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Series: Parables
Luke 14:15-24

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“What's Your Excuse?”

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Well good morning. Very good to see you, and be with you this morning. You know I was reflecting this week that there are few things in life that feel worse than missed opportunities...missed opportunities.

Not long after I graduated from college, a classmate of mine was trying to find a job, and he was looking in the world of internet start-up companies. He had a computer science degree from Stanford, and at that time (this is during kind of the late 90s, Internet tech boom), and a computer science grad from Stanford could literally pick and choose which jobs they wanted, unlike us English majors who had no marketable skills whatsoever.

My friend was deciding between two different start-up companies. Both made him lucrative offers, which meant pretty much no salary and tons of yet-to-have-any-value stock, but lots and lots of potential. In the end, he went with this one company called DoDots. Now just to ask you a question, anyone here ever heard of the company DoDots? Okay, not a lot of hands raised. The reason for that is it doesn't exist anymore. They didn't make it big. I'm not sure exactly what happened, but DoDots didn't do dots very well, or whatever it was.

I'm not trying to knock on the founders or the ideas. In this part of the world, as you know, companies come and go. It's just kind of part of the innovation process, but I must say I feel bad for my friend and for his missed opportunity because as I said, he had two job offers when he got started. The first from DoDots, the other from a very small, little start-up company called Google. Oops.

Don't worry, I've been a good friend, and I've told him time after time that God still loves him, and people make hundred-million-dollar mistakes all the time.

Have you ever missed a big opportunity in your life? Maybe it was a job you didn't take, an investment you passed on. Maybe it was someone you wanted to ask out years ago but were too afraid, or someone you asked out, and boy you wish you hadn't. Missed opportunities can be haunting realities as we reflect back.

More often than not, we don't even really know we've missed out on something great until long after the fact. When I think of some of the missed opportunities in my own life based on some of the decisions I've made, I find myself saying things like, "If I only knew. If only someone had told me, and if they did, if only I had listened." Right? "If only... If only... If only..."

Well this weekend we are talking about the most significant "if only" in human history, the most significant missed opportunity or potential for a missed opportunity in all of history. It's not about a financial decision. It's not about a work or career decision. It's not even about a relationship decision, per

se, though as we are about to see, it will involve all of those things.

This missed opportunity has to do with a spiritual decision, a spiritual decision that is actually facing each one of us, every person in this room, right now. This decision has to do with the person of Jesus. Now, I know it may sound like it's the obvious answer because we're gathered in church where we talk about Jesus. It's the right and good thing to do. Sometimes Christians say, "Jesus comes first," simply because that's what we think we're supposed to say.

It kind of reminds me of the story of a Sunday school teacher who asked the class, "What's furry, grey and has a fluffy tail?" A little boy raised up his hand and said, "I know the answer is Jesus, but it sure sounds like a squirrel." Sometimes we feel like we're out living our lives, raising our hands, saying, "Well, I know I'm supposed to say Jesus, but it sure feels like the most important thing is this thing going on in my investment portfolio, or this thing going on in my office, or this thing going on in my marriage." Those are important things, but Jesus... *Where does He fit?*

I mean if I'm honest, sure, I value Jesus and I value being able to ask Him for help, and lean on Him when I feel like I'm in trouble, or call out for answers when I'm at the end of my rope, but when life is going okay, sometimes I feel like maybe I don't need him as much. Oh, I'll still go to church, and I'll still try to follow the rules, especially the big important ones that everyone can see, but inside, I know that if I feel like I'm doing okay, God must be okay with me.

Maybe that's true for you, or maybe it's true for someone you know. The deal is a similar kind of thinking was actually prevalent in Jesus' day as well. There is a story from the gospel of Luke, chapter 14 that we're told that Jesus was invited to dine at the home of a prominent Pharisee. A prominent Pharisee... these were wealthy, powerful, influential, religious, moral leaders. They had heard all the rumors about Jesus, and so when they invite Jesus into their home, they're not just having Him over for a friendly visit, they are investigating. They are watching His every move.

During this one particular meal, one of the Pharisees said, "***Blessed are those who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.***" It sounds almost like a toast, like, "Three cheers for Jesus. Three cheers for God. And now let's eat," but the truth is, this was a loaded and controversial statement.

If someone today said, "Blessed are those who will receive universal healthcare," you'd know they were talking about far more than just how to care for the sick. That particular phrase is loaded with contemporary political and ideological assumptions that could turn a dinner party into a debate, and maybe it has.

