important. Why might that be?

What does the story teach us about the way society was structured at the time of Jesus? Do you think society is still like this today? Why and in what ways?

Reflecting on wider Christian issues

What other stories about Jesus eating with people have you heard? Does the story of Jesus' last meal with his followers have any connections with this story?

For Christians, what does this story teach them about what it means to be a follower of Jesus?

If the host in this story is supposed to represent God, what is God like?

The Parable of the Great Feast
(Luke 14.15-24)

When one of the guests sitting at the table heard this, he said to Jesus, “How happy are those who will sit down at the feast in the Kingdom of God!”

Jesus said to him, “There was once a man who was giving a great feast to which he invited many people. When it was time for the feast, he sent his servant to tell his guests, ‘Come, everything is ready!’

But they all began, one after another, to make excuses. The first one told the servant, ‘I have bought a field and must go and look at it; please accept my apologies.’ Another one said, ‘I have bought five pairs of oxen and am on my way to try them out; please accept my apologies.’ Another one said, ‘I have just gotten married, and for that reason I cannot come.’

The servant went back and told all this to his master. The master was furious and said to his servant, ‘Hurry out to the streets and alleys of the town, and bring back the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.’

Soon the servant said, ‘Your order has been carried out, sir, but there is room for more.’ So the master said to the servant, ‘Go out to the country roads and lanes and make people come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you all that none of those who were invited will taste my dinner!’”