

Dr. Daniel K. Darko, Gospel of Luke, Session 23, Mealtime Discourses on the Kingdom, Luke 14

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This is Dr. Daniel K. Darko in his teaching on the Gospel of Luke. This is session 23, Mealtime Discourses on the Kingdom, Luke 14.

Welcome back to the Biblica e-learning lecture series on the Gospel of Luke.

Following the previous lectures in which Jesus challenged the disciples about what true discipleship entails and his prophetic pronouncement to call people to repentance, now we turn to chapter 14, in which we find Jesus in mealtime settings and various things evolving out of that mealtime setting. Here, in this particular chapter, which I will try to put in one recording, I'll try to show you some of the encounters Jesus had as he laid the foundation about how the kingdom attends to the poor and the marginalized and that society may deem insignificant. As you may recall, in one of the previous lectures, I drew your attention to that woman who was sick for 18 years and who got healed in the synagogue, and the ruler of the synagogue had an issue with that.

Here we proceed to see Jesus now in the mealtime setting, but before that, let me take time for the first time to outline a few things that are culturally relevant as you think about mealtime scenes in the Gospel of Luke. I thought perhaps this particular occasion provided us with a very good place to look into that. One, mealtime settings are very, very important social functions in the first century setting.

For mealtimes, especially when it goes beyond the traditional time in which people eat to invite outsiders into the scene, it becomes a very important part of defining those whom the family trusts, those whom the family wants to invite into their space, those who the family desire to know more. Both the host and the guest consider this to be an honorable gesture and take it very, very seriously. When we see Jesus dining with the Pharisees, it is important to realize that anytime Jesus is invited to mealtime with the Pharisees, someone is inviting him to the in-group gathering where there will be more Pharisees.

In effect, it plays the social function of somebody hosting Jesus as a guest of honor and having the sense of honor on Jesus's part to participate in mealtime with the people. Having said that, it so happened that too often, when Jesus is at mealtime with the Pharisees, Luke likes to qualify another group, the nomos, the lawyers. They may also be there, and anytime Luke mentions the presence of the lawyers along with the Pharisees, he always shows the conflict that would ensue at the mealtime setting.

So, think about Jesus's gathering with the Pharisees for mealtime as an in-group event. Those who are out-groupers will not be invited to such a place, notwithstanding the rituals that go into being part of meals with Pharisees, such as the one we saw in the past dipping one's hand in the water to wash. Some scholars have gone on to see the mealtime discourse with Jesus and the Pharisees in light of the Greco-Roman symposium, for example, where people meet, have meals, exchange ideas, debate, share intellectual ideas, and almost in a very nice academic way, if you like, sit down and share great thoughts and benefit from sharing knowledge one with the other.

One may see it as such, but let's not lose sight of the fact that the Pharisees were a religious party in Second Temple Judaism. Also, as I go on to look at the text that deals with mealtime, I want to draw your attention to the culture of honor and shame again. In this culture, honor is very important, and shame is a big thing.

So, to be an honorable guest or to put someone to public shame is very damaging indeed. We will see Jesus with Pharisees at mealtime, and the setting will lend itself to a place where the honorable space of give and take between the host and the guest can actually turn into awkward moments of conflict and dispute. One of the things mealtime usually does is to enhance the bonds between those who are already in an in-group and create an opportunity for future members of that in-group to come and let the group check them out, if you like.

Having this brief understanding of mealtime in the Greco-Roman world in the background, let's turn to Luke chapter 14, verse 1, and I read from verses 1 to 6. On the 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 dropped sin. And Jesus responded to the lawyers and the 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 an ox that has fallen into a well on the Sabbath day will not immediately pull him out? And they could not reply to these things. Here, I draw your attention to the mealtime setting as you see in the passage. A leader of the Pharisees had invited Jesus, supposing that there were more Pharisees in this gathering. Verse 3 draws our attention to the fact that there are lawyers and Pharisees there whom Jesus will address in this particular occasion.

