

Will you Honour your RSVP? Missed Opportunity Luke 14:15-24

Some years ago an energetic young man began as a clerk in a hardware store. Like many old-time hardware stores, the inventory included thousands of dollars' worth of items that were obsolete or seldom called for by customers. The young man was smart enough to know that no thriving business could carry such an inventory and still show a healthy profit. He proposed a sale to get rid of the stuff. The owner was reluctant but finally agreed to let him set up a table in the middle of the store and try to sell off a few of the oldest items.

Every product was priced at ten cents. The sale was a success and the young fellow got permission to run a second sale. It, too, went over just as well as the first. This gave the young clerk an idea. Why not open a store that would sell only nickel and dime items? He could run the store and his boss could supply the capital.

The young man's boss wasn't enthusiastic. "The plan will never work," he said, "because you can't find enough items to sell at a nickel and a dime." The young man was disappointed but eventually went ahead on his own and made a fortune out of the idea. His name was F.W. Woolworth.

Years later his old boss lamented, "As near as I can figure it, every word I used in turning Woolworth down has cost me about a million dollars!" And that was at a time when each dollar was worth a lot more than today's dollars.

Lost opportunities. The nature of life is such that we all have them. We're finite beings. We don't have unlimited resources. We don't have unlimited time. We don't know everything. Thus, we can't take all the opportunities that present themselves to us during our lifetimes.

- Some opportunities will be squeezed out because we're too busy doing other things to take them up.
- Some opportunities will be abandoned because we don't know enough to even recognise what great opportunities they are.

The passage we're looking at this morning is about a lost opportunity.

The Setting

This story Jesus tells is still in the context of a Sabbath meal. Remember the passage we looked at last week. Luke 14:1

One Sabbath, when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, He was being carefully watched.

This is a significant social occasion. The "who's who" of the local town is present. Sure, they set a trap for Jesus – to see if He'd heal a man on the Sabbath – but the overall setting is still this feast with all the local dignitaries present. Jesus took advantage of the occasion to give them some advice – to teach them about God's kingdom.

- Be humble. Don't jockey for chairs at the top table. Don't push yourself forward.
- Be generous. Don't just invite people who can repay the favour. Give to those who can't give back to you.

One of the guests picks up on the language Jesus uses. Verse 15:

When one of those at the table with Him heard this, he

said to Jesus, "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God."

Two questions. Why's this guy make this remark?

- Has he actually picked up on what Jesus is saying? Jesus didn't mention the feast in the kingdom of God in what He's just taught. Certainly, He's mentioned meals – wedding feasts and luncheons and dinners.
 - He's talked about not going for the best places at the meal table.
 - He's talked about inviting the poor to the great banquets you put on.

But, on the surface at least, these are simply earthly meals. Why does this guy suddenly start talking about God's banquet? Has he simply picked up on that last phrase Jesus used: *the resurrection of the righteous*?

- Some think he's trying to diffuse the situation. At the end of verse 14, there could very well be an awkward silence in the room. Jesus has just got stuck into these guys.
 - I saw the way you guys all headed for the top table – shoving each other out of the way and trying to get the best seats.
 - And to the host he says: You really shouldn't have invited this lot. They'll only pay you back later. You should've invited the poor and the blind.

As Jesus now looked around, most would return His gaze with icy stares. Perhaps this guy's simply saying: Isn't it great that, despite all our differences, at some time in the future we'll all sit down together and enjoy God's great feast.

That leads to the second question: What assumptions are behind this guy's comment? I'd suggest a couple.

- First, God's banquet's the one to be at. Those who attend are *blessed*. That's a highly desirable state.
- Secondly, he expects the Pharisees to be at God's banquet. They were part of the cream of Jewish society. They were considered currently blessed by God. Of course, they'd be there. In other words, all these guys present at this social occasion – they'd all be there – except perhaps for the poor guy with dropsy Jesus just healed. That was the expectation.

The Excuses

Now, it's into that context that Jesus tells this story. Verse 16:

Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready!'"

When people get married today, they send out wedding invitations beforehand. We're getting married on June 20. We'd like you to come to our wedding and to the wedding breakfast (which is actually a dinner). RSVP by May 29 – which means: let us know if you're coming or not. If you say you're coming and then don't turn up – that's really bad form. You'd better have a really good excuse. If you say you're not coming – that's fairly insulting to us. You'd better have a really good excuse too.

This great banquet was like that. The invitations went out beforehand: I'm going to have this great banquet – will you come? The invitations were accepted: We'll be there. They've made the commitment. Now, the animals have

been butchered and the feast's been prepared. The servant's sent out again: The great banquet's ready. It's time to honour your commitment. We don't have freezers – nor electricity to run them. It's all got to be eaten tonight.

Verse 18:

"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'

"Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.'

"Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come'."

