

The Parable of the Great Supper

Our New Testament reading from Luke chapter 14 illustrates the saying that “many are called, but few are chosen” (Mat. 22:14). Focussing our attention upon the Calling of the gospel, this parable reveals the state of men’s hearts in relation to the things of the Spirit, and demonstrates their antipathy to the things of the Spirit.

The parable is given as a direct response to the exclamation of one who sat at meat with Messiah: “*Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God*” (Lu. 14:15). The Master then demonstrates that many have been called to such a position whereby they might partake of a “great supper” – a spiritual feast of delectable things – yet who spurned the invitation. We take it therefore, that the invitation of the Supper represents an invitation to life in the Kingdom. Concerning his last Passover, Messiah promised his disciples: “I will not any more eat thereof, *until* it be fulfilled in the Kingdom of God”. And again: “I will not drink of the fruit of the vine, *until* the kingdom of God shall come” (Lu. 22:16,18). Christ will not do these things “until” the Kingdom has come, which implies that at this time, he will eat and drink again with his disciples – and the parable of the Great Supper describes the calling to that feast.

The Master began his parable by speaking of the calling which went out to those who had already been invited: “Come, for all things are now ready”. But they “with one accord began to make excuse” to avoid having to attend. We shall consider the excuses as given:

“I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it”

This excuse illustrates a spirit of slothfulness, for he would surely have been better to see the land before buying it. There is a contrast between this case, and that of Abraham, the father of the faithful. He sojourned in the land as a stranger and sojourner, looking for the day when he would take up his inheritance with his Greater Seed, even the Master himself. He also purchased a piece of ground – but not for personal gain or to build a house upon, but to bury his dead. Thus he spoke to the land owner, Ephron before all the people “... I will give thee money for the field; take it of me, and *I will bury my dead* there” (Gen. 23:13). So it was that the cave of Machpelah in the field of Ephron became a purchased possession, that Abraham’s dead family members might lie there in piece, and in hope. This purchase then, became a token of Abraham’s faith, that the time would come when his dead would be raised up together, being invited to the Great Supper.

In contrast to Abraham, the Scriptures record the treachery of Judas in betraying Messiah for pieces of silver. Again, the money was used to purchase a portion of land in which the dead might be buried: “they took counsel, and bought with them the potter’s field *to bury strangers in*” (Mat. 27:7). There is a striking difference between the two cases: whilst in each case a field was purchased to bury the dead, one was to be a place of resting for the family of the faithful, whilst the other was to be used to bury those who were “strangers,” i.e. not Jews or descended from Abraham, and therefore not heirs of the promise of the kingdom. In the case in point the purchasing of land was used as an excuse not to attend the Great Supper, and being as the invitation was to partake of the Supper in the Kingdom, the refusal to attend would only result in death to those who refused.

“I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee, have me excused”

Again, there is a serious error of priorities: rather than attend, the guest wanted to go and see some animals that he had bought.

We have another occasion of the buying of Oxen in the example of king David – who at the same time, interestingly, bought a portion of land. 2 Samuel 24 records how David was “to buy the threshing floor” of

Araunah to be used as a place to offer sacrifice, and verse 22 recounts how the Oxen were to be purchased with the field that the sacrifice could be offered. But verse 22 recounts the words of Araunah:

“Behold, here be oxen for burnt sacrifice, and threshing instruments, and other instruments of the Oxen for wood”

This shows that there is a lot more to the incident than might be thought at first sight. Not only were the oxen used as a sacrifice, but the wooden instruments commonly used with the Oxen were burned as well – which meant that the work hitherto done by the Oxen was to cease. This brings to mind the cessation of mortal labours in the Age to Come, as a consequence of the sacrifice of Christ. Certainly it speaks of the cessation of the works of the flesh, and a re-focus upon the need for sacrifice, with everything, Oxen, instruments and all given for that sacrifice.

1 Kings 19 describes the calling of Elisha to be a servant to Elijah the prophet. After being called to follow Elijah, the record tells us that:

“he left the oxen, and ran after Elijah, and said, Let me, I pray thee, kiss my father and my mother, and then I will follow thee” (1 Kings 19:20)

Then verse 31 records his actions: “and he returned back from him, and took a yoke of oxen, and slew them, and boiled their flesh with the instruments of the oxen, and gave unto the people, and they did eat” (1 Kings 19:20-21)

Contrasts abound in this record: firstly, it is evident that Elisha was making a “great supper.” The total number of animals offered were “twelve yoke of oxen,” which makes up 24 individual animals – certainly enough for a very great feast indeed. But this feast was a token of the fact that he was going to rededicate his life to the service of Elijah, and in consuming all of his oxen and instruments, he demonstrated that he was not going to turn back to his previous way of life.

This latter aspect is brought out by Messiah in his teaching, alluding to this event:

“No man, having put his hand to the plough, and looking back, is fit for the kingdom of God”
(Lu. 9:62).

The “plough” here is referring to the work of a disciple – Elisha redirected his energies from plowing after the flesh, to plowing in spiritual things. A man who is always looking behind will find that he cannot plough a straight course: there is a need therefore to be constantly looking ahead, leaving behind worldly things, and labouring rather in the servitude of Christ.

I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come

Under the Old Covenant, there was provision made for the newly married to be excused from war. The third provision states:

“what man is there that hath betrothed a wife, and hath not taken her? Let him go and return unto his house, lest he die in the battle, and another man take her” (Deut. 20:7)

This then, is also the third reason why men would refuse to attend the marriage supper: by misusing provision made under the Law for a man going out to battle.

