

EXPOSITORY AND PRACTICAL STUDIES ON THE LIFE OF CHRIST

XXVIII. THE PARABLE OF THE GREAT SUPPER

LUKE 14:15-24¹

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

1. Is this parable identical with Matt. 22:1-14, commonly called the parable of the Wedding Garment? This question is still answered both affirmatively and negatively. But while the parabolic germ is the same in both, the occasions of utterance and the applications are plainly different. In the one case Christ uses it to meet the attempt to arrest him, by telling of rebels put to death for insulting and killing the king's messengers. In the other it answers a pious remark showing how little the privileged really care for the good things they pretend to prize. Bleek thinks Matthew has combined two parabolic utterances. But Luke presents a single idea consistently carried out.

2. Has Luke added to the Lord's teaching the distinction between two classes of invited, those within and those without the city; the Jew and gentile, as Weizsäcker claims? But the same teaching has appeared in 13:28-30, also reported in Matthew. The same idea is taught in Matt. 24:14 and in John 10:16. It cannot have originated with Luke.

II. EXPOSITION

A guest with the best intentions tried to break the awkward silence following the rebuke of the guests and host, by a perfectly proper pious remark. But he rubbed the point off the Master's lesson of sharp personal application by his vague generality. Besides, it also savored of cant. While true upon some lips, it was not upon the tongue of a solemn trifler. Hence, the tactful teacher is ready with a parable.

The motive is twofold. Immediately it flays false, self-deceiving piety. More distantly it meets the general objection of the hearers to the graciousness of his ministry and message. The select invitation list of his host affords him an admirable foil for the free grace of his own inviting. And the eagerness of his table-companions to get to the feast throws into strong relief the unnatural reluctance of the invited in the parable.

The double invitation may or may not be a custom of wealthy Jews. It finely serves the purpose of the parable in robbing the invited

¹ International Sunday-School Lesson for August 5, 1906.

of the excuse of forgetfulness and indicating the joyous eagerness of the master of the house. Plummer quotes Pliny to prove the reminding *vocator* an ancient custom. Bruce thinks the double invitation was not customary.

The excuses are all pretexts. The reason for the declination is invariably indifference. The story is so cleverly told that we feel the *raconteur's* astonishment, not that the invited should separately come into agreement, but that that agreement should be to beg to be excused. We had expected a general and hearty acceptance. They are men who more or less appreciate the honor done them and want to keep in the good graces of the host, while actually feeling little desire for his company or his kindness. Notified of the feast, they might have arranged their engagements or have at once informed him, that they would not attend. Instead, they permitted him to count on their presence.

The three excuse-makers are but samples like the three in the parable of the Pounds (19:16-21). With the first, "necessity" is plainly an exaggeration. The second, not feeling as strongly the need of placating the host, simply announces his intention of doing something else. Both may "drop in" later. But the host has something to say about that in vs. 24. The third in his reply, "I am not able," is most abrupt and has no idea but that his excuse is unanswerable.

While valueless as excuses, they are suggestive as reasons for absence from the divine feast. They all agree in their absorbing preoccupation with other things.

The anger of the host is fully explained by the thinly veiled indifference of his supposed friends. He will offer his bounties to the appreciative. He sends to the city spaces where the comfortless and homeless loiter. Unsatisfied with the overflow of the crowded tenements and the swarming lodging-houses, he sends to the country for the tramps and unfortunates, wearily walking the highways or crouching from view under the heavy hedges.

It is a parable of grace. The exigencies of parable-telling make the second invitation to appear an after-thought. But, in fact, Christ from the beginning included sinners in his invitation. He got the name of "Friend of sinners" and this was one reason why the Pharisees objected to him. Later the Jew objected to Paul because he included the gentile. Grace speaks loudly in "yet there is room," "that my house may be filled," and "compel them to come in."

The speaker in the last verse has been called in question. Is he Jesus addressing the Pharisees about the table, or the master of the house address-

ing his plural "you" to all the excuse-makers imagined to be present? But is it impossible to suppose that the Lord chose one sentence, admirably fitted to be a conclusion of his parable, and at the same time a plain, though unanswerable, application to his hearers?

III. SUGGESTED SERMON: THE DIVINE INSTITUTION

1. Character is tested, not by pious words, but by the actual disposition toward the present invitation of the kingdom of God.
2. Excuses vainly attempt to cover indifference, for they deceive no one but the maker.
3. God finds men preoccupied with the pleasures of proprietorship, so engrossed in their own pursuits as not to know he has any claims on their time, resenting his invitation as inopportune just as they are beginning a domestic happiness in which they expect to be selfishly absorbed.
4. Any man, wretched or abandoned, may be sure that God invites him to his abundant feast.

