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## **The Great Banquet**

### **Part 1 – The Place of Honor**

Pastor Ted Cunningham

Today, we are starting a series out of Luke 14 called *The Great Banquet*. We're looking at the Parable of the Great banquet. We won't get to it until next week because Jesus has to set the stage for us today, as he's been invited to a meal at a prominent Pharisee's home. Before he even gets into the house, he has to confront some religious attitudes. And then once he gets into the meal at the Pharisee's home, he has to confront some prideful attitudes.

We are headed into Thanksgiving on Thursday. I just want to find out who is on campus today. I want you to make some noise as your favorite side dish pops up on the screen. If you hate this side dish, I want you to boo. I want you to get passionate about this. We all love food, so get passionate about it. I'm going to start with one of my favorites, Green Bean Casserole. Who hates it? I consider it a vegetable. I know it's got a lot of other things going on, but it is my primary vegetable.

This next one I hate with all of my guts. It's this canned cranberry nonsense. Especially when it bleeds into the mashed potatoes. Who enjoys a plate with compartments on it. I like to keep all of my food separate. I can't even sit next to you at Thanksgiving if you're going to mash it all up together. You're at the other end of the table for me.

Probably one of my all-time favorites isn't the dressing you're getting today; it's the stuff we grew up with – Stove Top. Some of you got on a Food Network Chef's plan for this and you're getting all fancy with it. Stick with what we grew up with – Stove Top.

If you even think about bringing this next thing into our house, you won't be invited next Thanksgiving. Who thinks Jello salad is the worst thing ever invented?

Here's one of my favorites right here – Mashed potatoes. Every body loves mashed potatoes.

Now, this part shocked. I ask people all the time about the start of the show. We know the star of the show is turkey. Who hates turkey? Wow! Do you hate chicken? What's the difference between turkey and chicken. It's all the same.

Can we all agree on this next one right here? – Pumpkin pie Yes we can. And it's not complete without Cool Whip. I just want you to know. Everybody calls it Kleenex. Kleenex is a brand of tissue. Not all tissue is Kleenex. And not all whipped cream is Cool Whip. Everybody calls it Cool Whip.

Listen, if you bring Great Value Whipped Topping into my house, you saved a dollar, but it cost you a friendship. And can we agree this is the only proper way to serve pumpkin pie and whipped cream right there. (piece of pie directly in the Cool Whip). You can't have too much Cool Whip.

So, you've been involved in the text thread. That's the new way of inviting people to your home for a meal. And after you give the date and the time, what's the first question that comes up on that text thread? What can I bring? I want to participate in this. I want to offer something.

Studying this week has been refreshing for me. It's brought great joy to my soul to be reminded that when it comes to your salvation, when it comes to entering the Kingdom of Heaven, when it comes to becoming a part of the family of God, when it comes to accepting the invitation to the Great Banquet, the answer to that question is nothing. There is nothing you can bring. It has all been prepared for you.

Today, as we walk, this morning and the next week, into The Parable of The Great Banquet, for us to be reminded of the joy that we have because of grace through faith. That is your salvation. By grace, through faith... Don't even think about bringing something to the table. Your good works, Your giving, Your acts of Christian service, that's obedience. And obedience is not a requirement of salvation, it's the overflow of it. Let's not mix that up. So, as we move through this... Let me tell you that if there is one doctrine those who gather at Woodland Hills each week struggle with, it's this one right here. This understanding of by grace, through faith, because we think it can't be that easy. That invitation can't be accepted like that. And you're going to see that you don't try to bring green bean Casserole to the Great Banquet. You're going to ruin it because my works and your works, when it comes to our salvation, is like filthy rags. We don't sing "Jesus paid some. You must bring the rest." We sing "Jesus paid it all."

