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## Prayers

### To God

*Weekly theme - dedication to the Lord God*

I offer You my life, Lord, to use me as You will. I am nervous, because I am uncertain about what You will do with me even though You have promised me the best of Your love. I am hesitant, because I do not know what will happen to me even though Your plan is perfect. I am cautious, because I feel I am giving up my life even though I know that this sacrifice leads to eternal life. Calm my simple spirit, Lord, take my resolve in this very moment, and give me peace as I yield to Your Spirit: **AMEN**

### For myself

*Pray in silence, lifting your own thoughts, the reflections in your mind right now, to the Lord.*

### For others

*Pray in thanksgiving for the many benefits of your life and the many things you enjoy. Give thanks for the world in which you live and the people you meet, the society in which you live and the work you do. Bless the world, your country and your locality.*

## Meditation

Face the hardest challenges of life,  
whatever they may be ...  
Christ has trod this pathway before us;  
so we have nothing to fear.

Repent before the Lord of all,  
and leave behind your past;  
Love the unlovely, whoever they are,  
embrace the poor of the world.

Heal past hurts, let go your regrets,  
deny the devil his chance.  
Give total respect for each other in Christ,  
seek only the best for God's church.

Embrace the power of the Holy Spirit,  
and pursue His vibrant lead.

Speak such words as honour the Lord,  
to show your love for His Word.

Always demonstrate your faith, like breathing,  
and enjoy who you are in Christ!  
Be prepared for the coming of Christ in glory,  
and be ready for the glory to come!

## Bible Passage

### **Luke 14:15-24**

<sup>15</sup> When one of those at the meal with him heard this, he said to Jesus,  
*“Blessed is the man who will eat bread in the kingdom of God.”*

<sup>16</sup> Jesus then said to him:

*“A certain man was giving a great banquet, and he invited a large number of guests. <sup>17</sup> When the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to tell the guests,*

*‘Come, for everything is now ready.’*

<sup>18</sup> *“But they made excuses, one and all. The first said to him,*

*‘I have just bought farmland and must go to see it. Please accept my apologies.’*

<sup>19</sup> *“Another one said,*

*‘I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and am on my way to check them out. Please accept my apologies.’*

<sup>20</sup> *“Yet another said,*

*‘I have just got married, so I cannot come.’*

<sup>21</sup> *“The servant returned and reported these things to his master. The house owner was greatly angered and said to his servant,*

*‘Go out quickly into the streets and alleyways of the town to bring the poor, crippled, blind and lame back here.’*

<sup>22</sup> *“The servant said,*

*‘Sir, all you have ordered has been done, yet there is room to spare.’*

<sup>23</sup> *“So the master told his servant,*

*‘Go out to the open roads and hedged pathways and urge them to come in, so that my house will be full. <sup>24</sup> I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.’”*

# Review

In Luke 14, Jesus had been invited to a meal with some Pharisees, and they got more than they bargained for. He challenged their faith, exposing the difference between their own law and the Law of God (14:1-6), the hypocrisy of their attitudes towards status (14:7-11), and their lack of true godliness and concern for the poor (14:12-14). With all this ringing in his ears, at least one of those present sought to move the subject on. In contrast to the tensions of this sharp discussion, he looked forward the blessings of God's Messianic banquet, the famous '*feast in the kingdom of God*' (14:15). But Jesus was not finished. He knew more about God's banquet than the man who asked question, so he revealed this in a parable; the 'parable of the Great Banquet', or perhaps 'the Great Excuses', or better still, 'the Great Invitation' (14:16-23)!

If you think you have heard this parable before, you would be right. When Matthew tells a similar story (Matt 22:1-14), the bones of the story are the same but there are additions. We are told that the servants who went out with invitations were at first abused and then murdered, so an army goes out to destroy the land! Only then can the outcast be invited to the banquet, and there are further restrictions on entry because of the need to be prepared (dressed) for the wedding. Matthew famously concludes '*many are invited, but few are chosen*' (Matt 22:14); but are all these reports of the same incident of Jesus' teaching?

Some find it confusing to be presented by the Gospels with such different renditions of Jesus' teaching. I suggest that instead of imagining a single event lying behind the different Gospel stories, it is worth considering another explanation. The considerable differences between them all suggest to me that Jesus used the basis of this parable more than once, to make different points on different occasions. So each setting of the parable is valid; Matthew focuses on the difficulty of entry into the banquet, whereas Luke highlights the excuses of those invited (the Jews) and then the magnificent generosity of God. The key is to read the parable for what it says here in Luke, without worrying that this may be different from what we find in the other Gospels.

Luke begins by making it obvious that the invitations are not to be ignored. In Jewish society of those days, it was a mark of great leaders to send repeated invitations to events they organised; hence both the initial invitation (14:16) and then the sending out of servants to gather people in (14:17). One first century document records that an invitation was not to be considered important unless it was offered twice! In this light, the invitees should have known both what was happening and when, so their excuses show remarkable contempt.

