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They All Began to Make Excuses

#1361-B

Series: The Parables of Scripture



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Note: Russell wrote each of these lessons in a manner that would enable him to clearly communicate them to his weekly class. The grammar or punctuation you encounter may not be technically perfect, but you will certainly “hear” his unique gift for making the message applicable to the common man in everyday situations.

It’s been said of him that he was really a writer who read his stuff. And that’s a very accurate statement!

May you be richly blessed as you “hear” as you read.

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Christianity is not a religion; it is a relationship. And from the very beginning, Jesus' great opposition was not from the world, but from those who had religion in a neat package which allowed God the freedom to run His universe, but only so long as He used the prescribed boxes man had created to define spirituality. This, of course, took God off the throne, elevated religious leaders to the role of deity, and created a system of rules and regulations that so stifled man's ability to know God personally, that it made a mockery out of the very process.

Much of the Master's teaching, then, both by words and by example, had to be to restore to fallen man an understanding that he could actually know a God of compassion and mercy, and that he could know Him, not as a distant deity, but as a personal savior and friend.

This, of course, was a great threat to the religious system. Those who made their livelihood by maintaining control over the religious hierarchy were petrified by the utter simplicity and personal integrity of this Galilean carpenter who claimed to be God.

Much of Jesus' exhorting and many of Jesus' parables were efforts to expose the utter hypocrisy of some of the traditions the rabbis had imposed and go back to the simple, basic issues of life. Man had separated himself from a holy God through sin. God wanted to restore that relationship. He loved man. He longed for man to realize that it wasn't cold orthodoxy that He desired, but men and women filled with the very love that God possessed—agape love. That could only happen if they became filled with God Himself.

This was about to become possible, and Jesus was laying the groundwork for making the break between rules and reality. In Luke, chapter 14, we have another of His wonderful parables, and we have, once again, real life situations leading up to the sharing of that parable.

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In Luke 14 the chapter begins like this:

And it came to pass, as he went into the house of one of the chief Pharisees to eat bread on the Sabbath day, that they watched him.

And, behold, there was a certain man before him which had the dropsy.

And Jesus answering spake unto the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?

And they held their peace. And he took *him*, and healed him, and let him go;

And answered them, saying, Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day?

And they could not answer him again to these things.

(Luke 14:1-6)

Jesus was in enemy territory. He was eating dinner in the dining room of the religious secret service, and He was on their “hit” list. The Scripture says, “they watched Him”. Indeed. They scrutinized His every move.

There are seven incidents in the gospel in which apparently Jesus healed on the Sabbath. There was the healing of Simon’s mother-in-law in Luke 4:38, the healing of the man with the withered hand in Luke 6:6, of the woman who was bent for eighteen years in Luke 13:14, the healing of the paralytic in John 5:9, the man born blind in John 9:14 and the healing of the demon possessed man in the synagogue in Mark 1. What Jesus was about to do, then, was not at all unexpected. In fact, it wouldn’t be unusual for these Scribes and Pharisees to have planted the man with dropsy in the house and invited Jesus to dinner, *just to catch Him in the act of healing on the Sabbath*.

They, incidentally, were feeding Him on the Sabbath. So ritualistic had the Sabbath become that no food could be cooked on that day, and anything cooked beforehand could not be heated or kept warm “by oil dregs, manure, salt, chalk, or sand, either moist or dry, nor using straw, grape-skins, flock or vegetables”. Food could, however, be kept warm using “clothes, fruits, pigeons’ feathers and flax tow”.

It was into this kind of abusive traditionalism and legalism that Jesus came. Jesus never missed a beat. Without so much

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as a trace of fear, *for God hath not given us a spirit of fear*, He healed the man and “sent him away”. Before He healed him, though, He turned to His pious hosts and asked a perfectly logical question, “Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath day?” The Scribes and Pharisees held their peace. They said nothing, for anything they said could be held against them by the people.

After the man had left, Jesus turned to them and said, “Which of you shall have an ass or an ox fallen into a pit, and will not straightway pull him out on the Sabbath day?” Again, they had no answer. It was common practice in that time for even a pious Jew, if an animal was in danger, to rescue it, even on the Sabbath. Was not a man worth as much to God as an animal? How illogical had the law become. Don’t you love that final verse, “They could not answer these things.” They had no answer. They were caught in their own trap.

