



The Great Supper

Why do so many who seem so close to the kingdom of God still go lost? This is one of the most perplexing questions to try to wrap our minds around. Of course, the Bible teaches us the doctrines that help us to understand this. There are the fundamental truths of election and reprobation. There is the total inability of man, whose evil heart will not and cannot believe in its own strength. These indeed *are* the reasons why men go lost. In the parable of the Great Supper in Luke 14, however, Christ presses home man's *responsibility* for his lost condition in a very pointed way without contradicting any of these other truths in the process.

The Context

Jesus was at the home of a Pharisee to eat bread on the Sabbath day (14:1). Jesus used the occasion to teach those who were present at the meal about offering and receiving hospitality; when others invite us, we should have a humble spirit and choose a lowly place to sit, as opposed to thinking we deserve the best place (14:7-11). We should also have a gracious attitude and welcome strangers and others who are not able to reward us in return (14:13-14).

Perhaps, because Christ's teaching went so directly against the grain of what people were used to, one man wanted to change the subject to a more "spiritual" topic. He said, "*Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*" (v.15). These words are true and wonderful in and of themselves. However, you get the definite impression from the context that the man was using this statement to escape the force of what Jesus was teaching. It allowed him and the other guests to turn away from Jesus' direct words to a less objectionable truth – or so he may have thought. We shouldn't be surprised when people use truth this way. It happens most among religious people, like those in whose company Jesus was just now. Or perhaps this man wanted to sound more pious than Jesus Himself. Maybe he thought something like this: "Let Jesus dwell on a mundane topic like hospitality. I will talk about truly worthwhile things – like the feast in the kingdom of God."

Many people undoubtedly thought this man was already part of the kingdom – and he probably thought so himself. Yet, Christ's parable made clear that belonging to the kingdom was much more than saying nice things about it. Behind lofty and pious-sounding thoughts there can be hearts that are still completely lost.

Some Non-Reasons

Christ's parable made this clear, and more importantly, *why* men go lost and *why not*. Let's first look at some of the things that are not reasons why men go lost.

1. *It is not because salvation is lacking.* This parable tells of a great supper. The Bible frequently uses the picture of a feast to symbolize the joy and provision that gospel salvation affords (e.g. Ps. 23:5-6; Isa. 25:6; Rev. 3:20). There are a number of features of this supper that illustrate particular aspects of the salvation offered in the gospel. Notice that this supper is not a potluck, to which everyone brings a dish. Instead, a certain host takes the initiative and single-handedly prepares the meal. This is exactly what God does in salvation. He is the One who initiates and provides. Moreover, notice that the supper is a great supper where all things are ready (v.17). It is not a small meal, which only a handful of people can enjoy or to which the guests need to contribute. Likewise, God's salvation is a great salvation, and it is sufficient for many. Sinners do not go lost because there is no great salvation to be found.

2. *It is not because there is no invitation.* Those who were not at this supper could not say that they weren't invited. In fact, the host seemed to have invited them *sooner* and *more specifically* than the others. He had invited them beforehand, and on the day everything was ready, he sent a servant specifically to tell them that (v.17). By the end of the parable, the invitation had been extended to basically everyone who could be found. Likewise, the gospel invitation is broad and free. Anyone who hungers and thirsts is invited to come to Jesus for spiritual food and drink.
3. *It is not because sinners are unworthy.* This gospel feast is so very different from the feasts we are used to having. No one is disqualified because of disability or distance; the second half of the parable (vv.21-24) makes that clear. No one could say, "I am lame or blind, so I am unworthy to come." In fact, no one was too out of the way or too far away to reach. No one could say, "I was hidden in the byways or hedges, so the servant passed me over." The parable makes abundantly clear that no one could have used that argument either.

The Real Reason

Some years back, a friend said something to me that I will never forget. It was simple and yet so profound. He said, "*The reason people don't do what they are supposed to do is because they want to do something else.*" It is not only true in everyday life; it is especially true spiritually. The only explanation this parable leaves us with is that men go lost because of *their indifference to the sincere and well-meant invitations of the gospel*. Christ pinpointed this indifference with one short sentence: "*They all with one consent began to make excuse*" (v.18). This is the reason the parable says that people go lost. They are ultimately indifferent to the One giving the gospel feast and to His gospel invitation. They esteem what is offered to them in the gospel *less* than the things which the world and their own sinful hearts offer them.

This indifference to the gospel takes on different forms and differing degrees of vehemence. We see this when we unpack the three excuses given in the parable. Let's look at them briefly. The first excuse runs like this: "*I have a piece of ground, and must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused*" (v. 8). This excuse is more politely worded than the others. The man asks to be excused, and seems to want the host to understand that he would have come if he hadn't been faced with this particular dilemma. Yet, beneath this politeness lies an attitude of indifference. This man makes it clear that his plot of land is more interesting to him than the feast. Why? He probably wants to look at it in order to decide what to do with it. What it might yield him in the next harvest, or what he might build on it, is probably occupying his mind.

The second man is less courteous. He simply says that he intends to try out his oxen. He clearly is so engrossed in his possessions and work that he has no time to even reason his way out of this invitation. He expects the host to understand the validity of his excuse.

And the third man's excuse is the harshest. He implies that the host has invited him at the wrong time. He has just married, and so this invitation could not possibly demand his serious consideration.

Although these three responses vary somewhat, they are united in suggesting that there is something more important than the host and fellowship with him. Men go lost because they esteem the things of this world – their possessions, their preferences, their preoccupations – of greater worth than the Lord and His gospel.

Notice that it isn't enough to know about the supper or to be invited to the supper. It isn't even enough to respond to the invitation. Nothing less than coming to the gospel supper by faith is adequate. This is what Christ is preaching through this parable. People don't go lost because there is some fault in God, or in His salvation. Neither is there a problem in the gospel or in its invitation. People cannot plead their unworthiness, or that somehow they don't measure up to the feast. The presence of the many maimed and blind at the feast is one voice accusing those who aren't there: "You wanted to do something else." Let's take heed to the admonition: "*Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief*" (Heb 4:11).

QUESTIONS

1. Why does Christ compare salvations to a supper or a feast?
2. How does God invite people to come to the gospel? Can anyone say, "I have never been truly invited?"
3. What sorts of excuses do we use, or have you heard, for not believing the gospel? What are modern-day equivalents for the oxen?
4. Why do people's excuses sometimes sound more plausible than they really are? How can they sound pious?
5. How can people be "compelled" to come in (v.23)?

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