

A Sermon
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Grace Baptist Church
Bryans Road, Maryland
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Top Priority
Luke 14:15-24

"I wonder if we'll have cake in heaven." That's the question he asked as he sat at his office desk, enjoying a really big, and thickly iced, piece of—you guessed it—cake. A few minutes earlier, when he learned that I was a pastor, the conversation immediately turned to religious matters. Topics like salvation, worship styles, altar calls, spiritual transformation, and resurrection bodies. Clearly, he was thinking about and anticipating what's ahead for those who are in Christ, even down to the details of the menu at the kingdom banquet. "I wonder if we'll have cake in heaven."

In today's text from Luke, Jesus talks more about his favorite religious subject, the kingdom of God, present and future. In this particular scene, Jesus is less interested in what's on the table and more interested in who's at the table. Sitting near Jesus is a man who's probably sure that he already has a seat reserved at the heavenly banquet. He says to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" (v. 15). Maybe he's just restating an affirmation that would prompt other guests to nod with approval. Or maybe he's just expressing confidence about what he assumes is his safe place on God's guest list.

But then again, he's like most of the other people sitting around the table where Jesus is eating. He's probably not lacking for food or money. He has more than enough to pay the bills. His elevated status in the community is unquestioned. He's scrupulous about his religious practices, which further enhances his respectability. In short, he has plenty of this present world's blessings.

But there are things about this present world, and its arrangements, that contradict the order of things in the world to come. So Jesus does what he often does in the course of his daily life and ministry. He uses a meal as an occasion for evangelizing. Just when everyone is finishing their main course and getting ready for their cake, Jesus tells a story about a man who decided to host a dinner party.

The man's guest list features the who's who of local society. These are the movers and shakers. Most of them are well-connected individuals who live in gated communities. Going to parties is just part of the normal rhythm of their lives. That's where they socialize, network, and make deals. That's also part of the reason why it was customary for the host to issue a two-phase invitation. First, an invitation in advance, and then, at the time of the meal, another invitation to those who had accepted the first, confirming that everything is now ready. That way, invited guests could make sure that proper arrangements were being made for the banquet and that the right people would be in attendance. After all, if the right people weren't going to be there, then perhaps it was better to decline.

In Jesus' story, all the party protocols have been followed. After days of planning, multiple trips to Costco, and regular social media updates, everything is now ready. So the man sends out a group message saying that the table is set and everyone should come on. Let's get this party started.

But now, at the last minute, the guests start changing their minds. Instead of getting smiles, handshakes, and hugs, all the host gets is a litany of excuses. One by one, the guests' names start showing up on his caller ID. "I'm sorry I can't make it. I recently bought a large tract of land. My broker just called and we need to go inspect it further. Please excuse me." "I'm sorry I can't attend after all. I just purchased some oxen to improve my farm's productivity, and I really need to try them out this afternoon. Please excuse me." "My wife and I are newlyweds, so lots of other social engagements have come up. We can't make it." At least the first two asked to be excused.

But that doesn't make the host any happier. He's justifiably angry. Surprisingly, instead of scrolling through his contacts and finding others in his social circle who might accept a last-minute invitation, the man reaches out to others in the lower ranks of society. He opens his doors to the poor and the disabled. He tells his messenger, "Don't bother stopping at those upper crust neighborhoods. Go on into town. Go down to the street corner where people stand holding cardboard signs. Go over to that crack house. Go under the bridge where the homeless sleep. Go to that rundown apartment building where some of the senior adults have to choose between buying groceries or buying medicine. Tell them that the table is set, and they're invited."

By the end of the story, the man hosting the party has gone beyond inviting, to pressuring. He's so determined to have a full house that his servants are going to people who were so used to being socially ostracized that they were reluctant to say yes. So the host is virtually "compelling" them to come.

By the time all these folks show up, the table in Jesus' story looks very different from the table where he's actually sitting. But then again, that's the way it often is in Jesus' parables. They invite us to come into a different reality where the order of things in this present world gets turned upside down. Note that a bit earlier, during the same dinner, Jesus told the guests that when invited to a wedding feast, they should seek out the less prominent seats at the table, rather than rushing to grab the places of honor. "For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted" (14:11). The kingdom of God isn't a matter of taking present circumstances and arrangements, and just extending them into a future that never ends. No, the arrival of God's reign upends things. It creates personal and social change.