To Jesus' hearers, however, the parable's truly shocking feature was not the fact that some made excuses, but rather that everyone made excuses. The Pharisees believed there were plenty of sinners amongst God's people who would turn away from Him; but they believed that, being better than everybody else because of their religious zeal, they would have no difficulty with access to God's banquets!

So what are the excuses, and what part do they play in the parable? By all accounts, the first two are ridiculous. No one would purchase a field without inspecting it first, so the excuse that it must be seen immediately after purchase is demonstrably false (14:18). Neither would someone making a major investment in working animals release money before examining the intended purchase (14:19). The third excuse appears to have a realistic basis; the Old Testament (Deut. 24:5) proscribes that a man will stay at home in the first year of marriage (14:20). But this regulation was designed to prevent army service that may lead to death; it was not intended to stop people being sociable, or prevent them from responding to their God! This excuse is therefore as nonsensical as the rest, and all reveal flagrant disregard for God, a theme consistent within Luke 14.

The whole situation was cause for great concern, indeed anger, to the one who prepared the banquet (14:21). Jesus was speaking however about God, and the Messianic banquet to open His victorious, Kingdom rule, but the scenario Jesus paints next was completely unfamiliar to those who were listening to Him. He describes God sending His servants to gather in people who, according to the Pharisees, were not eligible for this great event! In their understanding of Old Testament Law, people who were blemished by physical defect or illness, tragically most common amongst the poor, were banned from worship in the Temple! In many parts of Israel they were not even able to attend synagogue of the Sabbath day!

But the poor are all people God wants to have at His feast (14:23)! Moreover, His generosity is such that the banquet prepared can take even more than the servants can muster (14:22)! Ultimately, the glory of God's gracious salvation and His acceptance of the outcast is a work of grace, and we only hear about it from Jesus and find it through His love.

The parable's final warning; '*not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet*' (14:24), is a dire message to those who thought they were invited and imagined they would enter God's banquet, but discover, perhaps without being fully aware of it, that they have turned God down and been excluded. The pathetic excuses offered in the parable (14:18-20), now sound as if they were given in ignorance. Quite frankly, those who offered them were either not ready or not willing to realise that the invitation was current and active; they needed to act immediately, but had not.

There is much for us to learn from this passage. It speaks of God's gracious invitation to all to come to His Messianic banquet, and the evangelical quest of His servants to make sure that as many have the opportunity to come as possible. God's sorrow is that His own people offer pathetic excuses because they are not ready to respond. This was a shattering message to those who first heard Jesus deliver it, especially the Pharisees with whom He was having dinner; But it is a powerful and energising message for God's people today, because we have the duty to explore every hidden corner of our world in pursuit of our call to deliver the Gospel message to all who will receive it!

## Going Deeper

### ***Notes on the text and translation***

#### **V21 'bring ... back here'**

##### Other translations:

'bring in' (NIV)

'invite' (New Living)

Most translations say either '*bring you*', or '*invite*'. The reason I have translated '*bring ... back here*', is because the Greek says literally '*lead in here*', which contains the idea of something more than just invitation, but the idea of actively gathering back to the house the disadvantaged and poor people identified in the passage. I reckon my translation conveys this with greater clarity.

#### **V23 'open roads and hedged pathways'**

##### Other translations:

'roads and country lanes' (NIV)

*'highways and hedges'* (NAS)

Different expressions may be best for English or American usage here, but the Greek expression is simply *'roads and hedges'*. Some translators reckon that *'hedges'* means not hedges themselves, but hedged pathways or country roads. There is a slight danger that if we translate this phrase literally using the word *'hedges'*, we invite the idea that the second has to go and find people who have fallen into hedges, perhaps drunks! I think it more likely that he needs something like *'hedged pathways'*.

### **VX23 *'urge them to come in'***

#### *Other translations:*

*'make them come in'* (NIV)

*'compel them to come in'* (NRSV)

Some translations speak of compelling people to come, but how can you force people to do what they do not wish to do? Also, are we right to think that people can be forced into the kingdom of God? The Greek verb used here can be translated easily and correctly as *'urge'*, so without the implication of undue and inappropriate force, this is by far the best translation here.

## **Further Comments**

### ***Eating bread in God's Messianic banquet***

In verse 15, the question put to Jesus speaks of eating bread in the kingdom of God. Eating bread perhaps meant more to people in Jesus' day than it does to us now. Remember that the people of Israel had to leave behind their old leaven for the making of bread in Egypt, when they escaped the land and headed for the desert and their Promised Land (Exodus 12,14). In the desert, they had to eat 'manna', bread provided miraculously by God, and from that day, the term 'eating bread' was closely associated with the whole idea of God's provision.

The idea of *'eating bread in the kingdom of God'* was therefore a picture of security to the Jews who used it, and with this parable, Jesus shattered this precious hope. The problem was not the heart of God to spread a large banquet but the expectations of Jewish people that they would have a seat and come automatically. As this passage says, it is His desire to make this security available to all who will come; to all who will accept an invitation. The bread of God's Kingdom will be sufficient for all our needs in His heaven.