We are not sure about the man who is sick with dropsy. Whether he was a Pharisee or not is unclear, but there is an issue of when Jesus will heal this man. Looking at the discourse carefully, I see that this was a table fellowship of Pharisees, and it so happened that it was a table fellowship on a Sabbath day.

Notice that Sabbath day has already come up earlier on in the discourse of Luke, showing that whenever Jesus healed on a Sabbath day, it was understood by the Pharisees or a ruler of the synagogue as working, and it was not often greeted well in that sense. Fellowship here is reserved for the inner circle, so understand that when Jesus was a guest, Jesus was supposed to do the bidding of the host as a gesture of honor to the host. The lawyers and Pharisees present, as I indicated earlier, is suggestive that, indeed, there is going to be conflict.

The man who was healed had dropsy. What is dropsy you may ask? For English speakers, this may not be an issue, but for someone like me who is not a native English speaker, I must say dropsy is one of those that I needed more knowledge to be able to understand what the condition is. Dropsy is where there is some kind of problem with the skin, and there is some kind of fluid, and then that will cause inflammation of some sort.

In some cases, dropsy can lead or result in leprosy. So, imagine a skin condition that could in itself be an unclean element in dealing with Pharisees. Having that thought at the back of your mind, let's go on to read from verse 7 to see what Luke shares with us.

Now, he told a parable to those who were invited. That is Jesus telling parables at the mealtime scene. When you notice how they chose the place of honor, say to them, when you are invited to someone to a wedding 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 the table with you. Everyone who exalts himself will be humbled. And he who humbles himself will be exalted.

Verse 12. When he said this to the man who had invited him, he said this 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 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 on the day of the resurrection of the just.

Quick things to observe in this particular passage. In the first instance of Jesus talking about sitting at a place of honor, Jesus is not saying anything new that wisdom

writers have not said in the past. It is always better to be promoted than to be demoted.

In a culture of honor and shame, one's position at a table or a banquet shows a person's social standing. In other words, as we say in America, Great Britain, or elsewhere in the world, we have the high table, and we have the other places. Jesus' point is that in a group of people, namely the Pharisees and the lawyers who are obsessed with public image, should understand that when one is invited to a wedding banquet, it is important to take the lowest place and be promoted to a place of honor than to accord oneself a certain status of honor and sit at a place only to be demoted, knowing nothing here is the issue of honor and shame.

Jesus says to choose the place that may not project honor and status, and you will be elevated to the place of honor. In the second instance, when he turns to the host of the banquet, you notice here what Jesus is trying to do. He appeals to the honor and the other part of that culture, the hospitality culture, in which the element of reciprocity is part of the hospitality.

Great people, important people, bring certain people around them to honor them at the banquet, knowing that they, too, owe them subconsciously a norm of reciprocity where they may be invited to such a gathering. Jesus challenges his host on two grounds. One is on city arrangement.

Two, whom you invite to an important banquet. On the second door, when he touches on whom to invite, he could easily upset the audience there, namely the pharisees and the lawyers. Jesus said, don't invite people who are like you because they will invite you back.

They will repay you in the custom of reciprocity in the hospitality culture. Invite people who cannot repay. He then names specific people who should make them very uncomfortable.

These are people they would despise and would not like to have at their table. He says to the host, invite the poor, the cripple, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed because they cannot repay you. Wow.

You see, now Jesus has moved to the direct challenge of repentance to show social engagement. And here, in the Lucan way, Luke is going to show that the poor and the marginalized are integral parts of what God is doing in the kingdom of God. The unwritten code is assumed.

I noted that the sitting and status at the fellowship table are intact. They know it at that very gathering as the seat where people are seated at certain places to gain honor. And so, Jesus' statement almost plays out in front of them.

They understood that. Jesus' appeal to decency and propriety provokes something in the Pharisees. Their desire to be honored is now being challenged to adopt a posture of humility in the kingdom of God.

