

# Luke 14:15-24

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Preacher: Paul Levy

[ 0 : 00 ] So there was a visitor from overseas that came to the UK and he was confused by some of our social customs. He received a formal invitation to a formal party.

And he replied saying, Dear so and so, thank you so and so for your kind invitation and I regret that I am able to come.

And I think if we're honest, that's exactly how some of us feel like replying, don't we, to invitations that you get. Some dreary social occasion that we know we have to attend and we want to say I regret that I am able to come.

Groucho Marx once said to his host, I had a wonderful evening but this wasn't it. And I think lots of people think of church like that.

They imagine church to be stuffy and irrelevant, dull and formal. Designed for old women of both sexes.

[ 1 : 12 ] But it shouldn't be really like that at all. Because Jesus says, his kingdom, his church, his kingdom of heaven is like a marvellous feast. It is a great banquet, it is something tremendous and attractive.

And Jesus tells us a story about what his kingdom is about. A man once gave a great banquet, he invited many. And at the time the banquet was ready, he sent his servant to all those who had been invited.

And the servant was to say, come, now is the time, everything is ready. And so four things about an invitation. First, it's a glorious invitation from the Lord Jesus.

Because in Christ is everything that ultimately satisfies the deepest hunger in the heart of human beings. And to be in Christ means to have complete forgiveness.

All of us here, without exception, know of some things that have been wrong in the past. Some things of which we are ashamed. Maybe some things that still exist.

[ 2 : 17 ] But Jesus, through the cross, and by bearing our sin once and for all at the cross, offers to you and I full and complete and absolute forgiveness.

There's a sense of freedom, isn't it? When people become Christians, what happens? How do they feel? One of the things that they nearly always say is they say, a weight has been taken off my shoulders.

We know, don't we, that there is a weight of guilt inside all of us that lurks beneath the surface. And to come to Christ and to trust him means that that guilt can go strong.

Now in Christ there's unconditional love, isn't it? Which is very good news in a society which is marked by broken and fractured relationships at every level. In marriage, in the workplace, everywhere.

And I could go on giving you what are the benefits of what we find in Christ. But I want to give you two in particular. First of all, in Christ we have a life worth living.

[ 3 : 22 ] A life worth living. Sadly, probably today more so than at any other time, people feel that life is not worth living.

Man is absurd, says John Paul Sartre, that he must grimly act as if he were not. And for many people, life is grim.

It was so in the first century. If you read about the first century, you read that there was a lot of violence, a lot of oppression and a lot of injustice. And the first Christians, though timid and frightened, though they were that, through the power of Christ they turned their world upside down. And they changed for good the course of human history. And they were imprisoned, and they were beaten up for it, and some of them lost their lives. But through the power of Christ, those early Christians in that first century, in a society very similar to ours, made an impact on the whole world.

And that is a life worth living. Look at 90 centuries later, look at the impact of people like Gladys Aylward, Amy Carmichael, Martin Luther, Nicholas Ridley, John Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Helen Rosevear, Elizabeth Elliot.

[ 4 : 45 ] Some of these people, they suffered, they suffered even to the point of death. But through their commitment to Christ, they brought freedom and love and joy and liberty to many millions.

It's a life worth living. Think of William Wilberforce, it's through his vision, isn't it? And through the power of Christ, that slavery was abolished. Slavery, it took 20 years of hard work before he saw any progress at all.

Various abolition bills were debated to abolish slavery in the House of Commons. In 1789 a bill was defeated. In 1791, 1792, 1794, 1796, 1798, all were lost.

And eventually, the bill for the abolition of slavery was passed in both houses, in the House of Commons and the House of Lords, in 1833. 45 years of jogged persistence.

Three days later, Wilberforce died. And that's a life worth living, isn't it? And we need to pray for Wilberforce's today. People who are in the secular world, who've got a vision for Christ and the Kingdom of God.

[ 6 : 05 ] Who see that the Kingdom of God is not only a treasure to enjoy, which it is, but with those treasures we pass it on to the world. It's a colossal need, isn't it, for Christian leaders who will bring the presence of Christ into this borough, to this council, to this business environment, to the sporting world, to the media, to education.

