

Come, Everything is Ready – and: There is Still Room
A Bible Study on Luke 14:1-24
Bible Study ICWDP 2017, Brazil
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The women of Slovenia will be at the center of World Day of Prayer 2019 and they offer the service under the title: Come, Everything Is Ready. The theme is a quote from the parable of the Great Banquet in Luke 14:17. The banquet is ready and the master of the banquet invites his guests: "Come; for everything is ready now." His slave later expands and enlarges this invitation: "There is still room" (Lk 14:22).

The following study includes the analysis of the biblical text and offers suggestions on how to present this Bible study. It takes up what I presented at the Meeting of the World Day of Prayer International Committee in Brazil in 2017. It is given to you as an example of a Bible Study that you could conduct in preparation for the World Day of Prayer 2019. Some practical steps and tools for the presentation are also included. At the end a *chart* outlines the composition of Lk 14:1-24 in order to make the interpretation visible.

(Within the study, the remarks in italics and brackets are proposals for the presentation).

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1. Careful reading: Stumbling blocks in Luke 14

This Bible study searches for an empowering message in the gospel. To do this requires a close contextual analysis of the literary structure of the story in the gospel of Luke. Unfortunately, in church history the interpretation of Luke 14 was far from being empowering. On the contrary: this story often was misused for moralizing messages that downgraded the public, and also for forcing people into confessions and conversions to Christianity, often enough violently. Luke 14, especially Luke 14:15-24 has many stumbling blocks and its interpretation needs caution.

(Visual Signal for Caution): To underline the necessary caution that is needed before any interpretation put up a signal to the audience. Example: A large red exclamation mark.)

“Compelle intrare” (Latin: Force them to come in)

The first problem is the interpretation of v.23. In Luke 14:23 the master’s invitation for the poor is: Compel them to come in. The Greek word *“anankason eiselthein”* can be understood in this way. Church Father Augustin (354-430 A.D.) interpreted this as a calling to fight against those who didn’t join the Church. This interpretation was taken up in a horrid way throughout the history of various churches. So, if there were military or other forceful measures available for churches they used Luke 14:23 as a justification to violently force people into Christianity. Violence was directed against people considered as heretics or heathen. Be it the Donatism in the time of Augustin, the “heretics” in the Middle Ages in Europe or the indigenous people in Latin America during the 16th century and later – the violence against them was religiously legitimated by the gospel. Therefore caution in interpretation is needed!

Luke 14:16-23 is a parable

The story of the Great Banquet (Lk 14:16-23) is told as a parable (v.7). Beware not to make quick and simplifying identifications; you do not want to miss the main point of the parable. Unfortunately, reading many interpretations one has to admit that often this quick identification is the case.

- A too quick identification holds that the master in the story is Jesus or God and “we” are the ones who refuse to come because we have excuses - and thus we will miss the kingdom of God. We are portrayed as an ungrateful lot!

- Or alternatively: The master (God/Jesus) invites all and if we do not come on our own, we will miss the kingdom of God. The same result!

In the end people are sinners and they are put down instead of being empowered. But is this the aim of the parable?

A parable sets up a comparison, but does not compare in a simple way: “This is ...” Often a parable begins by saying something like “this is like ...” In the story of the Great Banquet just a sigh of a guest, a beatitude to those who are eating bread in the kingdom of heaven, indicates that comparison. It is clear that Jesus picks up that hint on the kingdom of heaven in

the following story. It is a parable, even if the character as *parable* is now placed in v.7. “Parable” indicates that the story that follows has a second meaning in addition to the apparent meaning of the story. For sure one has to avoid a direct identification. The danger here is to identify the master of the house directly with God (*see below*). But the challenge is: What in this story is *like* the invitation to the Great Banquet. Caution: do not ask, “Who is God or Jesus?” or “Is the Banquet heaven?” Being open minded to this difference is important!

Why are the parables in the gospels so intriguing? They seem to be simple stories that everybody can understand. Mark Twain’s quote, “It ain’t those parts of the Bible that I can’t understand that bother me, it is the parts that I do understand”, hits the nail on the head

The parables are stories that do not give an answer to questions or problems. They are told in a way that draws the readers into the story. And when there are open endings, the reader is especially asked: What do you think? What do you make out of this story? Parables want to provoke, to initiate thinking! Very often, it is an open process provoking the reader to search out for a deeper understanding. This understanding depends on the standpoint of the reader, the culture, the identification with figures in the story, one’s own value system – there is more than one answer and more possible interpretations than only one. It is at the core of Christian communities to discuss the parables and interpret them in their context. Living according to them is and was always the challenge and it is a different meaning depending on who is reading them. Any of the gospels has a special theology that aims at the community for which the gospel is written.

2. Context and Theology of the Gospel of Luke

(Visual Signal for Narrator: To visualize the narrative structure a “narrator” is asked to take a special chair, he/she is addressed when the special literary quality of the phrases and the gospel are named. Explaining the special literary form of the text it is possible to held up a sign with N for “narrator”.)