A posture that in a subsequent statement will lead to a point of even asking the fact that they bring the marginalized among them at the table. You see, Jesus wanted to show these Pharisees and the lawyers that promotion at the table and honor at the table are always nice when the host accords them. Appealing to them is the straight statement.

One needs to learn to be humble. And they will be exalted if they choose the path of humility. The invitation of Jesus is very, very strong in leading to this when he says, do not invite your brothers.

Do not invite friends. Do not invite rich neighbors. Invite the crippled.

Invite the poor. Invite the lame. You see, Jesus is hinting here that at the table of fellowship in the kingdom of God, all people must be present.

Notwithstanding the fact that from chapter eight, I drew your attention to the fact that there were women following Jesus all this while on his way to Jerusalem. Jesus is touching the lives of the ordinary as well as the noble. Jesus does not exclude any group of social institutions or social sectors.

The kingdom of God includes all. One of the things that rings in the background as one reads this text is the words of wisdom from Proverbs that seem to echo what Jesus is projecting in this passage. Proverbs 25, verses six to seven, read, 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 the noble. Jesus teaches what is supposed to be cultural decency and respect, but where people are obsessed with honor, they could self-appoint and endanger their standing. Propriety in the kingdom of God is different.

Jesus then talks about invitations to a banquet and goes on to elaborate on mealtime scenes, some things that can emerge, and lessons that can be drawn out in regard to the kingdom of God. Verse 15 and I read, when one of those who reclined at table with him had this thing, he said to him, blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God. And he said to him, a man once gave a great banquet and invited many.

And at that time, and at a time for the banquet, he sent his servant to say to those who had been invited, come, for everything now is now ready. But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, I have bought a field.

I must go out and see it. Please excuse me. Another said I have bought five yokes of oxen.

And I will go to examine them, please excuse me. And another said, I have married a wife, and therefore I cannot come. So the servant came and reported these things to his master.

Then the master of the house became angry and said to his servant, go out quickly to the streets and lanes of the city and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame. Notice the names of the people who have been mentioned in the previous parable. And the servant said, sir, what you commanded has been done, and still there is room.

And the master told the servant to go out to the highways and hedges and compel people to come in, that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those men who were invited shall taste my banquet. In this parable of the banquet, we observe that Jesus actually is in a certain way. Another statement is going to provoke the giving of a parable.

One guest talks about blessings for those who will be able to enjoy mealtime in the kingdom of God. And that alone sparks this, where Jesus talks about a banquet. Notice the three people that were invited first and gave excuses.

They were the right people that should have been at the banquet. But all three of them had excuses. The excuses aroused anger, and I noticed an emotional response from the host.

Out of anger and frustration, he orders to bring in the second set of invitees. Those are the social outcasts. Those are the poor, the crippled, the lame.

And the servant went and invited them in. And then he goes on to say there is room. He said, now go and bring another set of people.

Notice the language there, he says, compel those guys on the outside to come in. Those are people who would otherwise not feel worthy to be present at such a gathering. Most of us think that this will be in reference to Gentiles.

But notice what Jesus is not saying in this parable. Jesus is not saying that the first three groups are completely out. This parable is often read to understand that Jesus

invited some Jews or some nobles into the banquet, and because they failed, he replaced them with other people.

Perhaps a better reading is supposed to understand how Jesus, by talking to this group of people who are nobles, is trying to invite the set of people he had mentioned previously to the host as the people who should be invited into such a gathering. If you read it that way, then Jesus is saying the people he sits with are giving excuses. But oh, how he wishes that they would consider the need to bring the outcasts into their fold.

Because in the kingdom of God, no one is excluded. The social outcasts, the marginalized, the poor, crippled, blind, and lame could find their place at the table with God. Even Gentiles will be given a place in the kingdom of God.

