

**"When God Throws a Party"
Luke 14:12-24**

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Dr. J. Howard Olds**

*Jesus has a table spread,
Where the saints of God are fed
He invites His chosen people,
Come and dine.*

As Jesus dined with the leaders of the Pharisees, He wound up describing a party that includes you and me. Jesus says to us today: **You are invited.** The honor of your presence is requested. You are invited to a party in the Kingdom of God. You are invited to a feast at a table that's been prepared for you. The invitation has your name on it. Even now you are being reminded to come. Everything is ready--everything is ready for you.

I know, it's a stretch, isn't it? To connect religion and rejoicing is more than some of us can imagine. When we think of church, it's *un-party*. It's more like boredom than a bash and it's more dullness than delight. The thought so permeates our culture that to think otherwise takes deliberate effort and redemptive experience.

During the first pastorate that I served, I remember frequently visiting a guy who ran a Laundromat. I would visit his Laundromat because I was trying to entice him back to the church that he had left over a fight with a relative. In that Laundromat, there was a plaque that had become the motto of his life. It said: *Everything I enjoy is either illegal, immoral, or fattening.* There are many people who join his view of life.

One of today's best selling religious books is the series, "Left Behind." Its authors ring out a warning and announce a

danger, "You better get ready or the rapture will leave you behind." A religion of fear has always enticed the fearful but there is no fear in this parable today. It is not a warning; instead, it's an invitation. It's a welcome. Jesus describes the Kingdom of God as a very great party. It is a fabulous feast--a kind of celebration that you dare not miss and all who will may come.

It was a great awakening to me to read the Bible and discover for myself that it contains much more about feasting than fasting; much more about grace than it does about guilt; much more about delight than duty. On the eve of David's coronation more than 300,000 people gathered in a celebration at Mount Hebron. When Solomon completed the temple, they threw a party that lasted for 14 days and the Bible says, "The king went home joyful and glad in his heart for all the good things that God had done."

When Jesus was born, the angels sang. During His ministry, He changed water into wine and fed over 5,000 from a poor boy's lunch. He told stories of great rejoicing when lost sheep are found and wayward boys come home. Even at His death, he instituted this meal that you and I call Holy Communion. It is a means of grace until He comes in His final victory and we feast at His heavenly banquet. What a winsome invitation has been extended to us!

So I say to you, my friends today, come to this Table not with frowning souls and forlorn faces. Let us be sorry for our sins, yes, but let us also rejoice in the hope of our salvation.

Unburdened by long histories, sometimes the children get it best. In our tradition, we invite children to participate in Communion, and every now and then, they give me gems that I take with me throughout life. I will never forget Alex, the three year old, who came to the chancel rail one day, knelt, and took Communion. He was totally unsatisfied with that

thimble-full of grape juice that he got. When he stood and started back, he flung himself down in the middle of the aisle and started flailing with both his hands and legs saying, "I want more juice; I want more juice!" Sometimes I'm like Alex and I want more juice. I want more of God's grace extended to me.

Of course, what makes a party great is the host. Isn't that always the case? I go to tons of wedding receptions and the best thing about a reception is that somebody else is paying for it. Somebody else has planned it and all I have to do is show up! Our invitation to the wedding banquet in the sky is something like that. In fact, that is the precise imagery that the New Testament uses to describe the Kingdom of God. Everything is ready and you are invited; **you** are welcomed!

A woman was diagnosed with cancer, with that terrible word, terminal, in front of it. She invited her pastor to her home one day to plan her funeral. She had some songs she wanted sung, some scripture she wanted read and a favorite Bible that she wanted placed in her casket. Then she said to her pastor, "I have a strange request to make. On the day of my funeral would you put a fork in my hand? Let me tell you why. For years, I've come to church suppers. It's been like family to me and people have surrounded me with love in those genuine fellowship events. When the meal was over, the host or hostess who came to take my plate away always told me to keep my fork. I knew that meant something better was about to come. Not Jell-O or stale cookies, but the good dessert that only people of the church know how to prepare for those great feasts we call fellowship suppers. On the day of my funeral, when people pass by my casket, they'll see the fork in my hand and ask you why. I want you to tell them that I know that something better is coming and I'm on my way to receive it." How happy are those who feast in the great Kingdom of God! You are invited to that place. The invitation is for you.

People respond to this great invitation with goofy excuses. Verse 18: *But they all alike began to make an excuse. One says I've bought a piece of property and I need to see about it.* Let me ask you a question--how often have you bought a house or a business without ever going to check it out before you bought it? Do you understand the contrast of the story? Somebody said an excuse is something we tell ourselves to get out of doing what we really don't want to do anyway.

