

## "R.S.V.P."

Julie was the "teacher's pet" type: noted more for her brains than her looks. It was springtime and near the end of the school year. Julie's parents invited all of us in her 9th grade homeroom to an outdoor weekend picnic at their house. I thought, "Oh, man, I've got better things to do than go to a stupid old party at *Julie's house*." Well, the next Monday morning our homeroom teacher, with anger in his voice, informed us that almost *no one* had gone. Even though I was a 9th grade brat, I hung my head, and felt ashamed - as I thought how hurt and humiliated Julie and her mom and dad must have felt, because almost every one of us had refused their gracious invitation to a party.

Jesus told a story about a man who must have felt much like Julie and her parents. The man prepared a great feast. In those days, actually two invitations were issued. The *day* of the party or banquet would be announced long beforehand. Invitations were extended, and people responded. But the *hour* was not specified. Then, when the day came and everything was ready, servants were sent out to summon the already invited guests.

Everything was ready. Guests were told to come, but *every one of them* made an excuse why they couldn't come. Well, the host was furious! "So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, 'Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame'" (Luke 14:21). The servants did that, then came back and said, "There's still room for more." So the man hosting the dinner said, "Go, get some more!" "For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner" (Luke 14:24).

What does this story mean? It helps if we keep in mind two things. First, Jews in the time of Jesus thought that when God wraps up history and His kingdom is established, there would be a huge banquet hosted by the Messiah - *but only Israel, God's people, would be present!* No Gentiles, or "sinners" would be there. And also, when He told this parable, Jesus was having dinner in the home of a prominent *Pharisee*. Pharisees were a very devout religious sect of the Jews. They tried to keep God's law to the hilt. To help people do that, they developed a whole set of specific rules to explain God's commands. And if a person didn't strictly observe all these regulations, the Pharisees *thought God had no time for you*. Jesus often locked horns with the Pharisees over their narrow exclusiveness, and their belief that unless people were like them, they couldn't get into God's kingdom. In fact, look at what says in Luke 14:1 about the Pharisees at this dinner, "*they were watching him closely*". They were hoping to trip Him up. So, there was some tension in the air!

Jesus tells this parable about a man who invited people to dinner, they refused his invitation, and so he went out to the streets and brought in a whole new group of guests, a very motley crew!

***Jesus' parable was a word for that day - a message and warning for Israel.*** God had invited them to a feast! They were His chosen people - chosen for a mission to the world. But throughout history, again and again, they turned from God. Now, by rejecting Jesus, the Messiah God was sending, they were refusing God's invitation to His kingdom. So God was going out to the streets and inviting others to His banquet - people who didn't have Hebrew blood in them,

people who didn't keep all the strict religious laws - the "poor" "lame" "blind" – not exactly the “cream of the crop” in society’s eyes! In other words, God was opening up His kingdom *to everyone!*

This story was a warning for Israel, in Jesus' time. But it is also a message for today: ***God invites each of us to a feast, a party!*** Following Jesus, sharing in God's kingdom, is like a mega feast! (in fact, the Greek word “mega” is used in verse 16: “a certain man was preparing a great (“mega”) feast”).

Becoming a Christian, surrendering one’s will to Jesus, is an invitation to a gala banquet! *Now that’s certainly not the way a lot of people see it.* Many people think, if you’re a Christian, you’re going to be all pious and religious. Stuffy, straight-laced. To sign on for Jesus means to sign off to smiles and laughter and fun! *But that’s not true!* In fact, if Jesus is in us, we should be more alive than ever! Now I realize there are Christians who are colorless, critical, unhappy people. But that's not Christ in them - that's their own flawed human nature getting the upper hand. Because when the Spirit of Christ fills us (the Holy Spirit), the fruit of the Spirit will be shown in our life. And the second fruit of the Spirit listed is *joy* (after love). Someone has said, "A gloomy Christian is a contradiction in terms."

***God invites us to a party, a mega-feast!*** He loves us and welcomes us into His family that will last forever! He forgives all our sins through Christ! He gives us power for daily living! He invites us to share in His purposes for the world! God says, "Hey...I’m throwing a party! And *you* are invited!"

***Sad thing is, a lot of people wind up not coming to God's feast. They make excuses.*** The people in the story made excuses: "But they all alike began to make excuses" (verse 18). Did you ever try to think up an excuse when you were invited somewhere and didn't want to go? (Come on now, be honest!). "You'd like us to come over and look at a whole bunch of black and white photographs that belonged to your grandma?" And so you quick wrack your brain to think up a reason you can't come.

It's human nature to make excuses! For instance, I’m sure police officers have heard all the excuses in the book when they are about to give out a ticket. A police officer named Dave Hoffman tells how one night he was on patrol and observed a vehicle blow through a red light at a major intersection. There had been plenty of time to stop but the car hadn't even slowed down. He stopped the car and a young female driver gave this reason for running the red light: she had just had the car’s brakes repaired, it had been very expensive, and she didn't want to wear them out!

Look at the excuses people in the story give for not going to the banquet. “But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, ‘I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets’“(Luke 14:18). This person bought a piece of property, and now he has to go look at it. Doesn’t that sound a bit fishy? He bought a piece of land *without looking at it?* That’s like you got in on a fabulous land deal in Florida – an acre of prime

vacationland - then you go look at it, and it's swamp land....or land next to a race track or cement plant.

A second man made excuses too. "Another said, 'I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets'" (verse 19). Here again, this guy buys ten oxen *without looking at them!* They could have been blind or sickly, or missing a leg! I once sold a Datsun station wagon to a man from out of town. He saw the ad in the newspaper, and called. He asked a few questions, then said he'd buy it. I said, "Don't you want to look at it?" He said, "No, I'm sure it's in good shape." It was. It only had 12,000 miles on it. But I wouldn't buy a car without seeing it!