What sort of excuses are these? Some think they're fairly flimsy lies.

- What sort of gullible investor buys a field without checking it out first? Well, yes, there are some pretty gullible investors around – and some fairly unscrupulous fraudsters happy to relieve them of their money. There are stories of people buying land on the basis of glossy brochures and later discovering they've invested in worthless swamp. Were these guys that gullible?
- And what sort of successful businessman buys five yoke of oxen without checking them out first? The average farmer only needed one yoke of oxen – two at the most. The fact that this guy's bought five shows he's relatively wealthy. He's not a dill. So why would he part with his money before checking them out?

So maybe these guys are lying; maybe they're not. In the long run, it doesn't really matter.

Either way, they still don't go to the banquet. Either way, they still greatly insult the person throwing the banquet. It's the height of inconsiderateness and rudeness.

- You've killed that sheep so I could have a great meal – sorry, I'm not coming.
- You've gone to all this trouble and expense so we could celebrate together – sorry, I'm not coming.
- You relied on my acceptance of your kind invitation – sorry, I'm still not coming.

It's a pretty big slap in the face and kick in the gut for the guy who sent out the invites. And it's not accidental – it's not that they didn't have any warning of the banquet – it's quite deliberate.

Imagine a wife who's gone to a lot of trouble to prepare a first anniversary dinner for her husband.

- She's planned his favourite meal.
- She's told him for days what a special occasion it will be.
- She's cooked the meal to perfection.
- She's set up a nice romantic atmosphere.

Five o'clock he rings up and says he's going to the pub with his mates to watch the football. What's that sort of thing do to their relationship?

And remember, Jesus' story is about God's feast. That's the real reference point for this story. And that feast isn't simply a one-off meal with God in the context of a whole lot of such meals – it's actually a picture of the eternal kingdom itself. If you're at this feast, you're in God's kingdom. If you're not at this feast, you've missed out altogether. This is the place you definitely want to be. Whatever else you may miss out on, make sure you don't miss out on this. Nothing could be more important. And

yet, these guys do find things they think more important:

- A field.
- Five yoke of oxen.
- A wife.

The issue's one of priorities. These guys thought these things were a higher priority than attending God's feast. Seems pretty stupid, doesn't it? Are they really serious?

Yet, the reality is that's exactly what people do. People are more concerned about their property or their business concerns or their investments or their family than they are about God. Now, there's nothing wrong with any of those things in themselves. They're part of God's good creation. In the book of Proverbs, God's word even says:

*He who finds a wife finds what is good
and receives favour from the LORD.*

Yet, we must not allow even that which is good to distract us from that which is more important. Nothing must have a higher priority than God's kingdom. As Jesus said back in chapter 13:

*Make every effort to enter through the narrow door,
because many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not
be able to.*

I remember thinking when I was around 20: I'm looking forward to Jesus coming back, but I hope He doesn't come back before I'm married. By that I really meant: I hope He doesn't come back before I've experienced sex. Pretty stupid, isn't it? But what have you put in its place? A holiday to your dream destination? A bunch of grandchildren? Some grand achievement in the academic realm or on the sporting field?

You may not even verbalise it in the way I did when I

was 20. It may simply come out in your actions – how you spend your time or your money. If God's kingdom's the place to be – if this is where it's really at – why would you let anything stop you being there? Why would you give anything else a higher priority?

The guys Jesus is talking to here – they thought they were already in. They had God all neatly packaged up. They thought they had their standing with God all worked out. But when Jesus came along – when the incarnate God stared them in the face and told them what God was really like and what His desires were and what He was doing in the world – they didn't recognise Him. When Jesus invited them to enter God's kingdom, they turned down the invitation – because Jesus' version of God's kingdom didn't match their own self-righteous and self-serving ideas. They felt their stuff as they defined it was more important than reality as Jesus defined it. They hung onto that rather than accept the invitation. Sure, on the outside, it looked like they'd accepted it.

- They went to church each week.
- They learnt the law.
- They did lots of good works.
- They were very religious people.

But, Jesus says, they're still on the outside. They have no real relationship with God.

What would this look like today? There are people in churches who are very religious.

- They attend faithfully each week.
- They put their money in the offering plate.
- They even listen to the sermons.
- They may even have responded to an evangelist's appeal at some time in their life.

But there's no real relationship with God – certainly not a relationship where God's their highest priority. Their life hasn't changed so that God's a real part of it.

- They still decide what they'll do with their time.
- They still decide how they'll spend their money.
- They still decide how they'll live their lives.

Their lives revolve around the same things everyone else is chasing: a block of land, five yoke of oxen and a new wife – and their modern equivalents. These things seem to drive their lives more than God's kingdom. These are the values that drive their lives – not a desire for God and His will.

The Fresh Invitations

Jesus continues His story. Verse 21:

The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, "Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame."

