

The Welcome of the Kingdom

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July 16, 2000

The Kingdom of God Series

Luke 14:1-24

Have you ever been in a situation where you knew that you were not welcome? You are the second wife, the step-mom and your husband's son is graduating from high school or your husband's daughter is getting married, and you are absolutely treated like a leper by the ex-wife, by her whole family and friendship circle, maybe by the children. You know you are not welcome there. That often happens in blended families on important occasions and celebrations. There is very definitely a reality to the old saying that you cannot get a permanent divorce, especially if you have children. That other person is always going to be there as a part of your kids' lives. They are going to be there at key celebration moments, during family crises and at the birth of grandchildren. As a pastor who does a number of weddings, I have had to negotiate through those awkward moments at weddings when it was very clear that this stepfather or that stepmother was not welcome and wanted as part of this particular wedding.

Have you ever been in a situation where you weren't welcome? Maybe you have been involved in an interracial dating situation and your date's parents made it very clear that they didn't want you or what you represented to them, your kind, dating their daughter or son.

Most of you know that I was raised in a Jewish family. My oldest sister dated and later married an Italian Catholic boy. I remember the first time my grandmother met my sister's boyfriend. My grandmother was very traditional and you didn't date and certainly didn't get engaged to or marry someone outside of the Jewish faith. It just wasn't done.

The first time she met my future brother-in-law, whose name was Dominick Guerriera, she kept hearing my sister calling him Dom. "Dom, could you pass the rolls?" "Dom, could you get me some water?" Dom...this...Dom...that. So my grandmother asked, "Don – is that short for Donald or Donny?"

My sister said, "No, his name is Dom. D-O-M. It is short for Dominick."

Well, Dominick is clearly not a Jewish name. My grandmother lost all the color in her face and shouted, "Dominick? Dominick?" For the rest of the lunch, she was absolutely silent.

As a Jew, I have been in a number of situations over the years where I recognized that I was not welcome. Some of you who belong to a minority group have probably experienced this kind of thing. I became a follower of Jesus when

I was 18. Not too long after that Marlene and I began going to an evangelical church near our college. On one particular occasion we went to one of their adult Sunday School classes. There were about 50 people in the class, and the teacher was teaching the Parable of the Good Samaritan.

He got to the part in the story where the priest and the Levite avoided the victim in the road, and he asked this question: "Look here in this story that Jesus tells about how this Jewish priest and Levite avoid this poor victim in the road. Have any of you had negative experiences with Jews?"

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Because he took a story about neighborliness and having a big heart for others, and he turned it on its head and asked the class, "Have you ever been mistreated by Jews?"

Well, that opened the floodgates of anti-Semitic remarks in this evangelical church. One person after another shared a negative experience they had had with a Jew. I remember one particular fellow said that his Jewish neighbor didn't rake the leaves off of his grass, and so they blew onto his grass. That somehow was indicative of what Jews normally did. They don't rake their leaves. Another person shared about a negative experience he had had with a Jewish car dealer. And so it went.

I walked out of that class completely shell-shocked. I felt betrayed. I felt confused. I really didn't know as a teenager what I was supposed to do. There was so much hatred in that room. So much bitterness. I had signed up for Jesus, and then I got to meet some of his people and so-called followers, and they turned out to have such narrow hearts.

I have been doing a series on the Kingdom of God. In the story we are going to look at today there is one particular aspect of the kingdom that I am going to emphasize. It is the "Welcome of the Kingdom." We are going to find that one of the most important words for a Christian is the word "welcome." It was vital to the ministry of Jesus. Jesus is regularly said to have welcomed sinners and to have eaten with them. The heart of Jesus is a welcoming heart, and central to any understanding to the Kingdom of God is this word "welcome." I have called today's talk "The Welcome of the Kingdom." Let's pray.

Luke 14:1-6

"One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched. There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?' But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away. Then he asked them, 'If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?' And they had nothing to say."

