**Jews, Gentiles and a Banquet**

What kind of people will be in heaven? Seems like a great question, don’t you think. I hope the answer is, “People like me.” In 1986, USA Today did a poll that said 72% of Americans who believe in heaven, believed their chances of getting there are good to excellent, but only 60% believed their friends will be there. Either they didn’t have a very high opinion of their friends or they thought unsaved people are more fun to hang out with. Well, today, we’re going to see who Jesus says the people going there look like.

Last week we started a series called “Jesus’ Bible” by saying that you can’t understand Jesus if you don’t understand the Old Testament. Jesus wasn’t a made-up character in an imaginary world. He was God who became a real-life first century Jew in the Roman Empire. When we remove him from that context, we typically end up with a Jesus who looks us, believes what we believe, and agrees with our favorite causes.

But when we understand Jesus in his context and we understand what Jesus believed and what Jesus read in his Bible—the Old Testament, we’re better able to see the Jesus of Scripture, rather than the Jesus we want to see.

Sometimes Jesus taught directly from the Old Testament, sometimes he fulfilled prophecy from it, and today we’re going to look at a scene and a parable that paints a troubling picture of God unless you know the Old Testament history behind it.

Turn with me to Luke, chapter 14. We won’t read the whole thing, but let me set the scene for you from verses 1-14. Jesus was invited to eat at the house of a man Luke calls “a prominent Pharisee,” with what seems to be a good number of other Pharisees and religious leaders. While he was there, Jesus took notice of all the jockeying for position—everyone trying to get the good seats closest to the host.

This was a common scene in Jesus’ day where honor and social status were the biggest values and shame the one thing to be avoided. In that society, humility wasn’t a virtue, it was a character flaw. Humility was for slaves and women. But for men—especially wealthy, upwardly mobile men, if you got it, flaunt it.

Meals were opportunities to build or flaunt your status. You didn’t eat with people you thought were of lower social class, let alone the outcasts of society. The only relationship you had with people under you was charity.

As Jesus watches the social jockeying, he offers some practical advice. He says if you rush for the place of honor, when someone of higher status comes, the host will demote you, put them in your place and you’ll be humiliated. So, rather than running to the place of honor, sit in a less prominent position, then when the person with the real power promotes you to a better place, you’ll get a double honor because everyone will watch you move up. In other words, don’t presume you have high standing with the host. Allow them to make that determination.

To make it even more radical, in verse 13, he says if you’re the one throwing the party, instead of inviting people who can give you status, he says, **“invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind and you will be blessed.”** Because even though *they* can’t offer you anything, God will repay you **“at the resurrection of the righteous.”** This is challenging teaching in our culture, but ten-times more in Jesus’ culture.

But it’s the parable Jesus tells next that’s most challenging, especially when you divorce it from its Old Testament story. When you do, you end up with a God who favors the rich and powerful and only begrudgingly cares about the poor and marginalized. But when you understand the Old Testament back-story, you see that there’s more to it than meets the eye. [read Luke 14:15-23]

Now Jesus tells the parable to respond to a statement in by a man trying to relieve the tension. Jesus’ teaching violated an unwritten rule. That rule was, relgious leaders don’t associate with “people like that.” Apparently, Jesus didn’t know these people are ceremonially unclean. Suggesting such a thing was absurd, but no one dared challenge him on it. But this is a party, so, to cut the awkwardness, the man blurts, **“Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.”** He could have meant it one or two ways. He could have been saying, *“Well, won’t it be great when we don’t have to worry about people like that?”* or he might have realized that God would eventually accept “those people” which is good because then we don’t have to bother with them.

Now, the “great feast in the Kingdom of God,” was a common image of what the world would look like for the Jews after the Messiah came and made everything right. It was their understanding of the life to come. It was what all the Jews were looking for, so on the surface, his comment seems innocent enough. But Jesus knows that behind the man’s statement is the assumption that he (and everyone at that table) would be a part of that feast simply because they were Jews. As Abraham’s family and God’s chosen people, they were automatically included. But Jesus’ parable challenges their assumption.

Now, characters in parables always represent someone else. So, in order to understand the parable, you have to determine who’s who. In this parable, the man preparing the banquet is God, which should be pretty obvious. But identifying the other characters is key, otherwise you’re liable to misread this parable and believe that God only wanted the rich powerful in his Kingdom and not the poor, blind and lame.