2.1 Luke as Narrator, or: What does the text say and why?

Reading a gospel one first “meets” one important “person” that one does not know or even sees: that person is the narrator. The early Christian tradition has named them as Luke, Matthew, Mark, John. Each gospel has its own specific background and focus. Therefore, one speaks of the theology of Luke that is different from the theology of the other gospels.

No matter who this voice is in reality we are dealing with the text-voice that narrates. This text-voice directs the seeing and the feelings, the empathy, sympathy or enmity to the persons that are presented. The narrator decides what is important, what kind of scenery unfolds, the narrator holds the inner eye. Sometimes the narrator misleads readers and hearers in order to present a totally new and astonishing turn to what might be expected. What is told and what is not told matters in the same way. What is told is important for the narrator, but also what is not told. These empty spaces may be important for the interpretation if they are there on

purpose – to stimulate the imagination, the theology and to invite the reader to take a stand on the text, to claim their opinion, their point of view.

Not every text is told for us to follow it exactly; sometimes it is told to provoke a different understanding. The narrator asks his readers on which side they are standing and to decide what action this requires from them!

Just a few words on Luke: He writes for a community that seemingly has rich people as well as poor people. Any text has to be interpreted within its context and so we need some background about the gospel of Luke. Each story is carefully placed within the gospel. Some information about its special theology and message are necessary for a deeper understanding of the story. The following theological topics are important as background for the story of the Great Banquet.

2.2. Luke's Theology of Justice for the Poor

Luke has a strong theology of justice for the poor. From the beginning of the gospel, the kingdom of God means uplifting the poor. In Luke, poverty is not spiritualized. The poor are the real poor; the hunger is real, and justice is needed to lift up the lowly.

Luke made clear at the very beginning of his gospel that the kingdom of God and the coming of the Messiah Jesus would turn the world and its structure and values upside down. Mary's song of praise in Luke 1:

And Mary said,

*“My soul magnifies the Lord,
and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.
His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
**he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.**” (Lk 1:46-53)*

This introduction at the beginning of the gospel proclaims a justice that turns the unjust world upside down. Justice has to do with a just distribution of power and money in order to gain balance again. It is a revolutionary justice. The theology of justice requires talking about money and distribution of wealth. Luke is not spiritualizing poverty: The poor are the real

poor; the hungry are those who really have hunger. For Luke, big money or money based on injustice (“mammon”) stands in contrast to God. Sharing is necessary and unavoidable in order to gain justice. Sharing is a sign of the kingdom of God and the rich have to share. Only through sharing do they have a chance to gain the kingdom of God (Lk 16:19-31; 6:20-26). Money and wealth are meant to serve (Lk 16:9).

2.3. Luke’s Theology of Meals

Meals are structuring the gospel of Luke. Luke sends the readers of the gospel together with Jesus from meal to meal. Jesus eats with different people: Pharisees, sinners, poor, rich, tax collectors and his friends. The focus lies in eating together and having bread and wine for all – and eating together in a new community. At the meals Jesus develops his theology of a new community. Luke’s gospel reflects the situation in the early Christians communities. People of different social strata, bound through their belief in Jesus as the Messiah, are eating together. But how do slaves and rich persons eat together, which is contrary to the social relations in society? Luke narrates how Jesus behaves and teaches at meals. He has no problems to eat with diverse persons that are normally not together at a table.

Paul scolds the young Christian community of the Corinthians (1 Cor 11) and orders that they have to eat together. Furthermore the rich persons have to share their meals. The new community was difficult to maintain.

3. The Structure of Luke 14

(Red sign): Caution with interpretation; don’t take sentences out of their context!

In studying a biblical text, it is important to rely on the context of the text. It is not by chance how an episode is structured. Therefore, a short glance at the position of chapter 14 within the gospel is interesting. Luke (the narrator) puts the Great Banquet in the center of the gospel. The meal is the exact center of the various Lukan meals (Lk 7:36-50; 9:10-17; 11:37-54; 12:37; 14,1-24; 16:19-22; 17:7-10; 22:16ff.; 24:30ff.). Therefore, one can expect to find a central message there. The story of the great banquet is part of the whole chapter Luke 14 and is connected to the whole chapter. This placement within the whole chapter is important, because three parts of the chapter are dealing with the question how to behave at a feast and what Jesus is doing and saying about it.

Structure of Luke 14:

The chapter Luke 14 has three scenes; all three are held together while they tell what happened at the meal at the house of the Pharisee. Jesus goes there and from then on, he is the master of the symposium, acting, teaching, and telling a parable. The three scenes are within the same *symposium* and the same room. If you were to dramatize Luke 14 in a theater no changing of the stage would be necessary – but one would have to illustrate that V.16-23 is a story within a story. A play might “freeze” the banquet and then set within the scene the narration of the Great Banquet – now with Jesus as the narrator. The Great Banquet (Lk

14:16-23) is the third part of a threefold composition about banquets and behavior at banquets. It is framed by a beatitude (v.15) and a woe (v.24). The whole chapter is important for the interpretation of the Great Banquet.