So, we are going to jump into the Great Banquet just to introduce a couple of verses and then we are going to come back to Verse 1 and deal with these attitudes. But I want you to see what Jesus says in Luke 14: 16-17. **16 Jesus replied: "A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests.** I love how Lane led us today in the Lord's Supper. The invitation is for you and for every single person here to the Great Banquet. You maybe have heard this. We've shared it often at our church if you've been here for a while. But when we talk about the kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, there is this idea that's really kind of difficult to grasp. That the Kingdom of Heaven is here and now and not yet. We haven't experienced it in its fullness. But it's here and now. That's what Jesus says in just these couple of verses. **17 At the time of the banquet...** So, we're in the kingdom and it's being prepared. Things have to happen before the fullness or completion by us is seen. **...he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'** And you and I get to participate. That's the invitation that we've been given.

Amy and I don't hide the fact that we are foodies. I love food so much. And I know it's not good to say it like that, but I just enjoy eating. You're like, "We enjoy having a chubby little preacher. We think it works." If it wasn't for Amy, I'd be a lot chubbier. And you are going to hear it from this next story.

Food to us is not just nutrition; it's like an experience. I've been with my wife in restaurants and environments... Amy oversees all our environments here at the church. I've been with her in restaurants where she gets emotional. I've seen a lot of people crying in restaurants, but it's usually over something their kids did or said, or their spouse said. My wife gets emotional over environments.

There was this restaurant where there was this chef that had written a book that we read a year or so ago. We could never get a reservation when we were visiting this city. She finally said, "We've got to do it. We are near there for our anniversary; let's book it."

We got online and we were able to get a reservation, but it was one of those restaurants you had to prepay. Don't give me your credit card if you don't show up. No, you're paying for the whole meal right now. She told me how much it was, and I said, "We don't have to eat the week before we go." But she booked it and we're driving down the road and I'm just so excited because I've read this guy's book. I thought this was going to be one of our best anniversaries ever. She's just kind of quiet in the passenger seat. I said, "What?" She said, "I probably should have told you this before we paid for it." She goes, "It's a plant-based restaurant." I didn't even have any words to come back at that one. She knows we are republican and not vegetarian. She goes, "You're going to love it." We get there... This restaurant taunts you. We sat down and they walked over and the very first thing they do is attach a meat grinder to your table. I go, "I thought you said this was a plant-based restaurant?" She says, "It is."

The guy walks out with three carrots, and he puts them in the meat grinder and starts grinding the carrots. He goes, "Do you know what we find? It's so amazing." I've rolled my eyes quite a bit during this meal already. He goes, "We find that most of our patrons see carrots as a suitable replacement for red meat." "Do people buy that line you just threw out there?" I like carrots but I've never eaten a carrot and gone, "That's filet Mignon right there." Every detail of this meal was just so perfect. I thought to myself, *What if I would have brought a covered dish?*

I'm going to mess with some Baptists this morning, but I hate to tell you this – the Great Banquet is not a potluck. It's not a restaurant that you can pay for. It's a meal you are invited to take a seat at. You are graciously invited to this meal. I thought, *What if I would have brought green bean casserole?* They would have looked at me like, You're ruining this whole invitation by bringing your Jello salad. And it's what we do every time we think we can bring something to God that earns us salvation. He paid it all, and he invites you to participate.

We left that meal, and I got a slice of pizza as we headed back to the hotel. It won't surprise you that it was a meat lovers pizza. But these invitations required humility. And that's what Jesus is going to deal with. The humility required to receive this invitation. And the pride that often sneaks into our lives and the lives of believers.