Here is a situation where Jesus is at a wealthy Pharisee's house – one of the religious leaders of his day. He sees a man who is sick from dropsy, apparently some condition that causes your body to fill with fluid. Jesus' healing takes place on a Sabbath, which gives rise to a major controversy about whether Jesus was respecting the Sabbath or not.

Now, if you are a student of the New Testament or even a casual reader of the Gospels, you will often find Jesus and the Pharisees engaged in some or other controversy regarding the Sabbath. You may have asked yourself, "Why do we find the Pharisees always upset with Jesus' treatment of the Sabbath?" So many of the disputes take place on the Sabbath.

Now there is what I believe a profoundly incorrect view of why there are so many disputes between Jesus and the Pharisees on the Sabbath. For much of the past 500 years, the New Testament has been read through the lenses of Martin Luther and his battles with the Roman Catholics of his day. Luther's struggle with the Roman Catholics at that time was that the Catholics were teaching a kind of merit-salvation where a person earned their acceptance with God based on their own moral efforts. And so whether you were going to be ultimately accepted by God into his eternal kingdom or instead spend tens of thousands of years working off your sin in purgatory, or worse that you would go to hell was based on your own moral efforts. Luther struggled for years to be holy enough to merit salvation.

In a wonderful biography of Martin Luther, probably the best, one written by Roland Bainton, called "Here I Stand," Luther speaks about his life of trying to earn favor with God. He had been a Roman Catholic monk living away in a sheltered monastery. Luther said, "I was a good monk and I kept the rules of my order so strictly that I may say that if ever a monk got to heaven by his monkery, it was I. All my brothers in the monastery who knew me will bear me out. If I had kept on any longer I should have killed myself with vigils, prayers, reading and other work."

But all these different things that Luther did to himself gave him no inner sense of assurance until he discovered the free grace of God offered to us in the Gospels through Jesus Christ. But unfortunately, his particular struggles with the Roman Catholics were read anachronistically back into Jesus' controversies with the Pharisees. For almost 500 years there has been this view that the battle between Jesus and the Pharisees was a battle between grace and law. That the Pharisees were like the Roman Catholics of the 16th Century who believed they could earn God's favor by obeying the Sabbath or by their food regulations.

And so when people read this controversy with the Pharisees over the Sabbath, they oppose Jesus because he taught the way of grace, and they were teaching the way of law. But you miss the whole point of the controversy, if that is the lens through which you read it. It is not law versus grace. The Pharisees didn't

believe they could earn God's favor by keeping the Sabbath. They weren't arguing with Jesus because he taught the way of grace. For the Pharisee, Sabbath was all wrapped up in what you could call boundary markers.

There were certain boundary markers – what one ate, laws about hand-washing, the Temple, the Torah, and especially observing the Sabbath, which identified people as being part of God's covenant people or not being part of God's covenant people. In other words, what you ate, or how you observed the Sabbath, told the Pharisee whether you were in or out with God. The observance of the Sabbath - let me try to be clear about the issue - to the Pharisees was not like a Boy Scout merit badge, which a Boy Scout earns by getting involved in a certain project. The observance of the Sabbath for the Pharisees was more like a police badge, which identifies a police officer when they come to your house.

Someone comes to your door and they say, “I need to talk to you about a particular matter. I am a police officer.” You would say, “Well, show me your badge. Show me that you really are who you claim to be, that you are a police officer.” The Pharisees saw the Sabbath the same way – not like a Boy Scout merit badge, but rather your observance marks you out as someone who really is identified with God.

Someone like Jesus comes along and he claims to speak for God. The Pharisees would say, “Prove it. Show us your badge. Show us your credentials.” And the credentials they were looking for was, had you washed your hands? Did you wash your hands in the prescribed way? Did you eat the right foods? And particularly, did you observe the Sabbath in the prescribed way?

