

The Banquet Parables

Lk 14:15-24, Mt 22:1-14

BACKGROUND

- The messianic banquet alluded to in these parables has its roots in Is 25. Is 24 is a chilling description of the final judgment and the righteous remnant who are spared. Is 25 has three parts: 25:1-5 is a song by a solitary singer (presumably Isaiah) praising God for his mercy; 25:6-8 describes the festive banquet of the righteous; 25:9-12 is a communal song of praise.
- The universalism of Isaiah was watered down in the inter-testamental period, so that both Gentiles (1 Enoch 62:1-16) and the handicapped (Qumran, *The Messianic Rule*) were rejected. [Kenneth Bailey, *Through Peasant Eyes* (Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1980), p. 90.]
- Two invitations were typical. The first gave the head count, and saved the date. The second signaled that the slaughtered animal (chosen based on the number of guests) was ready.
- All three excuses in Luke's version, as Craig Blomberg puts it, "share... an extraordinary lameness." (*Interpreting the Parables*, IVP, 1990, p. 234.)
- "For all the invited guests to refuse to come would shame the host; the absurd excuses given barely disguise what must have been a concerted plan to deliberately insult the host." [Craig Keener, *A Commentary on the Gospel of Matthew* (Eerdmans, 1999).]
- Matthew's version has a parallel in the Talmud attributed to the first-century rabbi Johanan ben Zakkai.
- Matthew's version may be a *peshet* on Luke's—a "reputable method of Jewish exegesis" founding the Qumran literature in which Matthew "interweaves the text of the story Jesus told with the application he has observed in his own day" [Michael Green, *The Message of Matthew* (IVP, 2000)]. In this case, the interpolations would include (1) the poor treatment of the servants (v. 6), representing early Christian persecution as well as the burning of the city representing the sacking of Jerusalem by Titus. The latter is often taken as evidence for a post-70 date for Matthew, though many also argue that this is unnecessary e.g. that burning cities wasn't so unusual (see Craig Keener's Matthew commentary) that it has to be a symbol for something; see D. A. Carson, *Expositor's Bible Commentary*), and even that Matthew's version is independent of Luke's.



QUESTIONS

Luke's version: Lk 14:15-24

1. Without giving in to allegorical excesses, what invitation is being alluded to here? What group is represented by the servants sending out the invitation?
2. Placing Lk 14 in context, who is being warned or rebuked here? What real excuses parallel those in the parable?
3. Is there a modern counterpart to the original guests and the new guests?
4. Matthean expert and all-around exegete Craig Blomberg, in his article "Preaching the Parables: Preserving Three Main Points" [*Perspectives in Religious Studies* 11, 31 (1984)], while supporting that parables should have generally one main point, explores the idea that a main "sub-point" be associated with each of the primary characters. So, e.g., in the parable of the Prodigal,

Even as the father offered reconciliation to his sons, so God offers us forgiveness of our sins. Even as the prodigal received this reconciliation when he came home and repented, so we will be forgiven when we confess our sins and turn to God for forgiveness. Even as the older brother should not have begrudged his brother's good fortune when he ought to have been rejoicing, so we who are righteous should be glad and not mad that God extends his grace to others as well, even to the most undeserving.

Who are the main characters (or groups) in the two versions of this parable? What sub-points might be associated with each of them?

5. One of the conclusions drawn by Kenneth Bailey of this parable is,

The messianic banquet promised by Isaiah is inaugurated in the table fellowship of Jesus (realized eschatology). But the parable is left open-ended. All the guests are not assembled. The parable breaks off with the house not yet full. Thus there is an unfulfilled future anticipated by the parable (futuristic eschatology). The full version of the messianic banquet is yet in the future, when the faithful will sit down in the kingdom with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob (Lk 13:28-29). (*Through Peasant Eyes*, Eerdmans, 1980, p. 111-112.)

Consider the following questions:

- a. How did Jesus' table fellowship with tax collectors and sinners (cf. Mt 9:10-11) prefigure the Messianic banquet? Is this merely foreshadowing?
 - b. How does your ministry follow the pattern of the messianic banquet, and how does celebration characterize your spirituality?
 - c. In the parable, you *can't* be part of the party without rubbing shoulders with the second-round guests. Who do the lame, blind, poor and maimed of the parable represent? *Are they part of our party?*
6. In Lk 14:24 Jesus says, "I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet." The "you" in this verse is plural, setting it apart from the statements

made by the master earlier in this passage. Is this the final verse of the parable, or a summary statement following it? If the latter, what does it mean?

7. How does this parable respond to the statement made by Jesus' fellow diner in Lk 22:15?

Matthew's Version: Mt 22:1-14

8. How is Matthew's version different from Luke's?
9. As with Luke's version, Blomberg finds a triadic structure, the main groups being the king, the original guests who refuse to come, and the man without a wedding garment. With this structure, he sees the parable presenting a contrast between the latter two groups.

If we again follow Blomberg's proposal of associating a sub-point with each group, what points may be drawn? Who, in Jesus' context, would the groups correspond to?

10. In v. 10, "the bad and the good" are invited to the banquet. The *New Jerome Biblical Commentary* points out, "Sinners too are invited, and the church in history is a mixed body of saints and sinners, as in 13:17 [the parable of the wheat and the tares], 47-50 [the parable of the dragnet]." Other passages suggest this as well, such as Lk 13:22-30, where some who "ate and drank with you" are told by Jesus that he doesn't know them.

What would it mean to see a church veined with the gristle of false disciples as *normative*? Do you think Jesus envisioned a church constantly reforming and expelling false disciples, until the last day when Jesus himself cleans house? Or are we to focus on the work of the church and endure the false disciples among us?

11. D. A. Carson (*Expositor's*, p. 457) says of v. 10, "That Jesus is reported at saying this... clearly shows that the superior righteousness (5:20) believers must attain to enter the kingdom is not merely rigorous obedience to the law. After all, this Gospel promises a Messiah who saves his people from their sins (1:21; 20:28)."¹ If, as Garner asserts, the conclusion in 22:14 means that "invitation does not guarantee participation," what does this say to us—both as individuals, and as leaders in the church?

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Fun fact: Luke's version the banquet parable also appears in the Gospel of Thomas. In the latter version Jesus concludes that the problem isn't the excuses *per se*, but that they are all related to business transactions; he ends by saying, "traders and merchants shall not enter the places of my Father."

¹ Also bear in mind Rev 19:7-9, which describes the immense messianic celebration of worship and fellowship following the great judgment on Babylon, and provides a possible interpretation of the wedding garments: "Fine linen stands for the righteous acts of the saints."