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XXIX THE MERCIFUL FATHER

LUKE 15:11-32²

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

This parable is distinctly in keeping with the broad character of the gospel of Luke. Taken with the two which precede, it smothers into silence the pharisaic criticism: "This man receiveth sinners and eateth with them." The search for the lost sheep and the lost coin shows God's loving estimate of "sinners," and his consequent heroic effort to restore them to himself. This parable retains the former thought, and completes it by introducing the experience and effort necessary on the part of the sinner who becomes truly restored to God. If the tracing of this experience is the main concern, then the story is rightly named the parable of the Prodigal Son; but if the aim is the justification of Christ's intercourse with publicans and sinners by an exhibition of the parental love of God himself, then perhaps this story should be called the parable of the Merciful Father. The deduction which substitutes the Jew for the elder and the gentile for the younger son *may* also be intended by the author.

² International Sunday-School Lesson for August 12, 1906.

II. EXPOSITION

The father, reaching the age of retirement, was, according to ancient custom, about to make over his property to his two sons. Such a will became operative within the life-time of the testator. According to Deut. 21:17, the younger son would receive one-third of the estate. With unseemly urgency he demands his rights, quits home restraints and limitations post-haste, leaves no invested reserve behind, and in the convenient oblivion of the far country, and with the wealth the hard-earned value of which he cannot appreciate, he makes the rapid and dazzling descent of the spendthrift. How splendidly impetuous is his career; how truly naïve the coincidence of his penury and the "mighty famine"!

Hot-headed he strikes out to shift for himself. Penniless, forlorn, and famished, he attaches himself to a heathen as a servant of low rank and in work unspeakably repulsive to a Jew. He does not get even enough to eat. They will not waste on this menial and half-starved stranger even the carob pods with which they fatten the swine. But at length there comes an abrupt end to his insanity. Sharp physical need, and the vision, seen as never before, of his father's bounty over against this foreigner's lack of mercy, break the spell of his self-will, reveal his horrible impiety, and beget therewith a strong, homeward purpose, a contrite spirit, and the eloquent words of full repentance. He returns, without excuse and without presumption, to accept as a favor the position of a servant. The "I will arise" and the "he arose" show a power of decision and prompt action for good similar to that which he exercised in leaving home.

The father's reception, contrasted with that of the elder brother, forms the pertinent application and conclusion of the story. His father's vision ("his *own* father," the Greek has it), how gloriously clear and eager! That feeling in his heart, the consequent impulsive hurry, the embrace, the tenderly repeated kisses—and all this before one word escapes the lips that are dumb with shame. Did the request, "Make me as one of thy hired servants," reach the father's ear; or was it smothered as he pressed the boy's head against his bosom; or was it drowned in that quick order to the slave to invest him in the best robe without delay?³ The command as to robe and ring and shoes was not a bit of practical philanthropy to supply immediate bodily needs, but primarily as an act of mercy to assure the wanderer of his reinstatement as a son in the household. Moreover, with all due ceremony that particular fatted calf which they have been reserving will be used on this great and joyous

³ The best manuscripts insert the confession in full, as in vss. 18, 19.

occasion, and nothing will be spared to assure this sinner, who to the father had been as good as dead and actually lost, that he is welcomed home and welcomed as a son.

“This,” said Jesus to the Pharisees, “is the attitude of God toward sinners such as you rebuke me for befriending; and your attitude toward them is as that of the elder brother.” In their grudging, servile, and mercenary spirit, they despised sinners and through legalism reminded God of his indebtedness to them. Love played no part. It was all a business transaction and its rewards strictly in that realm.⁴ Now appears the perfection of the Father’s mercy and an indication of Christ’s attitude toward the Pharisees themselves—mercy, but not for the prodigal alone. Does he not come out and entreat the elder brother, does he not frankly confess his position of privilege and importance?⁵ Thus the Father’s true character is revealed, and Christ’s intercourse with publicans and sinners is justified.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR SERMON

Feel and tell the story. Then these truths may bear emphasis:

1. However wayward he may be, man is God’s son. Hence his sin is the more awful and his hope the more reasonable; for repentance will bring him from abnormality and insanity into his normal and sane life.