And if that's going to happen, there will be mockery, and ridicule and opposition left, right and centre. And yet, through the power of Christ, the potential, here and in our churches is staggering. And it requires courage and faith and patience and perseverance. To be in Christ is a life worth living. But to be in Christ is also a death worth dying, isn't it?

Woody Allen said, I'm not afraid of death, I just don't want to be there when it happens. But it will happen, won't it? Whether it will be a few months for you, or through years for you and I.

But when it does happen, and it is going to happen, we find ourselves confronted by great reality, don't we?

[ 7 : 22 ] Do we have hope at that point? Do we find ourselves going back to the rock solid historical facts of Christ and the facts of the resurrection?

And so eventually, when that moment comes for us to leave this life, for those who are in Christ, we will be with Him perfectly.

And it will be far better than the best joy that you've ever experienced here. And so that truly the best is yet to be. So can I ask you, have you got that sure and certain hope in the face of the one future certainty for all of us?

In Christ you have a death worth dying and a life worth living. And so come. Come. All is now ready. It's a glorious invitation. Secondly, it's a genuine invitation.

There is, if you like, this invitation from God. Come. For everything is now ready. There's an RSVP at the bottom. God does not force you to do what you do not want to do.

[ 8 : 33 ] He invites you and in His love, He waits for a response. I'm in the story Jesus told. Once the servant is sent with the message.

Do you see, the message, come all is ready, they alike begin to make their excuses. They're not reasons. Jesus says, they're not valid. They're not valid reasons, they are excuses.

And I want to mention a few of the common excuses that people say. People say Christianity is so old fashioned. And the answer to that is, well so is breathing, isn't it?

That it works. Others, I want to more seriously say, does it work? Churches are dead. And we have to face the fact, don't we, there are lots of churches which are dead.

But you have to draw that distinction between religion and the real thing. Jesus had lots of problems with religious people. And it's the same today. But the real thing is very, very different.

[ 9 : 36 ] And even when you have the real thing, you have to realise that the church is God's hospital. And when I go to Ealing Hospital and I visit folk, and I walk past, and ward after ward after ward of sick people, I don't say, this is a lousy place, isn't it?

This place is terrible, it's full of sick people. I don't say that. I say about the hospital, well, it's in the right, isn't it? It's in touch with the right kind of people. And when you go into a church, and you see lots of silly, sinful people behaving sometimes oddly, you don't say, oh, what a terrible church.

You say, well, this church is in touch with the right people. Because at best, you and I will always do silly, sinful things, because we are silly and sinful.

We are forgiven, yes, but not perfect. Not this side of heaven. The church isn't as dead as you think, is it? Millions upon millions all over the world, churches are throbbing, expanding with life.

You can't prove it, says someone. Maybe, but you can't disprove it either. And there are countless things that you can't prove, if you mean mathematical and scientific proof.

[ 11 : 02 ] But they are wonderfully real. How do you prove the love between a man and a woman? How do you explain it in scientific terms?

I can't understand the wind. But I know that when I go out with my children on the beach, I know that I can fly a kite in the wind. There are countless things out there, that you cannot understand, but you know that are true.

And anyway, when it comes to the great questions of faith, like, what is the meaning of life? What happens at death? Is there a God? Well, no one can give you 100% categorical proof, can they? We all have faith. The atheist has faith. And instead of what people think of Christianity, they think, well, it's kind of pie in the sky when you die, or it's burying your head in the sand on these great issues.

No one knows. But we come to you this morning and we say, well, put your foot on the rock of Jesus Christ. The only one who is ultimately worthy of your trust is Him.

[ 12 : 06 ] There's no one like Jesus. What about suffering? Why does God allow things to happen in suffering?

Why does God allow things to happen to me, you might say? You might say. And the helpful question is, is not why with suffering, but what? Not why, but what?

Not why is God allowing this? But what is God saying in it? You see, God, if He is God at all, is infinitely greater than our total human understanding, isn't He?

