

Sunday August 21<sup>st</sup>, 2022

Luke 14:15-24  
“I Cannot Come”

I am sure that this situation has happened to all of us at one time or another. Either by mail, email, or by phone: you receive an invitation to a social gathering. It could be a big event like a wedding, or simply an intimate evening with a few friends. Maybe we really enjoy such invitations, but occasionally, let us be honest, you get an invitation you really do not want, or what simply has no interest to you.

Reading the invite, or hearing in on the phone, your brain goes into over drive to seek any legitimate, or legitimate sounding excuse to turn the invitation down. The one fly in the ointment is that if you are married, or have a significant other, your partner maybe thrilled to get the invite, but perhaps you are not. You voice your hesitancy, and they say something like, “O come on. It will be fun.” Sometimes it is fun, but often your initial instincts are correct.

But if you really do not want to go, you must come up with a good excuse. And many of the regular ones are getting so cliché, people see right through them. Kind of like a child who claims a dog ate their homework. Well, I found a few possible excuses that I had never heard before, but they may be helpful to you in the future. How about these ones?

1. My brother-in-law's, friend's, father's, grandmother's, sister's, aunt's, turtle died, and yes, it was a tragic death. I simply cannot go into the details!
2. I need to spend some serious time coming up with a good excuse as to why I do not want to do anything tonight.
3. I do not usually go out on days that end with the letter "y". Sorry, personal preference.
4. Unfortunately, there is a disturbance in the force, and it is not with me right now. I never go anywhere without the force—Skywalker advises strongly against it.
5. My plot to take over the presidency of the book club is thickening, and I must stay home to make sure everything is working out smoothly.
6. I need to double-check the expiration date on my milk. You can never be too sure. And I love my Cheerios in the morning!
7. Sorry, but I cannot do anything for the next few hours. I am allowing my food to digest. You can never play it too safe!
8. I do not like to leave my comfort zone.
9. I left my body in my other clothes, and those clothes are currently in the washer.
10. The ceiling tiles in my living room need to be recounted. A friend and I were debating the number last night, and I must prove that I am right!
11. I am trying to be less popular. Someone has got to do it!

Any of those help you? I have noticed something of late; Jesus never seems to turn down a dinner invitation. Have you noticed that? In one incidence, Jesus even invites himself to dinner; at Zachaeus’ house. The gospels show Jesus eating with the religious elite, that is Pharisees and such, and also eating with what are described by his contemporaries as “sinners.” There is always in the gospels a contrast revealed between the reception Jesus receives at a “sinners” house, like Zachaeus, and what happens at a Pharisee’s house.

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Luke 14:1-24 is a recounting of a dinner that Jesus attended at the home of a leading Pharisee. Dinner parties in most societies, are significant events, and this one is no exception. The invitations are usually extended to the guests with generosity and grace. Like our dinners with family and friends, the food is really secondary to the conversation, among those around the table. News, jokes, anecdotes, and so forth: are offered alongside the entre and side dishes.

There are even holidays that would not seem complete without some sort of gathering for food; like Christmas or a birthday.

This rich environment for conversation, and mutual appreciation, was what was expected as Jesus shows up for the dinner party. But Jesus knew going into this dinner, that the Pharisees had laid a trap for Jesus. The Pharisee host had used a much-loved social custom to try and ruin Jesus; who by this point had been growing in influence and popularity. The trap is sprung in verse 2, when a man with dropsy (a swelling of the body) was put before Jesus.

We do not know exactly what his medical issue was, but it is safe to say, it was awful. This poor man, who was clearly suffering terribly, was not an honoured guest at the party. In normal circumstances, he would never have been invited. The man was a prop. This dinner party was on the Sabbath, in which the law said that no work was to be done. Jesus saw right through the plot and simply asked, "Is it lawful to cure people on the sabbath, or not?" So, Jesus then heals the man and sends him on his way. Indicating clearly, he was not a guest of the pharisee.

