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# The Gospel of Luke
# L. The Forever Feast
# Isaiah 25:6-9, Luke 14:15-24

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Centuries before, during some of the darkest days of Israel's existence, God had given the prophet Isaiah a vision of a glorious future awaiting the people of God – indeed, awaiting the people of every nation. The day would come, the prophet said, when the Lord would prepare a glorious feast for all. And not only a glorious feast, but a forever feast. For, on that day, death would be no more, sin would be no more, sorrow would be no more:

> *He will swallow up death forever;*
> *and the Lord God will wipe away tears from all faces . . .*
> *It will be said on that day,*
> *"Behold, this is our God;*
> *we have waited for him, that he might save us.*
> *This is the Lord; we have waited for him;*
> *let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation."*

A forever feast of endless joy for all the earth. This was the vision, the promise, God had given. A prophecy only waiting for the right moment for God to fulfill.

And now, centuries later, that moment at last had come – God was at last openly at work on the fulfillment of that prophecy in the form of Jesus of Nazareth, the Incarnate Son of God, the Messiah. As we have seen and as we have said, Jesus is on His way to Jerusalem – where He will fulfill the opening conditions of that prophecy coming to pass. He will die upon the cross, taking upon Himself the sins of the whole world – *"the reproach of his people he will take away from all the earth."* And then He will rise again from the dead, opening the path into eternal life: *"He will swallow up death forever."* And, along the way of His earthly journey, we have seen already the signs, through His teachings and healings and through His interactions with various Gentiles along the way, of how God is soon going to open the doors of His grace so that all the nations may enter, not just Israel. In fact, the night before His crucifixion, He will institute a new meal, celebrate a new Passover, which shall be open to all peoples – an earthly foretaste of that coming forever feast, which even now only awaits for Him to come again. God is on the march in Jesus to fulfill that great promise He has made – the forever feast of the Kingdom of God.

So why was not Israel more excited to receive Jesus when He came the first time? Well, much of Israel did rejoice in the ministry of Jesus – and many did receive Him. Out of Israel the Church is born. But not so much the religious leadership of Israel – the scribes and the Pharisees.

They viewed all that He said with deep suspicion, then with increasing hostility. Which is what our passage this morning is all about. Jesus is dining with scribes and Pharisees, in the home of a Pharisee. He has just told them that when they give a feast, they should invite not just those they deem worthy, but specifically to include those whom they consider not to be – the poor, for example, and the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In other words, Jesus is trying to get them to see the meaning of His ministry, trying to get them to grasp the basic meaning of Isaiah's vision of the forever feast – which is that none of us will deserve to be there when it comes. That we are all as undeserving of that forever feast in the eyes of God as they consider the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind to be in relation to their own little Pharisee dinner parties. The only way any of them, any of us, will sit at the table in that forever feast of the Kingdom of God – Jesus is trying to get this through to them – is by the unmerited grace of God. And that grace, even now, is meant to be changing the way we see ourselves before God, as well as how we see those we are ever tempted to dismiss as unworthy of our fellowship.

But the scribes and the Pharisees are having none of it. One of them exclaims, *"Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"* But that doesn't really mean what it seems to mean on the surface. What he is really saying – and everyone there would have understood this – what he is really saying is, *"Blessed are those who, like us of course, have earned the right to eat bread in the kingdom of God."* And the expected response to this statement – the response they were hoping to hear from Jesus, but probably already knew that they would not, was something like this: "Oh yes, that we might continue to keep the law as we have done, in such a precise and righteous fashion – so that when that great day comes, we will be counted worthy to sit with the Messiah and all the other deserving, right-minded believers like us." Everyone knew what this man meant by his exclamation, and everyone knew what the correct reply was supposed to be.

Everyone knew – including Jesus. Jesus knew exactly their thoughts, as well as the narrowness and self-deception of their self-righteous religious attitudes. And so, instead of giving the expected reply, Jesus tells a parable about a man giving a great banquet. The host invites all the fine, upstanding citizens like himself – all the right people. The good, God-fearing people – just like how the scribes and Pharisees saw themselves. Now, in that day, a dinner invitation came in two parts. First went out the general invitation: "You are invited to a dinner this Saturday." And, based on the replies to this initial invitation, the host would then start making preparations, slaughtering the appropriate number of beasts for the feast, for example. And then, on Saturday night, when everything was barbecued and ready, the second invitation would go out. A servant would be sent to all the houses of those who had accepted the first invitation, saying to them, "It's time to come, dinner is about to be served." And those who had accepted the first invitation would then drop whatever they were doing and head to the feast.

