



LESSONS ON HOSPITALITY

SERIES: THE GOSPEL OF LUKE

Luke 14:1–14

49th Message

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The era of the Hippie movement and free love in the 1960's brought a great deal of change to the United States. A few weeks ago we remembered Martin Luther King and the changes brought about by the civil rights movement. Last Sunday marked the 50th anniversary of the Beatles' appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show. The show was entitled "The Night That Changed America." I remember seeing that show when I was fourteen and hearing *I Want To Hold Your Hand*. Bob Dylan captured the spirit of the age in his song, *The Times They Are A-Changin'*. Some of you don't have any idea of what it was like to live through those years, but some of you who are older, like me, certainly do.

Change was hard for many people in the 60's. Change is always hard. Several of us were at a conference this week talking about the youth of today and why they aren't sticking with the church after they graduate from high school. The thrust of the conference was to ask, "how does the church need to change in order to keep young people?" One of the speakers had some very insightful thoughts about change. He said that change is hard because people have a mental image or picture of how the world should look, how the world should behave. And he went on to say that people don't resist change, they resist loss. People tend to hang onto their mental pictures because they do not want to lose the world they want to keep.

Jesus in the gospels is threatening to change the world of the Jews. The Pharisees and teachers of the law had a picture of how the religious world should be and they resisted the teachings of Jesus because they were resisting the loss of their authority. When Jesus says in Luke 13 to the Pharisees "your house is forsaken," he is saying that the world that the Jews had lived in is going to change for good and the world that they had hoped for is not going to happen. The door is going to close and a new door is opening. Jesus is singing *The Times They Are A-Changin'* and the Pharisees don't like it. The trouble is that they will not be able to stop it.

Two of the ways that Jesus was promoting change included Sabbath observance and table fellowship. We know how important Sabbath was to the Pharisees but table fellowship was also a matter of extreme importance. Meals were the main social network of that age, the place of intimacy and friendship. Extended political and religious conversations took place at meals where social values, status, and hierarchies were upheld. Jesus was redefining hospitality, which in turn pointed to a completely different way of being the people of God. This is the context for our next two studies in Luke 14. We begin in verse 1 with a Sabbath healing, the fourth in Luke's gospel:

One Sabbath, when he went to dine at the house of a ruler of the Pharisees, they were watching him carefully. And behold, there was a man before him who had dropsy. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and Pharisees, saying, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" But they remained silent. Then he took him and healed him and sent him away. And he said to them,

"Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" And they could not reply to these things. (Luke 14:1–6 ESV)

Jesus is invited to the home of a synagogue official for a meal, probably a midday meal, the biggest meal of the day. The Pharisees were watching him closely, which is an understatement. They were lurking about to see what he would do. Also invited to this meal was a man with dropsy, also called hydrops, after the Greek word. Dropsy is a condition of swollen limbs and tissue resulting from excess body fluids. The condition might have been viewed as God's judgment. At this time dropsy was a metaphor for loving money and being greedy, the very things that Jesus accused the Pharisees of in chapter 11 (11:37–44). The Pharisees were as sick as the man but would never have seen themselves in that way.

According to Lev. 15:1–12 the man is unclean. Table fellowship required strict ritual purity since the table was a surrogate for the Lord's altar in the Temple in Jerusalem. Therefore, even though people could come uninvited as we saw in Luke 7, it is much more likely that the man was a set-up, a trap for Jesus. "Behold, look who just happens to be here?" The Pharisees hospitality was really inhospitality.

When Jesus responds with a question it means that they were already in dialogue. He asks, "Is it lawful (or permitted) to heal on the Sabbath, or not?" He basically asks the same question that he did in chapter 6: "is it lawful on the Sabbath to do good or to do harm, to save life or to destroy it?" (Luke 6:9). The leaders are silent.

Jesus heals the man. He "took" him, a verb that is used of seizing somebody. Thus Jesus embraced the man or touched him in some way, making Jesus also ritually impure for table fellowship. Then Jesus sent the man away, an act of kindness to release the man from an awkward situation.

Jesus asks another question: "Which of you, having a son or an ox that has fallen into a well on a Sabbath day, will not immediately pull him out?" The question refers to the Pharisees own Sabbath practice of showing compassion to rescue a son or an ox that was in danger. This was consistent with the Law: "You shall not see your brother's donkey or his ox fallen down by the way and ignore them. You shall help him to lift them up again" (Deuteronomy 22:4). Jesus asked much the same thing when he healed the bent-over woman in the last chapter: "You hypocrites! Does not each of you on the Sabbath untie his ox or his donkey from the manger and lead it away to water it?" (Luke 13:15).

The Pharisees are hypocrites. They treat animals better than people. Their practices are inconsistent and even lack common sense. Like an ox stuck in a ditch or a well, they can't get out. When an animal lies in one place for too long, they tend to bloat and again we are reminded that the man's swollen condition points to the condition of the Pharisees, bloated with wealth and pride.

