

The Great Invitation

by T. Austin-Sparks

The sermon explores the Great Invitation to the Kingdom of God, emphasizing the importance of human choice and the grace of God in inviting all to partake in His feast.

Scripture: Psalm 42:1, Isaiah 55:1, Matthew 5:6, Matthew 21:43, Luke 13:34-35, Luke 14:16-24, John 6:35, Romans 10:13, Ephesians 1:3, Revelation 22:17

Topics: "God's Invitation", "Response to God's Call"

Description

T. Austin-Sparks delivers a profound message on 'The Great Invitation' found in Luke 14, emphasizing the transition from Israel to the Church and the nature of those who will inherit the Kingdom of God. He highlights the significance of God's invitation, the human tendency to make excuses, and the importance of recognizing our need for God. Sparks illustrates that true acceptance of God's invitation requires a hunger for Him and a desire for fellowship with His people. Ultimately, he warns against indifference and the consequences of rejecting God's call, urging listeners to respond to the invitation with urgency and sincerity.

Transcript

We turn now to Luke 14, to what is called the story of the Great Supper and the Great Invitation. It might be thought that this story has very little relationship to what we have been considering. But I want to correct that idea immediately and to say that it is an integral part of this very matter of the kind of people that God has set His heart upon, who are to be the fruit of Christ's travail.

There are two applications of this story. There is what we may call the dispensational interpretation, and there is the wider interpretation and application in relation to the Kingdom of God.

A Time of Transition

The dispensational interpretation finds this story closely related to what was happening at the time that the Lord Jesus spoke these words. It was in the time of the great transition from Israel to the church, from Judaism to Christianity. The utterances of the Lord Jesus in these chapters, including the so well-known fifteenth chapter of Luke, containing the parables of the lost things -- the lost coin, the lost sheep and the prodigal son -- these utterances were all of a piece, and were probably gathered into the last week of our Lord's ministry.

If you go back to the Gospel by Matthew and take it up at say chapter 21 and move right on, you will recognise that these are undoubtedly the closing days. What is being said here has to do with His going and the great crisis which was immediately in view -- the crisis of the Cross. In chapter 21 He has made that statement to the Jews, to Israel as a nation after the flesh: "Therefore the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you, and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof", and then straight into chapter 22, and to a story about a king who made a marriage supper for his son, very similar to this one in Luke 14. The same kind of invitations went out.

Now this story in Luke is all of a piece with that: it circles round the great crisis. Israel is about to be set aside, rejected; the Kingdom of Heaven is about to be taken away from them, and to be given to a nation which would bring forth the fruits of that Kingdom -- the nation to which Peter later referred when he spoke of believers in Christ as a "holy nation". It would be not another nation on this earth, but God's own people out of the nations of this world, the people for His Name. So you see, this story in its historic setting relates to that great crisis, that great transition, that change-over: the rejection of one people and the putting in their place of another. We have to read the story in the light of that, for here we have the death-knell of Israel after the flesh.

Who Shall Enter the Kingdom?

And, as I said, it is in keeping, in the main, with what we are considering at the present -- a people, a kind of people, secured by God through the travail of His Son in the Cross. I think that is the outstanding thing in this story and in these stories: the kind of people that will inherit the Kingdom of Heaven. There is a much larger application and interpretation than the immediate, for it applies to the whole meaning of the Kingdom of God. And that is a matter of supreme, of superlative importance -- who will be in the Kingdom of Heaven? Here we have the Gospel of the Kingdom, there is no doubt about it.