What made the Pharisees so upset with Jesus was that Jesus rejected their whole credentialing system. He basically said, “Not only won't I show you my badge, but I am going to call my followers to a whole different set of credentials, a whole different set of identity markers. What will mark out my followers is not going to be what they eat or what they drink or how they observe the Sabbath. What is going to mark out my followers is first of all love.” “By this,” Jesus said, “All men will know that you are my disciples. If you love each other.”

“My followers will have welcoming hearts. Their love will mark them out. The great mark of faith will mark them out. My followers will be characterized by trusting in me. The Holy Spirit will mark them out. My followers are going to have the witness of the Holy Spirit. But I reject your markers and your credentials and your badges. In fact, I reject your power to even credential anyone. I don't think you have the monopoly on credentialing. God does.”

Now, it is very upsetting to credentialing authorities when someone comes along and says, “I reject your credentials. I reject your right to credential me or qualify

me.” It is very upsetting to credentialing authorities when the credentialing authority of a seminary or some ordination body in some denomination says, “You can’t teach the Bible unless you can show the degree from this accredited seminary. You can’t teach the Bible. We won’t let you teach it around here.” And a person says, “Hey, I am going to teach the Bible anyway.”

Or “We won’t let you teach school in our public schools unless you have a degree from one of our approved education departments. You can’t just teach school with a history or science degree. You have to go through the track we say you do.” And when people begin to threaten that kind of authority and say, “We are going to teach school anyway and we think we have the skill to do it,” it upsets people.

And in counseling you aren’t allowed to counsel someone unless you go to this kind of school. And that monopoly power on credentialing is challenged not only when we deny someone the power to decide, but when we say, “Your whole criteria are off for measuring people and identifying them.” It is very upsetting.

The truth is, friends, we all love identity markers – real simple ways of saying who’s in and who’s out. Jesus, you are going to have to give us something a little more concrete than this fuzzy thing: what will mark my disciples is love and their welcoming heart. Or their trust in me, their absolute trust and faith in me. Or what will mark out my followers is the witness of the Holy Spirit that they carry in their lives. Can’t you help us to identify people by what they wear? Yeah...all Christians have to dress a certain way. How many Christian denominations have said that over the last 20 centuries? You have to wear a little thing on your head if you are a woman. Or you have to wear sleeves down to your wrists. Or you have to cover your knees. Or you can’t wear jeans.

We all look for some simple clear markers of one’s spiritual status with God. Lots of people prefer the real simple things like “I can drive up to church in my BMW with vanity plates and immediately know that I am OK with God and someone else isn’t when I spot them standing under one of the church canopies smoking a cigarette.” Ah, marker right there. I have my Jesus bumper sticker. I am OK with God; he’s not because he is smoking.

We use these markers all the time in our evangelical churches, don’t we? If you are conservative politically, you are in. If you’re liberal, you’re out. We don’t care how many times you say to us that you believe in Jesus, if you are liberal politically, there is no way we are going to believe that you are a Christian.

And if you are conservative, we will accept you no matter how appalling your personal or family life is. Or how hateful and non-welcoming is your speech, how unloving is your speech.

If you are a feminist, you are out. Anti-feminist, you're in. If you would advocate homosexual rights, not homosexual practice, but homosexual rights in the workplace, you are way, way out.

We all have these identity markers. I am not advocating for one side or the other of these debates. Don't hear that. But one of the reasons that Jesus was crucified was because he continually by his practice and teaching rejected the Pharisees' markers of spirituality, and he regularly called for new markers. And I will tell you something. If we, as a church, really, really got it into our minds that we are going to reject the traditional evangelical markers of spirituality and what is current in our culture - the political markers, the ridiculous behavioral markers, the dress markers - and we said we are only going to emphasize those markers which Jesus emphasized - markers like love, markers like welcome, markers like total trust in Christ and the witness of the Spirit - we will experience great opposition from the larger Christian community. How dare you challenge our markers?

But Jesus' ministry was all about welcome. It was all about breaking down these walls and these barriers that kept some people out and let some in. And you know Jesus' healing was all about welcome as well. It says in verse 2, "There in front of him was a man suffering from dropsy. Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, 'Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?' But they remained silent. So taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him away."