Zig Ziglar likes to tell the story about a man who knocked on his neighbor's door and asked if he could borrow his lawn mower. The neighbor explained that he could not lend his lawn mower because all the flights had been cancelled between New York and Los Angeles. "What does that have to do with a lawn mower?" asked the man. "Absolutely nothing," said the neighbor, "but since I don't want to let you borrow my lawn mower, one excuse is as good as another." That's sort of the way it is in this list of excuses we have in this story. Sometimes I read this story and wonder, how exactly will you explain to God that you let lawn work supersede His work? Maybe you never intended to sell your soul to the company store, but have you?

I've got this problem. You see, I've bought this property. I have these 5 yoke of oxen. William Barclay says oxen in this story are like the novelties of our lives. You know how it goes--I've bought this boat, I have these tickets, I have this tee-time, I've built this cabin, my kids play soccer; all good things, pleasurable things but not eternal things.

I love the parody somebody wrote about ball games, "I'm going to stop going to ball games because they always ask for money, the other fans don't speak to me, the seats are too hard, the music is too loud, the coach never visits me, the referee makes calls I don't agree with, the games last too long, and, besides, I've got other things to do." How can we

avoid embarrassment when we choose the trivial over the eternal, pleasing ourselves over pleasing God and choosing material things over spiritual things?

"You see, I've got this problem. I can't come to the greatest banquet in all the world because I took this wife and I'm married with responsibilities. There are people to care for. The law gives me a deferment." He was right. In Deuteronomy, chapter 24:5, it says, "*When a man takes a wife, he shall not go to war or be charged with any business but shall be free to be at home for one year so he can cheer up his wife.*"

God knows our families need us, indeed they do. When you *fixate* on your family instead of *focusing* on your family, everyone will be hurt in the process. Your children are not gods. Your spouse is not your sunshine, your only sunshine. Not even your grandchild measures up to the God status. Do you understand? When we unload that stuff on the people around us, we unload burdens on them that are much too heavy to bear.

Parker Palmer has been a scholar, educator, author, and a former professor at Georgetown University. Later in his life, he became a consultant. "I had a terrible time trying to explain to my 80-year old mother what a consultant was, he said. "Finally, I explained to her that I visit churches and universities and corporations and I conduct workshops." "I see," said his mom, "you talk and they pay you for it." "That's right, mother." "Well, Parker, I like it when you talk to me too but I certainly wouldn't pay you for it."

Don't unload a burden on your family by trying to make them gods because you haven't found a god yourself to worship. It won't work in the long run of your relational lives; it just won't work.

So in the light of such goofy excuses, God makes a **grand expansion** in the inclusiveness of this story. Watch how it happens. He throws open the gates, breaks down the walls, turns up the lights and invites the least likely and the most alienated to this royal ball. God is not just looking for the healthy and the whole or the clean and the beautiful; whosoever will, may come. Remember the elite live inside the city walls and those who own nothing live outside the walls. Now the message becomes clear and dramatic. Go out into the highways and the sparse places of your city and invite them to come.

Herein lies the dramatic difference between a church and a country club. A country club exists to please you; a church exists to please God. A country club exists to serve its members; churches exist for members to serve. Country clubs grant privileges; churches expect presence. Country clubs have closed doors; churches have open doors. Country clubs are exclusive; churches are inclusive. Country clubs serve the elite; churches serve everybody. The church is the only cooperative society in the world that exists primarily for its non-members.

Furthermore, the story suggests that the Lord of the Church holds us responsible for extending the invitation. Go to the roads and the lanes and compel them to come in so that My house may be filled. *The Institute of American Church Growth* asked 10,000 people how they happened to come to church for the first time and here's what they said:

2% had a special need.

3% happened to walk in.

6% happened to like the pastor

13% liked the programs provided.

76% said a friend, relative, acquaintance or a neighbor invited me.

So how many Methodists does it take to get somebody to church? We're about to run an experiment on that this month.

The research says we, of all the denominations, are least likely to invite anybody else to church. I'm out to prove the research wrong. I ask you to join me in that task. Who are your friends? Who are your relatives? Who are your associates? Who are your neighbors? Who are your acquaintances? Who are the people at the grocery store checkout line whose only hope for finding a connection with God may be a simple, winsome, positive, non-coercing invitation that says, "Come along with me?"

*Come and dine the Master calleth,
Come and dine.
You can feast at Jesus' table all the time
He who fed the multitude,
Turned the water into wine,
To the hungry, calleth now,
Come and dine.*