1	Setting the scene: Meal at a Pharisee's house
2-6	Jesus teaching and healing of a dropsy
7-10	Jesus' wisdom word: How to behave as a guest
11-14	Jesus' wisdom word: How to behave as guest and as host
15	Guest: Beatitude (framing and triggering the parable)
16-23	Parable of the Great Banquet
24	Jesus: Woe (framing and ending the parable)

Many cross-references indicate that these three parts are put together with caution.

- They have a common theme: What is a meal or banquet? Whom to invite? How to behave?
- 12 times the chapter uses the word "invite"
- 7 times the chapter uses the word "dine"
- "Eating bread" connects v.1 with v.15

It would be interesting to go deeper into each of the three scenes, but due to the necessary concentration on the parable, I note only few aspects.

3.1. First scene: The Healing of a Dropsy (v.1-6):

Luke 14:1 sets up the first meal in the house a leading person of the Pharisees on Shabbat. Jesus visits the house in order to "eat bread". The host and the guests are watching closely what Jesus does or says.

Jesus eats with different kinds of people, here it is the Pharisees. "Eating bread" is used as a symbol for any meal. Bread was the basic food, and hunger was a threat to the poor. In the whole scene, the Pharisees are silent: They only watch Jesus, they do not approve his citing the Jewish law and questioning the behavior on Shabbat; they do not comment on his healing the dropsy. Silence – no answer or action whatsoever. We find silent Pharisees and guests and a talkative Jesus.

At a *symposium*, a meal with guests in the Greek tradition, the host and the guests had different roles. One of the guests had a leading role in talking. Here Jesus is the one who talks. We are told explicitly that the others are "silent" and do not know what to say. Jesus alone is talking during this meal. And having healed the man with dropsy he teaches about how to understand Shabbat and its Halacha¹, and having given wisdom sayings, he responds to the beatitude of an anonymous guest by telling a parable about the kingdom of God.

¹ "Halacha" is the "way" a Jew is directed to behave in every aspect of life, encompassing civil, criminal and religious law.

What is Shabbat? Shabbat has all the characteristics of a feast – it is different from the “normal day’s routine” and it is *the* feast that unites and binds the community together even up to today, even before the destruction of Jerusalem’s temple in the year 70 AD. Like any feasts, Shabbat is the central significant markers of the Jewish community. At Shabbat Jews celebrate and remind themselves ritually of the great deeds of God. The absence of any work and the feast with eating, drinking, family, study of God’s word also celebrate God’s creation. Resting from any work repeats the resting of God’s rest at the creation. “So God blessed the seventh day and hallowed it, because on it God rested from all the work that he had done in creation. (Gen 2:3)”. The ritual of Shabbat reminds us of the exodus, Israel’s liberation from Egypt. Symbols and prayers, drinking and eating at Shabbat recall the liberation from Egypt through God accompanying them. Liberation is the central theme. Jesus refers to this meaning when he justifies his healing on a Shabbat.

Who were the Pharisees? The Pharisees are often seen as the main adversaries of Jesus. They were one of the religious Jewish groups and focused on the interpretation of the Torah in daily life under Roman occupation. What is life according to the Torah under problematic political circumstances, as the Romans had occupied Juda? The Pharisees are at the core of the rabbinic movement after the fall of the temple and Jerusalem 70 A.D. Jesus and the Pharisees are discussing the same question: What is according to the Tora and for Jesus what is the kingdom of God? The kingdom in the Greek language is the *basileia tou theou*. In Luke 11:20 Jesus sees in his healings the beginning of the kingdom of God.

Jesus heals a dropsy: A sick man appears at the meal on the Sabbat. What “dropsy” really means is not quite clear. In old texts, it is seen as a dangerous disease. The narrator is not interested in the man but in Jesus and his deed. Jesus starts to discuss the question with his host: Is it allowed to heal on a Shabbat? The main question behind this: Is this a forbidden “work” on Shabbat or is healing something that fulfils what Shabbat is all about: celebrating the healing and liberating deeds of God. Jesus gets no answer, heals the man, and sends him away. The silent Pharisees stay silent even at the second question of Jesus: Is this not according to the Torah?

The narrator sets a spotlight on the discussion about healing on Shabbat. Jesus understands healing as the deep meaning of the Shabbat and Jesus fulfills that meaning in healing this man. In this way, the meal reveals that the kingdom of God is present in the healing – even if it seems to be a violation of the Shabbat. Luke here gives an example for the meals of the early Christians. Their practice of meals should reveal the kingdom of God.

3.2. Second scene: Words of Wisdom on Behavior at Banquets (V.7-14)

The main theme of the second scene is a meal or a feast and the behavior of host and guests. The two wisdom sayings build the second part of the chapter 14. Jesus is teaching with twofold sayings. The first is about the behavior as a guest; the second is about whom to invite to a banquet.