Healing is all about the welcome of the kingdom of God. Why healing? Why miracles? Certainly, miracles were performed (we are going to cover this at much greater length in future talks on the kingdom as we explore the issue of the power of the kingdom), but certainly miracles are done to fulfill Old Testament prophecies. When the kingdom of God comes, it will come in power. It will come accompanied by the miraculous in healings.

Why did Jesus heal? Well, certainly, a part of it was just his compassion when he saw someone in pain. His heart moved him as our hearts should move us when we see someone in pain. We should be moved to want to pray for that person. To ask to pray for that person - whether it is the pain of going through a divorce or the pain of rejection or the pain of dealing with an illness.

But healing goes beyond mere demonstration of compassion. Healing is a demonstration of the welcome of the kingdom. Because when Jesus healed folks he was not only physically restoring them, he was restoring them into full participation in the covenant community. See, in Jesus' day, there were certain people who were excluded from the community. If you weren't a Jew, if you were a Gentile, you were excluded. You aren't welcome here. There is a wall up, leave. If you were a Gentile, you weren't part of the community.

But if you were a defective Jew, either in your practice because you didn't observe the Sabbath in the right way or you didn't wash your hands; if you were a defective Jew or you were defective physically, if you were born blind or deaf or lame or you were blemished in some way or you had a skin disease or discharge – then you were also excluded from community.

And so what Jesus does when he performs a miracle of healing for a Gentile or a miracle of healing for a Samaritan or a defective Jew, a Jew who wasn't doing the Torah or who was physically impaired, what Jesus is doing in all these healings is demonstrating the wide open arms of God. He is demonstrating the welcome of God to all the groups who had been pushed out. He is saying, "I am declaring you are included in the family of God. You are part of the community. You are welcome."

He tells this little story about the ox in verse 5. "If one of you has a son or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull him out?' And they had nothing to say." I think Jesus could say the same thing to a lot of people in our church. Do you treat your pet more kindly than you treat people? Does your heart go out more for suffering animals than it does for suffering human beings?

I read a statistic a few years ago that said that American Christians spend more money on pet food every year than they do on world missions. Talk about wrestling the ox that fell into the well, but not rescuing people. Let me ask you a question. If you have a pet, how much do you spend on that pet? What is your world mission giving like? What do you give to the poor? It is our unfortunate tendency to treat some animals like people and to treat some people like animals.

Luke 14 is all about welcoming.

Let's move on where we see this theme of welcome picked up in verse 12 where we read: "Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid.'" Let me just pause here. There is an old saying regarding your good deeds - you can't be rewarded twice. You either get it now or you get it then. And if you are getting it all now from people, then you aren't going to get it in the future from God.

But his point is not only on reward. Jesus goes on to say, "But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they can't repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous."

What is going on here? Jesus noticed as he looked around the party that the only people there, the only invited guests, are those who are important, influential

or wealthy. That these were people who, in turn, could invite the Pharisee back when they had parties. And in verse 12, I want you to see this. It is an important grammatical point. What Jesus says in verse 12 literally should read, "Then Jesus said to his host, 'When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not always keep inviting your friends.'" It shouldn't read "do not invite your friends" as if it is totally wrong to get together with friends or family members. People have read this and asked, "Is it OK for me to have a gathering with friends and family?" Jesus is not saying don't ever get together with friends. But literally he says, "Don't always keep inviting friends." In other words, don't exclusively restrict your invitation list to those who you already know and like and who are friends with you or family members.

It is easy in a church to have little friendship cliques and say, "Well that is our practice of community." But it is easy in a church to have our little circle that excludes others. When people come into a church setting like this and they are new people, visitors and guests, they just can't break in.