### ***The defective - banned from worship***

The idea that the defective are to be banned from worship is not as straightforward as we might think. Certainly, the Pharisees believed that anything that was not perfect should not be presented to God in worship, and this, together with the fact that many diseases and illnesses rendered people *'unclean'* (e.g. Leviticus 13:1f.) meant that in a very real sense, people could only worship God if they were in complete health, physically, mentally, and spiritually.

We must be careful this idea, however, because although this seems typically Jewish, the idea is not to be found in the Old Testament, and we must be clear about this. The first time we meet any hint of this notion is in the book of Leviticus, where animals presented for ritual

slaughter are required to be perfect and without blemish or disease (see Leviticus 1-4). The second time we find something similar is in Leviticus 21:17-23, where those who are impaired in any way are banned from holding office as priests within Israel (or as Leviticus defines it, descendants of Aaron). All other references to the banning of 'defects'; or 'blemishes' in the worship of God in the Old Testament is a development of one of these notions.

It is remarkable therefore that by the time of Jesus, these ideas had become convoluted into the idea that anything presented to God, even the worshipper, must be a 'perfect specimen', even the worshipper himself or herself! Yet again, we find that the rabbinical law practiced in Jesus' day was far removed from what was actually written in the Old Testament (see also my comments on Luke 14:1-6).

In studying the Bible, we must make sure that we do not presume we know what the Old Testament actually says from a passing knowledge of the Pharisees and their prejudices as revealed in the New Testament! I also suggest that this study calls into question what people sometimes mean by calling for 'the best'; in our worship of God. While it is right to never hold back the best from God, His people come to Him faulty and in need of repair; if our worship is so fine tuned as to represent the very best of human abilities, we run the risk of presenting a picture of God that is unattainable to those who need Him most.

## **Discipleship**

### ***Application***

#### ***What about those excuses?***

This is a stark message, and it warns us to make sure we are not making excuses. People who have been in the church and have known that their salvation for a good many years, may find themselves perilously close to the Jews in this parable. They can be in danger of missing out on the Messianic banquet. Jesus gave this parable not just for the Jews but for us as well, because He does not want us making excuses to Him when there is work to be done for His kingdom.

So what are the excuses we use to avoid God's messengers and His invitations? There are many, of course, but the excuses in this passage of Scripture point to some of the most common. The first two are about personal attachment to possessions, and reflect what we term 'materialism'. In the western world especially, we excuse ourselves from God's service too easily because of the perceived need to attend to our many possessions. The third excuse is about private and personal commitment. Excuses that come from this source because people want to keep aspects of life to themselves, perhaps some part of home life or personal relationships kept separate from the things of God.

Scriptures such as this will teach us about the deep things of God, and point us towards a deeper understanding of our own failings and sins. But it is no use knowing such teachings if we do not act on them; we must make sure we do not offer anything as an excuse to our God when He calls.

#### ***Our mission to the world***

Most Christians are aware of the 'Great Commission' given by Jesus to His disciples just before he left them (Matthew 28:19). They also know that Jesus' commands to His disciples are commands to His people today, and the Great Commission has been given so that it may be fulfilled by each generation.

Various famous passages of Scripture remind us that God is constantly searching for people, especially amongst the poor who are often in dire need of His salvation. The world offers nothing, yet God offers them everything, like a *'pearl of great price'* (Matthew 13:46f.). This passage of Scripture does the same, and our study has highlighted the desire of God to draw to Himself people who are thought not worthy, perhaps at the bottom of the pile of human society. It is a stirring call.

One other feature of the work God calls His servants to do is their search in the *'streets and alleyways'* (14:21), and in the *'open roads and hedged pathways'* (14:23). The picture given is of a search for people to respond as tough and as exacting as any search for a missing person. Just like Jesus' parable of the 'lost sheep', the Lord does not rest until all have had the opportunity to respond to His love, and we are those who put His passion into effect.

### ***Ideas for what to do***

- Do you think it is God's intention to bless Jewish people today in any way more than either His church, or the people of the world in general? Discuss what you think about this with some other Christians.
- Think and pray about how you can take God's invitation to the poor and disadvantaged of your world. If you believe God is revealing to you something new about this, make sure you discuss it with other Christians first before acting on it.

### ***Questions (for use in groups)***

1. Imagine what it would be like to sit at God's banquet; in your group, be quiet for a moment, and then share your feelings in response to this picture.
2. What does this passage of Scripture do to help us understand God's eternal purposes. Why do some people make excuses to God, and why do some people accept Him unreservedly.
3. Why does God favour the poor? Do you feel any less favoured because God favours the poor? This is an important question. Why is it that when some people are accepted, others feel rejected?

## **Final Prayer**

Almighty and blessed Lord, God of passion and of might, of wisdom and insight, of power and strength, You are everything to me. My life, my work, my feelings, my thoughts, my future, my plans, my gifts, my graces; everything I have is Yours. Take me and use me according to Your will, and give me true happiness in every aspect of what it means to be Your servant. I love You Lord; **AMEN**

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