In v.7-11 Jesus reacts to the situation: The behavior of the guests at the meal in the Pharisee's house triggers the sayings. v.7 introduces them as "parable". But the way in which they are told are wisdom-sayings, not a parable. Maybe they were inserted later and v.7 was originally the introduction into the parable of v.16. But however, v.7 connects the third part with the second.

a) v.7-11: The best behavior as a guest: Don't seek the best places but choose the last ones

b) v.8-14: The best behavior as a host: Invite the lame, the blind, the crippled, and the poor.

This second saying challenges the system of reciprocity and is taken up by the parable later. Reciprocity means: If someone invites you, they expect to get an invitation from you. This was common practice for rich people and a system of networking. In such a system it is not possible for the poor and all the people on the margins to be included. "The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" links the verse to the parable, where "the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind" are indeed invited. The parable tells a story and challenges the societal structures.

3.3. Third scene: The parable of the Great Banquet v.15-24

Eating bread binds V.1 to V.15 together. The guest's beatitude praises those who "eat bread" in the kingdom of God. The third scene tells a story in the story. V.15 and v.24 frame the parable that is v.16-23. In v.15 someone responds by describing those are blessed who eat bread in the kingdom of God – thus telling the story about a great banquet. In v.24 Jesus utters a woe to the rich people.

4. Interpretation of the Parable v.15-24

4.1. The Frame of the Parable: A Beatitude Pronounced by a Guest (v.15) *(Bringing persons on a "stage" helps to illustrate the structure of the text. The persons must not speak on their own, just representing the persons. Jesus, a Pharisee, and a "guest" sit together. A cloth or other materials separate the parable as story in the story from the group of the symposium. And again, the two scenes are indicated. The master and the slave start at the first part, after the music (V.21) both change to the second part. There other persons can be brought to the stage and fill the room.)*

Sketch of the scenes:

<i>Jesus and the Pharisees v.1-15</i>	<i>master + slave v.16-21b</i>	<i>master + slave + guests (filling up) v.21c-23</i>	<i>Jesus and the Pharisees v.24</i>
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Lk 14:15:

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to him, "Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!"

V.15 has various functions:

- a) It binds the story back to the invitation to the house of a Pharisee in v.1. They all are eating bread and one of the guests starts to talk.
- b) It explains the association to bread: Bread is the connection - how would it be to eat bread in the kingdom of God?
- c) It is the transition from the end of the wisdom sayings about guests and host into the parable
- d) The beatitude (v.15) and the woe frames the parable (v.24).
- e) It refers to the Kingdom of God as a theme of the parable.

As an answer to this guest' beatitude – it is not important who the guest is – Jesus tells a parable about the kingdom of God. The times are hard. Different political movements try to cope with the Roman occupation through violence, terror, or obedience or negotiating. They all are longing for liberation from the Roman oppression and hoping for the kingdom of God, God's salvation, God's Shalom, peace. Jesus tells stories that shed a different and unexpected light on a situation. What that means for the kingdom of God, (the *basileia thou theou* in Greek,) the hearers then – and we, the readers, - will all have to find out.

By a parable, Jesus is not defining the kingdom of God directly. Very often interpretations start with V.16. However, for the gospel the framework is important. It has an impact on hearing the story.

Parables have an open end, they try to make us think, and they try to draw us into the story and be part of it – and ask us to make something out of it. And this message is not the same for everybody. Who reads and hears the parable comes from a certain context. The individual interaction between parable and reader provides an outcome that is different for each one.

4.2. The Parable of the Great Banquet: A story within a story (v.16-23)

v. 16: Then Jesus said to him, "Someone gave a great dinner and invited many.

Jesus' parable is a story within a story. The very first sentence of the story of any text is very meaningful. Here also we have an artfully arranged sentence. *How* things are presented is important for the interpretation.

Think of a stage: Curtain – and the stage is visible. What and who is visible?

Here is **someone**. Someone: Any other determination is missing.

Who is the host? It is not important. Important is the type of person and his invitation. The same applies for the invited persons. Many! The “many” are not distinguished. What is the reason for the invitation? No reason given. The indetermination provides the opportunity for open identification.

Presenting the acting persons without anything special indicates that the persons as individuals are not the focus of the story. However, as little as the text says, some information is there and it is about their milieu.

Who is “someone”, who is able to invite many? It must be a well-to-do person. To provide enough room for many people lying on couches at a banquet requires a big house. Inviting many implies enough room and enough food and drink. Maybe he was invited by the “many” before and has now to invite them back. The hearers of the story are not totally in the dark whom Jesus means when he says “someone”. The “someone“ stands for all who are able to give a banquet and celebrate a feast. A poor man or a poor family cannot raise enough money for such an event. So there should be some wealth; there must be enough money. A small sentence, but it implies a lot for the hearers: The host and the guests are rich persons.