Let's jump into Luke 14: **One Sabbath...** Very important detail. **...when Jesus went to eat in the house of a prominent Pharisee, he was being carefully watched.** They were always watching, they were always trying to trip him up. **2 There in front of him was a man suffering from abnormal swelling of his body.** It was called Dropsy, and your translation may say that. **3 Jesus asked the Pharisees and experts in the law, "Is it lawful to heal on the Sabbath or not?" 4 But they remained silent.** This isn't the main point, but it's a key point that needs to be drawn out of the text. You will find, in your Christian life, your biggest critics are the least helpful. They have a lot of opinions and a lot to say, but they don't lift a finger to help. They remain silent. So, Jesus answers the question. And you've heard the expression, "Actions speak louder than words?" Jesus doesn't answer it with words, what does it say? **So, taking hold of the man, he healed him and sent him on his way.** He answered that question. So, the very first attitude that we are going to see in this story, this week and next week, is that Jesus confronts religious

attitudes that emphasize strict obedience to the law while neglecting the Law's purpose to love God and others. Completely missed the point. What did Jesus say? "I have come to fulfill the law." What's the most important law?" "Well, the law all hangs on these two. What are these two?" Love God and love your neighbor." If you're not getting that out of it, you missed the point. That was the Pharisee. They studied the minutia of the law and the detail of it. And Jesus comes in and says, Can I heal this man? So then he goes on to answer another very important question.

**5 Then he asked them, "If one of you has a child or an ox that falls into a well on the Sabbath day, will you not immediately pull it out?"** Let me ask you. Who is more important, a child or an ox. A child is the image bearer of almighty God. And what Jesus is saying to them is "You would pull the ox out, you'd save your animal on the sabbath, right? So, if you would do that, why would I not heal and rescue this man. You've completely missed the point. **6 And they had nothing to say.** So, we have to get into the mind and the heart of a Pharisee today.

In Matthew 23, we get some of the strongest words of Jesus about the Pharisees. Here's what we read. I'm just going to give you snippets from it, we can't cover the whole chapter. Verse 3 says, **They do not practice what they preach.** What do we call that? Hypocrite. Verse 4 goes on to say, "They tie up heavy, cumbersome loads and put them on other people's shoulders. They weigh other people down and they don't even lift a finger to try to help.

Verse 5 – **Everything they do is done for people to see.** They are showboats. So, I think the first lesson that's key for us, as we study the Kingdom this week and next, and as we get into the Great banquet next week, is for us to understand, first of all, don't let a Pharisee stop you. Don't let the silence and inactivity of another person keep you from doing the right things. But I hear this and you've heard this before. You've heard this from some of your family members and friends. "I don't go to that church because it's full of hypocrites." And you know our answer to that is always the same. "There's always room for one more?" At 8:15 or 11:45.

Maybe some of you are visiting with family today and you're like, "I'm here because we had to do this before Silver Dollar City." Some of you are here because the chiefs are on Monday night football. This isn't your first place you want to be, and you look at what we're doing and you're like, "Oh, they are so showy, and they've got theater people leading the worship..." Can I just encourage you? Why would you ever keep from doing the right thing based on somebody else, no matter what?

Do the right thing. Don't let a Pharisee stop you. And by the way, I think this is just as important: Don't be a Pharisee. How about that? Don't let one stop you and don't be one.

Jesus gave this warning in Luke 12: 1 – **Be on your guard against the yeast of the Pharisee, which is hypocrisy.**

I'm the grocery guy at the end of the day. She sent me in once to get yeast. I had never bought yeast in my life at a grocery store. So, I go over to the baking section. She said it would be in the baking section. I start at these big bags of sugar and flour, and I can't find the yeast. So, I call her, and she said, "It's going to be a little tiny box up in the corner. Sure enough this is what you buy when you buy yeast (tiny little packet). But do you know how powerful this is. What Jesus is saying is arrogance and pride, the

yeast of the Pharisee, be very careful. Even a little bit of it... That's why we're on guard against it as believers. And on guard against it in this church all the time. Let's not show boat. If we say the marginalized matter to God, may our giving prove that if we say God's heart is for the marginalized, let's make sure we're actually going out into the community and providing for people who have nothing. Let's actually do what we say. Let's do what we're told to do. But it only takes a little bit to puff us up.

