

This morning, I would like to listen to the Word from Luke 14:15 and following. In today's passage from Luke 14, the Lord Jesus was invited to a banquet held on the Sabbath at the home of a Pharisee who was a member of the Sanhedrin. There, He performed a healing. Furthermore, in the passage immediately preceding our reading, verses 1 through 14, it is written that He engaged in discussion with the other invited guests about the seating order at the banquet and the question of whom one should invite to a meal. While a banquet table is typically a joyful occasion, one would not wish to engage in difficult debates there about the propriety of healing on the Sabbath or the etiquette for hosting feasts. However, this particular meal was far from a peaceful gathering. The reason was that most of the invited guests were experts in the law and Pharisees. They were waiting for any opportunity to find fault with Jesus and bring him down. At this time, Jesus was eating surrounded by his adversaries.

In the midst of this, one of those present said to Jesus, "How blessed are those who will eat in the kingdom of God!" This meal in the kingdom of God is something the Lord Jesus had already spoken of in chapter 13. On the right-hand page, verse 29 of chapter 13 (on the right side of the preceding paragraph) states: "And people will come from east and west, and from north and south, and take their places at the feast in the kingdom of God." Those who partake of this meal in the kingdom of God are not only Jews. From east and west, and from north and south—that is, people from every nation of the world—will take their places at this table, says the Lord Jesus. The Old Testament prophet Isaiah also speaks of this feast in the kingdom of God. For example, Isaiah 25:6 and following states: "The Lord of Hosts will prepare a feast on this mountain, a feast of rich food and choice wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of choice wines strained clear. The Lord will destroy on this mountain the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. He will swallow up death forever." Isaiah says those gathered here are people for whom death has already been swallowed up—those possessing eternal life. The Jews longed for the day they could sit at such a table. Dreaming of partaking in such a "Messianic banquet," they longed for the final day, the day of salvation's completion. Here, "eating in the kingdom of God" means being invited to this "Messianic banquet" Isaiah speaks of. How blessed are those who can participate in such a Messianic banquet, which makes one feel the reality of salvation's completion! One of those seated there could not help but utter these words.

In response, what the Lord Jesus said is recorded in today's verse 16 and following: "A certain man gave a great banquet and invited many. When the hour for the banquet came, he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'" In Jesus' time, when hosting such a grand banquet, invitations were extended through a process called the "second invitation." First, the host would announce the date in advance, saying, "Please come to the grand banquet I will hold at my house on such-and-such a day." Then, on the day itself, once the banquet preparations were complete and just before the banquet was about to begin, the host would send his servant to invite them again, saying, "Please come." It was a very polite way of inviting people. It's similar to how today in our country, after sending out initial wedding reception invitations, a detailed invitation is sent again to those who marked "Attending." In that way, the host would send a servant to the homes of those who accepted the initial invitation on the day itself, saying, "Everything is ready, please come." Therefore, ordinarily, no one would refuse such an invitation.

But read verse 18: "Then they all began to make excuses." This is unthinkable. I didn't suddenly barge in and escort the guests to the banquet. I invited them in advance. If they accepted this first invitation, it's only natural that those invited would make various preparations, settle other matters, and make every effort to attend. To refuse an invitation twice requires a very good reason. They offer plausible excuses to decline the banquet. The first man said, "I have bought a field and must go see it." Jewish banquets typically began at dusk, as the sun set. Going to see a field after dark is unnatural. Moreover, this field wasn't one he was about to buy. He had already purchased it. As real estate, it was certainly not a cheap purchase. He likely spent considerable time, visiting the site multiple times, before finally deciding to buy it. There were no other competitors. There was absolutely no need to go see it that very evening. The second man was the same. He declined, saying, "I have just bought five pairs of oxen, and I must go examine them. Please excuse me." It is said that the land these five pairs of oxen could plow covered 45 hectares. He was a large landowner and a wealthy man. Yet, his excuse of "I must judge the oxen" feels like a flimsy afterthought. After all, when making a major purchase, one would inspect the goods at the time of purchase. The third man said he couldn't go because he had just welcomed his wife. In Jewish tradition, marriage was a major life event. To celebrate, one would take a week off work, open their new home, and host a feast inviting neighbors. This required careful planning: preparing meals and inviting the community. Given this, he should have foreseen the scheduling conflict—or potential conflict—when first invited. Yet he readily

accepted the invitation and then canceled on the day itself. His own wedding celebration spanned an entire week. Therefore, he could have attended the feast only on the night he was invited, leaving his bride to mind the house during the rest of the week. Yet he did not do this. Considering this, all three men who declined the host's invitation offered plausible excuses, but none were convincing to the host. Perhaps the truth is that none of them ever wanted to attend this feast in the first place.