There are certain very clearly defined features to this story of the Great Supper and the Great Invitation. Firstly, we find here God in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, and speaking as by His mouth, for what He says is what came from God. God is here taking up a common, social custom, a feast, and bringing it into use in relation to the Gospel of the Kingdom. We notice, of course, that Jesus was, at the time when He gave this story, at a feast. If you look at the earlier part of the chapter, you will see that He went to a feast that was made by a prominent Pharisee, evidently a wealthy man, in a good position, because certain very important people -- in their own eyes at any rate -- came in and took the top places. Jesus noted all that and had something to say about it. But the point is: it was a feast and Jesus went to it, and it says that they watched Him. Now there is a great deal of detail that we leave untouched, but we note that Jesus took hold of this and enlarged it in relation to the Kingdom of God. That is, He took up this common social custom of a feast and used it for Gospel purposes, to interpret the Gospel, to interpret the Kingdom of Heaven, to interpret the whole matter of who would and who would not get in at the feast.

The Significance of Acceptance

Appreciation -- appetite -- fellowship

There are certain things about this feast which, although not exactly stated, are quite evidently implied. We might note three of them. A certain man made a feast and sent out his servant with invitations. The implication is that that man would be respected and honoured. He would not have done it if he had thought that he was in disfavour and that no one would accept his invitation. He was assuming that they would respect him and his invitation, and be quite glad to go to his feast and to be with him in his house. Now

that is quite simple, but you will see what it means as we go on. It is the assumption that the invitation would be welcomed and that he would be in good standing with them, and they would give him respect and honour and respond suitably to the invitation and would go to his feast. The second thing that is assumed is that the invited people would have an appetite for a feast. A feast might not interest some people very much: they would turn down any invitation purely on the ground that they have no appetite for such things, or there is something wrong with their digestion; they just could not face it all. But it is assumed here that the people who were invited would have an appetite for the feast, for the provision. That is very simple. And then, of course, the third thing that is assumed is that they would be quite happy to meet other people in this house and have good intercourse and fellowship, have a good time together. These are things which are part of any feast of this kind. We are glad to go and meet the host, glad to go and meet the other people, and we are glad to have what is provided. That is the atmosphere; these are the elements of this very thing. Dismiss any of them, and you dismiss the whole point of a feast: the feast breaks down at once.

The Forbearing Grace of God

Jesus is not speaking casually. He knows; He has a very deep and comprehensive knowledge, indeed: He knows God's mind. Now note this: God foreknew the refusal that would come to His invitation: the foreknowledge of God, His omniscience made Him to know that this would be the reaction -- they would not accept, they would not come. And Jesus knew that, otherwise He would not have said all these things, especially perhaps that consummate thing: "Therefore... the kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." He knew what the issue would be, God knew what the reaction would be, but God did not act upon His foreknowledge in this matter -- He sent out the invitation. In that is one of the great gospel principles. God, who foreknows all about men and their reactions to His invitation and His great provision, does not begin from that point and say, "I know they won't accept, and I know it will be to their doom: therefore I will never invite them; I will doom them right away in My foreknowledge." "God sent not his Son into the world to condemn the world..." Whatever God may know about men's refusal, He leaves the door wide open; He always takes the positive line in grace, never the negative line in judgment. That is one of the great things about the gospel. Though He knows, nevertheless, God comes right out in infinite grace and opens the door wide and makes His appeal and says, "Come, for all things are now ready." You see, God keeps back that foreknowledge of His while He tries in grace to make a way. It is a tremendous thing that, the grace of God holding back the judgment of God until the thing is settled by man himself. He knows the truth, and yet He does not, in the first instance, act according to His knowledge of men's reactions: He acts in grace to give them an opportunity to respond.

But note that there is something else involved in this. God removes all ground upon which man's doom could be laid to His charge. In the end it will never be possible for any doomed man or woman to say: "You never gave me a chance; You never gave me an opportunity; the door was never opened to me; the way was never provided." No, God removes all that ground. You see, in His grace and His mercy He takes all the ground of the possibility of His own condemnation away and puts the whole issue upon man. If anybody misses all that God has provided and calls them unto, it will be their own fault entirely. God is seeing to that. He puts it back on us.