The same is true in this story with Jesus. "***Blessed are those who eat at the feast in the kingdom of God,***" is a controversial, loaded political, social, ideological statement about salvation, and who gets in. You see 700 years before the life of Jesus, a prophet named Isaiah imagined the great day of salvation as a great banquet feast. Peoples of all nations, Jew and Gentile, would gather around God's table, and God was the great host, and God was in charge of inviting all who would be there.

Over time, that vision of salvation began to narrow. We actually have documents from the first century that show the interpretation of that passage narrowing down to exclude Gentiles, to exclude unclean Jews, and so when a glass is raised at the house of a prominent Pharisee, "Blessed are those who will eat in God's kingdom," a gauntlet is being thrown.

"Jesus, what do You say about salvation? We know we're good. We know we're in. We know we measure up. We follow the rules. We go to church, so what do You think about that, Jesus?" To which Jesus responded by telling the Pharisees this parable.

This is from Luke, chapter 14, starting in verse 16, ***"Jesus replied: 'A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests. At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.' But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.' Another said, 'I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.' Still another said, 'I just got married, so I can't come.' The servant came back and reported this to his master.***

Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done, but there is still room.' Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full. I tell you [now looking back across the table at those surrounding Jesus], not one of those who were invited will get a taste of my banquet.'"

It's kind of an uncomfortable story, kind of rattles the cage a little bit. Kind of makes those around this table who felt pretty good at the beginning of the meal, who felt appropriate saying, "Blessed are all of us who are doing just fine, who are doing okay," maybe feel a little bit uncomfortable in our chair.

So I want to walk back through this parable one step at a time trying to understand what Jesus is teaching us about salvation and how that relates to us in our lives. The story begins, as many of Jesus' parables do, with a hypothetical situation. ***"A certain man was preparing a great banquet and invited many guests."***

Now, this sounds like a fairly innocuous statement, a fairly dry and simple beginning, but Jesus is already, in this one line, making a striking theological claim about God. The two words that direct our attention to that claim are the words *great* and *many*.

The Greek word for *great* is the word *mega*, from which we get the English word *mega*. It means *huge, immense, vast, spectacular, overwhelming*. "This is going to be the banquet of all banquets," Jesus says, "This is going to be the party of all parties." Jesus says that many are invited, meaning a great number, crowds, droves, far more than would fit in any one home. Jesus makes no mention in this opening of anyone being unqualified or unfit. The hospitality of the host is ever inclusive, ever far reaching, wanting to bring all into that house so that it may be full.

One's worthiness seems to have nothing to do with the invitation for this particular host, which is a great contrast to the very dinner Jesus was attending. Remember this was a dinner where they were scrambling to pick out the seats of honor. The guest list was reserved for just a wealthy, privileged few.

Of course, the Pharisees believed that's how God operates. That's what God does. He picks out those who measure up. He picks out those who are most honorable. But this story is about a God who throws spectacular parties and invites many, and you'd be surprised to know who will show up.

Years ago, a Christian professor and writer named Tony Campolo went to Hawaii to speak at a conference. Because Tony flew in from the East Coast, he woke up ready for breakfast at about 3:00am, but the only restaurant that was open was a little diner in the back of an alley in downtown Honolulu. So

Tony got up and went in and sat down at the counter, and ordered some breakfast.

A few minutes later, a few scantily clad women walked in, sat down next to him, and started telling their stories about that night's clientele. Feeling a little self-conscious being the Christian conference speaker and all, Tony decided to do his best to try to slip away unnoticed and move to a different table so he would not be surrounded by prostitutes.

Before he could sneak away, he heard one of the women say, "Did you know tomorrow is my birthday?" One of her friends snapped back sarcastically, "Well so what? Do you want me to buy you a cake or sing *Happy Birthday*?" The woman whose name was Agnes replied, "No, I don't want anything from you. I'm just saying it's my birthday, that's all. I've never really had a birthday party before."

After the women left, Tony asked the man behind the counter whose name was Harry if these women came in every night, and Harry said they did. That's when Tony had his idea. At 2:30 the next morning, Tony returned with a huge sign that read, "Happy Birthday, Agnes," and Harry had prepared a giant birthday cake with icing, candles and all, and the whole diner was decorated.