Jesus now tells the first of two parables, and the message of the two indicates that they are part of the same truth. It reads:

And he put forth a parable to those which were bidden, when he marked how they chose out the chief rooms; saying unto them,

When thou art bidden of any *man* to a wedding, sit not down in the highest room; lest a more honourable man than thou be bidden of him;

And he that bade thee and him come and say to thee, Give this man place; and thou begin with shame to take the lowest room.

But when thou art bidden, go and sit down in the lowest room; that when he that bade thee cometh, he may say unto thee, Friend, go up higher: then shalt thou have worship in the presence of them that sit at meat with thee.

For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

Then said he also to him that bade him, When thou makest a dinner or a supper, call not thy friends, nor thy brethren, neither thy kinsmen, nor *thy* rich neighbours; lest they also bid thee again, and a recompence be made thee.

But when thou makest a feast, call the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind:

And thou shalt be blessed; for they cannot recompense thee: for thou shalt be recompensed at the resurrection of the just.

(Luke 14:7-14)

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Whether this first exhortation is really a parable or not is debatable. It may well be that “He put forth a parable”, but first He addressed the hypocrisy that so permeated this “covered-dish social” at the preacher’s house. It says, “He marked how they chose out the chief rooms.” These Pharisees and their religiously acceptable cohorts walked into the dining area and scanned the room, looking for the best seats in the house. After all, they surmised, their place in the synagogue certainly earned them a treasured place at the dinner table. Their attitude of self-importance was obvious and sickening to the Master.

Jesus used the analogy of a wedding feast to put it in perspective. Imagine that you are invited to a wedding reception, He said, and you walk into the room and there are ten seats available, two of them next to the bride and groom. If you go up to the front and sit down by them, you are taking a big risk and are being presumptuous, to say the least. Now imagine that about that time the groom’s brother and sister-in-law arrive, and *you are sitting in their place*. With the accompanying embarrassment for everyone, you are asked to please move, because you have seated yourself in a higher place than was assigned to you. How humiliating.

On the other hand, had you seated yourself in the back where there were also vacant seats, and the groom had seen you come in and waved to you to come sit by him, *what an honor, and what a mark of love and acceptance it showed to everyone in the room*. Your job was to assume the role of a nobody; God’s role was to exalt you if He so chose. The passage adds:

For whosoever exalteth himself shall be abased; and he that humbleth himself shall be exalted.

It has always amazed me that the verse doesn’t say, “Oftentimes the one exalting himself will be abased” or “It is possible that by exalting yourself you might have to be humbled.” No, it is framed as an absolute. “Whosoever” is a word that means “Every one who does the following” and “shall” means it will happen. Everyone, each and every time, who consciously puts himself forward to attract attention or assume acclaim will, in some way, have to be brought low or humiliated. And (absolute again) everyone who consciously assumes a place of humility and does not for a minute imagine that he deserves honor, will in some way, some day, be exalted. It may be here; it may be in heaven,

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but the truth will stand.

So, having first of all healed on the Sabbath, crushing their tradition, then having sternly rebuked them for demanding the best seats in the house, he now looks around the room and questions the guest list. He says, "Let's see who you invite to your home for meals. Those you want to minister to, or those you want to impress? Those you owe a favor to, or those who cannot return the favor and so return praise to God for the invitation? What is your goal in hospitality, anyway? To please yourself and enjoy yourself or to use your home to touch the lives of those who otherwise would have no invitations at all?"

Jesus, it says, turned to His host, who by now must have been seething in anger, and said, "When you have a dinner and invite others to your home, don't ask your buddies or your relatives or your wealthy friends you are trying to impress so they will, in turn, invite you to their home. Here's your prospective guest list. Ask the poor (those who cannot afford a meal), the physically challenged (those the world calls "handicapped"), and the blind (those who cannot be impressed with your gaudy surroundings). When that becomes your guest list, you will be laying up treasures in heaven, and you will be blessed with rewards at the resurrection."

Wouldn't you have loved to be a fly on the wall at the petrified Pharisee's hacienda about now? I'll bet the silence must have stretched the length of Israel. Jesus has, in one fell swoop, mopped up the floor with all of the self-righteous traditions and self-serving attitudes of these religious generals. In effect, Jesus has just told them they aren't even privates in God's army. They have been living as though the kingdom depended on them, *and they weren't even in the kingdom, let alone in charge of it, and they were too arrogant even to know it.*

We don't know for sure the gamut of reactions Jesus faced, but we do know about one, and that one spawned the parable we will focus on for the remainder of this lesson. Verse 15 continues:

And when one of them that sat at meat with him heard these things, he said unto him, Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God.