Condition Indicated by the Choice

As we read a story like this, it looks on the face of things as though -- and now put God into the place of the man who makes the feast and sends out the invitations -- it looks as though He assumes that those invited will respect Him, honour Him, and give Him credit for being worthy of their acceptance. It looks as though God assumes that. Of course, He knows, but nevertheless He proceeds upon this basis, and in His procedure He is appealing to man to give some expression to and some proof of his respect for God; and if man does not respond to God's appeal and invitation, it means that man has no respect for God: he has not given God His place, he has put Him out, he thinks He is not worth considering. The implications are tremendous, are they not?

Further, it means that man has no appetite for the things of God. We have only to imagine these people, when they received the invitation, saying, "Well, now, I don't care about his feast, I don't think I want to go, I have not much of an appetite for that." Ah, yes, but look: that very desire or absence of desire for the things of God is the deciding factor -- the Kingdom or not the Kingdom. Jesus had elsewhere said, "Blessed are they that hunger and thirst after righteousness." There is something bound up with this appetite or the lack of it. The same applies to this matter of the people of God. It is very discriminating. To refuse means, not only that I have no interest in God and His things, but that I do not want to have any association with His people. All this, you see, is forcing a choice.

God the Only Joy of His People

Now, if we turn that round, it is surely not difficult to see what kind of people will inherit the Kingdom, what kind of a seed this will be that He shall see as of the travail of His soul. A people, in the first place, who, above all other things, desire God: and then, who desire God's things, to feed upon them: and then, who desire God's people. It is a remarkable thing, is it not, how that takes place and becomes the very constitution, the make-up and nature of children of the Kingdom of Heaven. One thing that is pre-eminent with them is their love for God, their desire for God; that He is their joy -- not only their chiefest joy, but really their only joy. It is a wonderful thing that happens in us. Something happens, something takes place so that we come to the state where we just cannot live without God. If there should be an hour in our life when any shadow comes between us and God, that is the darkest hour, the most wretched time. He has spoilt us for all but Himself, He has made Himself indispensable to us, we cannot get on without Him. It is not only a matter of being able to, having a desire to -- we just long to be in His presence. Our hearts cry with the Psalmist: "As the hart panteth after the water brooks, so panteth my soul after thee, O God." It is like that; something happens inside.

The Oneness of the Children of the Kingdom

That is a test as to whether we are children of the Kingdom or not, and a test as to whether we are going to inherit the Kingdom. It would be a poor lookout for anybody who had not that disposition to have to live in the presence of God for all eternity; it would be a very miserable thing. But it will not happen, of course. And what is true in that connection is true in these other two things. Something happens to us so that OUR company, OUR people -- may I use the word? -- OUR set, is the people of God. We have to move in this world, and we have to live with others, but we are not happy with them; there is no deep, basic, fundamental oneness between us: we belong to two different worlds. But with the people of God it is different: we are at home, we are in the family. It is something that happens to us, it is not something that we decide upon: that we are going to be Christians and mix with Christians, and have meetings. It is simply this: we long for the fellowship of God's people, and if we are deprived of it, we are deprived of our very life. I think that those who have very much of it are sometimes in danger of losing the sense of its

value, but if you were to ask some of those Christians who have to live in isolation, with little or no Christian fellowship, you would soon discover that something has happened in them. They long for this fellowship. These are the children of the Kingdom!

And as for the feast, the things of God spread for His children! Is not the coming together of the Lord's people, in some places in such large companies, an evidence, not only of the Lord's desire to provide, to spread a feast, but also of a deep hunger? There is something constitutional about this; there is an appetite. These are the children of the Kingdom. You see, God is working on that principle; discriminating, selecting, in order to give the Kingdom.

Now, we must go back to the story, to the other, disappointing, aspect. God in His grace, putting back in His foreknowledge the doom which He knows will most certainly come upon many who will react unfavourably to His invitation, putting that back and saying nothing about it for the moment, goes out in grace, inviting, inviting, inviting, in spite of His knowledge of them. It is a question of who will respond. So we see here what is really shown to be the case with many. They are totally indifferent to all these things: to Him, to His feast, and to His people; they are totally indifferent. They are not touched by the invitation, it makes no appeal to them; there is no sense that they are either under obligation or in peril of losing something of vital importance. And that is their judgment: that is their condemnation: that is their doom.

