

The Banquet Parable--Priority on the Poor over the Rich (Luke 14:12-24)

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Some find the Gospel of Luke contains a theology of dining, a feminist theology and a "theology of way". Some would also call it the Gospel of the poor as it discusses at some length Jesus' preferential love for the poor and the coming of salvation to the poor. For example, in the first two chapters on Jesus' birth and childhood to speak of Jesus' humble origins. His birth was to bring salvation to humanity, to lift the lowly and to send the rich away empty (1:52-53). At the beginning of his ministry, he proclaimed the bringing of good news to the poor, the releasing of captives, recovery of sight to the blind and the salvation of the oppressed (4:18). During his ministry, he uttered many sayings and parables on love for the poor. He performed many miracles for the afflicted and the outcast. These all pointed to an orientation that rich is abandoned and poor is chosen. In this article, I will use the Banquet Parable (14:12-24) for the following discussion and show how an "priority on poor over the rich" is found in the banquet of the Reign of God.

The Banquet Parable (Luke 14:12-24)

The parable itself lines in Luke 14:15-24 but as verses 12-14 deal with the question of which people should be invited is related to the parable, this passage will therefore be included in the discussion.

The parable talks about a man giving a banquet. When his servant is sent to invite a group of guests to come, they all refuse. The host then invites the poor, the crippled, the blind, the lame and those on the roads and hedgerows. In addition to the banquet parable itself, 14:1ff on Jesus' dining at the home of a leading Pharisee and right up to the end of the parable at 14:24 provides a context for this banquet. 14:1 is a kind of introduction when Jesus goes to dine at the home of a Pharisee. 14:2-5 consists of an argument about the Sabbath. 14:7-11 is a parable on the behavior of people invited to a dinner. 14:12-14 is a parable about someone hosting a dinner. 14:15-24 is the banquet parable. The whole section is in the context of people eating together (1). According to Jewish practice, a dinner was an opportunity for both eating and giving lesson (2). It was in such a context that Jesus elaborated the teachings below.

A parable saying "priority on the poor over the rich"

Luke 14:12-14 lays out the principle for the invitation of guests. Very obviously, one should not just invite one's friends or relatives nor the rich, but the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind. Similar passages are recorded everywhere in the Gospel of Luke, such as in 6:20, "Blessed are you who are poor..." and in 6:24, "Woe to you who are rich..." It is obviously a choice of "priority on the poor over the rich". Luke 14:15-24 contains the parable itself. A man holding a large banquet invited three kinds of people at different times respectively. In fact, the Palestinian custom was similar to our Chinese one in the sense that the host of a banquet usually notified the date in advance and sent out invitations. However, the difference was that the Palestinians did not confirm the starting time in the invitations. On the day of the banquet, the host would send a servant out to invite the guests. Therefore, the servant had to go and fetch the guests on that day (3). However, the first group of guests all excuse themselves when the servant comes. Each of them made an excuse about a field, about oxen, about a wife.

The excuse of the first one was his need to examine his newly purchased field, so he could not attend. In ancient times, those who could afford to buy a field had to be rich landlords. Just as those today who can buy a flat have to be property-owners. Thus, he had to be rich. The excuse of the second guest was his need to evaluate his five pairs of oxen, i.e. 10 oxen he had just purchased. This number of oxen was enough to farm a 45-hectare field. According to exegetical scholars, Luke's description of this man indicates someone not buying oxen for the first time. Therefore, he had to be a big landowner. In other words, he too was a rich man. From the background of the third guest, Luke does not reveal very much. But we can still suppose that this first group of guests declining the invitation was not poor (4). Hence, those excluded from the banquet were rich.

The host was now very angry and sent his servant to invite a second group of guests. This group included the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame. The crippled, the blind, the lame and those handicapped in today's society hope to find a nice job but face a greater difficulty greater than that of able-bodied people. Needless to say, when religious, racial and sexist forms of discriminations were so common 2000 years ago, nine out of ten handicapped people had to beg in a society which provided no legal protection from discrimination. Therefore, they were, in fact, the "poor" (5). The third group consisted of those living in the hedgerows, people deserted by upper class people like Pharisees and the Scribes. These outcasts could not be the rich. In other words, all those who finally enjoyed the banquet were the poor.

Banquet = Banquet of Salvation = Banquet of "Priority on the Poor over the Rich"

According to Jewish culture, a banquet symbolized the establishment of a covenant, i.e. the Banquet of the Reign of God (6). The Jews saw the coming time for a new heaven and earth as the hosting of a banquet by the Messiah. A banquet was used to symbolize the Banquet of the Reign of God, i.e. the coming moment of the Reign of God (7). Thus, the parable of the banquet is, in fact, concerned with teachings on the salvation that the Reign of God brings.