Then said he unto him, A certain man made a great supper, and bade many:

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And sent his servant at supper time to say to them that were bidden, Come; for all things are now ready.

And they all with one *consent* began to make excuse. The first said unto him, I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it: I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I go to prove them: I pray thee have me excused.

And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come.

So that servant came, and shewed his lord these things. Then the master of the house being angry said to his servant, 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.

And the servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.

And the lord said unto the servant, Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel *them* to come in, that my house may be filled.

For I say unto you, That none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper. (Luke 14:15-24)

It was common in Jesus' day, when someone was to hold a banquet or a dinner party, for the invitations to go out far in advance, and for the invited parties to accept or reject ahead of time. The exact time of the meal, however, was not announced in advance.

Only when the food was ready to be served would the servants of the host go through the city streets calling those who had been invited and had accepted to come, for the meal was prepared and the table was set. It was an insult indeed to be invited, accept the invitation, and then when the servant came to bring them to the dinner, to make an excuse and not come. For someone to decline without an emergency such as an illness was an offense indeed.

Jesus has taken the occasion of this Pharisaical setting to tell a story with all kinds of hidden meanings for "those who had ears to hear". If you are a believer, you have ears to hear, and the message is as appropriate for the church of our generation as it was for the Scribes and Pharisees in Jesus' day.

The story was about just such a dinner party. It was a

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hypothetical illustration about a man who invited a select group of friends to a gala dinner at his home. The invitations went out and everyone accepted. They indicated they wanted to attend. On the day of the party, the man sent out his servants as was customary, and waited for them to fill the dining hall so the festivities could begin.

As the servants approached the houses, however, where the guests lived, they found, not homes brimming with excited guests, dressed and ready for the dinner, but apathetic, apologetic men who were not dressed for the occasion, not prepared to come, and not planning to come. The Scripture says “They all began to make excuses.”

The background is important because these people knew beforehand that they were invited and that their host was going to a great deal of trouble preparing a meal for them. Their excuses, then, must be looked at in the light of their urgency. This was no last minute thing. It wasn't like driving down the street, seeing a neighbor, asking him if he wants to play golf, and he shrugs his shoulders and says, “I wish I could, but I promised my wife I'd take her shopping.” No, these guys knew all about this dinner, and they had accepted the invitation long ago. The kinds of excuses they gave, then, must be viewed in that light. Let's look at them:

1- “I have bought a piece of ground, and I must needs go and see it.” Now there is an urgent excuse. Surely, he didn't think that piece of real estate would change value in the next three hours. This man was in bondage to his *investments*. He had been invited to a most prestigious event and he was using as his excuse that he needed to tend to a piece of land. He would rather miss the great feast than take his eyes off his investments for just a little while. It says, “They all began to make excuses.” His was ridiculous. So are many of ours.

2- “I have bought five yoke of oxen and I go to prove them. I pray thee have me excused.” His latest toys had arrived from the mail order catalog and he had to try them out. This was like a farmer getting a new tractor with an fm radio and a cassette player and he couldn't wait to see if they worked. Or it would be like being invited to a wonderful dinner party, accepting, and then canceling because you got that new laser printer in the mail and you wanted to see if all the fonts worked correctly. Sounds

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silly, doesn't it. But don't laugh. The Scripture says, "They all began to make excuses." So do we.

3- "I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come." It is unlikely that he didn't know he was getting married when the invitation came. His excuse was the most logical, but still obviously, based on the outcome of the parable, it was unacceptable. Jewish law allowed a man to not go out to war for one year or be charged with any business responsibilities during that time. He was to stay at home and build a relationship with his new spouse. (Deuteronomy 24:5) It was a good law, but this man was using a law intended for one purpose as an excuse for something else. It says, "They all began to make excuses." His, too, was not acceptable.

The servant who was out calling people to the dinner returned to his master with the grim news. "No one you invited is planning to come. The very people you honored with your invitation have, after accepting, come up with reasons why they can't be nourished at your house today. They all made excuses. What shall I do?"

The host was furious, and well he should have been. He had extended an honor to these people and incurred an incredible cost to bring them to the table of the feast. They took it so lightly. They treated an invitation to the master's table with contempt and disregarded his grace in extending the invitation in the first place.

What did the master do? Did he call off the dinner? Did he send back to the homes of those who refused and plead with them to reconsider? No, he did an amazingly unusual thing.