One contributor to *Desiring God* I read this week said this and I thought it was just a good summary of the Pharisees. *"Pharisees are legalists. They study the minutia of the law, but they've completely forgotten the heart behind it. They have all the same fears about grace, but they have coated their insecurities with accumulated knowledge, morality, and religion. Pharisees are legalists who are puffed up. They look educated, clean, and alive, all while dying inside. The seeds of sin and death keep going and spreading underneath the confident appearances and practices, always harder and harder to cover up."*

And what does it say in 1 Corinthians? Knowledge puffs up. Love builds up, but knowledge puffs up. And that's exactly what yeast does. It puffs up. They look educated, clean, and alive while dying inside. And Jesus is going to deal with that once we get into the house, The seeds of sin and death keep growing and spreading underneath the confident appearances and practices always harder and harder to cover up.

What's our takeaway from this, church family? You may have heard someone in church say this too. "I want to go deeper." Can I encourage us. Don't study the Bible to the point that you miss the point.

Cathy Jensen, our Discipleship Director, I love what she says. She's mentioned it several times in staff meetings over the last couple of months. She says, "We in the church tend to be educated beyond our obedience." And she just wants to encourage people, "Hey, let's do something with what you already know." Before you seek more knowledge, live out what you already know.

Look at what Jesus said. I'm going to go further down into Matthew 23 and then we are going to come back up to Matthew 23. We're bouncing all around this one chapter.

Matthew 23 - **23** *"Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin (so they are tithing). But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. So, what does Jesus say? "Do this but not that?" No, he doesn't say that. **You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.** Yes, you should have done what was right, but also know the heart behind it and practice all of the justice and mercy that comes with it. **24** *You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel.**

And now we'll go a little bit further up at the beginning of the chapter because now In Matthew 23 he's going to talk about what he has to address once he gets inside the house after healing the man. **6** *they love the place of honor at banquets and the most important seats in the synagogues...* Position is very important for them. Not only position, they love the titles. **7** *they love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others.*

It's kind of one of my favorite things when I meet somebody new in our church and they'll ask, "What do you want me to call you?" I'm like, "Ted." Some call me Tim, I've been called Todd. I've even been called Jeff on a few occasions, and we're okay with that. The titles and positions, don't get caught up in that because remember when Jesus came, he flipped the kingdom of God. He said, "The greatest among you will be your servants." Those who serve.

So, Jesus dealt with the religious attitudes and now going into the house for this meal, Jesus confronted prideful attitudes that led some to think they were better than others. Let's go to Luke 14: 7. So, now he's inside the house.

**7 When he noticed how the guests picked the places of honor at the table, he told them this parable: 8 "When someone invites you to a wedding feast, do not take the place of honor... The place of honor was the person closest to the host. ...for a person more distinguished than you may have been invited. This is where it gets embarrassing. 9 If so, the host who invited both of you will come and say to you, 'Give this person your seat.' Then, humiliated, you will have to take the least important place. 10 But when you are invited, take the lowest place, so that when your host comes, he will say to you, 'Friend, move up to a better place.' Then you will be honored in the presence of all the other guests.**

This is very important. The Kingdom truth is being taught here about salvation and then the practice of life in the kingdom. The pharisees thought *because we look the best...* You've seen this in movies... probably more than the Ozarks, but when we throw a party... You see in the movie that the sharpest dressed people, the best-looking people, the richest people, you want to rub shoulders with all of those people. And the pharisees had that mind set of like, *we obviously know this better than anyone else; we're going to be the closest.*

The disciples dealt with this attitude too. "Who's going to be the greatest in the kingdom? When your kingdom comes, who gets to sit at your right or at your left? What are we doing here. We want to make sure you have good middle management, Jesus." So, this attitude is something we all have to be on guard against. And Jesus is going to say "Guys, you're missing it. *You see those out there, the marginalized that weren't even invited into this meal, go get them, for theirs is the kingdom of Heaven. They are the ones who have a seat at this table and when I bring them in, they don't have all your knowledge, they are not dressed like you, they don't have your titles, but guess what? There is a seat for them and it's a place of honor. So, Jesus is going to unpack all of this.*

I was just at an event recently with a lot of marriage and family speakers and authors. I loved it. I felt like we were getting the rules of fight club when we walked in. Like how we are going to behave. There was like 80 of us. I just loved what they said. One guy, a friend of mine, who is a very strong personality. He stood up and goes, "Hey, really the only rule this weekend is to leave your egos and logos at the door. We don't want any of it." It was such a refreshing time. Have you been in those meetings where everybody is like, shaking it up and getting in the... No.