Up to now one expects a nice story. A big meal – what a joy. Most of the people had a shortage of everything. To be hungry was normal for many people at that time. Many lived in villages or in towns in poor circumstances. Even if there was no hunger – the possibility of poverty was omnipresent. How easily it could be that there was not enough rain for the crops and then the harvest would be in danger. Or the Romans could take the food away or raise the taxes. If one was ill, there was no income. The daily workers in towns lived from hand to mouth and it was not sure that the family got enough food. In short, many people lived in precarious conditions.

A story about a feast raised expectations. A banquet, a feast implies more than just enough eating and drinking. It was (and is) a symbol for joy, for community, and in religious terms it is a sign for the kingdom of God. The beatitude of the guest about the blessed who eat bread in the kingdom of God opens up to a second level of understanding. The abundance of a feast is the taste of the kingdom of God. In Isaiah says:

Is 25, 6-8

*(6) On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-matured wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-matured wines strained clear.*

*(7) And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;*

(8) he will swallow up death forever.

*Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,*

for the Lord has spoken.

(9) It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the Lord for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.

(10) For the hand of the Lord will rest on this mountain.

The story nourishes these positive expectations with the next verse.

v. 17: At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now."

The second sentence of the parable heads directly into action without any other information. It comes to the present time and sends his slave. The banquet is ready to start. Sending his slave confirms that this host is well off. He has slaves. The notion of a big rich house is strengthened. In addition, one expects that the guests belong to the same social class.

The slave

The slave is another figure in the story that is only described by his status. A slave! Like the other figures, only the types, the position, the function is of interest. What is his perspective on the feast? There was a lot to do for all who serve in the house of the host, workers and women, cooking, baking, bringing so much food for a big feast, providing the rooms. And bringing the invitation to the guests.

He is sent to the many guests and has one sentence to say: Come, everything is ready.

Come, everything is ready.

The slave has to repeat the invitation of the host. It is high time. The dinner is ready. Now – the guests are summoned to come. What an invitation! Come now, everything is ready! All you have to do is to go. No preparation, no work to do. One is invited to get food and wine in abundance, an opportunity to be saturated, to become full up. Eat and drink as much as you want. A gift for you!

The two first verses seem to introduce a nice story of a feast. If one looks closer, there is no direct communication. The story reports what the host had said, what the slave has to say, what the host had done. The host is not talking to the slave directly; he is not talking directly to the guests. The story sends us with the slave to the invited guests.

v. 18a: But they all alike began to make excuses.

This is a blow. All the expectations melt away. This is the end of the idea of the banquet. Because **all** alike began to make excuses! All, not only the following three that are paradigmatic for the whole bunch of persons. *Nobody* wants to join the feast!

A small sentence and everything is gone. The story could end here. Reading any commentary the interpretations haste to the three following examples of excuses. However, they are only

illustrations of what this small sentence says. Important is that *nobody* wants to join the feast! This is extraordinary and highly unlikely. Some excuses would be normal, but *nobody*? They all had accepted the first invitation. The banquet ended before it even started.

A parable exaggerates and tells something unexpected in order to get its point. The following three invited guests and their excuses are representing types of persons. Repetition is important in ancient literature. Literature was produced for ears; the hearers have to be reminded. Variation of a theme was desirable. It is part of the style of Luke to repeat things or tell incidents three times. Here, three times he cites an excuse, not only extending the story but in a skilled rhetorical way. Even if we have three cited speeches they are only reported speeches. No one speaks directly to someone else. But the speeches illustrate again the milieu. Although the excuses take more lines than the invitation, the focus stays on the one who wants to have a Great Banquet.

A short notice on preaching about the text: Very often preachers try to identify their actual hearer with the guests. Then moral exhortations about what we do or not do are abundant. But it is important to stay in the story and follow the flow of a parable. Again: A parable does not identify directly but offers a move to end the story with our own answer!

In v.18b-20 the repetitions of three excuses are composed very carefully.

v. 18b:

The first said to him:

I have bought a piece of land,

and I must go out

and see it;

please accept my regrets.

The first one is a long speech with a detailed reported. To buy – to go out – to see: three “actions” and then the formal excuse: “Please accept my regrets”.

Here the parable is open for reactions. With whom do we feel?

- Do we feel with the host? The poor man, what a rejection! Isn't it bitter if you have everything ready for a feast and nobody shows up? Will this fact damage his reputation ?

- Or with the guest, understanding his excuse? Sometimes there *is* work to do instead of time for celebrating!

- Or with the guest, knowing that there are meals and feasts where you do not like to go?

Before jumping too early to conclusions a look at the context is helpful. The background of the milieu was clear for the hearers of the parable. The invited person is very rich, maybe one of the tax collectors. Why? Because he is able to buy land.

Under Roman occupation, it was complicate for the ordinary peasants to keep their land. The taxes were high and the poor people in the countryside often were not able to pay them. The Romans did not collect the taxes themselves. They sold the taxes of a village, a small town or

a part of a countryside to a rich person. This person payed and was now allowed to regain the money from the people. For him it was business to press and regain more than he had payed. Even living under the same oppression through the Romans, the rich ones had ways and money to adjust. Some of them worked with the Romans, especially those who benefitted from the tax collection system.