This party, word of the party, must have gotten around because there were prostitutes from wall to wall. Then, at 3:30 on the dot, Agnes and her friend walked into the diner, and the whole room erupted, "Happy birthday, Agnes." And poor little Agnes, she just lost it. She could hardly stand up. She didn't know whether to laugh or to cry, and it was a mixture of both.

"Blow out the candles. Let's cut the cake," people cheered. Agnes looked down at that cake and said, "Is it all right with you if, I mean, is it okay if I just keep the cake for just a little while?" She picked up that cake like it was the Holy Grail itself, and she promised to be right back, and she left to take that cake home and put it in a place where it would be safe.

Then the room got very quiet. Everyone knew something really significant had just happened for her. Tony said, "Can we all pray together for Agnes?" So in the middle of the night, in a hole in the wall, greasy spoon diner, Tony Campolo, Harry the cook, and half the prostitutes of Honolulu prayed for Agnes.

They prayed God would be good to her. They prayed God would lead her in her life, and they prayed she would always know just how loved she really is. After the prayer, Harry looked over at Tony and said, "Hey, you never told me you were a preacher. What kind of church do you belong to anyway?" Tony said, "I belong to a church that throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning."

Now, I don't know how many churches out there are really like that, but our God is a God who throws birthday parties for prostitutes at 3:30 in the morning, and He throws parties for deadbeats, and dropouts, and hustlers, and traders, and deviants, and addicts. God says, "You're coming to My house. This party is for you. I'm not worried about your background. Come on into My home. Come on into My love. Come on into My fellowship, and we'll take care of the rest."

You see this is a party where marriages are restored. This is a party where addictions are broken. This is a party where forgiveness is received. This is a party where hearts are finally healed. Oh, how quickly many of us religious insiders forget we are not here because we met the necessary requirements. God found you in His grace, in your mess, and invited you to share in the banquet table of His love, and all you had to do was say, "Yes."

All you have to do is say, "Yes." The question is not are you worthy of grace, as the Pharisees might think, the question is...*Are you willing to receive it?* Are you willing to receive it? We never outgrow this need for grace. Sometimes we think we might. Sometimes it feels like the grace that has claimed us once is so far back in our past that we've forgotten the reason we're here because Jesus said, "Come, the Father's party is for you."

Maybe some of you have lost sight of that. Maybe some of those Pharisees around the table had lost sight of that, which is where Jesus moves next in the story. He says, ***"At the time of the banquet he sent his servant to tell those who had been invited, 'Come, for everything is now ready.'"***

What good news it should have been. You see in that culture, guests were invited at two different times. The first invitations were sent out well in advance so the host could prepare the appropriate amount of food and wine. Then on the day of the feast, when all the preparations are ready, the host would send a servant to let the guests know everything is prepared, and what a joyous moment that would be. They would have been waiting for this incredible celebration.

Now clearly this is very different from how invitations go out today. In my world, you get a Facebook or Evite message in your inbox. There will be 10 yeses, 10 no's, about 400 maybes. I'm part of the most noncommittal generation that maybe has ever lived, but in that day, when the servant came and announced everything was ready, you would drop everything at the moment.

It would be so exciting. You would drop everything and head straight to that party. It didn't matter if you were sick, hurt, shot, maimed by a cougar. It didn't matter what was going on in your life, you would drop it all and get yourself there. For one, to not show up would be a great offence to the host. But more importantly, this was going to be the banquet of all banquets, the party of all parties. No one in their right mind would want to miss, would they?

Picking up in verse 18, ***"But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said, 'I have just bought a field, and I must go and see it. Please excuse me.'"*** Now we may not pick up sort of the first century sensitivities of this moment, but the Pharisees would have begun to snicker at this line because this excuse was a flat-out lie, and they knew it. Why? Well you see ancient Palestine had far more desert than agricultural land, so to buy a field would be an extensive process of research and investigation that could literally take years to complete.

If you were a perspective landowner in the first century, you would have already investigated every last inch of that field. You'd know its size, its dimensions, topography, history, soil type, expected rainfall. You'd know every path, ditch, wall, crevice, tree, spring, rock, and rodent. You'd know it all. So then to say on the day of the banquet, "I just purchased a field, and I must go and examine it," is absurd. It's unthinkable. It's a lie. It's an excuse. He just doesn't want to be there. Something else is going on here. We'll come back to that.