Luke chapter 17 speaks of this aspect:

“they did eat, they drank, they bought, they sold, they planted, they builded ...”

Notice, they spurned the Master's calling, yet still have time to "eat" and "drink" of their own feasts! Again, verse 27 reads:

"they did eat, they drank, *they married wives, they were given in marriage ...*"

There is nothing at all wrong with eating, drinking, or marrying in themselves. But the problem was that in tending to the cares of this life, these everyday activities were taking place to the exclusion of the things of the Spirit. Indeed, when we look at all of the excuses given in the case at hand, there is nothing wrong with any of the activities *per se*. Buying and selling fields and oxen, and marrying wives are all part of daily living. But the point is, they were engaging in these activities at the expense of the demands of the Truth. They were "lovers of pleasures rather than lovers of God" (2 Tim. 3:4). They had received a holy calling, but preferred the things of this life to the things of the Spirit. So we have the sobering exhortation: "love not the world, nether the things that are in the world. If any man love the world, the love of the Father is not in him" (1 Jno. 2:15).

The Streets and the Lanes of the City

The calling of the original guests being spurned, the command was to gather together those who were afflicted in various ways after the flesh, that they might take their place:

"Go out quickly into the streets and lanes of the city, and bring in hither the poor, and the maimed, and the halt and the blind"

We have no difficulty in identifying these first two groups to be invited. The apostolic pattern was that the Gospel Calling went out to the Jew first, then the Gentile (cp. Rom. 1:16). So it was that when the Jew rejected this calling: "Paul and Barnabas waxed bold, and said, It was necessary that the Word of God should first have been spoken to you: but *seeing you put it from you*, and judge yourselves unworthy of everlasting life, lo, we turn to the Gentiles" (Acts 13:46). Upon the basis that "they that are whole need not a physician, *but they that are sick*" (Lu. 5:31), the calling went out to Gentiles who recognised their mortal weakness, that they might find healing in the Name of the Son of God.

The calling, we are informed, went out into "the streets and lanes" of the city. This same pattern is seen in the spirit of Wisdom, as described in the book of Proverbs. Proverbs 1:20 reads:

"Wisdom crieth without; she uttereth her voice *in the streets*. She crieth in the chief place of concourse, in the openings of the gates: *in the city* she uttereth her words ..." (see also Prov. 8:2)

And the chapter continues in the spirit of the Jews' rejection of Messiah's calling:

"... I have called, *and ye refused ...*" (verse 24)

And rather than to attend the great supper to which they were invited, it is written in the same chapter that like Cain of old:

"... therefore they shall *eat of the fruit* of their own way ..." (verse 31)

There is, therefore, a powerful exhortation in these things: that we must not neglect the call of Wisdom, but rather seek her early (Prov. 8:17) whilst the time remains.

Highways and Hedges

There is an apparent difficulty in identifying who this third class represents. We can readily see how that the gospel was sent out to the Jews first, then the Gentiles – but what after that? Bro Robert Roberts gives the following explanation of these 3 classes:

- 1) “It was necessary that the word of God should *first* have been sent to you (Jews)” (Acts 13:46).
- 2) “The Salvation of God is sent unto the Gentiles and they will hear it (Acts 28:28)
- 3) Nearly AD 100, when the Apostles were all in their graves, except John: “the spirit and the bride say come ... whosoever will, let him take of the water of life freely (Rev. 22:17). The highways and hedges operation continues to the very coming of the Lord, and embraces those who “are alive and remain unto the coming of the Lord”.

If this is so, the “city” into which the Calling went for the Gentiles is not Jerusalem: we would suggest that it is “... the great city which spiritually is called Sodom and Egypt, where also our Lord was crucified” (Rev. 11:8). Some say that this “great city” is Jerusalem herself, but there are several reasons why that cannot be so we will refer to only two:

- 1) The “great city” is both a city (Sodom) and a country (Egypt) – like Rome famously was, but Jerusalem was not.
- 2) The Master was *not* crucified in Jerusalem. We know this from John chapter 19: “the place where Jesus was crucified was nigh to the city ...” (Jno. 19:20). It could not be inside the city as well as near the city. But he was crucified within the Roman *kosmos* and it was to this arena (the Roman Habitable) that the Gospel was preached.

Following the preaching of the Apostles begins a period of time during which the Gospel Message was sent forth to any who would listen. As bro Roberts observes, this period extends to the time when the supper is eaten, and therefore covers our own dispensation, when the Gospel is preached by the “Bride,” to invite and prepare a people to partake of the Great Supper.

In each of these things, we cannot fail to be impressed with the central theme of the parable, namely the Calling. We must individually look within ourselves to ensure that we are answering the call, like Samuel, whilst others sleep on, unaware of what it is they are rejecting. The proverbs describe the end for those who refuse her calling:

“when your fear cometh as desolation and your destruction cometh as a whirlwind; when distress and anguish cometh upon you. Then shall they call upon me, but I will not answer; they shall seek me early, but they shall not find me ... “(Prov.1:27-28).

To the Jews who rejected the Wisdom of Messiah, came the terrible destruction of AD 70. The practical lessons that emerge from these things abound: it is not the high and lofty individuals who come to the feast, but those who know the afflictions of mortality: “the foolish things of the world”. The calling of the Gospel extends to our own day – a dispensation when it has never been easier to access a copy of the Word of God. The cry of wisdom calls out to us from its pages: but it is for us alone to decide if, or how we respond.

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