If He is God, He is greater than little old you and me. And the fact that I don't know why, does not mean that there is no reason why. It just means that I am a finite being.

And I don't understand an infinite God. And that's obvious. But if I ask the question, what is God saying? I find that God is saying a great many things in the midst of suffering.

[ 13 : 15 ] Listen to C.S. Lewis. C.S. Lewis says, we can ignore even pleasure, but pain insists on being attended to. God whispers to us in our pleasures, speaks in our conscience, but shouts in our pains.

It is His megaphone to rouse a deaf world. And Jesus made it clear, doesn't he? It's not so much our situation, but the way that we react to it that counts.

And so in suffering you can either be bitter or better. One day we are going to lose everything in this life.

And what ultimately matters is how much we know of the reality of God, who is of course beyond all time limitations and space limitations, and beyond suffering and death.

And our eternal life is something which death cannot destroy. That is the vital thing. And the people I know who know more of the love of God than anything else, have also known more suffering.

[ 14 : 20 ] God can do tremendous things in the midst of suffering. You might say, why bother with this invitation? Why bother? Well, a day of accountability is coming up and we don't know when.

When the books of our life will be opened and there will be a very careful auditing of our accounts. And we will be asked from the scriptures, I think, questions as to what you've done with your life.

What you've done with your time and your money and your talents and your energy. But above all, what you've done with the greatest gift God has given, which is the gift of the Lord Jesus Christ.

And the essence, tragically, of judgment is that God gives us what we've chosen. And so if I don't want Him, I won't have Him.

And if I want to be on my own, running my own life, me in charge, on my own I shall be. And this is a genuine invitation. God doesn't force you.

[ 15 : 30 ] He says, come, all is now ready. But you have to come. Lastly, it's an urgent invitation. Come, all is now ready.

Jesus said at the end of the parable, can you see that in verse 24, about those who've made their excuses. For I tell you, none of those men, the people that I invited, those people that had made excuses, none of those men who were invited shall face my banquet.

They neglected the invitation. And when it comes to responding to God's love in Jesus, there is no sitting on the fence.

That is an impossible position. There's no such position. Many people would say, well I'm not against the Lord Jesus, I'm not against Christ, but neither are you committed to Him.

And they want to say they are neutral to Christ. But not to act is to act. It's like that in lots of areas of life, isn't it? Not to act is to act.

[16:37] Not to decide is to decide. And so it is with Jesus. And so what must I do? How must I respond? How must I respond to God's gracious invitation?

Firstly, you must turn. You've got to be willing to turn from what is wrong, and to let God decide what is wrong, and turn around to the Lord Jesus.

And so you must turn. The second thing is you must trust. Trust that not only has Jesus dealt with my sins once and for all upon the cross.

But He's dealt with my rebellion. He's taken it upon Himself. But I must trust Him as I commit my life to Him. That He knows what He is doing.

And that's very difficult, isn't it? It's hard to hand over the controls. But understand this. No one loves His people so much as Jesus loves His people.

[18:03] And never be afraid of committing yourself fully to a God of love. And so turn to Him. And trust Him.

Third thing is take. You take that free gift. So do you remember the Apostle Paul, he says the wages of sin is death, but the gift of God, God's free gift, is eternal life in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And if I were to offer you a gift, let's say I had a free gift here, and I'll say it's yours, but you must come and take it. You can't walk out without it.

You must take the free gift. I won't throw it at you. I won't throw it at you. Whether you like it or not.

Do you see, God gives you, doesn't he, a gentle and a gracious invitation.

Come, for everything is now ready. And then lastly, thank. Turn, trust, take. And then thank you.

And that's when we pray.

[19:17] And we ask the living Lord Jesus to enter into our lives, and we need to thank Him that He has come according to His promise. And so let me ask you, have you done that?

And you don't have to reply to me, but one day you and I will have to reply to Almighty God. And if your answer is frankly no or not sure, I would urge you very, very simply to make sure.

Turn, trust, take, thank you. Thank you. Come, for everything is now ready.

Let's pray.