The second excuse follows a similar pattern. He says, ***"I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me."'*** Now here is a guy who sounds like someone we would all respect...responsible, thorough, hard working. He wants his work to be successful. He is being meticulous, but while this might sound legitimate to us, this excuse in the ears of a first-century listener was just as phony as the first.

For those of you who grew up working with oxen, you know that a team of oxen is worthless unless they pull together and they pull evenly across the ground. So a buyer would always, always, always test the oxen before buying, not after. So to go and say, "Well, I've just bought five yoke of oxen, and I have to go test them out," is absurd. It's unthinkable. It's a flat-out lie. He just doesn't want to be there. Something else is going on here. We'll come back to that.

Which leads us to a third excuse, **"I just got married, so I can't come."** I know what you're thinking. You're thinking, *Scotty, please don't tell me this isn't a worthy excuse because I've already found my soul mate, or I'm banking on finding them maybe today in this worship service, whatever.* But sadly, and not as a reflection on God's view of marriage, God thought it up. He invented it. He loves it, but sadly, this would have been considered another bogus excuse as well.

First of all, it sounds totally fabricated. Weddings in that culture were huge, multi-day, potentially weeklong affairs, and no village could handle two events of this scale scheduled at once. The host would have never scheduled his banquet close to a wedding, but even if there was a recent wedding, the way this man speaks about it is intentionally insulting the host.

You see this is a world that practiced great restraint when it came to speaking about women or sex, and this statement in particular, if you go back into the original language, this statement is actually a very crude and crass way of talking about both. He didn't even have the courtesy to say, "Please excuse me." He just said, "I can't make it," meaning, "I want nothing to do with your party." It's absurd. It's unthinkable.

So what's going on? What is going on with all these excuses? Well clearly, it's not that all of these are gross evils. We're not talking about murder or adultery or being a Dodgers fan or anything that's just unforgivable. Notice these are all good things, but notice in the hearts of the people who are talking about them, in the hearts of these men in the story, all of these good things have become impediments to faith in Jesus.

They've become impediments to faith in Jesus. The same can be true in our lives. You may not be leaving here to go stare at a field, but far too many of us are almost totally controlled by our stuff, our resources, our money, our fields. We believe that more stuff, more money leads to being happy, and so we accumulate more and more and more. We cling to it for our identity. We cling to it for our security.

When Jesus comes, and invites you into His fellowship and says, "You can give to the poor. You can be generous. You don't have to worry about tomorrow. I will provide." You find yourself nodding and saying, "That sounds great, Jesus, but I have a checkbook, I have an investment, I have a resource, and I must go look at it. I can't come."

You may not be leaving here to go test a team of oxen, but most of us are driven by this incessant need to succeed and perform, and achieve in some way, so much so that we live under this constant fear of failure, or being inadequate, or not being recognized for being great at something. So we give our lives to climbing whatever ladder we think we're on to achieve more respect or esteem in the eyes of our peers.

Then Jesus comes, and He invites you into the fellowship of His grace, and He says, "You can serve others. It's time to give your life away. Don't worry about receiving credit or acclaim. I know what you've done." But you find yourself saying, "That sounds really nice, Jesus, but I just got this job. I just got this promotion. Just starting this new career, and I must go and test to see how that will work for me. Please,

excuse me."

You may not have just gotten married this week, but all too often we treat romantic relationships like they will be the things that will save us, they will turn a broken or lonely heart whole. Then when Jesus invites us to trust Him to heal our hearts, whether we're single or married, we find ourselves saying, "You know I'm this close to a perfect marriage, or finding the perfect mate. Will You just leave me alone and let me enjoy this for a moment? Let me pursue this with all I have. Please, excuse me."

You see the truth is we like to believe we can kind of have it both ways. We can hoard our money, or pursue our own glory, or idolize a relationship and then just keep going through the motions of church and faith, and things will be fine. But Jesus is saying, "You actually can't have it both ways." He said, "You can't serve both God and money. What good is it for you to gain the whole world, and yet forfeit your soul?"

He said, "If you want to follow Me, I have to come before all your relationships, even the closest ones." It's not because we love these things too much, it's because we love God too little in relation to them. Our God has gotten too small. Our God has gotten too weak. Our God has gotten too insignificant in our hearts, and so we will scramble to trust anything else, thinking that's going to get us to the party. That's going to get us to joy. That's going to get us to contentment. That's going to get us to peace.