Again, the Pharisees have no response. In fact they are given no voice in the account. But their silence speaks louder than words. It is interesting that in between this healing and the healing of the woman in the last chapter Luke places the narrow and soon-shut door discourse. The point is that the Pharisees have not changed. They want to hold onto a world based on their mental picture. They could not refute Jesus but were unwilling to repent and enter the narrow door. *The Times They Are A-Changin'.*

Like the Pharisees we can get stuck in religious practices and patterns that go beyond logic and common sense. We can become blind to our own condition. Jesus invites us to look past our traditions and customs and practices to see and experience the life of God. God wants us to become whole people and that does not happen through keeping law but rather through an openness to God and the healing touch of Jesus.

Jesus now uses this dinner opportunity to speak to the Pharisees and lawyers about table fellowship. He has three things to say: how to be a guest, how to be a host, and the banquet that God will host. We will look at the first two today and save the third for next week. First, how to be a guest, verse 7:

Now he told a parable to those who were invited, when he noticed how they chose the places of honor, saying to them, "When you are invited by someone to a wedding feast, do not sit down in a place of honor, lest someone more distinguished than you be invited by him, and he who invited you both will come and say to you, 'Give your place to this person,' and then you will begin with shame to take the lowest place. But when you are invited, go and sit in the lowest place, so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, move up higher.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all who sit at table with you. For everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." (Luke 14:7-11)

On formal occasions the guests would recline around a u-shaped table on couches. One's position at the table manifested one's rank or status compared to the other guests. The host would carefully assign positions of honor. Hierarchies were strictly enforced. Since Israel was a honor/shame culture, to violate these social customs was a serious offense.

Jesus notices how people are choosing the places of honor and so he tells a parable about a guest arriving at a wedding banquet or feast. The parable is actually closer to a wisdom proverb on what not to do and what to do. The wise thing to avoid as a guest is taking the seat of honor. The reason for this is because an honored guest might arrive a little later and if all the seats were taken, then you would be asked by the host to take the end or lowest seat. As you slowly walked around the table to take the last spot everyone would be watching. This would be incredibly shameful, embarrassing, and humiliating and you would be viewed as an enemy of social stability.

The wise thing to do when you are a guest is to take the last seat and thus assume the lowest rank among all the guests. Then you allow the host to assign the appropriate ranking and he might come to you and ask you to move up. As a result, you would be honored in the presence of all.

Proverbs gives the same wisdom:

**Do not put yourself forward in the king's presence
or stand in the place of the great,
for it is better to be told, "Come up here,"**

**than to be put lower in the presence of a noble.
(Proverbs 25:6-7)**

Jesus ends with the principle: "he who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted." The issue at stake is pride, the sinful human preoccupation with self-promotion and placing ourselves above others. Often the motivation for even religious activity is to promote our value and secure our identity.

The parable is really self-explanatory. When we arrive at a wedding reception or a formal dinner, our tendency is to maneuver for a good seat or a fun table. We want to sit with significant or more important people. We tell selected other guests to sit with us. We mark our spot. We are very aware of the "inner" group and the "outer" group. We pay careful attention to those of wealth or status, desiring to gain their approval, even if we don't really like them all that much. If we get delegated to a "lesser" table or a seat at the end, it affects our evening significantly. We measure ourselves against others in order to gain value, approval, and identity. We want to be above other people.

James gives a similar illustration in his epistle:

My brothers, show no partiality as you hold the faith in our Lord Jesus Christ, the Lord of glory. For if a man wearing a gold ring and fine clothing comes into your assembly, and a poor man in shabby clothing also comes in, and if you pay attention to the one who wears the fine clothing and say, "You sit here in a good place," while you say to the poor man, "You stand over there," or, "Sit down at my feet," have you not then made distinctions among yourselves and become judges with evil thoughts? (James 2:1-4)

When we choose someone of higher status or wealth over someone who is poor or less esteemed, we make a value judgment on people. God shows no such partiality. "For the LORD sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the LORD looks on the heart" (1 Samuel 16:7).

I know for myself how easy it is to fall into this trap. Therefore, when I attend a dinner I try to let the host tell me where to sit. Or I just take a seat without thinking where everyone might be, trusting the Lord for who I sit near. Sometimes when I go to a gathering I try to picture who will be there and what might be happening in their lives. Since I am an introvert I think of questions ahead of time to engage them in conversation. Sometimes I will pray about who God might want me to spend time with and, instead of "working the room," look for one person with whom to have a deeper conversation.

Jesus invites us to take the lower seat and to descend rather than ascend. The pathway to up is to go down, to be humble. This is what Jesus did. Even though Jesus was God, he took the lowest seat and "he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross." And what did God do after that? "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name" (Philippians 2:8-9). What God did for Jesus is what he wants to do for us.

Unlike the Pharisees who saw themselves with a lofty and favored position, we approach God with humility knowing we are totally dependent on his grace. And then we approach people in the same way, not trying to assess or determine earthly rank or status in order to feel better about ourselves. How we approach God is often manifest in our treatment of others.

