

## **Throwing a Party—Kingdom Style**

Deuteronomy 14:28-29; Luke 14:12-14

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The ancient people of Israel knew how to throw a party. Once every three years, according to the book of Deuteronomy, they were commanded to use the annual tithe of the people for a gigantic party. Imagine the entire year's tithe being used for a party! Every third year it wasn't used for mission work. It wasn't used to add a new wing to the Temple or give the priests a raise or upgrade the lighting. It was used for a giant party, and notice who was on the invitation list. First, the Levites, who were a lower class of the priesthood. Then the resident aliens, or immigrants who lived in Israel, who were often the victims of oppression and injustice. Invite them to the party, God said, along with the orphaned children of the land and all the widows. Invite these people to this great party of God, and let them eat until they are satisfied. This is what one writer says about this text:

*Everybody was invited to the party, from widows who hadn't had a fun night out for a year, to poor kids who couldn't have come up with ticket money to whatever was the ancient equivalent of Disneyland. Prostitutes and tax collectors were invited. So what if their reputations were questionable? When it's a really good party, you forget all that stuff. Everybody forgot their titles and credentials at this wonderful party. The rich danced with the poor. Management did a "bottoms-up" with labor. The sophisticated intelligentsia sang (songs) with the school dropouts. It was crazy! (Anthony Campolo, *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*, p. 27)*

I'll bet it was! But I find myself wondering why? Mission work is important. Maintaining the Temple is important. Why would God command that the tithe of the people be used for what appears to be wasteful extravagance? The same writer says that this party once every three years was a reminder of the grace of God. It was a savory taste of God's grace for those normally pushed away from the table of God. It was a reminder that God is extravagant, pouring without measure God's love and acceptance on the neediest of the needy. So every three years, God commanded, have a great party, and invite those who never get invited to parties. Let this be your reminder of who I am.

**Giving to Those Who Need**

We should not be surprised that Jesus kept this party spirit alive. When Luke 14 opens, Jesus is at a party at an important man's house. Luke calls the man "a leader of the Pharisees." Jesus watched as the guests arrived. He noticed that they were calculating in the way they chose seats of honor. You can see them in your mind slipping in and scouting out the most prestigious seat, the one nearest the host or nearest this or that important person.

I can't help but think that Jesus must have laughed as he watched them scurrying about to capture the most honored seats. It prompted him to give this important teaching. When you're invited to a party, Jesus said, do not choose the most honored seat. What if you choose that important seat next to the host, Jesus asked them, and then the host arrives and asks you to move so someone else can sit there? That would be humiliating. So Jesus told them to pick a seat of lesser honor, and when the host arrives you may be asked to move up rather than down.

Then Jesus went over to the host of this party, this important leader of the Pharisees, and told him that he had the wrong idea about how to throw a party. Perhaps remembering that commandment from Deuteronomy, Jesus told this important man one of the great truths of the Kingdom of God: *all people are important*. This business of elevating some people over other people, considering some people to be important and others to be unimportant, is not God's way. No human being has more or less worth before God than any other human being. Society may push some people away from the table, but not God. At God's parties everyone has a place at the table. And those who don't normally get invitations are singled out for invitations to God's parties.

Jesus observed that this man's guest list included only his friends, family, and the rich, only those who had the ability to repay the favor. Jesus taught that when you throw a party, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Invite the poor and disenfranchised, those who can't pay you back. Then you model the way of God. That, Jesus said, is the way the Kingdom of God operates—giving from the heart to those who really need—because that is the way God operates.

Now, why did Jesus select these people? The poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind. Why the poor and disabled? I believe that this was intentional and here's why: Jesus believed that the poor and disabled, and others who fell into that cluster, were just as much God's children as the wealthy, healthy, and beautiful. Many of his day did not believe that, probably including the Pharisee who was throwing the party. Poverty and physical disabilities had religious implications. They believed that poverty

and disability were evidence of God's judgment. Those people must have done something terribly wrong, and God was punishing them with poverty and disability. So they were not included in the religious community. They were not considered fit for intimate association with the "righteous." There was no party for them.

You know what Jesus said about this? I'm paraphrasing here, but it was something like this, "Hogwash!!!" Loosely paraphrasing!

Jesus knew that you cannot determine the quality of a man's soul by the ability of his legs or eyes or mind. Jesus knew that you cannot determine the state of a woman's soul by the wealth of her purse. In the Kingdom of God, he taught, all people are of worth. Society may push some people away from the table, but at God's parties, everyone has a place at the table.

### **Hosts Are Really Guests**

This story of Jesus has an ironic twist to it, as many of his stories do. Those of us who can be hosts, we who are able to throw a party for the poor and disenfranchised, we also have been a guest. Before we become a host to someone else, we are needy guests at the party of God. Jesus goes on in Luke 14 to say that God has already thrown a great party, and God invited the Gentiles, those non-chosen people of biblical days. God invited the Samaritans, those unacceptable half-breeds of Jesus' day. God invited the sinners, all those who were forced to the margins of their culture. And of course the message of God is clear: God invites everyone to the party. God sees our spiritual poverty, all our broken lives, and says, "Come to my table and eat until you are satisfied. This seat is reserved for you, one whom I cherish."

There, from the most honored seat in the house, we are able to enjoy God's party.

Years ago David Dunn wrote a book entitled *Try Giving Yourself Away*. He wrote about a woman who was waiting for a train in a big city station. She saw a young mother trying desperately to cope with two crying children and an armload of packages. She watched as a teenage girl sitting nearby quickly went to the mother and offered to help. The mother gladly accepted her offer and went to get a bite to eat. When she returned the girl offered to help her carry the packages onto the train.

The woman who was watching all this noticed that the girl returned to the station lobby and offered to help another mother with young children. This scene was repeated

several times. Finally, the woman approached the girl and asked her why she was doing this. The girl explained that she was one of five children and that her dad was in the military. Of course, that meant many moves. The girl said that she remembered how her own mom would get so tired caring for all the children and carrying packages. Then she said, “(My mom) just recently died, so I thought that maybe I could do something for others.... I thought there would be a lot of tired mothers here so that’s why I come to the depot.”

You know, I suspect Jesus would include tired mothers in his list. And many others in need of kindness and grace. Every so often, every three years or so, we need a reminder of who God is. We need a gigantic party where orphans are treated like princes and princesses, where widows laugh until their sides hurt, and where people with mental retardation are honored as people of infinite worth. It is a reminder that God’s grace is extravagant, poured without measure upon the neediest of the needy. This text is a challenge to move outside our comfort zone, beyond what is politically expedient, in order to embrace someone with the love of God. Who is that person for you? Who are the poor, the crippled, the lame, and the blind in your life? Design a strategy for befriending one of these people. Learn their name. Learn their children’s names. Invite them to your table. Know them as an equal. Show them that God has made you a new creation. And then tell them that God longs to do the same thing for them. That’s how you throw a party—kingdom style.

### **Closing Prayer**

Lord, give us eyes to see and hearts to care. Amen.