The Wilfulness of Human Choice

Let us look at this setting as to Israel, as to the Jewish nation. You remember how the Lord Jesus put this to them in another way. Weeping over Jerusalem, He said: "O Jerusalem, Jerusalem, which killeth the prophets, and stoneth them that are sent unto her! How often would I have gathered thy children together, even as a hen gathereth her own brood under her wings, and ye would not! Behold, your house is left unto you desolate" ... "because thou knewest not the time of thy visitation" (Luke 13:34,35; 19:44). Now note two things: "ye would not", "thou knewest not". But that was something in themselves. It was not that they COULD not, but that they WOULD not. It was not that they could not know, it was because they would not know. They did not want to know. And they had decided that they were not going to know.

God knows the heart, and it is not merely that we are like that. Somewhere, somehow we have taken an attitude: we have taken the attitude, "I am not interested in that, I don't want that; that is not for me, I am not going that way." "Thou wouldest not... thou knewest not...", when you might have known. That is always the ground of judgment.

Let us then look at these people. Whether they were actual people, whether it was a real story from life or what is called a parable, does not matter. The Lord Jesus knew what He was saying. They were not only indifferent, but would, when it came to the test, reject the invitation. And this is where we are found out, you know. When it really comes to it and someone says, "Look here, the Lord wants you, the Lord calls you, the Lord has sent His Word to invite you to come", then we are found out; then the real attitude is disclosed. "And they all with one consent began to make excuse."

EXCUSES. I don't really know how far the Lord Jesus had a sense of irony or of humour. He presents one as saying, "I have bought a piece of land and I must go and see it." Now may I be quite blunt here: that is a thing that not one of you would do. If you did you would be a fool! Who would buy a piece of land without first of all having seen it! That is very lame; oh, no, that won't pass, that is not good enough. But you see, when we are really run to earth it is found out that we have no solid basis. We are just evading, we are trying to get round, we are looking for a back-door way out. It is an excuse, it is not a reason. Another man

said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen and I must go and prove them." Well, what would practical farmers say to that! Is that the way of going about business, buying before having seen? You see how empty it is. The third man said he had married a wife, and therefore he could not come, but the Lord Jesus said that that was an excuse all the same. How was it an excuse? Something in the realm of natural affections was accounted of greater value than the Kingdom of God. And that is a poor excuse at best.

The point is, if we face the matter squarely, there is no really solid ground for this kind of reaction. It is a "don't want", it is a failure to recognise the infinite seriousness and value of this Kingdom of God, this gospel of the grace of God. It discloses a state of heart and mind and will which in itself is the ground of rejection. "Therefore... the Kingdom of God shall be taken away from you and shall be given to a nation bringing forth the fruits thereof." And what are the fruits? Hungering and thirsting after righteousness. Thirsting for the living God, a sense of real business, not this prevarication and excuse. These are the conditions of inheriting the Kingdom.

And, of course, these conditions are capable of very far-reaching, widely-extending application. They touch so many things, they are principles. But it is not just the immediate connection, it is that which is betrayed, the attitude of heart.

"Well", says the Lord, "none of those shall come to my feast, none of those shall enter or inherit the Kingdom. Go out", He says to His servant, "into the streets and the lanes of the city, and call the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame"; and the servant comes back and says, "It is done, I have brought them in and yet there is room." "Out again into the highways and hedges, compel them to come in, the poor, the maimed, the blind, the lame, the vagabonds, the wayfarers." Jesus said to the Jewish leaders: "The publicans and the harlots go into the kingdom before you." On this principle we see who they are that will inherit the Kingdom, and not only get into it initially, but who will come into all the fullness that the Lord has provided. And what a vast fullness it is! We could profitably dwell upon this feast and what there is in it. Paul speaks much about it himself: "Blessed... with every spiritual blessing in the heavenlies in Christ" (Eph. 1:3). How much there is in this inheritance, this Kingdom!