Now, I understand that it is very, very difficult in a growing church, as we have been for 15 years, to continually be open to new people and also to maintain relationships with old friends. But brothers and sisters, the heart of Jesus is a welcoming heart, and we must pray for that and get his welcoming heart down in our hearts. Jesus is always, always open to someone new. He never says, "Enough. I am putting out a sign right now to all the other people who want to come. I am going out of business as Savior. I am out of business. I am full up. No room in the inn."

Let me make an appeal to small group leaders here. If you are a women's leader, a men's leader, a small group leader of one of our kinships, or you lead one of our ministries, will you please start again to aggressively invite new people to your groups? The very heart and soul of this church is our small groups. It is not our Sunday morning programming. It has never been that. It is what happens in group life. That's where community occurs, if it is going to occur. That is where accountability happens. That is where we get to know one another and take off our masks. Small group leaders, you are either the people who are going to make it happen or not. Will you again commit yourself to aggressively inviting new people in?

You say, "We don't know who's new." Well, one approach you could take is every week you come up here to pray for people. You have 52 chances a year to talk with someone up front when I invite people to come forward for prayer; if you are part of the group who leads in prayer. One of the questions you should be asking folks after you get done praying with them is "Are you in a group?" They say, "No." Well, how about inviting them to a group? Take their phone number. Give them your phone number. Don't just say, "Be warmed and be filled." Say, "I am interested in more of you than just a four minute prayer. I care about you. I want to follow up with you." You can come back to the pastor's

welcome after the services. Every week we invite guests to come back to the room right next to the new bookstore and greet people and invite them to your group.

Long-time members of the church - and if you have been here longer than 3 years, you are one of the long-time members because more than half the church has been here 3 years or less - when you sit down on Sunday, if you come before worship starts or even after the service is over, greet people in your row that you don't know.

This whole business of invitation leads to the practice of the ministry of hospitality. I have said this before, but one of the most neglected gifts in the church is the gift and ministry of hospitality. The gift of hospitality is literally the spiritual gift of welcoming. If you are a person who likes to cook, if you are a person when people come over to your house they always say, "I feel so at home here;" if you are a person who enjoys welcoming people into your home, then I urge you if you have a gift that displays this welcoming aspect of the kingdom, you need to exercise it regularly. Introduce yourself to people in the rows. Ask folks over. Invite new people from your small group over. Not just the prominent and the important, but the one who is excluded. If you watch people wandering in the church, welcome them by exercising your gift of hospitality.

This whole text is about welcoming. We read in verse 15: "When one of those at the table heard this, he said to Jesus, 'Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.'"

Jesus then tells a story about a banquet, and he is going to challenge the assumption of the man who exclaimed the blessedness of those who eat the feast of the Messianic banquet in the kingdom of God. His assumption is that those of us who are first in line will certainly be eating. Those of us sitting in this room, Jesus, I know will all be eating. Jesus regularly challenges the assumptions of those who think they are first in line with God.

That is the assumption at every funeral. You never go to a funeral where you hear anything other than, "Of course, this person is going to end up in the kingdom of God." That is the assumption of almost everyone. Well, of course, we will all end up in the kingdom of God. We are first in line.

Jesus was talking to a group of people who had all of the advantages – a whole history of dealing with God and God speaking to them and sending prophets, being recipients of God's Word, being taught God's Word – a history of being part of a community of God's people. Being part of what we would say is the church. Jesus is talking to a group of people who had all of the advantages and who thoroughly wasted their spiritual advantage.

You know, we really do need to ask ourselves whether we waste the spiritual

advantage we have where we have six Bibles on a shelf, but we never read them. Or we participate in great church life, but we aren't growing. We don't really apply what we hear. What a sad thing to be first in line and wind up not being able to even eat at the table. I think of people who have been raised in Christian families where there was a genuineness in their parents' faith. I know some families go to evangelical churches, and yet their family life is such a mess. There is much hypocrisy in the home and the home is so utterly unreal in its practice of spirituality, but they put on a good Christian front when they go to their good evangelical church. I know some kids grow up in homes like that, and their parents' hypocrisy and unreality actually forms an obstacle to those children being able to embrace the kingdom.