Only, in Jesus' parable, that is not what they do. One says, "Can't come, just bought a field and need to go check it out." Another says, "Can't come, just bought five yoke of oxen and need to go check them out." A third says, "Can't come, am still on my honeymoon, and – well, you know." Now the important thing to understand about each one of these excuses is that they are not only bogus, but they are also a direct insult to the host. I could go into detail about how that is so with each one – but just trust me on that. They are the equivalent of – say you're holding a dinner party. The invited guests are sipping their drinks in the living room, while you are in the

kitchen and dining room getting everything ready. Everything ready, you go into the living room and announce, "Dinner is served; come and get it!" And immediately one couple starts putting on their coats, saying, "You know what, we need to leave. Joe thinks he left the light on in the garage and we need to go check on it." Another guest says, "You know what, I need to leave also – I forgot to return an email this morning and need to go get that done." And then another couple stands up and says, "You know what, we need to leave also. As you know, we're still newlyweds and – well, you know." Not just the hurt caused to the host by leaving just as dinner is served, but also giving excuses so outrageously lame and ridiculous as to add insult to the injury.

So who is Jesus talking about here? The scribes and the Pharisees, of course. Here they have Jesus, the promised Messiah, the Son of God, preaching in their midst, healing in their midst, on His way to Jerusalem to fulfill the opening preparations for the inauguration of God's Forever Feast – and what are they doing? How are they responding? By saying "no" to Jesus. Coming up with all sorts of false and lame excuses not to accept Jesus. By actively insulting Him, even as they plot to do away with Him. This parable, so far, is obviously drawn from Jesus' own experience on earth thus far.

By what happens next in Jesus' parable is not so obvious. Instead of plotting revenge against his insulting dinner guests – which he certainly has every right under heaven and earth to do – the host sends his servant out to invite to his feast – guest who? The poor and the crippled and the blind and the lame. In other words, all those in Israel who are only too aware that they do not "deserve" to be invited to such a fine feast thrown by such a lofty host. And then, since there is still room at the table after these have come in, the host sends the servant out a second time to just bring in anyone He can find out on the highway who is willing to say yes, and bring them in to the feast. The Gentiles, in other words.

The great eternal God, Host of the Forever Feast will have His banquet. And those who think they deserve to be there, who are even now turning down God's great invitation to the Forever Feast given to them in the form of Jesus, will find themselves missing out. But those who know that it is only by the great grace of their Host that they have been given a seat at His Feast, those who have responded to that invitation of grace in Jesus with utter joy and thanksgiving – they shall celebrate with Him in the Forever Feast of the eternal Kingdom of God. Where there will be no more death, no more tears, no more divisions, no more sorrow. Only joy, and a never-ending feast such as the world has never even imagined possible.

That's what Jesus' parable is all about. That entrance into the Forever Feast of God's Kingdom comes only by accepting the invitation of God's grace to us in Jesus. If you think you have earned you way in on your own, apart from Jesus; and if you think you can look down on any of the other guests seated around you – then you're in trouble. In fact, you're going to find yourself missing out on God's Forever Feast. For the point of Jesus' parable is that, when it comes to God's Forever Feast, we are all – all of us – the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. None of us deserve to be there. But because of the surpassing graciousness of our Host, even now He is preparing a place for us at His Table.

And, again, not just for us, but for all who, like us, have found themselves met by the grace of God and accepted that invitation out of their own great need for that grace. In other words, like

Jesus said to us last week, how we see ourselves before God is meant to be reflected also in how we see others – through the eyes of God. If the only way any of us get to sit at the Forever Feast of God is by His grace, then not one of us can ever turn to any of those around us at that great table and say, "You don't deserve to be here. You are beneath me. I'm not sitting next to you." Around that table, we are all one and the same – sinners saved by the grace of God. Those so loved by God that we are now trying, as best as we can, to love others – all others – as God has first loved us. Or, as Frederick Buechner once put it, with a little alteration of my own:

> *Rich or poor, successes or failures as the world counts it, [we all, seated at that Forever Feast], are the ones who are willing to believe in miracles because [we] know it will take a miracle to fill the empty place inside [us] where grace and peace belong with grace and peace.*[1]

But, you know what, maybe the greatest thing about this parable Jesus tells about the Forever Feast of the Kingdom of God is what this parable tells us about the One who will be our Host at that great and eternal celebration. Namely, that He loves all of us undeserving dinner guests so much that He actually wants us to be His guests at His Forever Feast. That He loves us so much that He sends Jesus here into this world to invite us, in person, to His eternal banquet. That He loves us so much that He actually greatly desires forever fellowship with the likes of you and me, and with all who will be joining with us in the Forever Feast of God's Kingdom. He wants us to be right there with Him, sharing together in that forever joy and peace which shall belong to the people of God.

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[1] Frederick Buechner, Telling the Truth: The Gospel as Tragedy, Comedy & Fairy Tale (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), p. 71.