I think Joel Green summarizes what is going on in this parable very well when he writes in his Gospel of Luke, and I quote. Indeed, the point seems to be that, now working from a transforming understanding of social relations, this householder would include anyone among his table guests, that no one is too solid, too wretched, to be counted as a friend at table, thus the rows and the lanes of the city would be the location of the dwelling of those of low status, whether due to their despised occupation, their family heritage, their religious impurity, their poverty, or some other cause. You see, this identifies the master of Jesus' story as an example of an elite who took Jesus' earlier counsel seriously and extended hospitality to those generally defined by their dishonorable status and their exclusion from circles of power and privilege. In other words, Jesus could be speaking to the host and to others that, indeed, in the kingdom of God, all this group of people must be able to be given a place at a table, an invitation.

Jesus, knowing how upsetting this could be to his audience, will go on to challenge them to understand the cost and the conditions of discipleship. Because if they will understand to have a place for the poor, the lame, the blind, the crippled, and Gentiles in the midst, they shall understand that to be a disciple in the kingdom of God is not an easy thing. Now great crowds accompanied him, and he turned and said to them, If anyone comes to me and does not hate his own father and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple.

Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple. For which of you desiring to build a tower does not first sit down and count the cost, whether he has enough to complete? Otherwise, when he has laid a foundation and is not able to finish, all who see it begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish. Or what kind of king, going out to encounter another king in war, will not sit down first and deliberate whether he is able with 10,000 to meet him who comes against him with 20,000? Or if not, while the other is yet a great way

off, he sends a delegation and asks for terms of peace. So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is of no use either for the soil or for the manure pile. It is thrown away. He who has an ear to hear, let him hear.

Jesus, in these teachings, is challenging the Pharisees, the lawyers, and his audience to review their understanding of discipleship and to come to terms with the cost of discipleship. Here, I remind you that Jesus is dealing with some crucial things. The context here you could find in Luke 25 is that Luke sets up the journey motif to say Jesus is still on his way towards Jerusalem, and now the audience is a large crowd he has to deal with.

The other thing to observe here is the relational impediment that people need to weigh if they want to follow him. This audience may include Pharisees and lawyers, but Luke says it's a large crowd, suggesting to us that it's a large crowd of people, and there he turns to them again to give them the challenge he had given earlier on about kinship and prioritizing kingdom mission above kinship. One should be ready to relinquish loyalty to one's father, mother, wife, children, brothers, sisters, and even self, Jesus says, to be able to become a true follower.

When Jesus said you should hate your father, mother, wife, children, brothers, and sisters, please let us not take that to mean hate in the sense of despise, deplore, and all that. He is not suggesting that one should hate one's family. He suggests that the use of the language of hate here is to relinquish one's sense of loyalty and prioritize the kingdom's mission.

Jesus challenges the audience to consider the cost of discipleship. Discipleship may include suffering, and those who want to be disciples of Jesus have to count the cost. To count the cost as a wise builder will count the cost before they start the building project, and a king will count the cost in times of war before he sends out the troops to go and fight on the battlefield.

You see, counting the cost is significant as Jesus also introduces an element of suffering, which is to say that one will have to know that they may have to carry their cross to follow him. Luke is echoing what has already happened before his writing, that Jesus will die, and in that sense, carrying the cross of Jesus is bearing a sacrifice for the cost of the kingdom. Jesus reminds the people listening to him in the king's analogy that even material possessions may be an impediment in the language of war and that one needs to count the cost before one engages.

Jesus is so concerned that people embrace the kingdom for what it is, prioritize the standing of the kingdom, and understand that those who are included in the

kingdom include people from all spheres of life. But beyond people, things and possessions can also be impediments in one's pursuit to find a place in God's kingdom. In the salt analogy, Jesus is trying to say people need to be awoken to the fact that one cannot go in half and half and lose half of their essence and retain the others.

If a salt loses its saltiness, it's not good for fertilizing or preservation. Jesus says, So therefore, any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. Wow! Any one of you who does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple.