***11 For all those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted."***

I want to remind us. We think *If I humble myself, I'm going to be exalted immediately*. Keep this truth in light of everything that we're learning. Ultimately, every believer will be exalted in the end. Some of you have humbled yourself, humbled yourself, and humbled yourself and you've not been exalted. This isn't a promise for this side of heaven, that if you humble yourself, you will automatically have a seat. The point for the follower of Jesus is don't let a pharisee stop you, don't be a pharisee, so every room you walk into... I hope this is your attitude walking in on thanksgiving. When you walk into the thanksgiving meal this week, walk in with this attitude – “There you are.” not “Here I am.” The pharisees were “Here I am. You want to get to know me, you want to hear what I've been up to? Big things.” Do you have any friends that ask you about your life and you're not a sentence or two into it and the start with, “Well, you think your life is awesome, you have no idea. Let me get back into me and my story.” Don't be that person. Walk in with, “There you are.” Get to know other people.

I'm going to give you just one more short text from Matthew 23 because this is what is just firing us up on this whole thing.

Matthew 23: 13 - <sup>13</sup> ***“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You shut the door of the kingdom of heaven in people's faces...with your haughty attitudes, with your arrogance, and with your pride. You look out at the people who are on the streets, begging. You look out at those people and think to yourself, They don't deserve a place of honor, we do. And you actually stiff arm those people from the kingdom. This is why we shared those numbers at the beginning. Our desire is to have seats here on Sunday for those who are not part of the Kingdom. We want the invitation to go far and wide for people to come and see the goodness. But he says, “You shut the door.” You yourselves do not enter, nor will you let those enter who are trying to.***

The next three verses are instruction, but it's still a strong lesson for us in what Jesus is teaching on humility entering the Kingdom of Heaven. Look at what he says, and this is a great lesson for all of us. Maybe it will affect the way you move forward this week, into thanksgiving.

***12 Then Jesus said to his host, “When you give a luncheon or dinner, do not invite your friends, your brothers or sisters, your relatives, or your rich neighbors... Some of you are like, “We can uninvite all those people we... You know that's not the point of this right here. ...if you do, they may invite you back and so you will be repaid. “Can I bring anything?” “I tell you what. I won't bring anything, but then you come over to my house next time. Jesus teaches an important kingdom truth here.***

***13 But when you give a banquet... We're going to see this next week as he gets into the next parable, The Parable of the Great Banquet. ...invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind, 14 and you will be blessed.*** God's heart is for the marginalized and may this church's heart always be for the marginalized. I stand out in that lobby at almost every service, and the joy to see those who are coming through our doors... Let's make sure our doors are always wide open to everyone in this community. And let everybody know, “You have a seat.” And you walk in next to someone who you know from town and they are a prominent person. I'm telling you that person is not walking in here because they want to be known as a prominent person. That person is walking in here... Trust me, I know a lot of leaders that are in this gathering right now. They want you to know who Jesus is. They are here as humble servants of Christ. Let that be our attitudes and true of us.

***Although they cannot repay you, you will be repaid at the resurrection of the righteous.***

Today, there are those in here... to just end with this as part of the invitation. You feel like an outcast. You have for a long time. You've never found your group. I want you to know God's family is for you, and you are welcome and invited to join his family. You feel like you don't fit in. You've never fit in. There's never been anyone who has warmly received you. I want you to know God's Kingdom is for you. God's heart is for you. I think Lane set us up so well for that this morning and reminded us of that.