George Herbert wrote a couplet that gives us the wisdom of Jesus: “Humble we must be, if to heaven we go; High is the roof there, but the gate is low.”¹

Jesus now turns to being a host:

He said also to the man who had invited him, “When you give a dinner or a banquet, do not invite your friends or your brothers or your relatives or rich neighbors, lest they also invite you in return and you be repaid. But when you give a feast, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. For you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just.” (Luke 14:12–14)

The prevailing custom of the day was to eat with people from your own social class. People invited guests who were social, religious, and economic equals and were in a position to return the favor.

Jesus again gives wisdom on what not to do and what to do. The action to avoid is inviting your friends, brothers, relatives, or rich neighbors. The reason is that they have the means to repay and thus hospitality becomes social insurance. Inviting others with the motive of receiving a return invitation earns no favor with God. Payback hospitality is not hospitality.

Rather one is to invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind because they do not have the means to repay. According to the Law such people were excluded from the temple (Lev. 21:17–23; 2 Sam. 5:8), but *The Times They Are A-Changin’*. The result is that this pleases God and he will repay or reward such acts of hospitality at the resurrection of the just or righteous.

The principle is that hospitality is to be inclusive rather than exclusive. This is what Jesus was doing. He was breaking down boundaries and social hierarchies. He was eating with tax collectors and sinners, the marginalized of society, the least, the lost, and the left out. He was also eating with women and with Pharisees as well. This means that there was room at his table for everyone.

John Newton understood this text to be extremely important, but under-observed. He wrote:

One would almost think that the passage in Luke 14:12–14 was not considered as a part of God’s word; at least I believe there is no one passage so generally neglected by his own people.²

Again the parable is self-explanatory. The challenge is to extend table fellowship beyond the people we want to be with to include those who are poor and needy, materially and spiritually. We are to welcome the least, the lost, and left out at our table. True hospitality shows no social limits; it is what is given, not what is exchanged, and it is generosity without expecting any gain whatsoever. Our table is to be a place of grace and undeserved blessing. God’s grace towards us calls us to show grace to those who have nothing to offer us. As a guest we are humble and as a host we are generous.

This is what Andy Drake is doing this weekend in Mexicali and the orphanage that PBC has supported there for many years—eating with the poor and showing hospitality to the needy. We are reminded to keep him in our prayers and if we want to help with a meal we can put a little extra in the plate when we take our offering.

Hospitality can be the means of incredible blessing. When I first got involved with college students and young singles Liz and I would often have them over for dinner. They didn’t have much money and did not have the means to repay. Some Sundays we would go to church and spontaneously start inviting people for dinner. It was not uncommon for us have 10–15 people sitting on our lawn eating

hamburgers. Our children grew up with young singles sitting around our table listening to our conversations about life and God. I think this had more influence on my kids than anything else I did spiritually. Some of these people have become lifelong friends both to us and to our children. Now our children are friends to their children. We didn’t plan this, but this is just what happened by simply feeding people. Now our kids just assume they can invite others when they come for dinner.

Luke mentions Jesus in the context of table fellowship more than any other gospel. Why is table fellowship so important? It is important on a couple of levels—personal and corporate. On one level we are to see how each of us can use meals and gatherings as opportunities to show love and grace rather than a place for personal gain or seeking status. When you think about it, many significant and meaningful conversations take place sitting at a table with others for an extended period of time, something we don’t have time for at church on Sunday mornings.

But on another level Jesus is bringing change to the people of God and this would have an incredible impact on table fellowship. Jews would have never thought of sharing the table with Gentiles, but Jesus is going to change all of that. This change was very hard for the Jews to accept, as we see in the book of Acts. And we read in Galatians that Paul even had to confront Peter on this issue.

The community of the Pharisees and lawyers had become exclusive, accumulating ways to keep others out. Jesus challenges the people of God to be inclusive. The church is to be a place where fellowship is extended to all—the least, the lost, the left out; the wealthy landowner and poor peasant, because all are of equal value to God. We must always be willing to change, to break down religious, social, and cultural barriers.

PBC started as a fellowship meeting at the Palo Alto Cultural Center in the late 1940’s and later moved into their current location on Middlefield Road. From what I understand this group of people were a rather conservative group. Women even wore hats to church. But during the 50’s and early 60’s God prepared this group of people for the Jesus movement in the 60s and 70s. And when young, longhaired hippies began to show up without any shoes they were welcomed by young and old alike. It was very common after the service to see a young person sitting in the pew talking to an older couple. This is our history, our legacy. We are a church that is willing to change and grow as God leads us.

How might God be calling us individually and corporately to be humble, hospitable, and inclusive? Who might God be calling to your mind to invite for dinner?

Now to him “who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, who alone has immortality, who dwells in unapproachable light, whom no one has ever seen or can see. To him be honor and eternal dominion. Amen.” (1 Timothy 6:15–16)

¹ Darrell Bock, *Luke Volume 2* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1994), 1265.

² David Lyle Jeffrey, *Luke* (Grand Rapids: BrazosPress, 2012), 186.