He, in effect, revised the guest list. He "uninvited" those with all the weak excuses, and he told his servant this, "Go back out in the street and invite four groups of people to my house for this festive dinner." He was to invite:

1- The poor. πτωχος ptochos {pto-khos}

It means someone who is reduced to begging for his food; someone so lowly that he or she is helpless or powerless to fend for themselves, and thus they have to resort to welfare. They are, in effect, destitute and unable to do anything about it. You've seen them standing on the street corner, begging for enough bus fare to get home, or enough food to stay alive. Your first response

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may be one of disgust, rather than pity. But these, according to definition, are not begging because they are lazy, but because they are unable to do anything about their wretched condition. Jesus said the man hosting the feast sent out the word to go under the expressway bridges of life and find the poor who live there, and invite them to be your honored guests. I wish I could see the response of those Pharisees. Unfortunately, I'm not sure it was much different from ours.

2- The maimed. αναπηρος anaperos {an-ap'-ay-ros}
disabled in the limbs, maimed, crippled, injured in, or bereft of, some member of the body

The master of the feast extended an invitation to those who could not walk or work at ordinary jobs because of a crippling injury or because of a physical defect. These are wheel-chair bound men and women and boys and girls who would like to be involved in the sports activities and in the business activities of ordinary people, but some circumstance has befallen them and they are physically unable to be a part of the mainstream of life. The master of the household said, "Move out some of the chairs. Make room for the wheelchairs and the walkers. Clear out the waiting area at the nursing homes". You say nobody ever invites them? He did.

3- The halt. χωλος cholos {kho-los'}

This word apparently denotes a person who is more seriously injured than the maimed. It may mean someone without an arm or without a leg or in some way disfigured. The seriousness of their handicap can be seen in the way it is used in Mark 9:

And if thy foot offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter halt into life, than having two feet to be cast into hell, into the fire that never shall be quenched:(Mark 9:45)

It is a disfigurement so pronounced that it may be difficult for some to spend time with you. It may include those you see with Alzheimer's disease or other ailments of the aged that make them hard to watch, hard to eat with, hard to fellowship with. It could have been used to describe a leper in Jesus' day. Something has turned what would be a normal life into one that is socially unacceptable. It probably would include those whose mental condition causes them to behave in ways not considered socially correct. No one in his right mind, who is trying to impress his neighbors, would invite these people to dinner. This man did.

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4- The blind τῶς tuphlos {toof-los}

This word is used more than 50 times in Scripture to denote someone who cannot see. This person won't be impressed with your exotic color scheme or your beautiful new cabinets or that expensive painting you hung on the wall. They cannot see the things we see; but sometimes, beloved, they see things we don't. Often they have vision of the soul. They, too, were added to the top of the guest list.

So the servant went out and invited these most unlikely prospects. The neighbors may have looked on in disbelief. Guess who's coming to dinner? was probably the word that burned the wires of the prehistoric phone lines in Israel that day. Guess who's coming to dinner, indeed.

Even after all these folks came running, walking, hobbling, and rolling up to the dinner table, there was still room. "Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room.", the servant reported. The master of the household didn't waste a minute.

And the lord said unto the servant, "Go out into the highways and hedges, and compel them to come in, that my house may be filled," For I say unto you, "none of those men which were bidden shall taste of my supper".

Still there is room. What an incredible reality. There is yet room for more at the table of the Lord. The master's response: "Go out into the highways and hedges and compel them to come in." That word "compel" is a stumblingblock to some. It has been misused in ages past to create state churches and force membership based on external conditions such as geography or tradition, rather than on conversion and transformation. It literally means "to go out and aggressively seek to extend an invitation." It is not simply a passive or generalized kind of invitation. It makes the terms of the invitation clear and the motivation behind the invitation intense.

The application of this parable is so many-faceted that we cannot possibly cover it all, but we need to see at least the main points.

1- There is a clear message about Israel and their initial rejection of Messiah. The Jew was the chosen one invited to the feast of Messiah, but "He came unto His own, and His own

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received Him not.” The Scribes and the Pharisees, the ones to whom this parable was addressed, were blinded to Messiah’s presence. Having accepted the invitation of God to be His people, when the servant of the Most High God came and personally invited them to feast at His table, they refused. The dinner would go on. The guest list would change. Now whosoever will might come. And on to the end of the age, it will be so.