And change always involves reexamining and readjusting priorities. In Jesus' parable, all the people who can't make it to the man's party offer an excuse, an explanation. And each explanation shows that, from their perspective, they have something better and more important to do. They have business matters to take care of. They have family matters to attend to. Not that these kinds of issues and activities aren't significant. These aren't necessarily thin and flimsy excuses. Each one is rooted in circumstances that merit some attention. The problem is that by devoting their time and attention to these matters, they're excluding themselves from more important matters. Business and family may have been good things to do, but attending the party would have been the best thing to do.

At the end of a long letter, C. S. Lewis wrote: "When I have learnt to love God better than my earthly dearest, I shall love my earthly dearest better than I do now. Insofar as I learn to love my earthly dearest at the expense of God and instead of God, I shall be moving toward the state in which I shall not love my earthly dearest at all. When first things are put first, second things are not suppressed but increased."¹

First things first. Priorities matter. And the top priority for followers of Jesus is the kingdom of God, both as a present reality and as a future hope. Jesus isn't telling us to scrap all the activities, events, and commitments of ordinary daily life, and do nothing but pray, read our Bibles, and think about our relationship with God. True, relationship with

God and with neighbor, shaped by Scripture and animated by prayer, is first and foremost. But if that's really so, then it will show up in the agenda of our daily lives, and in the life of our church.

The problem is that God's agenda often looks less attractive than our own agendas. His plans don't seem to be as pressing as our plans. We get so busy with what we think we should be doing, and fail to recognize and participate in what God is doing. Our lips may be saying, "Yes Lord," but our calendars may be saying "No."

Journalist Hope King once wrote a piece about an app called "Got This Thing." It fills your calendar so you can pretend to be busy. King says:

Your friend is moving Saturday. Are you free to help?

The real answer is yes. The honest answer is no, because you're a human being and not a forklift. And also because you guys aren't really *that* close.

If only you had something else planned so it would be easier to say no. . .

"Got This Thing" is just that. The Web app uses your phone's location to populate your Google calendar with local stuff that's happening, pulled from public event information on sites like Eventbrite.

Click on the "Get Busy" button and in an instant—your blank schedule turns into a confetti of things to do.²

In Jesus' parable, the people who eventually showed up for the man's party probably didn't have, or even need, the "Got This Thing" app. They weren't very used to being wanted or in demand. On the contrary, they were accustomed to being overlooked or closed out. In the first century AD, most towns had a gate that was closed at night and guarded during the day. Its purpose was to protect against dangers and to keep out the undesirables.

But with the arrival of God's kingdom, things have changed. The party host doesn't get very far with those who think they have better things to do. So he sends representatives out beyond the city gates to welcome in those who had no wealth, no worldly accomplishments, and no overbooked schedules. These are the ones he wants at his table. The ones who recognize their neediness. The ones who don't have credentials that they can use to impress others. The ones who aren't trying to get to the front of the line so they can get the seats of honor. The ones who can only come with empty hands, ready to receive mercy and grace. That's really the only way that any of us can get into the party, the heavenly banquet called the reign of God.

The shape and content of our daily lives will reveal the extent to which we've said yes to God's kingdom invitation. If you've truly tasted God's heavenly meal, and have an appetite for the righteousness of the world to come, then it will be evident in the way you choose from among the alternatives put before you each day. If your relationship with God and with neighbor truly is your top priority in life, then it will be evident in the ways that you use your time, reach out to others, share your resources, and promote the gospel. And if the kingdom of God truly is our church's top priority, then it will be evident in the way we open our doors and our hearts to welcome others, to practice the hospitality of Christ, and to spread the good news of God's merciful grace toward all.

¹ <<https://www.preachingtoday.com/illustrations/2002/june/13719.html>>

² Hope King, "App Fills Your Calendar So You Can Pretend to Be Busy." CNNMoney website. June 12, 2015. Accessed March 21, 2019 <<https://money.cnn.com/2015/06/11/technology/get-fake-busy/index.html>>.