2. Forgiveness in God is not induced by man’s repentance. Repentance is the necessary act by which the sinner accepts divine forgiveness.

Conclusion: Implore men to come into a normal, God-conscious, God-governed life, and by a definite act of will to renounce all that means separation, dissatisfaction, and defeat.

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XXX. THE JUDGE, THE PHARISEE, AND THE PUBLICAN

LUKE 18:1-15⁶

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Of the two parables recorded in this lesson it is probable that the first is presented by Luke in its true historical setting. In Luke 17:23-26 Jesus describes his second coming, and this parable is a continuation of that discourse and takes up the thought expressed in 17:22. They are not to lose courage in these days of delay, but are to pray constantly for deliverance, with the assurance that their prayer will be answered.

⁴ See Matt. 6:2 and 21:31.

⁵ See Matt. 23:1-3a.

⁶ International Sunday-School Lesson for August 19, 1906.

The other parable herein recorded (Luke 18:9-15) was probably spoken at another time and to a different audience, but is grouped here, since it deals also with the subject of prayer.

II. EXPOSITION

a) The parable of the Unjust Judge. The "judge" is probably a gentile official, and is pictured as an unscrupulous and irresponsible oriental tyrant, who is restrained neither by the fear of God nor by the moral sentiments of his fellow-men. The "widow" is to the eastern mind a type of weakness. She is destitute, friendless, and despised. She has neither the influence to compel an unjust judge to deliver a righteous decision, nor has she the money with which to buy a favorable verdict. But she is persistent; and she "kept coming," and he "continued refusing," until at last the judge yielded, fearing that her "continual coming would wear him out." The word translated "to wear out" means literally "to bruise," "to hit under the eye," and some have given it this meaning here; that is, that the judge feared that the widow in her desperation would finally assault him. But it is plain that it was just the continual annoyance of her coming that the judge dreaded.

Jesus applies the parable as follows: If an unjust judge yielded to the repeated petition of a friendless and unknown widow, how much more will a righteous God answer the prayers of his own elect which are presented unceasingly to him, even though he may defer his manifestation of sympathy for a time. Therefore the disciples are to be constant in prayer in the days of tribulation and waiting for the coming of the Son of man. In this way the parable points out the true attitude of mind in which every child of God should endure the afflictions of life.

b) The parable of the Pharisee and the Publican. The Pharisee is self-complacent, and his prayer is merely self-congratulation. He has no sins of commission, and his worth in this regard is made correspondingly greater by his depreciation of all other men. He is in a class by himself. Moreover, God is placed under obligation to him because he has actually exceeded the demands of the law. In the picture of the publican we have, in the whole attitude of body and mind, humility and contrition. He, too, places himself apart from other men, for he is "*the* sinner." He trusts entirely in the mercy of God.

The primary aim of Jesus in this parable is to enable that class of men represented by the Pharisee to see themselves in their true nature, as God sees them. And, in order to do this, he presents one of their number in the attitude of secret or silent prayer; that is, as he speaks

out his real thoughts to God. When so presented it is not difficult to see how reprehensible is the real spirit of his life. At the same time, this parable has a word of encouragement for that other class of men of which the publican is a type. God is more pleased with the humble prayer of the despised publican than with the self-satisfied congratulations of the proud Pharisee.

III. SUGGESTIONS FOR A SERMON: PRAYER

1. True prayer arises in a soul (*a*) that has a sense of need; the feeling of human weakness may arise out of the sorrows, disappointments, or afflictions of life, or from a consciousness of moral failure; (*b*) that has had a vision of God or felt his presence in life; otherwise the sense of human weakness would bring despair, but never the attitude of prayer. Moreover, only a vision of God can lead a soul to a consciousness of sin, or a sense of moral failure, and inspire the prayer of the Publican.

2. The prayer-life in a soul fruits in (*a*) patience; it is through prayer that inward peace is to be attained; prayer brings self-control, the power to endure with patience and hope the manifold experiences of life; (*b*) charity; the man who has experienced in his poor life the helping hand of God will place a humble estimate upon himself, and possess a large sympathy and a noble charity for others.

3. True prayer is importunate. Greatly desiring to be heard and to be assured of God's blessing, the earnest humble soul prays fervently and with a holy boldness.

