

## Were You Invited to This Party?

Luke's gospel describes a social event while Jesus was traveling around the countryside and teaching. Jesus was only one of many traveling teachers at the time. Some of them had a large following while some had only a few followers.

When these traveling teachers came to town, the local religious leaders would take a look at them. Sometimes this meant showing up in the crowd where Jesus was teaching, and sometimes he was invited to come over for dinner. Usually the host would invite some colleagues and friends, folks who would be interested in hearing what Jesus had to say up close and personal.

The host in this story is a leader of Pharisees. Sometimes Pharisees are pictured as the villains of the Gospels—enemies who argued with Jesus everywhere he went. Pharisees were actually like the Puritans of first century Israel, folks who were trying to get back to basics, to restore the purity of their faith and live it in their daily lives.

Pharisees were very concerned about how to obey the law of Moses in practice. They would debate about what one should do or not do in different situations. They liked to have advocates for both sides of an issue, so they could be sure that the final choice of what to do was thoroughly thought through. While they come across as always arguing with Jesus, they actually argued with each other most of the time as well.

### Jesus noticed social status around him

Since Jesus was the special guest at dinner, he was the center of attention. Everyone was watching him closely. Jesus joined the other guests while they were going in to dinner. He was interested in the way the guests arranged themselves and the way they chose the places they wanted to sit.

Have you ever found yourself in this kind of situation, going in to sit down for a meal with a bunch of people in a cafeteria or a big dining room? What do you do? Try to find someone you know to sit next to? See someone you want to impress and get close to them? In those days, the closer you sit to somebody important, the better your seat.

I was actually in a meeting like that once. The senior executives of the company I was working for were all seated on one side of a long table. The CEO was in the center and folks seated themselves in order of rank, the top guys toward the center, lower ranks toward the edges. At the last minute, the company president came in. He walked over to where the CEO was sitting. Everyone on that side of the CEO stood up and moved over one seat to make a space for him next to the CEO. I thought I was looking as some royal court on Masterpiece Theater.

Jesus knew how this kind of status thing worked, and he clearly didn't like it much. He said.

*When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor, for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this man your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move*

*up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all your fellow guests. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:7–11)*

In the time of Jesus, social status was visible everywhere. High status people got all the best—the best seats, the best food, the best service, the best accommodations. Low status people got the leftovers, and sometimes nothing at all. Privilege was everything, and humility was nothing anyone would want to be seen to have.

Jesus was saying something that his listeners couldn't understand, because it reversed all that they had ever experienced. We don't hear their reaction, but I imagine it was some kind of stunned silence.

Humble folks, low status folks, had no individual value in society in those days. Where they were useful—farming, serving, or whatever—they were considered interchangeable and replaceable. By breaking social distinctions, Jesus was mixing folks of different status with each other.

Without status, how could you tell who was who? You might be talking with someone beneath your dignity, or trying to work with someone far above you. How would you know how to speak to them? Should you bow to them or expect the other person to bow to you? It would be like taking an army and taking all the rank labels off of the uniforms. You wouldn't be able to tell the general from the privates, and the captains and the sergeants would look alike. Without any way to tell people apart by status, you can't include or exclude people based on their status.

### **Who should be invited for dinner?**

If that wasn't bad enough, Jesus went on to say to the one who had invited him,

*When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or relatives, or your rich neighbors; if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed. Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous. (Luke 14:12–14)*

Why would anyone want to invite the poor, crippled, lame, and blind to a party? Would you look forward to their company? Would you be able to get them to do you some favors? Could you depend on them to have good table manners, and not make a mess of your dining room? This was unheard of.

In the time of Jesus, friendship had clearer expectations than it does today. A social relationship was a social contract, not written down but understood by everybody. If someone gave you an expensive present, you owed that person a present just as expensive. If you were invited to a steak dinner, repaying your host with an invitation to hot dogs wouldn't pay your obligation. You'd need to repay with the same kind and level of meal that you received.

If you invited friends or relatives or rich neighbors, you were assured of having matching invitations coming back to you. Inviting folks who couldn't repay your hospitality made no sense at all to most of those who were listening to Jesus.

Only one of the guests seemed to get it. One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him,

*Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God. (Luke 14:15)*

This may seem obvious to us, but Jesus knew how few would appreciate what they were really being invited to share.

### **How does it feel to have your invitation ignored?**

I don't know about you, but I don't invite guests to my house very often. To begin with, I'm not a very good cook. Actually, I'm a really terrible cook, so folks who come to my place for dinner are taking a significant risk.

