

NOTES AND QUESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUAL OR GROUP STUDY OF THE GOSPEL OF LUKE – PART FIFTEEN

As chapter fourteen opened, Jesus was still confronting the hard hearted legalism of the religious leaders. Throughout this gospel it is portrayed as the greatest obstacle to accepting the boundless unconditional love of God. Our problem when we make the same mistake as the Pharisees is that we suppose we have to make our lives right for God to bless us rather than simply letting Him bless in our state of failure as a result of which our lives begin to come right. In this chapter the debate is played out in a series of stories about dinner parties. Remember that in the Jewish culture, a shared meal was the most intimate form of relationship.

The first shared meal was the result of another invitation from a Pharisee.(7:36; 11:37) This meal appears to have been a deliberate attempt to set Jesus up. It was the Sabbath, the religious jury were watching closely, and a man was there with dropsy, usually the result of heart, kidney or liver failure, a terminal illness in those days. Knowing what was behind this Jesus asked the question, ‘What does the law say about healing on the Sabbath?’ There was silence. Jesus healed the man and sent him off. Jesus asked one of those penetrating questions He used so effectively. What would they do if their son or ox fell down a well on the Sabbath? Would they really be left there until the next day? Everyone knew the answer. The silence continued. Surely we would not forbid God to care for His desperately needy son on the Sabbath?(14:1-6)

Taking the initiative in the emotionally charged atmosphere of anger and embarrassment, Jesus began a series of three parables based around the dinner party. On special occasions such as weddings, being noticed is a high priority for some, beginning with what we wear and what kind of transport we arrive in. When it comes to being seated we look for our place name, hoping it will be on a prominent table, or even on the very top table. In a culture where names were not written down for all to see, choosing a place became an unseen process of determining precedence and seizing the opportunity to be important, assuming it would be acknowledged by others. Jesus described such a wedding reception where someone took a place at the top table only to have the terrible embarrassment of being demoted to a lower place. How much better it would have been the other way around, to have assumed his unimportance and then to be surprised by promotion. He compared this to His would-be followers who assumed they were important because of their religious performance, only to be confronted with the fearful truth that they never really knew Him.(14:7-11)

The next issue about special dinner parties is the difficult one of whom to invite. So often the decision is about obligation and benefit. Who has invited us and expects to be rewarded with a return invitation? Family are often top of the list, followed by friends and neighbours. Leave them out and we will never hear the end of it! The rich are also worth considering because by our invitation we can earn a future favour. Those with skills we made need to call on for their free or cut-rate services at some time may also be included. Jesus suggested a radical new approach. Instead of considering benefit to us, let us ask the simple question, ‘Who needs dinner?’ The poor, crippled, lame and blind may not have great table manners. They may smell. They may not have sparkling, witty dinner conversation. But remember how hungry they are! What is true in a social sense is equally true of those we invite to feed on the truth concerning Jesus.(14:12-14)

One of the other dinner guests saw the relevance of Jesus’ words to future dinner parties in heaven but missed the point of the earthly attitude about which the Lord was talking. This gave opportunity for the third message about spiritual dinner parties. The question this time was ‘How do people respond to the invitation?’ The host had issued invitations to the banquet and the big day arrived, but not the guests. When the would-be guests were pressed for their response all

kinds of excuses began to be given. For one his investment was more important. For the second there was a new ox team which needed a test drive. Today it would probably have four wheels and an engine, and the neighbours would be watching enviously. For the third, his new wife came before the invitation. Things, status and marriage are still more precious to many than God's invitation to fellowship with Him. Angry at their indifference, the host invited the same needy people who would have been excluded from the previous dinner party. When David invited guests to join him in the wilderness it was the distressed, the discontented and those in debt who flocked to share his cave.(I Sam.22:2) Finally the host, because there was still room at the table, sent his slave to round up the homeless for a dinner they would never have expected to be allowed to share. The true Christian church is made up, not of the respectable, but the needy.(14:15-24)

Jesus summed up His series of illustrations from dinner parties with some straight talking about the conditions for discipleship. He talked about what hinders our acceptance of His invitation. First there is family to whom we feel a tie and whose approval we want. Who comes first, family or Jesus? Second there is us, our comforts and pleasures. Following Him will hurt like the cross did. Third we need to consider if we have the resources for a lifelong commitment. He compared this question to building a tower and the cost of finishing it. The cost however is paid by Him if we trust Him to complete in us what He started.(Phil.1:6) The fourth is the strength to meet and defeat the enemy, in our case, Satan, who in Jesus' power alone is already defeated.(I Pet.5:8,9; I Jn.4:4) Letting go of what we prize as the way to enjoy the richness of life in Christ, is nothing. Let us choose the real thing not a poor imitation which even the world around us will see to be fake!(14:25-35)

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY AND DISCUSSION

1. What was the objection of the Pharisees to Jesus on this occasion? How do we show the same attitude at times? What was the first story Jesus told by way of answer? What does it tell us about how lost people get found by God? How important is one such lost person in heaven? How does this speak to the disapproving attitude of religious people today?(15:1-7)
2. How is the second story Jesus told similar and what important differences are there? Who does the woman picture? Why is a lost coin not the same as a lost sheep? What is the message to us this time?(15:8-10)
3. How is the third story similar and how is it different? Who is the father and who are the sons? How do we make the same mistake as the younger son? What vital message about son-ship had he not understood at first? What brought him to his senses? What did he expect in returning home? What did he receive and what does it picture to us? How do we make the same mistake as the elder son? To whom was this story addressed?(15:11-32)
4. How does each of these three stories build on the one before? How do they continue the theme of what hinders 'fish' getting caught by spiritual 'fishermen', or why invitations to dinner with Jesus are ignored or refused?(15:1-32)