When I think of the many children whose parents really did, with all their flaws and all their faults, where parents really did go after God, where homes really did have Jesus at the center, where kids were so near to Christ and yet they opted out. They took another fork in the road by their own choices. They walked away. How awful it is to be first in line and yet to walk away from embracing a real relationship with Jesus. Any of you who are part of a second generation where your parents are real believers, you have to personally embrace this Jesus by your own faith.

I think of some of you who are first in line because your spouses are believers. You are around this all the time. Your close friends are Christians. You have the offer. It is time for you to take it.

Well, Jesus tells this story of the welcome of God. "Jesus replied, '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.'"

Of course, the certain man in this story is God. And the great banquet is the Messianic banquet. Now, banquets are often used by the writers of scripture as symbols of the kingdom of God. They are symbols of pure grace because you don't have to do anything other than to just show up to eat the banquet. The banquet is a symbol of the pure, sheer grace of God offered to us in the kingdom.

See, Jesus doesn't say that a man once threw a potluck dinner in which everyone contributed what they had to the dinner. Salvation is not a potluck dinner where you come with what you have, and then God adds what he has. The only thing you bring to the table is your appetite, your hunger. Where you say, "I have to have something more than what I am experiencing in life. My way of doing life never works. And his way of doing life always does. I am not satisfied. I am hungry for real answers. I am hungry for truth. I am hungry for joy. I am hungry for God." The only requirement is that you come hungry. That you come thirsty. Nothing else. All you need to do is come and eat.

And eating, you know, is such a great picture of the way salvation works because in order to enjoy the banquet you don't just come and stare at the food. You take it in. You make it your own. It is the same thing with the kingdom. You go for it. You eat it. You take it in. It is not that you stare at issues about healing and issues of deliverance and prayer and you observe and study. No, you take it in. You make it your own. You incorporate it into your own being. The kingdom is not a potluck.

It is not a funeral, either, friends. Looking at some churches, you would think that basically the kingdom of God was described as some funeral. It is a great banquet. It is a good deal. And this banquet is the result of great preparation. Jesus says, "A certain man was preparing a great banquet." The Messianic banquet was prepared from the beginning of time by God. He gave hints and foreshadowings of this coming banquet through all the Old Testament prophets and patriarchs, through Abraham and Moses and King David and Solomon and the various prophets.

What Jesus is saying in this parable is "Now is the time. I am coming to give you the now-ness of the Messianic banquet. You come and eat now." He is not talking about the end times. He is talking about "I am standing in front of you guys with an invitation into the enjoyment of kingdom life. Now start tasting it."

There is going to be a great feast at the end. But that is not what this parable is referring to. What was in the minds of the Pharisees was that one day we will get to eat. And Jesus says that he sent his servant out to tell those who had been invited to come, because everything is now ready. Circle that word "now" in your Bible. We can experience kingdom healing now. That is part of the kingdom of God. We can experience intimacy with God now. That is part of the kingdom of God. Righteousness, peace and joy now. A significant measure of healing in our marriages now. Racial reconciliation now. An end to exclusions in the church now. Now is the appointed time. Now is the day of salvation.

And this man sends his messengers out to invite. Verse 17: "At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come for everything is now ready.'"

Now, in the ancient Middle East a host would send out invitations telling guests he was going to have a banquet on such-and-such a night. When the night came, he would send a messenger telling people that the banquet was prepared. In verse 17 we really ought to circle the word "come" because that is the welcoming word of God. Come. The old preachers used to talk about how the word "come" was an acronym – C is for children; O is for old people; M is for middle-aged folks; and E is for everyone. The word "come" is the word of the Gospel. It is the word of grace. The call of the Gospel and the call of the kingdom is not *do*; it is not *try*; it is not *push*; it is **come**.

