

LUKE 14

Luke 14:1–6. Healing a Man with Dropsy during a Meal

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 690–692.

As in his stories about the man with the withered hand (Luke 6:6–10) and the bent-over woman (13:10–13), Luke again leads us inside a room where the Savior spends part of His Sabbath. In the earlier stories, Jesus stands in a synagogue. In this latest account, Jesus evidently rises from His place at the table during the Sabbath meal and stands with the afflicted man, placing His hands on him as He heals him, even wrapping His arms around him as He does so. Besides Jesus’s obvious compassion that weaves itself brightly through this report, another personality trait enters the pattern. Jesus simply takes over the conversation, just as He does in the home of Simon the Pharisee when dealing with the penitent woman.¹

Jesus’s willingness and ability to dominate a situation—hinted at long ago: “He taught in their synagogues” (4:15)—here jump out at a reader. In Luke’s portrayal, no one is His match. The observation that Jesus’s dominance arises within a group of “lawyers and Pharisees” (14:3), people who have thought about and taught religious principles throughout their lives, underscores Jesus’s irrepressible character. And He exhibits His dominance not in casual conversation, discussing the latest news from the town, but with His own, definite purposes in mind. He does not spin away time in the small talk that often arises at dinner parties. As the evident expectation of the other guests underscores, He already enjoys a reputation of seizing whatever occasion presents itself and turning it into a teaching moment.

Only Luke records this report as well as the following parable about humility (14:7–14), each a part of Jesus’s effort to steer the dinner conversation. With this story of the man with dropsy, of course, Luke underscores again Jesus’s powers to heal long-term illnesses, as He has with the leper (5:12–14), the paralyzed man (5:18–25), and the woman afflicted twelve years with the issue of blood (8:43–48).

But unlike these earlier miracles, this one occurs on a Sabbath day, raising the question of proper observance of the Sabbath, just as do other accounts, such as the healing of the man with the withered hand and the bent-over woman (6:6–10; 13:10–13). As noted in the comments on Luke 6:6–12, for centuries the Sabbath has served as a sign that graces “a perpetual covenant” between God and His people. Any act that dishonors the Sabbath leads to “death” for the offender (Exodus 31:13–17). By Jesus’s era, traditions about Sabbath observance have become entrenched deep in people’s lives and help to explain the rancorous responses from Jesus’s detractors. Jesus is marching against old, established views, and He knows it. Because of the Sabbath’s centrality in religious life, His calculated efforts to push forward fundamental questions about this holy day allow Him to bring His own agenda into the consciousness of His hearers with unforgettable strength. And as with the other accounts, this report establishes Jesus’s lordship over the Sabbath.

At the heart of this story lingers Jesus’s compassion in contrast to established custom. His Sabbath action in effect elevates the needs of people over the perceived requirements of programs or customs, establishing a pattern that His observers are expected to emulate. But His deed does not sabotage the Mosaic law. The question, at base, is how one interprets and responds to the law, not whether to reject or reframe the law itself. Jesus leaves intact the Sabbath, and that is how matters are to remain. His act dramatically introduces the guests to a higher, more noble way to celebrate the sacred Sabbath by offering deliverance instead of turning a blind eye.

Luke 14:7–11. Parable of the Marriage Feast

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 696–697.

The Savior, having taken over the conversation and now animatedly guiding it, turns to chastise some at the dinner party for boorish behavior—pushing and jostling their way into the more honorable places at the table, close to the host. This scene does not feature Jesus as a social critic except in a very limited and minor way. But the behavior of some opens the door for Him to comment on an aspect of social etiquette and then, most pointedly, as is His custom, to apply it to eternal questions—those of God exalting and abasing people. Although some have opined that Luke adds the lesson in 14:11 from another source, no substantial reason has been advanced to convince us that Jesus does not utter these words on this occasion. The pattern is consistent: He makes a set of observations from the surrounding, workaday world and then draws out from them lasting lessons.

The fact that Jesus chooses a wedding celebration is notable since His illustration adds flesh to the growing perception that He concerns Himself deeply and repeatedly with the home and family.² A wedding sets up a home and family, those anchoring elements that allow a society to survive and flourish, those molded pieces that graciously give meaning to the lives of individuals and communities. In His hands, weddings

should not be events at which rank and self-importance are on display. Implied is the sense that the newlyweds are to remain the heart and soul of the celebration—not the guests, not the relatives.

The issue arises because Jesus inaugurates a conversation—almost entirely one-sided—that rests on a custom tied to the most honored guest, a natural outcome to what He is witnessing in the Pharisee’s home. Even today, as in antiquity, Middle Eastern society functions in this manner, with the guest of honor arriving last so that all others are present to greet that person. But Jesus’s chief point does not gain its sharpest meaning in His comments on customary etiquette but in its application to how the divine world functions: God is the One who exalts and abases. No one holds the right to make claim to a position of divine honor.