For the poor people it was disastrous. If they couldn't pay they had to sell their land. Maybe the peasants could stay and work, but now as tenants and not owners. In addition, if again the harvest surplus was not enough for the taxes they had to surrender their children or themselves as slaves. In this context only a small class of people was able to buy land.

The gospels name these tax collectors as an enemy of the people and, from a Jewish point of view, as a sinner. Jesus often discusses with them and even eats with them (cf. Lk 19, Zachäus).

The first guest sets a pattern with his excuse and regret. The narrator takes two more examples, carefully working on the speeches.

*v. 19: Another said,
"I have bought five yoke of oxen,
and I am going to try them out;
please accept my regrets."*

The narrator has set the pattern and now shortens the answer of the second guest: He uses only two lines as explanation and adds the regret. But his milieu has even more wealth. Five yoke of oxen: What a huge investment! This must be a very rich person. Simple peasants were glad if they had some goats or some sheep. A cow or an ox was very expensive! Five yoke oxen exceeds any "normal" investment. How much land does he have to need five yoke of oxen? The invited guest stands for a type of social class. Again, in the light of reciprocity the host also belongs to the upper class.

*v. 20: Another said,
"I have just been married,
and therefore I cannot come."*

The third guest only has two very short sentences and even a polite regret is missing! Just married, can't come! Our narrator makes it short; the hearers now have to get the principle.

This third excuse is widely discussed. Is it different from the others? Just married – who would not understand if he stays with his wife? Moneymaking or administration of the newly bought property and cattle occupies the first two persons. Having married is something personal. Well, not for the portrayed class! To marry a wife in the upper class mostly was an act of accumulating wealth. Family bonding was important, not personal feelings.

Remember: There were more excuses. The slave had to go to all invited guests, and all found a reason to reject the invitation. How short would their excuse be? The house is still empty, the meal and the wine are ready. The intention to have a full house for a feast failed.

*v. 21: So the slave returned
and reported this to his master.*

In v.21 the slave is the active person. He returns and he reports. Again not knowing how exactly the slave put the words, it is enough to know that he reported that all excused themselves. All have an important reason not to come. Land, cattle, marriage ... are three reasons and there were more. The parable makes a halt! The story exceeded the situation in such a way that there is only the host and a huge empty house full of meal and wine, waiting for guests who will not come. The story comes to a dead end. What will happen?

Dead End! No feast, no celebration, no joy, only an empty house! And now?

- What will be the reaction of the inviting person?
- Accept the excuses and invite for another day?
- Give the food away to the poor?
- Invite other persons?

Important for the interpretation is not to leave the parable but to stay in the story. The host is neither God nor Jesus who tells the parable. A parable does not compare directly but says "This is like ...". What the "like" is has to be found out. The open end of the story challenges us to find an end for the story.

The dead end is the turning point of the parable (see chart)

(We want to experience the dead end and then the turn around: music plays; the participants are moving in their place without going forward. After some time the participants turn around. The turn enables them to see something else, to get a new perspective.)

The verse is the turning point of the parable. The old order of the rich milieu ends. The dead end requires a new beginning. Otherwise there is no future and of course no kingdom of God! It needs a total conversion of everything and especially of everyone. If the host wants to celebrate a feast, he has to turn around and change. Therefore, the story is a story about the conversion of a rich man. Few words mark this change and the one can experience the change in how the narrator puts the text.

v. 22: Then the owner of the house became angry

Up to now one did understand that the host belongs to a high class in society and is a rich person with a big house, slaves, enough money to invite other rich persons.

One of the changes is the first glimpse of the personality of the host. The feast is more important than any business. The excuses are not acceptable or sufficient for the host. He became angry! The narrator attests an emotion. The language represents this change with

something else: The “someone” now is specified with his position as “owner of the house” – *oikodespotes* in Greek.

Many interpretations relate this “being angry” to the excuses. As a turning point, the “anger” relates not only to the past sequence but also primarily to consequence: There will be no feast. The house stays empty, no meal, no music, no drinking. However, his aim is to fill the house. If the feast is missing, the kingdom of God is not present. No taste of the *basileia tou theou*, no messianic hint for the new world.

... *and said to his slave:*

Again an important change in contrast to the beginning. He addresses the slave *directly*. Up to now there was no direct speech to the slave, just the report of what he should do. Now the host sees the slave as a person – still as a slave, but he speaks to him. As we will hear the slave also gains his own voice.

This verse describes the host now differently, as a person, not as a type representing the milieu, also with directly citing his words.

*"Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town
and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame."*

Go out – bring in! The two movements are important. It is not “summon”, as the others are summoned. There was no invitation before. The invitation for the feast into the house of a rich man will surprise all. Such an invitation blows up any convention of inviting guests or holding a banquet. It overtakes the rules for invitations, and it overrules the system of reciprocity.