How blatantly hypocritical this scene is. If the pharisee's own child, or ox, fell into a well, would he not work immediately to pull it out, whether it was the sabbath or not? Jesus is not yet done with his lessons, that may have come right out of this very dinner party. He says things like; do not take the seat of honour when you arrive, lest you be told to move for someone else more important and be humiliated. Wait to be invited to move up. If you exalt yourself, you will be humbled.

Also, when you give a dinner party, do not invite your friends or family who will feel obligated to return the favour. Instead invite those who are poor, lame, or sick. People who rarely receive generosity or inclusion; like the man with the dropsy. They will not be able to return the favour but you will be repaid after the resurrection of the righteous.

I actually heard a little story about a minister who preached on this very passage, and urged his flock to make a real effort to invite the poor and outcast in for a meal. That week, he and his wife received several dinner invitations. All of this is a prelude to the parable Jesus is about to tell. It is prompted by what has gone on before, and is a response to a guest at the party who said to Jesus "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God!"

Jesus does not disagree with his declaration, but instead, gives a parable directed at those seated at this dinner party, and in turn, anyone of us who refuses to partake of the bounty of God's goodness poured out for us. The parable may be familiar to a lot of us, and it was a familiar scene for those listening to Jesus. In the Matthew version of this story, it is a wedding feast, but here it is simply a "great dinner".

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The dinner is ready, and with some urgency the slave of the host goes out to invite people to come. What is missed often, when looking at this parable, is that the first people approached to come to the dinner were people of some means. They themselves were not impoverished. The urgency with the invitation was such that it was like saying, “Come now. Drop everything!

All is ready.” The words “great dinner” may indicate that this feast was full of the finest foods, and choicest wines. This dinner was the best of the best. No cost was spared in its preparation. It was a great honour to be invited. The wisest course of action, the one most of Jesus’ listeners would have opted for, was to accept the invitation and head to the dinner.

Instead, what happens? The response of the invitees was insulting to the host. In Jesus’ day it was unheard of to respond as those in the parable did. In an effort to not appear blunt, those invited make excuses as to why they cannot come. The excuses are deliberately supposed to be seen as lame, or ridiculous. Scratch the surface, and you see the illogical nature of the excuses. Those who made excuses, simply did not want to come, and social customs led to excuses.

Let us see how ridiculous these excuses are. The first person says he bought a piece of land and needed to go see it. Lame! I mean, who buys a piece of land without seeing it? The second person says that they had just gotten married, and cannot come. How is that an excuse? Are you all celebrated out? How long ago was this marriage undertaken? Finally, a man says he bought five yokes of oxen, and he needed to go try them out.

Five yokes of oxen show richness of resources. The one who bought the oxen would likely never handle them himself. He would have servants to plow. All three of them, simply did not want to come. They preferred to stay home, and attend to trivial matters or nothing at all, rather than put on their nicest robes and go and eat and be merry. The slave returns and reports the excuses he has heard.

The host’s reaction is exactly how we would feel, if we invited people to come to a dinner and they all made excuses not to come. In our culture, almost every invitational dinner, like a wedding banquet, has people who say they are going to come, but they do not show up, often with no explanation. Since those dinners are usually charged by the plate, the host can be out significant money.

The host in the parable is angry, insulted, and frustrated that his generosity and hospitality is so easily refused. What to do? The food is already prepared. If no one eats it, it will spoil. So, the host does something that would have surprised his listeners. He does not want this resource to go to waste. Neither would we. If we had leftover food in such abundance, we might seek out a soup kitchen, or call “Church Out Serving” to come and pick it up and distribute it.

This happens a great deal in many places. Cobb bakery in Toronto, only sells freshly made bread. Anything it doesn’t sell must be discarded. So, as a company, they offer their left-over loaves to shelters and food banks. This seems so much better than the fact that trailer loads of food go to landfills every day in this country. The host could have done something similar. He could have had his servants pack it all up and distribute it to the poor. We would likely have applauded his efforts. But this is not what he does.

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Instead, he tells his servant to go out to the streets and lanes, where the poor live or hang out. Find those who have no resources of their own, and who rely on the generosity of others. But don't just give them some food; invite them to come and join the feast.