As with so many other accounts, Luke alone leads us to Jesus’s clarifying illustration about rank and place in society, once again underscoring the significance of his account. Without these polishing words from Jesus, which disclose customs of His day and especially reveal His thoughts about humility and self-importance, a reader stands on a rougher, stony surface. The fact that the Risen Savior later chooses to quote Luke 14:11 to a modern audience and also repeats it to introduce a parable, as He does in this chapter, underscores the significance of what Luke preserves for us (Doctrine and Covenants 101:42–43).

Luke 14:12–14. The Meaningful Guest List

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 699–700.

The Savior’s pithy statement about how His host should craft a guest list turns the social world upside down. Who has ever considered inviting anyone but one’s acquaintances to a dinner party? Who has ever thought of bidding those on the bottom rung of society to a private supper? Who has ever imagined sharing a meal with the dirty and unkempt? To be sure, men in the tribe of Levi who suffer from physical blemishes are not allowed to serve at the temple and are thus excluded (Leviticus 21:17–21). But this circumstance applies only to those of the priestly ranks. Even more exclusive is the Essenes’ forbidding of the blemished from joining with them in their principal meals because, it is written, during such meals “the angels of holiness are among [the Essenes’] congregation.” In this view, the blemished are unworthy to even be in the presence of the angels. More striking is that according to the Dead Sea Scrolls, such persons will be excluded from the messianic banquet at the end of time. Plainly, Jesus turns firmly and robustly against such views.

More than the prior parable (Luke 14:7–11), Jesus’s words cut against the social norms of insiders versus outsiders. In His kingdom, no one will possess an edge because of friendships, no one will receive special favors because of family ties, no one will hold onto influence and power because of long-time connections among the elite. Instead, the downtrodden receive equal treatment, the despised stand in places

of honor, and the humble find themselves exalted. Such a view offers a universal appeal and reverses the debilitating status quo, promising reward and meaning to all.

Continuing a pattern, Luke alone preserves these words from Jesus, but their authenticity is therefore not to be questioned. Rather, as in the case of Jesus's parable about taking the lesser places at a wedding celebration (14:7–11), Luke's repetition of Jesus's saying enriches our store of wisdom and celestial vision that derives from the Christ.

Luke 14:15–24. The Great Supper

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 705–707.

With a wrenching twist intended to bring the Savior's words back into the channels of tradition-laden expectations, a guest in the chief Pharisee's home corrects Jesus's painting of God's kingdom that teems with "the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind" and inserts himself and others of his kind into that kingdom by declaring boldly, "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God" (Luke 14:13, 15). He is taking back the divine territory for those of influence and wealth. But he does not reckon that Jesus, the irrepressible teacher, will turn his remark into a foil for driving home His point that the kingdom welcomes all, embraces the poor and disadvantaged, offers succor to more than the upper classes, and opens its doors to more than Jews. With the story of the supper, Jesus changes the entire celestial landscape.

The shocked guests must have thought, How can this man allow the scum of the earth into God's kingdom? Does he not grasp that their lowly circumstance discloses perfectly their status before God? In response, Jesus's stories and lessons unveil a kingdom that is infinitely more accepting, that is fundamentally full of grace and graciousness, and that is bathed in warm and cleansing waters. For those who have grown up asking the question, "Are there few that be saved?" (13:23; also 18:26) and live with the impression that only few really are saved, Jesus's answer through His vivid words comes as a breeze sweetened by the scent of spring flowers.

Jesus reciting a story about activities in a home fits a now-established pattern of concern for home and family. In this story, of course, He turns a bright light on the kind of generosity that can emanate from a home toward outsiders, demonstrating the strength of a home to reach out and touch the lives and affairs of those not within its normal circle of influence. This story also features the relationship between master and servant, between two people who bear responsibility for the home, though in very different roles. Jesus's narration continues His interests in the home, opening with the miraculous catch of fish that provides sustenance and a living for His disciples' families and continuing into His visit in Martha's home (10:38–42) and His sayings about homes under siege in chapter 11.³

The relationship of master—called “lord” in the story—and servant brings into the open the metaphorical character of Jesus’s story: it applies to His Church, to His growing community, as the plural “you” in 14:24 indicates. Jesus the Lord directs the affairs of His kingdom; those within it, His servants, do His bidding. But His bidding does not reek with the unsavory, with unrestrained power, or with cowering servility. On the contrary, the servant in the story acts as the master’s authorized agent for inviting and welcoming outsiders into the master’s home for a grand banquet. Those invited include the downtrodden of society and point up the master’s genuine compassion and concern for them—he does not invite them just for show. Jesus, though firm with resolve and clear in His objectives, will not govern His kingdom as a despot.