... *at once:*

At once makes things urgent: There is no time because the banquet as a sign for the kingdom of God is near.

The people in Palestine were waiting for the Messiah, hoping for a new world and new order, the kingdom of God. Jesus proclaims that there are moments where it is already present (Luke 11:20/Mt 12:28). The urgency of the invitation wants not to waste time, let people taste the kingdom of God; bring glimpses of experiences like healings, uplifting the poor and a new community where the *basileia tou theou* is present. One of these signs is the new community eating bread together and celebrating together. The parable gives an example for the new community: Those at the margin of the society are part of the banquet. Paul’s word in Gal 3,28 “there is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ“. Indeed, Luke is aiming with his parable at the early Christian community for which he is writing. (*see below*).

The master of the house takes up the kind of guests that v.13 enumerated: the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. In Luke 14:13 Jesus taught the Pharisees whom to invite: *But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind.*

One of the guests reacts: “Blessed is one who eats his bread in the kingdom of God.” It is a challenge to Jesus who may be right but the praxis is only possible in the kingdom of God. Jesus illustrated his word by a story how this kingdom of God can be achieved *now*. Very difficult and very easy, both! The feast constitutes the new community of the kingdom of God.

“... into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame.”

Other than the first time the master of the house indicates a space where the new guests are living and where to go. The streets and lanes of the town are the places where the poor, the crippled persons, the blind and the lame persons stayed during the day. They have no chance of working and earning some money. Begging is the only possibility of surviving and helping the family a bit – if there is any family to whom they belong; the family was – and is in many countries up to now – the only institution of support for sick or old people. The parable takes up the Tora because the invited persons “the poor ...” are found as a group of poor persons in the Old Testament. In relating to these persons in the house of the Pharisee, Jesus relates his word and his parable to the Jewish law.

... Bring them in:

I will come back to this phrase in v.23. But why: *Bring* them in? At first sight, one gets the impression that nobody wants to come to the feast, not even the poor people. Often interpreters think that the poor do not want to come.

But why are they not just invited? Why are they brought in? Looking at the persons who the slave has to bring to the feast the reason is clear: They really need help to come to the feast and to celebrate. It is not that they do not want to go or that they don't need the bread of the kingdom of God. It is not that they do not want to celebrate; nor is it that they do not want to satisfy their hunger and thirst, or to taste the wonderful world of the kingdom of God. They simply have no chance to get there on their own. The blind, the lame, the crippled persons are literally not able to get there. It is not only that they get no invitation from the rich person. They cannot come because of their handicap. How should someone with no eyesight find the house? How should someone who cannot walk, go to a house? How should someone crippled have the energy to come? And the poor? Even if they can walk on their own feet the poverty makes them crippled in a social sense. They are not part of the class that celebrates mutual invitations; they have no money to celebrate even with their own family and friends, they are not seen as persons of respect; they lack everything to be part of society.

Sending the slave with the order to bring them means sending a helping hand to bring them to the feast. It is a kind of empowerment for them to join the banquet – but not in a sense of bringing them to the level of the rich milieu. Otherwise, the terrible unjust system would be

sustained. On the contrary, the kingdom of God promises a new world with a new order, no injustice, no oppression, and no poverty. Looking out for *the good* news it tells those who are at the margin of life that this has to change.

The parable calls for the conversion of rich people! Indeed, rich people have to think anew about their wealth. Very often it is built at the expense of other people. This parable has a scary relation to present burning issues.

The message is: Your feasts are far from being a sign of the kingdom of God. If the table and house are not open for those in need, if the social system of reciprocity and connections of the same class and milieu does not end there is no real feast and no real joy and no liberation for the people.

(Hold up a “caution” sign)

Coming to this part of the parable it is important to *stay in the parable* and not to switch to allegory or identification with figures outside the story. A parable “*is like ...*”, not “*is*”. But interpreters often try to identify now suddenly the master of the house with God or Jesus. God invites the poor, Jesus invites the poor ... this is true, but not here in the story. The master of the house is not God or Jesus, just the master of the house. Otherwise, the whole meaning of the parable has failed.

a) It would be a terrible message if for God the poor and sick people would be only a replacement for the others who refuse to come. God’s feast is without reciprocity! He will feed all people and wipe their tears away. A feast that earns this name should have some of the messianic feast of God. Therefore, one has to go to the end of the parable.

b) One would miss the meaning that the parable has for the “masters” of houses. The story aims at the conversion of the master and therefore at the conversion of all who can identify with him – in different ways. The meaning of the parable depends on the interaction of text and reader. It is different and depends on who reads or hears it. It is not the same message to all people (see below).

And the slave said,

"Sir (kyrie)

what you ordered has been done, ...