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XXXI. THE RICH YOUNG RULER

MARK 10:17-31⁷

I. CRITICAL QUESTIONS

Luke gives this man the title *ἄρχων* "ruler" (Luke 18:18), which probably means that he was the president of the synagogue. This indicates that he enjoyed the confidence of the community, as this was an important office (Luke 13:14; Acts 13:15). Matthew tells us that he was young (Matt. 19:20); all the synoptics tell us that he was rich. For a man in his position to go to Jesus for help was hard at any time (John 3:2; 7:48), but especially now when the Jewish leaders had determined to kill Jesus.

⁷ International Sunday-School Lesson for August 26, 1906.

II. EXPOSITION

Vs. 17, "ran": His haste suggests that it had cost him a struggle to do it. He comes as if he had deferred it until he could do so no longer. "Kneeled": an oriental mode of salutation, indicating that he acknowledged Jesus as his superior. Vs. 18, "Why callest thou me good": Jesus did not recall having ever seen him, and wondered how he came to have such faith in him. "None is good save one, even God": Jesus did not mean to affirm his sinfulness, but sought in this way to turn the young man's thought away from him as the teacher of goodness to God as the giver of it. Until he knew Jesus as the revealer of God's goodness, it was necessary for his thoughts to be directed to God as the source of it. Vs. 19, "Thou knowest the commandments": eternal life can be had only by such as keep God's commandments (John 14:21,23). "Do not kill," etc.: Jesus enumerates the commands that relate to men's duties to men. There was no need to tell a ruler to keep the commandments which relate to our duties to God. These were scrupulously obeyed, while the former were neglected (Mark 7:10-13; Matt. 23:23). Vs. 20, "observed from my youth": We cannot doubt his sincerity, though we need not believe that his life had always been sinless. Vs. 21, "loved him": Jesus loved this clean-lived, devout young man. He loves such more than he loves the dissolute, the irreverent, and the rude, though he seeks to save all. Vs. 22, "One thing thou lackest": the unselfish spirit. "Go sell," etc.: Jesus called upon him to make a sacrifice. Being a rich man his religion had not cost him any self-denial, and therefore it had brought him no joy. One gets out of his religion what he puts into it in self-denial. To be a great saint and to have great joy, one has to make great sacrifices. "Treasure in heaven": Heaven and its treasures were very real to Jesus, and he never hesitated to make use of them as a motive for righteousness. He repeatedly enforced his appeals for higher living by pointing out the effect it would have on one's welfare in the life after death (Matt. 18:15-35; Luke 16:9, 10-12; 18:29; 21:36). "Follow me": The young man was to accompany Jesus, and be trained to become a co-worker with Peter and John and the rest of the Twelve. This would involve fellowship with sinners and sufferers, and the hostility of the Jewish leaders. Vs. 22, "he went away sorrowful." He loved his riches too well, and was afraid of the sacrifice required.

It may be that the command to "sell," etc., like that to the Samaritan woman to call her husband (John 4:16), was intended to reveal to the young man his weakness, and by pricking the bubble of his self-righteousness, to prepare him to seek salvation as a penitent. In that case,

had it succeeded, the actual carrying-out of the command would have been unnecessary.

Vs. 23, "How hardly," etc.: this is to be literally accepted. Vs. 24, the amazement of the disciples indicates that Jesus did not generally ask of his followers the abandonment of all riches. Joseph of Arimathea, the women of Galilee (Luke 8:2,3), the family at Bethany (Luke 10:38-42), and Zacchæus (Luke 19:8, 9), all had more or less riches. The words "them that trust in riches," found neither in Matthew nor Luke, probably do not belong here. Such an explanation by Jesus of his meaning would have scarcely left room for the exceeding surprise of the disciples (vs. 26). Vs. 25, "a needle's eye": a forcible and impressive hyperbole, not to be taken literally.

III. SUGGESTED TEACHINGS: THERE ARE BETTER THINGS THAN MONEY

1. The possession of great riches does not insure one's happiness, nor do culture, position, and the respect of men. Happiness depends on what we are, not on what we have.

2. One cannot enjoy his religion unless he makes a sacrifice for it, which for a rich man is difficult. It is hard for him to give so much as really to feel it.

3. The possession of great riches is apt to be a hindrance to entering the kingdom of heaven. Rich men are prone to trust in their riches and lose sight of their need of God.

4. What we shall have in heaven depends on what we give away here, not in money only, but by implication in anything that helps people to be happier and better.

5. While the story teaches that riches are dangerous, and insufficient to make one happy, it does not teach that riches should be despised. Honest accumulation is proper, yet we should not worry if we have not the opportunity for it.

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