We read this call in Revelation 22, “The Spirit and the Bride say ‘Come!’ and let him who hears say, ‘come!’ Whoever is thirsty let him come; and whoever wishes, let him take the free gift of the water of life.” We must as a church hang out a banner that says “come.” Anyone who wants to, anyone who is hungry for God, anyone who is tired of life as they are currently living it, anyone who has come to the end of themselves, anyone who is dissatisfied, anyone who is looking for truth, anyone who is hungry for God – come. The great invitation of God goes out to every single person in the world – Come to Jesus.

Of course, we need to respond. And the story here takes a twist in terms of this broad heart of God and his welcome because God doesn’t force the kingdom upon us. We need to receive the kingdom. We need to respond to the kingdom offer. And these men in the story who were originally invited make lame excuses.

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.’ Another said, ‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I am on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.’ Still another said, ‘I just got married, so I can’t come.’”

These are the lamest excuses in the world. No one in the ancient Middle East would have ever bought a field without knowing every square foot of that field. They would know the springs, the wells and the palm trees, the stone walls. They would know the history of the field. What kind of profits it brought. Who had owned it. When someone says, “I bought a field, and now I have to go and check it out and find out what I bought,” it is almost like inviting someone over for dinner, waiting for them, and at the last minute, after you have prepared everything, they call you and say, “Oh, sorry...I can’t come tonight. I just bought a house, signed a contract on it, and now my wife and I are going to check out the neighborhood and see what we bought.”

No one would do that. No one would believe that lame excuse. What do you mean you want to see the house you already bought? You haven’t seen it already? You don’t know what neighborhood it’s in?

In the ancient Middle East before anyone would buy a team of oxen they would watch them work to see if they worked together. That excuse is like, “Sorry, I have to cancel. I just bought five used cars, and I am going down to the lot to find out what model they are and how old they are and whether they will start.” You mean, you just went ahead and bought cars without even knowing anything about them?

The same is true for the marriage excuse. You just got married and so you can’t come to dinner? What’s that about?

Jesus is telling us that the invitation of God into the life of the kingdom does need to be responded to. Yes, God is welcoming, but he doesn't force us. And the truth is that today people continue to make lame excuses. If any of you are disconnected from God, what's your excuse?

Truly, we make excuses. Over the years, I have talked with hundreds and hundreds of individuals about forming a relationship with Jesus Christ. My experience is that folks sometimes make excuses about why now is not a good time or why Christ is not for them. Some people don't believe, at bottom, that they need Christ. Maybe you are in that place. Maybe you have been talked with about Jesus. Maybe someone has extended an invitation to receive him and to give him your life and control over your life, but you have made excuses. Maybe you don't think you need Christ. Christ is fine for the guy living under a bridge or the guy in prison. But I am doing OK with my life. I am working for some dot-com company or some start-up company. I have a good, secure job with a company or the state. I have a decent house.

I will tell you, if you don't have Christ, you don't have answers, friend. If you are a parent, what are you going to tell your teenager who is 14 or 15 years old and says, "Mom, Dad, I am having sex with my boyfriend or girlfriend."?

No, don't do that, it is wrong.

Why is it wrong, Mom? Why? You haven't raised me to follow the Bible. We don't have Christ in the center of our lives. What's wrong with having sex at 14 or 15?

What counsel do you give to your children? Practice safe sex? Is that the best you can do?

If you don't have Christ and you are a single person, on what basis can you confidently get married in the future? How do you know what the next 50 years are going to hold? If I didn't have Christ and I was thinking about getting married, I would be scared to death. It would be like jumping off a cliff. I wouldn't know what was going to happen to me in the future.

With Jesus Christ, I can trust my future. I can say, "Well, my wife is following Him, and I am following Him, my vows 'until death us do part' make sense. I think we are going to be able to hang together with the help of Jesus." But without God in my marriage, it's no wonder that two famous Hollywood folks recently made wedding vows in which the wife promised to make banana shakes for her husband (that was part of the wedding vow). And the husband promised that he would give his wife foot rubs. Without Christ, it can't be for better or worse, richer or poorer, in sickness and in health, until death us do part. It is, "I'll promise to make you banana shakes and you promise to rub my feet."