2- A spirit of humility is still the foundation for all of Christianity. The Scribes and Pharisees had no plumbline to help them understand this. Those who would be greatest must be least of all. They didn’t deserve the best seats in the house. And neither do we. Even today, Christianity is not known for its quiet, gracious servitude and its gentle but powerful gift of humility that exalts God and humbles man. Christianity is considered a religion, and as such, many of the man-made attributes that plagued the Pharisees have surfaced anew to cripple the power of the church. We are known by what we build and by how big we are, not by how “these unschooled and unlearned men have turned the world upside down”. Our calling card is not our character, but our accomplishments. What a tragedy. All the world can then do is measure us by themselves; and by their standards, we have nothing to offer. Oh, that we could return to being known by what happens in the spirit realm—by lives transformed, miraculous changes in human behavior, dramatic upheaval of human life through conversion. Then, and only then, will we be known by what God intended.

3- The church still has in many ways forgotten who it is God has invited to dinner. We are still inviting our peers because we relate to them, and we don’t feel contaminated in their presence. We want to build “mission” churches, so we go to the parts of town where the people “like us” are. We go where the money is, where the buildings are, where the acceptability factor is high. I don’t picture Jesus targeting the “pretty people” first. Granted, whosoever will may come. But not many noble, not many wise, not many mighty have been called.

God is still calling the poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind. They know they have a need. They have a spirit of desperation that cries out for acceptance, that longs for the security that only God can give. Their hearts do not have to compete with the baubles this world dangles in our faces. Their hearts are broken; they need to be bound up. Their spirits are grieving; they need

to be comforted.

If that's who God is calling, why aren't they the ones we are calling? The prisoner, the widow, the weary, the grieving—these are the prime candidates for the gospel. Life's hospitals and nursing homes and halfway houses are where the seed needs to fall. We appoint committees and designate money on occasion to such projects, *but as a general rule, that is not where you find us ministering*. We like our own kind, our own race, our own strata of income, our own comfort zone. We restrict most of our ministering to one another, and call it "fellowship". That may be fellowship, but it's not necessarily real evangelism. Real evangelism is more costly than that. It makes us vulnerable to people unlike ourselves. It makes us become one with those who are dirty, needy, hungry, hurting, and unacceptable by our social standards. It loves them with a love that is so completely different that they suddenly feel accepted, wanted, invited, if you will, to the banquet table of God.

The motto of the church today is, for the most part, "whosoever is like us may come". We are willing to send money to the prisons, but why don't we go? We are willing to build buildings for the homeless, but would we ask them to come home with us? We are willing to discuss the pros and cons of welfare, mostly to make fun of its abuses, *but are we willing to allow the body of Christ to so have the mind of Christ that it begins to care for its own so the government won't have to?*

4- Jesus is coming back soon, but until He does, we must not become passive in our search to reach the lost. Not on the mission field, not in our neighborhoods, not in our own city. We are to go into the highways and hedges and aggressively seek their salvation. As that old hymn says so well, "Though millions have come, there is still room for one; there is room at the Cross for you." There is yet room. And the reason our Lord has not yet returned is because "He is not willing that any should perish, but that all should come to repentance."

We must not get so caught up in our socials, our fellowships, our committee meetings, even in our Bible study groups, that we forget that out there where the poor, the maimed, the halt and the blind still are, there are millions of people, starving people, dying people, lonely people, crying people, who do not yet know that there is still room at the banquet table of eternity for them,

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nor do they know that the invitation includes them. Yea, it more than includes them.

The Master of the feast has called upon the servants of the household to go and plead with them to join Him at the table. Oh, beloved, we are the servants, and guess who's coming to dinner?

They are...if we ask them.

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A Challenge to Further Study

1- Look again at Luke 14:11. See how many places in Scripture you can find that same principle emerge. Why do you think it is so difficult to grasp experientially? What basic sin does it challenge? As you study those Scriptures, what other sins do you see emerge that are reflections of that one?

2- Why does the sin in verse 11 make it difficult to obey the commandment in verses 12-14?

3- Review the three excuses in Luke 14:18-20. Do men and women still use those basic excuses for not fellowshiping with their Master and Lord?

4- What do you think it means to compel them to come in?

A Challenge to Further Application

1- Examine those three excuses again. Ask God to examine your heart and reveal how you respond when invited to the King's table.

2- Look again at the four groups of people we were instructed to invite to our homes. Why do you suppose God picked those particular people? What was He testing in us? What was He expecting of us? What was He saying about our potential ministries?

3- Have you ever visited in a nursing home or orphanage or prison, where the people were seemingly without hope? Are you willing to ask God to send you, if He chooses, to people like that? Why not ask Him this week?

A Challenge to Scripture Memory

Memorize Luke 14:22-23

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