V.22 closes the first part of the invitation – what had been ordered has been done. The poor, blind, lame and crippled are in the house to participate in the banquet. The new world is present. The house owner now is addressed as *kyrie*. *Kyrios* (greek for master) is one of the messianic titles of Jesus; but also normally persons with high positions are called *kyrios*. The title can mislead the interpretation of the master as Jesus. The house owner is not God or Jesus but a rich man who converted. Here we experience the change and reversion of the man. In addition, this conversion may be indicated by the different title. If this were the end, nothing would be missing in the parable – really nothing? What about the slave?

... and there is still room.'

In the next sentence the slave gets his own voice. After having said what was done he rises to be part of the planning of the banquet. He is active, thinking, proposing and bringing his own input and contribution that the feast might be a success. He says: There is still room. He is more involved than the host *oikodespotes*. He knows because he is working on the spot, concrete, directly with the people. The slave advances from being oppressed to a partner for the owner. He supposes, he urges, he proposes how to improve and extend the banquet. It is not enough what has been done until now. "There is still room" is not only a remark. It is an active working for the kingdom of God. There is still room: It is the slave who brings good news and enables the house owner to extend his invitation.

At least there are two good news: One from the master, one from the slave – and according to Paul there is no longer slave or master. Relating to the kingdom of God both are the same: Proclaiming the Great Banquet.

a) *Come, everything is ready (master)*

b) *There is still room (slave).*

*v. 23: Then the master said to the slave,
"Go out into the roads and lanes,
and compel people to come in,
so that my house may be filled.*

"Compel" was the word where in history the force against others to be Christians was justified (cf. *compelle intrare*, see above; *hold up the "caution" sign*). But like the first "bring them in" it is an extended invitation. The aim is clear: That the house may be filled.

In Luke's gospel the banquet does not start, there are still persons to come, to be invited. It is a never ending process, always knowing "There is still room." To hold the house open is the end of the story. Luke's aims at the message that **today the access to the coming feast is possible** – any day! Because there is still room.

If there is still room more invitations are possible, the house is extended. House in Greek is *oikos* – and the *oikos* is extended, going from the town to the streets out of the town into the whole world.

4.3. The Frame of the Parable: A Woe at the End (v. 24)

v. 24: For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner

With v.23 the parable ends and switches back to the banquet in the house of the Pharisee. Still Jesus is talking, now having ended the parable he says a woe to the guests in the house of the Pharisee. Why is Luke 14:1-24 ending with a woe? This woe relates back to the beatitude of v.15, and both are framing the parable. The beatitude opens the window to experience the necessary changes for the kingdom of God to come and draws the picture of the Great

Banquet. The woe closes the window because Jesus is still at a banquet in the old order. Still the kingdom of God is not there.

But the parable had given the picture of the new community and the new values. The master of the house is there as an example how to come closer. And the invitation is there to identify with the people in the story and finish it in their own way. Like any other parable it depends who reads and hears it. The response is different and the message is different.

For those wealthy people it is the message to follow the master and to convert to the kingdom of God.

For those poor, lame, crippled and blind it is a story of hope and possibilities.

5. Luke 14:16-23: A parable for Luke's community

For Luke's community the parable is an appeal that the young Christian community has to be something different. It was a problem for the communities to break through the "normal" conventions.

Celebrating the kingdom of God is nothing that fits with the normal order of a society. The Great Banquet follows the different order of the new world in God's reign. This new order happened when rich persons as well as slaves sat and ate together. Those who served the one were now present as equals. This was a huge challenge. In 1 Cor 11 Paul argues that those who are not sharing at the same table are literally eating the last judgement. Many other references in the New Testament deal with this new situation. This difference was one of those that shaped Christianity in the long run as a belief on its own.

6. Selected Literature

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The Parable of the Great Banquet or: The Conversion of a Rich Man (Lk 14:15-24)

The frame of the parable:

v.15: The Beatitude: It sheds a certain light on the story – parable is like, not: is the kingdom of God (relating it to Isaiah 25)

	CONVERSION of Master
1. Scene: v.16-21b Focus on Master	2. Scene: v.21c-23
No emotion	Emotion – anger
Milieu of a rich man	Milieu: Poor people
Reciprocity: Contrary to this principle, he does not give away anything and he receives nothing back	System: No reciprocity possible – only grace
No individual presentation	
No direct communication	Individuality of persons: the slave names the master (<i>oikodespotes – kyrios</i>)
They are called – invited guests, closed system of community	Direct communication between man and slave
Those who can come don't come	Bring them in: open system of community
"All" have excuses: Rejection of the man in his system	Support for those who can't come and can't give
No community jn rich reciprocity	Slave works actively for the goal of a feast: Partner in filling the house
There is no feast without guests	New community of those who can't give anything
Aim: A Feast in a full house:	There is a feast because there are guests
No Feast is not possible in this world	Aim: A Feast in a full house:
	Feast is possible in this world
CONVERSION	

The frame of the parable:

v.24: The Woe: The story has an open end; how can the called (rich) people be part of the feast?

"Come, Everything is Ready"

"There is still room"