This parable indicates the urgency of responding to the invitation to the banquet of the Reign of God and the extension of salvation to all humanity. Moreover, it makes clear that the "priority on the poor over the rich" preference in the salvation that the Reign of God gives. First of all, the principle determining the salvation of guests is to invite those who are unable to repay. The parable itself also indicates that those left behind are the rich with their fields and oxen, whereas those accepted are the handicapped poor. The context of this passage shows that the Pharisees and the scholars of the law were the primary audience. Through this parable, Jesus showed the preference of "priority on the poor over the rich" in the banquet of the Reign of God. This was a response to their view of who would merit to enter the Reign of God (8). The general view, at that time, as that distinguished Jews were entitled to enter the banquet of the Reign of God. The snobbish Pharisees regarded this entitlement as their special privilege. Therefore, in verse 15, when a man said to Jesus, "Blessed is the one who will dine in the Reign of God", he felt quite certain that he was one of the fortunate ones (9). However, Jesus uses this parable precisely to challenge this certitude. The "distinguished" and the rich were precisely the ones who would not be at the banquet.

In addition, Luke's view of salvation not only demonstrates universality but also God's preferential love for the poor. Those who are awarded salvation include beggars, the poor, the captives, the blind and the oppressed, in addition to men, women, Jews and Gentiles. The mission of the Gospel is not only aimed at a higher life but is also this-worldly (10). We need both spiritual growth and care for the poor and the weak.

From the above, the principle of invitation, the parable itself, the target of the parable and Luke's view on salvation, all show the "priority on the poor over the rich". The salvation of the

Reign of God also consists of abandoning the rich and choosing the poor. Of course, we need to further explain the orientation of "priority on the poor over the rich". The reason for Jesus to abandon the rich and choose the poor is not out of his hatred for the rich. From the story, the reason for abandoning the rich is their attraction towards material things (fields, oxen) rather than responding to God. They love wealth more than God. The reason for the poor to enjoy the banquet is their acceptance of the invitation. Fr. Thomas Kwan, a Hong Kong priest, comments that Jesus' love for the poor is not out of affection for those who spend all they have until they have nothing left but because of their attitude of "willingness to be poor" and "satisfaction with being poor". Though rich, one can still be willing to live a simple lifestyle. In addition to enjoying material possessions, one can still find satisfaction in one's own status, respond to God's invitation and not decline the invitation because of one's wealth.

If choosing the poor, why not loving the poor and caring for the weak?

In fact, the parable particularly conveys an admonitory meaning for us today. The recent economic depression in Hong Kong has emphasized the urgency of the already serious problem of the gap between rich and poor. Of course, the reason for abandoning the rich is not because they are rich but because their wealth leads them to decline the promised invitation of the Reign of God. For Christians, the attitude of the "satisfaction of being poor" is the key to responding to the invitation the banquet of God's Reign. In the parable people decline the invitation to banquet because of a field and for five pairs of oxen. Two thousand years ago, they declined Jesus' invitation because of their status, wealth and "knowledge". Today, we also decline our responsibilities towards the weak, due to our apartments, stocks and jobs. During a booming property market, it is easy to forget that housing is a basic right for people. Property is treated it as a means to make money so that, through speculation, property prices rise to unreasonable levels. In order to guarantee a profit, public utilities also raise prices without any concern for people's hardships. Although we believe a society with industrious development is better than one with huge debts, the banquet parable reminds us that the banquet of the Reign of God is to abandon the rich and choose the poor. Abandon those who love money and choose those who are satisfied with and willing to accept being poor. Invite those who do not forget to respond to Jesus' demand to care for the weak in spite of their material possessions they may have.

(1) S. John Roth, The Blind, the Lame and the Poor, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1997), pp.180.

(2) Herman Hendrickx, The Parables of Jesus, (Manila: St. Paul Publications, 1990), pp.111~112.

(3) 巴克萊著，《路加福音》，(香港：基督教文藝出版社，1996)，頁233。

(4) Herman Hendrickx, The Parables of Jesus, (Manila: St. Paul Publications, 1990), pp.116.
比喻中第三個拒絕的人的身分較受爭議，因經文沒有明顯的提示。但無論如何，一般相信他不牽涉入貧富的討論。

(5) 馮蔭坤著，《擘開生命之餅—路加五個獨有的比喻》，(香港：基道書樓，1990)，頁6。

(6) 思高聖經學會編著，《聖經辭典》，(台灣：思高聖經學會，1988)，頁625。

(7) 巴克萊著，《路加福音》，(香港：基督教文藝出版社，1996)，頁232。

(8) John Roth, The Blind, the Lame and the Poor, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press Ltd, 1997), pp.180.

(9) 馮蔭坤著，《擘開生命之餅—路加五個獨有的比喻》，(香港：基道書樓，1990)，頁3。

(10) 楊克勤著，《路加的智慧》，(香港：卓越書樓，1995)，頁189~191。