Note the connection back to verse 13:

But when you give a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed.

This is the group now invited to this man's feast – to God's feast.

It's not the group you'd expect. That was the point of verses 12 to 14. When people give dinner parties today, they usually invite those who can return the favour. We stick to people of our own social standing. I'll invite you to my dinner party; I expect you'll invite me to yours. If I think you don't have the resources to throw a dinner party – or if I think your dinner party won't be up-to-scratch – then you'll be scratched from my guest list.

That's not how God operates. There were certainly some people in Jewish society in the first century who thought the poor and the maimed and the blind would be excluded from God's feast. The law prevented such people serving as priests. Some extended that principle to God's kingdom. They looked down on the riff-raff. They were second-rate. They didn't belong. They weren't the proper calibre to sit at God's table. Jesus disagrees.

Those who were expected to come refused. They missed out. So the invitation went out to others. They accepted. Yet, there's still more to this story. Verse 22:

"Sir," the servant said, "what you ordered has been done, but there is still room."

Then the master told his servant, "Go out to the roads and country lanes and make them come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you, not one of those men who were invited will get a taste of my banquet."

Overall, there are three groups of people:

- The group initially invited who refused to come when the time arrived.
- The group of poor and crippled people from the alleys of the town.
- The group of people from the country lanes.

Who do they represent?

Most agree on the first group: they're the people Jesus is talking to – the Pharisees and religious leaders of that day. Everyone else looked up to these people. Everyone else thought they weren't as good as these people. Everyone else expected these leaders would definitely be at the great banquet in God's kingdom – and that they'd have the

best seats. Jesus says: They're refusing the invitation. I'm preaching the kingdom of God. God's kingdom is present in My ministry. Indeed, I'm the King. I'm inviting them to the banquet – but they reject Me. They've chosen not to come.

It's the other two groups that people disagree over.

- Some think in terms of time. The second group are the poor and maimed amongst the Jews to whom Jesus turns when the leaders reject His message. The third group are those to whom Jesus' disciples take His message after Jesus returns to heaven.
- Others think in terms of nationality. The second group are the Jews who are willing to accept Jesus' invitation. The third group are the Gentiles – those to whom the gospel's taken because of the overall Jewish rejection of Jesus.

I don't think it matters a great deal – and it's quite possible Jesus didn't have specifics in mind when he spoke of these groups who did come to the feast. The main points Jesus drives home aren't really dependent on who these people are.

First, Jesus warns these leaders – these people who are sure they've already got the best seats sown up – they're in very real danger of missing out altogether. They think they've already entered the door. They may very well have gone through some door, but it's not the door to God's kingdom. Jesus invites them to enter. Indeed, He urges them to make every effort to find the door. But their own pride and sense of superiority stops them even looking. It blinds them to the door that's right in front of their face.

Secondly, these leaders are excluded because they choose not to come. They've been invited. It's not that Jesus snuck around and issued secret invitations behind their backs. Nor did Jesus put up His invitations where these guys wouldn't see them. Jesus warned them time and time again. They heard the invitation – but they excluded themselves when they refused to come.

Thirdly, the celebration comes even without them. God's feast will go ahead – and it will go ahead at the time God's determined. God's getting the feast ready. When the preparations are complete, it will go ahead. The fact these people who are full of their own self-importance aren't there won't impact the celebrations. Those who are there will be too busy enjoying the party to notice the absence of anyone.

Then and Now

This story has an important historical setting. It's a very clear warning to the Jewish people – and especially the Jewish religious leaders – to make sure they don't refuse the invitation. History shows us that, by and large, they didn't pay attention to this warning.

- Instead of accepting Jesus' invitation, the Jewish leaders turned around and arranged His execution.
- Instead of coming to the feast, many of the Jews shouted "Crucify Him".

Not all of them. The original church consisted entirely of Jews – a small minority of the Jews, but Jews nonetheless. But, when their fellow Jews persisted in refusing the message about Jesus, under God's clear direction, they took that message to the Gentiles. We too were invited to God's feast.

Yet, while that historical setting is important, the overall warning remains the same. It's not as if you can say: I'm not a Jewish religious leader – therefore I don't have to pay attention to this parable. The parable's about an opportunity lost. The opportunity's about sitting at God's feast – about being part of God's eternal kingdom. Sure, these guys refused. They didn't come. They missed out. But what about you? Maybe you're not in the first group invited. Maybe you're not even in the second group. Perhaps you're part of the final group. It doesn't really matter. You're still invited. The issue is whether you're going to turn up. Will you accept the invitation?

Jesus urges you to do so – make every effort to enter the door. You've heard the invitation. You have the opportunity to come to God's feast. If you don't come to the banquet, it's not because you didn't know. It's because you chose not to attend. What a lost opportunity that'd be.