I just want to remind us where we started this morning with "Can I bring anything?" If you have nothing to offer, here is your invitation to The Great Banquet. And even if you think you have something to offer, it won't bring you into the kingdom. Because your obedience, your giving, your acts of service, your attendance today, your family of origin being Christians and growing up in a Christian home, none of that is part of the invitation. None of that secures you a seat. Jesus secured your seat with his death on the cross. He paid it all and he did it all.

When I think about this, I just think about believers who feel like, "What Christianity is and the Christian life for you has just become... You want to do the right thing, but that Pharisee attitude has crept into you because you're like, "If I want to secure heaven, I just gotta kind of grind it out here on earth and I gotta serve at my church. They're always asking me to serve. And they want me to come to another service. If I want heaven, I better just do all of it..."

There are people that are going, *This is how you have to do it You just have to grind it out, there's going to be nothing fun about it. Life can be miserable, but that's okay. Heaven will be great.* You've missed the whole point. This is a feast, this is a meal to be enjoyed. This is the freedom and grace that we have been given in Christ. Which means now that the overflow... If you ever go to your kid and go, "Hey, I want you to do this, I want you to do that... Their attitudes are going to be really great in doing all those things you just asked them to do. But if there is joy in your home, if there is joy in your request, if there is joy in your invitation, it changes everything about how it's received and how it's lived out.

Some body sent me this this week and I thought it summed up how some Christians view life in Christ. Just stick with me for a second because it's two entries into two different diaries. One is a dog's diary. The other is a cat's diary. Here's the dog's diary entry:

## **Dog Diary**

8:00 am - Dog food! My favorite thing!

9:30 am - A car ride! My favorite thing!

9:40 am - A walk in the park! My favorite thing!

10:30 am - Got rubbed and petted! My favorite thing!

12:00 PM - Milk bones! My favorite thing!

1:00 PM - Played in the yard! My favorite thing!

3:00 PM - Wagged my tail! My favorite thing!

5:00 PM - Dinner! My favorite thing!

7:00 PM - Got to play ball! My favorite thing!

8:00 PM - Watched TV with my people! My favorite thing!

11:00 PM - Sleeping on the bed! My favorite thing!

## **Cat Diary**

Day 983 of my captivity

My captors continue to taunt me with bizarre little dangling objects. They dine lavishly on fresh meat, while the other inmates and I are fed hash or some sort of dry nuggets. Although I make my contempt for the rations perfectly clear, I nevertheless must eat something in order to keep up my strength.

The only thing that keeps me going is my dream of escape.

Today, I was almost successful in an attempt to assassinate one of my tormentors by weaving around his feet as he was walking. I must try this again tomorrow, but at the top of the stairs.

The meal that we've been invited to, the Lord of the feast invites us to a feast of joy, festival joy. And only the humble receive this joy. I don't know if you've met a prideful person full of joy. Have you thought about that lately? Full of joy. Someone who is full of themselves doesn't have a lot of time to be full of joy. But if you want fullness in Christ and the joy that comes with being a part of the Kingdom and part of the family of God, and a part of the Great Banquet, then I encourage you. The source of your salvation is Jesus, the overflow is your obedience and don't ever mix those two up. And for those who think you have nothing worthy to bring, Jesus paid it all. And all God's people said... Amen.

Father, we thank you for this morning. I thank you for the week we are entering into with just time with family and friends. I'm grateful for this church family. We learn hard truths together and at the same time we enjoy one another. May that always be true.

I just pray for our families gathered here and around the country for thanksgiving this week that they would eat together with glad and sincere hearts. For the one that has never placed faith in Jesus, who is waiting to become worthy, who is waiting to bring something of worth, who is waiting to fit in, who is waiting to have something of value to bring, that they would leave all of that behind and accept this free invitation to the Great Banquet. That they would dine with the Lord of the feast.

We pray this in the authority of the name of Jesus. And everyone agreed and said... Amen.