Remember the man with dropsy? Jesus' listeners would have grimaced at the idea of a rich powerful person, not only allowing, but actively inviting in the poor, lame, and blind folks to enjoy the banquet. How many folks in this category do you think turned down such an invitation? I bet no one did. I suspect that as soon word got around that free food, and lots of it, were available to anyone who came, they'd come.

No one would be turned away. No matter how difficult your life is right now or in the past, you can come. No matter what your life's circumstance are, you can come. Even if you do not have nice clothes to wear, come anyway. Come and partake, not in the leftovers, which was their normal allotment, but the first serving. Food that was freshly prepared, and in abundance. It is reported that many came in response to the invitation, but still the servant reported that there was still room at the table.

The host sent out his servant again, charging him to find every soul that wanted to come. Turn over every leaf to find them. Knock on every door. If it were today, we might put up posters or place adds on the radio, or run a social media campaign. Everyone was invited. No one would be turned away, and still there was room. The only thing an invitee was required to do with the invitation, was accept it and come.

We might be tempted to claim we get the meaning in this parable. That God gives us an invitation to the vast goodness of his grace. It is available to anyone, regardless of life's circumstance. But let us not try and push the parable too far. Beyond what Jesus intended. Let his parable rest in us and let its seed germinate. Remember, the parable arises out of the statement one of the guests blurted out at the dinner.

"Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the Kingdom of God." No argument from Jesus. But what is the bread? Is it not Jesus who said of himself that he was the "bread of life"? Eat of this bread and you will never grow hungry again. Jesus has given those around that dinner table an invitation to his banquet. The religious authorities were the ones who had all the resources to see and accept the invitation, but they made excuses.

"He eats with sinners. He heals on the sabbath. His is simply the son of a carpenter." Time and time again, Jesus offers the religious leaders an invitation to believe in him, to partake in the bread he is offering, but they will have no part of it. So, what does Jesus do? Jesus serves the Lord of the feast, so he goes out to people like Zachaeus, lepers, the lame, and the blind. Those rejected by the establishment, and offers them a seat at the table. To partake in him.

And how they relished this invitation. They came in droves. Tired of being excluded from hope and grace by religious authority and laws, they want so much to come. "This is my body broken for you". It's up to us to decided to take it, but we are never given permission to try and exclude others, who we might feel do not measure up.

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If we are willing to respond to the God's invitation to join in his banquet, then we must be prepared to rub shoulders with whoever else my come. And let's reassure all of you that it's not like we are going to be left out. There is still room. Lots of it.

One of the main hindrances that will keep us from having dinner with Jesus is that we are so full of our own goodness that we won't acknowledge our need for His banquet. Our pride will make us say, "I'll bring the salad and dessert."

But the Lord says, "No, I provide it all. You just come." Imagine a multimillionaire who sends his servant out in his limousine to the poorest section of town. The servant tells the chauffeur to stop by a street person in ragged clothes. He gets out and asks, "Would you like to come to a feast at my master's mansion? We'll take you. Please, get in."

The guy on the street eyes the servant warily and asks, "What's the catch?" "There's no catch; my master is a kind and generous man. He has prepared a meal like you wouldn't believe. Won't you come?" "I haven't had a bath in days. I haven't washed my clothes in weeks, and these rags are all I own. I would feel out of place at a mansion." "There will be many others there just like you. The food is on the table and the dinner is about to begin. Just come as you are."

It sounds too good to be true, doesn't it? It is good, but it's also true; according to Jesus. The main catch is, you have to see and admit that you are that needy street person. Spiritually, we have nothing to commend ourselves to God. Salvation is not based on anything in us. In fact, it is offered freely *in spite of* us. It is all of God's free grace, not at all of our works, lest anyone should boast.

Jesus is saying to each person, no matter how great your sins, "Come, for I have prepared *everything* for you to be saved from God's judgment and to dine with Me for all eternity." Will we say, "Yes, Lord. I'll come!"