

Luke 14:1-24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Luke chapter 14 verses 1 to 24 And they could not reply to these things.

Luke chapter 14 When one of those who reclined at table with him heard these things, he said to him, Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.

But he said to him, A man once gave a great banquet and invited many. And at the time for the banquet he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, Come, for everything is now ready.

But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I have bought a field and I must go out and see it. Please have me excused. And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to examine them.

Please have me excused. And another said, I have married a wife and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported these things to his master. Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, Go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor and crippled and blind and lame.

[2 : 31] And the servant said, Sir, what you commanded has been done and still there is room. And the master said to the servant, Go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in that my house may be filled.

For I tell you, None of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. Luke chapter 14 is set at the meal table. The kingdom is like a great supper and the way of the kingdom is seen in its table manners.

Jesus heals on the Sabbath again and we should observe the parallels with chapter 13 verses 10 to 17. There is a reference here to a son or an ox. But in other textual versions it's the donkey or the ox.

This is referring back to Deuteronomy chapter 5 and the law of the Sabbath in that place. Jesus is the one who is bringing in the Sabbath rest and his feast. And the man is suffering from dropsy, a condition involving fluid retention and a dangerous thirst.

And Jesus heals him and thereby addresses his thirst. Perhaps something that could be seen as a symbol of longing for deliverance. In his famous work, *The Civilising Process*, Norbert Elias explores the transformation of manners between the Middle Ages and the 18th century.

[3 : 39] He observes the way that our animality and things associated with it were gradually removed from public sight through instilling embarrassment, shame and aversion surrounding contact with other bodies, the display of excessive passions and sexuality or behaviours that foregrounded our physicality, things like nose-blowing or spitting, urinating or nudity.

Elias identified a political impulse behind much of this. It had its root in the rise of a new courtly class, and observing the new rigorous etiquette of the court, became necessary for inclusion and advancement in polite society, and social jockeying in the realm of the refinement of tastes and manners, and civility steadily displaced the martial values of previous ages.

Now the meal table was ground zero for this training and expression of this new regime of conduct. It spread from courtiers to the higher classes of society, and beyond.

And these new virtues of self-control, dignity and concealment of and distancing from animality was taught and manifested at meal tables, until what originated as a social compulsion became a part of people's very psychology, a second nature.

The rise of civility in the West then was a social development of the manners of the meal table that undergirded and spread a new political order, privileging cultivated courtly elites.

[4 : 58] The political importance of the meal table within this development was manifold. The meal table was, and remains, a reflection of the relations between people and of their place within a broader social and material world.

Each meal was, and still remains, an opportunity to secure or advance one's place within this social order. What on earth does any of this have to do with Luke chapter 14?

Well, as our passage shows, the same was true in Jesus' day. The meal table and the throwing of banquets were arenas within which people negotiated and competed for social status.

It was also a site of intense social scrutiny, and Jesus was being closely examined by the Pharisees, who wanted to see what his table manners would reveal about him. Jesus, however, was engaging in a sort of sociological study of his own.

He perceived and remarked upon some distinguishing features of mealtime behaviour in first-century Jewish honour society. Dinner guests pressing for the best seats, hosts inviting the sort of people from whom they could hope for repayment or improve social status.

[6 : 04] And Jesus, in these verses, addresses both groups. He teaches an alternative model of table etiquette. This model of table etiquette is not entirely new. Much of Jesus' teaching in this passage comes from the Old Testament and elsewhere.

In Proverbs chapter 25, verses 6 to 7, Richard Hayes has remarked, Jesus' teaching involves, then, as Hayes recognises, a rehearsal for the manners of the in-breaking kingdom.

Rather than trying to curry favour with their rich neighbours and adopting the manners of the regional rulers, the people of God are to cultivate the etiquette of a different kingdom. They are to behave as prospective members of a different court.

Jesus instructs his hearers to act against their apparent social interests, in the sure faith that God's order will prevail over all others. The table manners that Jesus called for involved the rejection of the sort of honour culture practised in many first century Mediterranean societies.

Instead of grasping for honour, Jesus' followers should be characterised by humility and self-effacement. While seating arrangements and dinner invitations were means for social climbers to accrue honour and status in their society, Jesus challenges his disciples to reject the way of honour-seekers, and like their master, to seek the praise of God over that of man.

[7 : 59] Abstaining from social jockeying in a society where so much depended upon one's honour and status is a very costly act of faith. The necessity of a new form of practice grounded in radical faith in the coming kingdom is perhaps even more pronounced in Jesus' challenge to hosts in the later verses of this passage.

Rather than inviting people who can be relied upon to give a generous return upon their social investment, Jesus' followers must throw their feasts for people with no power to repay.

In a society where the exchange of gifts and invitations to feasts was the basic currency by which you secured your social standing, Jesus' radical practice would be seen to be reckless.

One's political, legal and social position could become precarious if one was not prepared to throw one's weight into maintaining circles of reciprocal gift. If one did not give gifts and invitations to the right people, one wouldn't receive the return of social honour or any assurance of social security.

Consistently giving gifts and invitations to the wrong people might be an even riskier course of action. It would offend and dissociate you from people with social power. Greco-Roman thinkers who have reflected upon the significance of gifts, such as Cicero, commonly stressed the moral importance of giving judiciously.

[9 : 20] To give freely to the poor who lack the means to give a worthy return, being regarded not only economically but typically also as morally without standing, might reflect poorly upon the prudence and the character of the giver.

Jesus doesn't utterly reject the underlying logic of the gift society, but rather completely transforms its functioning by revealing that God is the guarantor of all gifts and debts.

If we give in faith to the poor and to those without the capacity to repay, we will receive a bountiful reward at the resurrection. Conversely, we need not be placed in others' debt when we receive their gifts, because God has promised to repay them on our behalf.

Jesus tells us to invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind to our suppers, rather than people who can repay us. God is the one who will reward us with a place at his table in the resurrection of the just.

And here the connection between Jesus' teaching in these verses and the teaching of the parable of the great supper that immediately follows should be recognised. It is the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind, precisely the same people as his disciples are called to invite to their feasts in verse 13, who are the people who sit at God's great supper, while the rich reject their invitation.

[10 : 34] In associating themselves with those without social status then, the disciples of Christ would be associating themselves with those who would one day sit at the great eschatological banquet.

Inviting people to this great banquet, the man finds one guest after another turning down his invitation for various weak excuses. We should note the similarity of the situation to the one in which Jesus presently finds himself.

It's a meal with a ruler of the Pharisees, with presumably many people of high status and social standing in attendance. The feast of the parable proceeds in a typical way.

It begins with invitations being sent out to socially respectable people. But things go awry. They are all too committed to their possessions and relationships to accept the invitation.

As his invitation has been spurned by the well-to-do, the man then turns to the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame, and then goes out beyond that still to find even more destitute persons outside of the city.

[11 : 33] This has often been related to marginal Jews and Gentiles. These people must be compelled into the feast, presumably because they knew that they couldn't offer anything in return, and there was an apparent social gulf between them and their host.

However, their host wasn't playing the old dynamics of a patronage culture anymore. A complete social reordering had occurred for him, and he now cut off association with the original invitees.

A question to consider. How does the celebration of the Eucharist or Lord's Supper provide us with training in the table manners of the kingdom?