The third man said, "I just got married, so I can't come" (verse 20). Now Jewish law did say, "When a man is newly married, he shall not go out with the army or be charged with any business; he shall be free at home one year, to be happy with his wife whom he has taken" (Deuteronomy 24:5). Isn't that great law! How merciful! This law excused a newly married man from war and certain business, but this guy stretched it to get out of going to the dinner.

Why would any of us refuse God's invitation to be part of His eternal kingdom? Why would anyone not want Christ ruling and guiding our life? Well, for one thing, *some of us misunderstand His invitation.* We think if we surrender our life to God and to Christ we'll have to give up things we enjoy, and have to become all "religious" and "pious" – what a drag! We need to be honest here. Following Jesus at times *can be* difficult. It may mean giving up some things we like. But Jesus never asks us to give something up for His sake, that He doesn't give us something better in return. Being Christian isn't about becoming super religious and following a bunch of religious rules. It is about having a *relationship* with the living Christ that transforms how we see life, how we treat people, and what our goals in life are!

*Then too, many refuse God's invitation because other things are more important.* We are not against Jesus and Christianity. We sort of toy around with being a Christian. It's just that other things get in the way of making that decisive choice to follow Jesus. We're busy with family obligations...or we're into the boat or camper or dirt bike or hunting cabin...or we are immersed in our job or business pursuits...or our mind is occupied with vacation plans, our social calendar, entertainment, and so on. "Sorry God, I'll have to be excused for now."

Somehow we just never seem to have time to get serious about Christ - to make pursuit of God and His will a life priority. Dr. R. G. Lee, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, tells about a young man in his church named Bob. Bob and his young family were faithful to church and active in its ministry. Bob was an astute businessman and started a retail store that was so successful that it expanded. Other stores were built and Bob became very wealthy. However, he was so busy that he never had time for God anymore. He showed up about once a month in church and quit serving in the church.

Dr. Lee was pretty bold, and one day he went to Bob's office and walked right past the receptionist and past Bob's secretary, into his office. Bob was surprised, but said, "Dr. Lee, good

to see you." Dr. Lee said, "Bob, I've come by to pray for your business." Bob stammered, "Sh-sure." They got down on their knees and Dr. Lee prayed, "Lord, I pray that you'll make Bob's business fail." Bob's head jerked up, but Dr. Lee continued to pray. "I pray that you'll take away all those other stores and just give him his original store, because You remember, Lord, how much he loved You and served You back before he got too busy for You. In Jesus' name. Amen." Bob said, "Dr. Lee, I didn't really like that prayer." Dr. Lee said, "That's okay, Bob, I wasn't talking to you anyway. See you Sunday."

That prayer was a wake up call. Bob started making God and the work of the Lord a higher priority than his retail business. He and his family got involved again. It just so happened that the business continued to grow, but serving God became Bob's main business. *Some of us refuse God's invitation because other things more important.*

***And then, some of us refuse God's invitation to a banquet because we just don't want to come.*** In all honesty, we just don't want to submit to God and His will. We don't want to surrender our life to Jesus, because this would interfere with our living life our way, doing our own thing. Over the years, I've been in churches where we've conducted visitation of inactive members. Often we wind up visiting people who somehow got on the church roll book, but never really made a commitment of their life to Christ. In these visitations, these church members sometimes will offer excuses why they don't come to church – they're just too busy, or they don't like something about the church. But in many cases the truth is, they just don't want to surrender their life to Christ and be active in the church because *it would cramp their style, and they want to live the way they want to live.* The sad thing is, living life on our own terms can never in the long run compare to the joy and satisfaction that comes from allowing God to work out His purposes in and through us, and His will to take precedence in our life.

God invites us to a feast that starts now and lasts forever in His kingdom. ***One more thing: although some didn't come, the Master didn't cancel the banquet. God wants His house full, and if we don't come, God will bring in others.*** The owner of the house tells his servants to go out to the streets and bring in the poor, the lame, the blind.

This is a word for some of us in the Church - because there are some in most every congregation who have not yet accepted God's gracious invitation to salvation in Christ. We may come to church regularly. We have some religion. We may even be on a church committee or be a church leader, but we have never surrendered our life and will to Christ. If we continue to refuse God's gracious invitation, He'll find others to fill the seats at His banquet table! He'll find others who *really want* to be serious about following Jesus!

We see this happen sometimes in a congregation. Persons in the church for years, but are spiritually dead. They have never truly been converted to Christ. And God begins to move in that church - a handful get really enthused about Jesus, and they start to reach out beyond the walls of the church. As a result, some unlikely people find their way to the church and to the Lord. Maybe an alcoholic or a druggie. Some poor soul with no class. Someone with no church background, who doesn't know squat about churchy things - but they come to know Jesus. And

then these new Christians begin to take over! And what do you hear from these church members who always made excuses why they would never be sold out for Jesus? "What are *they* doing here?" "Who do they think they are, coming in and taking over *our church!*"

We see this dynamic on a larger scale, when so called "Christian nations" in the "Christianized West" turn away from God. God just moves on from them and invites others - so a revival breaks out in Indonesia or Korea or some of the African nations.

***God wants His table full!*** He doesn't want to eat by Himself! Even having angels and heavenly beings at His table isn't enough for this big hearted Master of all creation! He wants ***us*** at His table. He's that's kind of God!

He wants everyone in His family. He wants all people – including us - to know the joy of walking with Jesus and having our sins forgiven! He wants us to get beyond our self-centeredness and align ourselves with His purposes for the world.

You're invited. I'm invited. Will we show up?

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