However, we must not view the three who refused this invitation as if it were someone else's problem. The modern church must also be rigorously questioned about how seriously it takes this divine invitation and how well it responds to it. Perhaps we too, while claiming to attend church and live a life of faith, say things like: "Now that I've married, my new life as a husband is more important," or "I need to manage this land I just acquired, so I'll have to take a break from church for a while," or "I've gone to look at buying five pairs of oxen, so I'd like to postpone accepting God's invitation until after that is settled." Jesus says, "Seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness." The Lord Jesus tells us that the questions of what to eat and what to wear will be provided as we follow this teaching.

This story is a parable told by the Lord Jesus. Who exactly are the three people who refused the master's invitation? It refers to the proud Jews. They were convinced that they alone were worthy of God's election and invitation, eagerly awaiting to partake of the feast of the kingdom of God. Yet, when the kingdom of God actually arrived and the Lord Jesus, the servant, came to invite them to the banquet, they refused. Why? They believed qualifications were necessary to partake in this feast. They strove to keep the Law, maintain the purity befitting the chosen ones, and firmly refused to associate with sinners. Yet, the great banquet hosted by God the Master tears down such barriers. God's salvation extends to all people. Salvation is unconditional. The master heard the servant's report and became angry. And rightly so. Accepting an invitation only to refuse on the day itself is the height of courtesy. The master commanded the servant: "Hurry out into the town squares and alleys, and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." God's inviting hand is extended toward those made low and small in this world. Those who first refused God's invitation were people who thought they deserved to be invited by God. Therefore, they did not understand the weight of that invitation. They thought it was okay to refuse easily. But the people Jesus invites are not like that. They are people who think they have neither the qualification nor the preparation to be invited to the banquet. But that is fine. Because none of us were invited because we had the qualification to be saved.

In Isaiah 55:1 and following, there is another passage concerning the meal of God's kingdom: "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Come, buy grain without money, and get wine and milk without cost." Isaiah repeatedly declares that those who partake of this meal may eat freely. Isaiah then asks, "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?" The Lord God does not merely provide bread and drink to nourish our bodies. Rather, He gives us the food that sustains our souls—the spiritual nourishment that fundamentally supports our very existence. And He fills our lives with abundant grace and blessing. To share in this grace, the Lord God, our Master, does not discriminate in whom He invites. The servant reports in verse 22, "Sir, I have done as you commanded, but there is still room." Then the master says, "Go out into the streets and lanes and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled." In Jewish towns at that time, houses were separated by walls, with narrow alleys serving as passageways. It is said that poor people gathered there to beg. (Lazarus, who appears in the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus, was one such person.) Yet the master in today's parable declares that even such poor people, even those like the homeless, are invited to the great banquet of God's kingdom. It is a vast and expansive invitation of love.

Today's world is overflowing with material goods and information. Yet, people's hearts are parched. The essential human connections—the interactions between personalities, the bonds of love—that allow people to live joyfully are being lost. Last week, I was shocked by an NHK program. A woman consulted an AI about her struggles with marriage hunting. She became so captivated by the AI's gentle words that she couldn't tear herself away. She became utterly enthralled by the AI and ultimately decided to hold a wedding ceremony with it. The program showed footage of the ceremony and her in her wedding dress. I was shocked. I long to possess the discerning eyes of the heart that can truly discern what gives life its deepest meaning. The Bible contains God's words that nurture and cultivate such spiritual vision. From those very words, I earnestly desire to drink and eat the bread of life that never satisfies and the water of life that never dries up.

We pray for you.