But what kind of picture of God is that? You’re right if that seems to paint God in a bad light. In fact, it’s not consistent with the picture Luke paints of God in his Gospel. That’s why you can’t take the characters in parable at face-value—you have to read it through the lens of the story of Israel. Fortunately, I brought a great video today that will give you a clear explanation of the story Jesus was thinking of. [clip The Covenants]

Just as an aside, that video was done by an organization called The Bible Project and they have tons more videos that do illustrated concise summaries of all the Biblical books and themes. You can find them at TheBibleProject.com for free.

This was the back-story of Jesus’ parable and when we understand this back-story, the characters come into focus. The man throwing the banquet still represents God, but the people originally invited to the banquet aren’t the literal rich and socially connected, they are people of Israel—the family of Abraham—and their invitation wasn’t just to enjoy God’s blessing, but to be the people through whom God’s blessing would come to the whole world. The invitation was to partner with God.

That’s why we read in Genesis 12, when God makes that covenant with Abraham, **“I will make you into a great nation, and I will bless you; I will make our name great, and you will be a blessing. I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse;”** here’s the key, **“and all the peoples on earth will be blessed through you.”**

God’s intent was not that he would invite Israel and everyone else would be left out, they were chosen to be God’s servant and invite the world into “the banquet in the Kingdom of God.” That was the invitation.

Now, there’s one character in the parable who’s easy to overlook. The man preparing the banquet, didn’t go out himself and tell the guests the banquet was ready. He sent his servant. Can you guess who the servant represents? The servant is *Jesus*. According to the Old Testament story, Israel themselves—the original guests—should have been the ones to make the invitation. But instead of inviting people in, at best they ignored the people on the outside and at worst, actively kept them out.

Jesus came to do what Israel failed to do. That’s why Jesus spends his ministry proclaiming that the Kingdom of God is a reality now! The Gospel’s summary of Jesus message was, “Repent, for the Kingdom of Heaven is here.” In other words, the banquet is about to begin. Jesus spent his ministry telling the Jews that what the Old Testament prophets foretold 500 years before, was happening now.

But even though they originally *said* they would come, now that the banquet was ready, they made lame excuses that showed they were so preoccupied with their own stuff and weren’t that interested. They presumed that they deserved to be invited.

The final characters and the last question we have to answer is, “Who were the replacement guests the master told the servant to go get?” Verse 21, **“Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.”** Now this is one group where there’s some overlap between the people in the parable and the people they represent. This group is from the streets and alleys of the town. The town is Jerusalem, the city of the Jews. They represent the Jews who had been rejected by Jewish society and the religious establishment. Here’s what I mean.

In the Old Testament, there were purity laws that said in order to worship in the Temple, a person had to be ritually clean. For instance, someone who worked with dead animals would need to go through ritual cleansing before they could worship. A menstruating woman couldn’t worship. The crippled, the blind and the lame—even if they were Jews—could never worship at the Temple because they were perpetually unclean. And there was nothing they could do to change that. Jesus says, the servant is told to first go to the Jews who up to that point had been rejected by Jewish society and the religious establishment.

The servant went out and invited them and there was still room, so in verse 23 the master tells the servant to get a second group, **“Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.”** Now Jesus is getting really crazy because outside the city were the *Gentiles*. They were the hated Romans.

But it wasn’t just the *good* Gentiles were out there. He said go to the highways where people where beggars would sit because they knew travelers with money would be coming by. Our translation says to also go to the “country lanes,” but a literal translation there would be “by the hedges.” There were always hedges planted around a vineyard to keep thieves and wild animals out of the vineyard, so Jesus would even be saying, “find everyone, even the thieves and invite them in.”

In fact, in Matthew 22, Jesus tells a similar parable and in that parable, He says they gathered **“all the people they could find, both good and bad.”** It didn’t matter who the person was or what they did, the man said “Invite them in! I want them.”

Now, don’t read too much into the fact that the Jews on the margins and the Gentiles weren’t part of the original group invited. In the Old Testament, it was always God’s intent that they be included. For instance, Hosea 2:23 says when the Messiah comes, **“…I will show my love to the one I called ‘Not my loved one’ I will say to those called ‘Not my people,’ ‘You are my people’; and they will say, ‘You are my God.’”**

Isaiah 49:6, speaking of Israel, **“I will make you a light for the Gentiles, that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth.”** Isaiah 61 is a Messiah song that says, **“The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners…”**

Jesus wasn’t teaching something new. It was always right there in his Bible. But the religious leaders were just so preoccupied with their own reputation and personal righteousness that they didn’t recognize it. And besides, it was becoming the kind of feast they weren’t really interested in.