But when I've done my best—cleaned the house, thought through the menu, followed the recipes as best I could, and put the best plates on the table—there's still that terrible moment, just before the guests arrive, when everything is ready and I'm suddenly afraid that no one will show up.

This is exactly what happened to another man Jesus talked about. Jesus said

*A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' 'But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' 'Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' 'Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' 'The servant came back and reported this to his master. (Luke 14:16–21)*

We know that the host who is giving the dinner in this story represents God, the One who will give the party at the end of time that celebrates the resurrection of the righteous. He begins by inviting all the A list guests—the rich, the famous, the successful, the admired. But it turns out that those high-profile guests are too busy with their impressive lives to bother showing up for the dinner. The busyness of their important engagements means more to them than the invitation to the celebration.

How would you feel if you were this host, with all the food ready and no one to enjoy it? At first I'd be embarrassed, sure that I'd made some mistake, like getting the date wrong. When I figured out that those invited just didn't care enough to come, I'd get mad, just like the host in the story.

He's invited folks he thought were his friends. He's just received a big load of disrespect—his invitation is worth less than a walk in the fields or working with some oxen. I actually can understand the newly-weds making a priority of their honeymoon, but the other excuses are pretty pathetic. He's been insulted very publicly.

As Jesus told it, the host gets mad at the ungrateful folks who won't take the time to enjoy his hospitality. He still wants to have a big party, and he doesn't want to party alone. Who can he invite at the last minute? Jesus said,

*Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' ' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' 'Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.' (Luke 14:21–24)*

The slave brought in everyone he could find who was really in need of a meal, but there was still more food to go around. On his second trip I hope he knocked on every door, because I

would probably have been sitting in a corner somewhere, just wishing someone would invite me. I'd probably even have said, "No, not me, I don't have a nice enough outfit" when the slave asked the first time. When he showed up again and made me get up and come as I was, I would have gone along.

Would I have had a good time at the party? You bet. Would it have been the best fun I had all year? Probably. Would I have felt I deserved to be invited to the next one? Not a chance. I could never earn the status that gets an invitation to the kind of parties you see in People magazine.

### **Do you want to respond to your own invitation?**

And this brings us to the point of all of these stories. God doesn't use the same standards that society does, when it comes to handing out invitations and blessings. Whether it's healing our sickness, giving us a good seat at the table, doing favors for those who can't pay back, or choosing guests for a party, God's ways are not our ways.

One of my teachers, Haddon Robinson, once told the story of a dream he had. In the dream, he'd died and was waiting at the gates of heaven, while the angel looked him up in the book of life. When the angel started to open the gate, he asked if he was invited in because he was one of Time Magazine's ten best preachers in the U.S.

"No," said the angel. "Do you remember the time after a service, when you saw a woman crying all alone in the empty church? You went over to talk with her and comfort her. That's the kind of action that got you in here." Haddon Robinson was one of those rare people who had both—fame and status, and true humility and kindness. We learn from Jesus which of those really matters most.

This brings us to the title of this article, Are You Invited? I think it's a really good question. Who is invited? Who's invited to dinner in the Kingdom of God? It's not the ones who are sure they deserve it. It's not the ones who are so busy being themselves that they don't listen for the invitation. This is for all those who can hear the invitation, and who are willing to respond to it. We're all invited, whoever we've been, whatever challenges we've faced, and whatever faults and virtues we have. We're all invited to share in the love that God offers us through Jesus.

We've all heard Jesus say, "*I stand at the door and knock.*" It wasn't until I started working with this scripture that I started to think about how it might feel to be on the other side, giving this invitation. I know I've spent some time standing outside of a door and knocking, hearing people inside having a good time, too busy to come to the door. That was a very sad and lonely place to be, feeling rejected by the very people I wanted to be with.

I know that Jesus is patient and that God's love never runs out. But in all that time before I took the invitation seriously, I never thought about the rejection and disrespect I was showing for the one who made it.

If you've accepted the invitation and made Jesus a part of your life, this is a good time to thank God for the blessings you've received. If you've heard the invitation, no matter how many times, but thought you didn't really deserve it, think again. If you heard the invitation and said "I'll get back to you later," make that later today. The invitation really is for you, too.

Are you invited? Absolutely everyone is invited, rich and poor, popular and unpopular, good-looking, ugly, and everyone in between. But most important, you're invited. Every one of

us is invited to be part of the family of Jesus, to be his brothers and sisters, to be welcome in his Father's house and at his Father's table. I hope we can all hear and accept his invitation.