Without Christ, how are you going to deal with death? The death of a parent; the death of a loved one? What happens? The truth is we do need Jesus. Without Jesus, our lives will ultimately not work. We are going to hit a wall at some point in our relationships, in our marriages, in our childraising. You are going to hit major failure without Christ, a wall that you can't get around.

Some people don't turn to Christ because they don't want to give anything up. Jesus does require our whole heart. We have to come to the banquet in order to enjoy Christ. He doesn't say, "Listen, if they don't show up, why don't we pack up some doggie bags and send it to them while they are following other pursuits? We will send them a box lunch. It is OK. I will take people on any terms."

No – the Lord says you have to come to the banquet with all that you are and all that you have – your whole heart. Some people don't want to give Jesus their whole heart. Are you ready to give him your whole heart? Then you are ready for Christ.

I will tell you there is nothing more valuable than Jesus. If your boyfriend is keeping you from Christ, then you are making a really bad bargain. If your girlfriend is keeping you from Christ, if some sexual practice is keeping you from Christ, if your business pursuit is keeping you from Christ, if your kids, if anything is keeping you from turning to Jesus, your busy-ness, you are making a bad deal, friend. You are trading second best or tenth best for what is ultimately best. Let go of whatever it is that is keeping you from coming to Christ and grab hold of him.

And I will say the same to those of you who have known Jesus Christ. Whatever is filling you up so that you don't have room in your life for Christ, then let that thing go. Some people believe that God will always keep inviting. Well, you know, the invitation will always be there. If I don't receive Christ today, I can receive him some other time. The invitation will always be there if I turn it down.

We miss a basic spiritual principle that when we turn God down, when we say "no" to God, he always will forgive us in the future. But we always won't want to be forgiven. Something happens to you when you say "no" to God. There's a fork in the road. You are following a different path when you say "no" to God; something inside of you changes, and the more you say "no" to God - because you are involved with your boyfriend, girlfriend, career, college or some other idol - the more you say "no" to God, the less you will in the future be able to hear his invitation. You change when you say "no" to God. You care less about being forgiven. You care less about what God thinks of you.

Again, I speak to Christians. The banquet of the kingdom is not just at the beginning of the Christian life. God wants to spread a table before you all the time. When was the last time you tasted and saw that the Lord is good? When is the last time you really felt God's presence in a real way when you prayed?

Aren't you hungry for God again? Don't you need him as much today as when you received him originally? Don't keep putting off the invitation of God to come to the banquet.

The host sends out other invitations. "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 make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

It is always the aim of God to send his people out so that they welcome others. Israel never fulfilled its calling to be a light to the world. They thought, "Well, as long as we are enjoying the banquet that's enough. That's all that God has." But Jesus wants his house full.

And in a very practical way, friend, we can resolve to be a welcoming church. Will you say to the Lord, "Lord, I will invite others to worship with me. I will open up my life. I will practice hospitality. I won't close the doors of my friendship circle. I won't just hang with the same people I have always hung out with. And I won't judge people or write them off by criteria that have nothing to do with the kingdom."

Because the kingdom is about love. It is about faith. It is about repentance. It is about the witness of the Spirit. Jesus welcomed sinners, and he ate with them. Let's pray.

The Welcome of the Kingdom

Rich Nathan
July 16, 2000
The Kingdom of God Series
Luke 14:1-24

- I. Welcome and the Sabbath (Luke 14:1-6)
- II. Welcome and Healing (Luke 14:1-4)
- III. Welcome and Hospitality (Luke 14:12-14)
- IV. Welcome and the Banquet (Luke 14:15-26)
 - A. God's Great Provision (Luke 14:16)
 - B. God's Great Preparation (Luke 14:16)
 - C. God's Great Invitation (Luke 14:17)
 - D. Our Lame Excuses (Luke 14:18-20)
 - E. God's Great Commission (Luke 14:21-24)