As we think about this parable, there are two key takeaways that applied not just to the people around that table, but to us today. The first is this: *Everyone invited, but you must accept the invitation.* The same Jesus in the parable that was inviting people into his Kingdom 2000 years ago continues to make that invitation. And he invites people with good family backgrounds and people who grew up in chaos. He invites the genius and the simple. He invites young and old, weak and strong, black and white and everything in-between. The sqeaky-clean church folk and the convict. Everyone is invited.

But we must respond. And how do we do that? We respond to Jesus through *humility*. It’s not that some get in with humility and grace and others through good behavior. It’s the same path for everyone—that we *recognize our need for Jesus*. We recognize that there’s nothing any of us have done that make us worthy to be a part of God’s people, but his invitation is a pure act of grace. No matter who you are or what you’ve done, you’re invited and all it takes to respond is humility and repentance.

The second takeaway is the warning that *all of us are vulnerable to the temptation of believing that people like us deserve to get in and others don’t*. We’d never say it out loud and we probably don’t even realize we’re doing it, but we stay with our kind of people and would be pretty surprised if “name your group” made it.

The iconic writer, Flannery O’Conner wrote a short story called “Revelation” set in a doctor’s waiting room in the South in the 1950’s. The main character is Mrs. Turpin, an older overweight good Christian lady. In the room were a variety of people. A little boy who hardly ever removed his finger from his nose who she thought, “if that child belonged to me, he would have some manners.” Then there was a pleasant lady, and white trash-lady with snuff-stains on her lips and an overweight girl about college age that could only muster pointed glares out her acne-tarnished face over the Human Development book she was buried in. Mrs. Turpin felt sorry anyone had to look like that.

*As she was sitting in the room Mrs. Turpin heard a gospel song that made her very thankful and she started reflecting on her life. “If it’s one thing I am,” Mrs. Turpin said with feeling, “it’s grateful. When I think who all I could have been besides myself and what all I got, a little of everything, and a good disposition besides, I just feel like shouting, ‘Thank you, Jesus, for making everything the way it is!’ It could have been different!” “Oh, thank you, Jesus, Jesus, thank you!” She cried aloud for everyone to hear.*

*…The book struck her directly over her left eye. It struck almost at the same instant that she realized the girl was about to hurl it. The girl's fingers sank like clamps the soft flesh of her neck. When things calmed down, Mrs. Turpin looked at the girl and, fishing for an apology, asks “Is there anything you’d like to say to me?” “Go back to hell where you came from, you old wart hog.” Her eyes burned for a moment as if she saw with pleasure that her message had struck its target.*

She went home with the gash over her eye and after a nap she was washing off the hogs on their farm having a conversation with God—she knew deep-down the message from the girl was a message from God. *“What do you send me a message like that for? How am I a hog and me both? How am I saved and from hell too?”*

As she stood there alone in the farm yard with the sun setting, pondering the question, Mrs. Turpin had a vision, *“She saw the streak [in the sky] as a vast swinging bridge extending upward from the earth through a field of living fire. Upon it a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies of white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black [people] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs. And bringing up the end of the procession was a tribe of people whom she recognized at once as those who, like herself and Claude, had always had a little of everything and the God-given wit to use it right. She leaned forward to observe them closer. They were marching behind the others with great dignity, accountable as they had always been for good order and common sense and respectable behavior. They alone were on key. Yet she could see by their shocked and altered faces that even their virtues were being burned away.”*

This short story captures the essence of the Gospel—the essence of Luke 14. It’s easy for those of us who have had it good in life to think we’re going to heaven because we deserve it. And when you feel like you deserve something is when you cease to really appreciate it. But none of us deserve to be invited. The Gospel—and a place at the table is a gift for all of us.

And more than anything, I want us to be a church full of people who are fully aware of our need for Jesus. I want us to realize our calling, not to be the frozen chosen, but to understand that we have been called to partnership with Jesus, who invites everyone to come be a part of his banquet in the Kingdom of God.