The Contrast -- a Consciousness of Need

And who is it that enters in? Those who know their own poverty. These people did not know that: they were independent; they did not need the provision that had been made; they felt they could get on quite well without it. They had no sense of their own poverty. They were in the grip of pride, not poverty. The maimed -- those who had suffered in life, whom life had treated cruelly, who on the way had met with hurt, damage; who were marred and marked. The blind who longed to see; from whom a whole world was shut out -- if only their eyes could see. The lame -- poor people who found it very difficult and very hard going, who were limited in their capacity and were knowing it. And what shall we say about the vagabonds and wayfarers from the highways and the hedges? You see, they are all people who, in some way or another, had a consciousness of need, and that is the great contrasting factor here. You will go a long way if that is your consciousness. You will go a long way in the things of God, if you really have heart hunger, if yours is really a heart set upon the Lord and His things and His church.

Now this is a challenge, a solemn challenge to us all -- both to Christians and to those who are not the Lord's alike. He calls; He has made a great provision; He is dealing with us in infinite grace and not in judgment. He has placed everything open to us and said: "Come, for all things are now ready." Oh, we Christians know that little phrase "all things", do we not? Go to Paul's letters again and collect up all the

occurrences of that phrase, "all things... ", "all things... " "All things in Christ", that is the great theme, is it not? And what a vast "all things" that comes to be when we look into it. All things! "Come, for all things are now ready." It is a challenge to those who have not come at all. But it is a challenge to us who have come. There is a range and a depth of those "all things" that you and I have never yet fathomed. It is all so much a matter of where our heart is -- whether we really mean business, or whether we can be put off, be like these people and make excuses. It is a challenge.

And it is a test of capacity for appreciating the things of God. May I say this as the last word: Blessed be God, when we get there, we shall no longer be poor and maimed and blind and vagabonds. There is a wonderful healing that goes on as soon as we get into the Kingdom: all these things clear up. Now you see, Jesus had taught the Kingdom of God in action. He was teaching the Kingdom of God in action as much as in word. His life and His work were a demonstration of the meaning of the Kingdom. He healed the maimed and the lame, He opened the eyes of the blind, He called the poor and the needy, publicans, sinners and harlots, and cleansed them. He demonstrated in action the Kingdom of God. And that is what happens. When we come, we find that in that Kingdom there is a tree, and the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations. He is the tree, and there is a healing that takes place. And when we are in, thank God, humbly we are able to say, "Yes, my eyes have been opened, my faltering steps have been strengthened, my wounds have been healed, my wanderings in the highways and byways have ceased, my vagabond life has been redeemed." That is what happens, that is the Gospel of the Kingdom. Are you going to make excuses to avoid all that? It is not worth it, is it? It is nonsense. They are mere empty excuses. May God give us to see the tremendous divide made by the invitation.

God's offer can be missed, it can be lost, it can be put beyond reach. Do not forget, there stands in this world the greatest object-lesson that ever God has given to men of this very thing. You remember the place that the Jewish nation once had with God in blessing and prospering, yes, in favour. What a place they had! And then God called them into the Kingdom of His Son, and they began to make excuses; they showed that they were not interested in that. Look at them! For these two thousand years, vagabonds on the earth, without a kingdom and a home, wounded, blinded -- Paul says, "Blindness hath happened to Israel" -- they are all in these conditions. They are in rejection, and what suffering, and what they have lost! They have lost the Kingdom of Heaven. That is the most terrible demonstration and object-lesson of what it means to lose the Kingdom of Heaven. But mark you, that is only an illustration in the temporal realm. Our peril is of it being in the eternal realm. One does not like speaking like that, but there it is. Here is a tremendous issue.

Well, there was one of their own number who responded and came. His testimony afterward was: "I was not disobedient to the heavenly vision." And that man went a long, long way. That was none other than the apostle Paul himself. The Lord incline our hearts to respond. He says: "Come, for all things are now ready." May our heart say, "I am coming, Lord, and I am coming now."

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