Salt is good, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? Commit and commit fully. You see here, I think Luke Timothy Johnson captures the essence of this when he writes that the parable of the banquet and the demands of discipleship together make the same point here and that the call of God issued by the Prophet must relativize all other claims on life. The parable shows how entanglement with persons and things can affect a refusal of the invitation.

The demands make clear that the choice for discipleship demands precisely the choice against a complete involvement in possessions or people. In the demands for possessions or people. There is little that is gentle or reassuring in this, but I like how Johnson phrases it. But as the final saying on the salt suggests, any mode of discipleship that tries to do both things tries to be defined, to be defined both by possessions and by the Prophet's call will, like, will be like the salt without a savor.

Fit for nothing much. It is tossed. Johnson captures the relationship between the banquet and the course of discipleship trying to suggest that what Jesus is saying is this.

Obsession and involvement in possessions and people and all that will not be able to allow people to participate fully in what God is doing in the kingdom of God. Chapter 14 if you like, in the mealtime discourse, is a place where Jesus finds a way to challenge how one pursues honor in a culture where people are obsessed with honor and shame—challenging humility as a noble virtue.

Challenging potential disciples, Pharisees, and lawyers to understand that it is important to understand gatherings in the kingdom of God include the most marginalized, the most outcast of society. Yes, true discipleship need to reorder their priority. This priority includes people engagement and commitment to material possessions.

Jesus is not calling us to relinquish all relations with people, but he edges us and admonishes us to prioritize our relationship with God and the demands of the kingdom in human relations. He does not say to be in the kingdom equates being

poor. No, but he's saying that those who are blessed to have more should understand that one principle of the kingdom is to invite people who are poor, marginalized, outcasts, lame, crippled, and blind to the table.

He does not say being in the kingdom should lead to someone being perceived as dishonorable. No, he is trying to say that yes, a place of honor is important in the kingdom as well, but people in the kingdom should adopt a posture of humility, and that posture of humility will naturally lead to the elevation of their social status that will accord them the desired honor. You see, counting the cost of discipleship, if counted seriously and perceived for what it is, will get us into living a life that Jesus himself lived.

Anyone who wants to be his true follower must be ready to commit, not half-heartedly, but the fullest sense of commitment with heart and mind, all hands on deck, trying to do the master's will. I began this lecture by introducing you to the significance of mealtime, and it sounded as if we are going to talk about party time and how to have fun and enjoy meals. Yes, it turned out to be that, but as usual, we saw that mealtime became the occasion for Jesus to introduce who to include.

In the ministry of Jesus, all are important. You see, I have said in Nigeria that if you are Christian, you should understand that the Yoruba are invited to a dinner table with the Igbos. The Hausa and the Igbo is invited to the dinner table of the Yorubas.

If you are following from Ghana, understand that in the kingdom of God, the Akan table has the Nognas invited, the Igbos invited, the Hausas invited, and the tribes you can think about invited. No one is excluded. In terms of race, white, black, brown, yellow, you name it, hair, no hair, tall, short, all are invited to the dinner table of the kingdom of God.

The kingdom of God is God at work in the world, where God is reaching out to people and all people that he has made in his image and likeness. The demands of the kingdom require that we do not prioritize possessions above people, status, and dignity above the ordinaries. God is interested in all, and I hope that together with me, we will strive in our Christian work to heed the demands of the kingdom that are being spelled out in this mealtime discourse so that we may count the cost of discipleship.

We may understand that sometimes it may include suffering, it may include public disdain, but we still choose to be followers of Jesus and see what God can do in our lives. You know, I like the Sunday school song, which profoundly summarizes my thoughts when I think about the cost of discipleship and my resolve. I have decided to follow Jesus, no turning back.

I have decided to follow Jesus, with no turning back and no turning back. May that be your song, may that be your resolve as well. Thank you for following these lectures with us as we think about the cost of following Jesus in this mealtime discourse.

Thank you.

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