

(32) THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH: LUKE 14:1-24

- Focus Idea:** The Church is relentlessly invitational. As a consequence, followers of Jesus break social boundaries and taboos, gathering otherwise excluded men and women into loving community. This act of inclusion points to God's desire to unite all persons in his Kingdom.
- The Context:** The Gospel of Luke is the most sympathetic and inclusive of the New Testament's portraits of Jesus. The book's author, a gentile physician, goes to great lengths to demonstrate the love and welcome of Jesus for people that have been socially marginalized. Women, outcasts, and the poor feature prominently in Luke's narrative. Unlike Matthew, who writes for a mostly Jewish audience, Luke tailors his message to people who have not grown up with the Old Testament. The Jesus he shares has a global ministry; it aims to touch and restore people of all ethnicities and social classes. Chapter 14, about halfway to the end of the gospel, find Jesus traveling, teaching, and healing, perhaps on the way to Jerusalem (13:22).
- The Characters:** In this text, Jesus is interacting with a group of *Pharisees*. The Pharisees were a group of religious leaders committed to strict adherence to the Old Testament laws. In addition to observing the 613 stated regulations in the Hebrew Bible, they had constructed a "fence" of myriad other rules to prevent Jews from accidentally violating one of the core prohibitions. Luke 14 locates Jesus in the home of one of these leaders who are "carefully watching" him (14:1). It is dinnertime on the Sabbath Day, the day observant Jews rest from work.
- The Core:** Who belongs in the community of Jesus? Are there established guidelines for when, where, and how people can become part of the Church? Luke 14 reflects upon Jesus' meal with a group of Pharisees to identify three markers of the broadness of inclusion in in the community of Christian faith.
- First, the Church places people above policy. In verses 1-6, Luke reports a healing story; in this instance, a man with painful swelling presents himself to Jesus. Jesus puts the question to the Pharisees: *Does the rule about resting on the Sabbath Day mean that this man should continue in his suffering?* For some religious leaders (see 13:10-14), the answer was easy: healings were work, and work was forbidden on the Sabbath.
- Jesus, however, touched and healed the man, arguing that even the strictest of Pharisees would have compassion on his animals (vs. 5). How much more shouldn't mercy be extended to a fellow man?
- Second, the church practices humility in a society otherwise fueled by pride. When Jesus saw how many of the dinner guests had jockeyed for best position at the table, he counselled them to seek places of lower honor. It is better, he taught, to be publicly elevated to a prime seat than to be sent to a lower position in full view of the guests (vs. 7-11).
- Last, Jesus taught explicitly (vs. 12-14), then through a parable (vs. 15-24), that God welcomes all persons into the table-fellowship of the Kingdom of God. Whereas many dinner guests were invited on the basis of expected reciprocity, Jesus' followers were to bring in others who couldn't ever invite them back. This act of openness and inclusion reflects God's desire to have a full house; when the invited guests back out, the host's servants reach out to the injured, poor, and excluded that they too might enjoy the great feast. Believers understand this as a mandate to include all persons in love.