You know what it leads to is just more weariness, restlessness, brokenness, dissatisfaction. I love how a writer and pastor, John Piper put it. He wrote this, "For all that ill that Satan can do, when God describes what keeps us from the banquet table of His love, it's a piece of land, a yoke of oxen, and a wife. The greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies, but His gifts." The greatest adversary of love to God is not His enemies; it's His gifts.

Those at risk are not the ones like Agnes who are ready to receive love at whatever cost, and when they receive it, they know, "Oh my gosh! This is grace. This is it. How do I treasure this? How do I preserve this? How do I wrap my life around what I've just received?"

The greatest risk is for those of us who are so full of ourselves or full of our stuff, or full of our careers or full of all these pursuits that we miss Him. It makes me ask the question, "Scotty, what have you been clinging to? Even if it's a good thing, what have you been clinging to that has left you outside the fellowship of God's love and the wonder of His grace, and the power of His provision in your life? Where are you saying no to Jesus? Where are you saying no to Jesus? Where are you not trusting Him? What are you clinging to?" It could be stuff. It could be a person.

What are you not willing to risk? Where will you not trust? Where will you not say yes? Do you feel the tension? It's the nudging of our God on your heart, wooing you to hear the servant, His Son, Jesus, who came into this world to give His life for you and say, "This party is for you. The party is still for you. You can put it down. You can trust Me with it."

As the tension would have filled the room full of Pharisees at that dinner, Jesus finishes the story with one final surprise. It says, ***"The servant came back and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and ordered his servant, 'Go out quickly into the streets and alleys of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind and the lame.' 'Sir,' the servant said, 'what you ordered has been done.'"***

Jesus is talking here about His own ministry. *"But there is still room,"* he says. *"Then the master told his servant, 'Go out to the roads and country lanes and compel them to come in, so that my house will be full.'"*

The master is angry and rightly so. He has been publically shamed and insulted by these rejections, and the word of those would have made him the laughing stock of the village. But what does the master do? What does he do? Does he seek vengeance? Does he seek retribution? No. The master turns his anger into grace.

This is what God does. This is what God always does. This is what the Cross is about. The master turns his anger into grace and says, "Fine, well then go find the needy. Go find the broken. Go find Agnes. Go find people who aren't staring at fields or worshipping the oxen. Go find whoever will come because I want my house full."

The sting to those religious Pharisees, those insiders, they were the few who made it. They could celebrate they had made the cut and they were that small remnant, and Jesus explodes the paradigm and says, "God wants a full house, and it's not about who you are or what you've done or your background; it's all about the servant. It's about saying yes to Jesus."

The parable ends in a way where it began with a gracious host, and a wide invitation, and a desire that His house would be full, which means He wants you there. He wants *you* there. He wants your friends there, and He wants your family there. He wants your colleagues there. He wants your coworkers there. He wants the righteous there. He wants the unrighteous there.

It's true and tragic that not everyone will say yes. Jesus will not force a heart. Love does not work that way. Jesus will honor your no if you choose to say no. But here's the good news: He will also honor your yes, if you will just choose to say yes to Him. There is no other god like this. There is no other savior like Him. This grace is still for you. He wants you there at the party of all parties.

So if you would, if you would just close your eyes for just a moment, let's take just a moment, a moment between you and God, and for a moment, don't worry about who is around you. Just reflect on these questions... *What's your excuse? What's holding you back? Where have you said no to Him?*

It could be about a person or a thing. It could be about a desire or a fear. It could be about a regret. This is your chance. This is the opportunity, and you don't want to miss it. This is a moment for you to say yes to Jesus, whether you've been walking with Him for years or you've never really known Him at all, this is a chance to say yes to Jesus who has come into this world with the invitation from His Father. He wants you to celebrate at the banquet table of His love. It cost Him everything, and it's a free gift to you. But you have to say yes. You have to want it more.

Jesus, we want to be people who say yes to You not because we should or because someone expects us to, but because it's what we want most. So let us not miss this opportunity. Let us not miss this moment. We want to share in that life and forgiveness and joy that You offer at Your table. So Jesus as best as we know how, personalized to the very things that are on our hearts right now, we say yes. May we celebrate this moment.

For those who aren't ready, for those who resist, Jesus, continue to pursue them, pursue them, compel them to come in. Compel them to come in as only You can. You be our vision, Jesus, heart of our hearts.

We say yes.