The metaphorical nature of the story persists into the hints of the messianic banquet at the end-time. Specifically, the broad set of invitations, the splendid nature of the feast, the ban on those who have refused the initial summonses, and the status of the master as lord and host—all these elements point to meaningful connections with this expected, unequaled occasion.⁴

The similarities of this story to one repeated by Matthew and to one that appears in the apocryphal Gospel of Thomas, saying 64, has led some to conclude that the three go back to a common source (Matthew 22:1–14). To be sure, the grand occasion for the banquet, the invitations to prominent people, the sending of the servant, the variety of excuses for not coming, and the invitation to those along the roads outside the city all point to commonalities. And the differences between the three versions may result from the ancient authors’ efforts to affix meaningful contexts to Jesus’s story. These same differences, however, may also point to Jesus’s independent retelling of a meaningful story in varying settings and ways—a view that most scholars will not accept. But the differences are striking enough that such a conclusion is not unreasonable. After all, in Matthew’s version, the banquet is a wedding feast, a detail, on the surface, that would have been natural for Luke to pick up because he has just related a saying of Jesus that involves a wedding banquet (Luke 14:8–10). Moreover, rather than simply banning the original invited guests from any further events, as in Luke’s version (14:24), Matthew’s account has the king—the host—ordering the execution of those who refuse to come because they have, horribly, killed the servants whom he sends to remind them (Matthew 22:6–7). In addition, Matthew rehearses both the discovery of a guest who is not wearing an appropriate wedding garment and his banishment “into outer darkness,” aspects that are completely absent in Luke’s report (Matthew 22:11–13). Furthermore, the interlocking connections between the prior sayings about the nature of the kingdom (Luke 14:7–14) and this story of the supper underline a fundamental unity that can only go back to one mind and one occasion, not to an imaginative author who is stitching together strands of tradition and memory that come to him in a disconnected fashion. In a different vein, the story in Luke 14:16–24 may be a recasting of the famous story of Bar Ma’jan, a rich tax collector who is reported to have done a single good deed in his life by inviting poor people to a banquet when other prominent persons refuse to come.

Luke 14:25–35. True Discipleship

The following is adapted from S. Kent Brown, The Testimony of Luke (Provo, UT: BYU Studies, 2015), 714–717.

When the Savior turns His attention to salt at the end of His discussion on discipleship, He creates a thunderclap. How so? Because the change of subject is abrupt (Luke 14:34). Further, salt stands as a most vivid symbol of life and death, of flourishing and fading. In addition, salt is the customary companion to a host of sacrifices and represents a needed and fundamental substance of covenants struck between individuals and entered into by God and His worshipers.⁵

Focusing first on salt as a symbol of life and death, this dimension presents itself in salt's ability to change the taste of simple foods, a mere pinch making them more delectable, as will doubtless be the case at the banquet that Jesus pictures (Luke 14:16–24). But if too much salt makes its way into foods, they become foul and inedible. Salt carries a similar impact for the land (14:35). In limited and proper portions, it acts as a growth stimulant for certain plants, effectively making it a fertilizer. Its presence, therefore, in “the dunghill” should not surprise us, for in small doses it will act as an enlivening agent for plant life. On the other hand, when salt is sown too abundantly across a field, the ground becomes sterile and unproductive, at least until the rains rinse it out of the soil. Hence, the mutinous town of Shechem was sown with salt so that nothing would grow there (Judges 9:45).

Moving into the spiritual realm, salt forms a natural symbol for covenant relationships. How so? Because, as with foods, salt in proper metaphorical proportions enhances the flavor and the sweetness of one's agreements with others. In contrast, when lacking in salt, symbolically, the flavor of a covenant becomes dull and insipid. What is worse, when salt is sown against a covenant in large amounts, as when the covenant is breached, the quality and strength of the agreement withers and dies, leaving the covenant lifeless. In this light, then, salt represents a natural indicator of the flavor of our life of consecration, of our willingness to stand as disciples.

Moreover, salt is a reminder of indestructibility. The saltiness of salt does not change. A person can dissolve it, but the taste permeates the dissolving agent, whether water or wine. In its solid state, it always keeps its essential flavor. Even in its diminished state, when “men cast it out” (Luke 14:35), the fundamental character of salt remains. Hence, on a metaphorical plane, it stands for the indestructibility and consistency that are to frame and give eternal meaning to our discipleship to the Savior.

In another vein, because salt makes meals more flavorful, Jesus's pointer to this substance also brings His hearers inside the home where people enjoy their meals. By doing so, He continues His focus on the home, a theme that has been running throughout this chapter.⁶ Thus, deftly and subtly by hinting at a common home scene, Jesus adorns salt with meaning that reflects the loyalties and shared joys within a family and leads directly to the loyalties and shared joys of discipleship.

Indirectly, this connection responds in part to the perceived tension between loyalties to family members and loyalty to the Savior: “If any man come unto me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters . . . he cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:26). The Joseph Smith Translation adds “or husband” in an apparent effort to balance the reference to one’s wife and to underscore a wife’s loyalties to her husband’s family when she marries. Beyond this, Jesus burrows inside a person’s most deeply held loyalties, those to family, and effectively declares that loyalty to Him ultimately stands on a higher peak.⁷ Such a lofty requirement, of course, does not undercut His concern for families, which shows up often, but simply gives loyalty to Him its proper celestial profile. Besides, the verb “to hate” (Greek *miseō*) here carries a strong hint of hyperbole—that is, of overstating the case so that His point will be clear and memorable. Moreover, in this context, “to hate” concerns turning against whatever competes for a person’s highest loyalties (Luke 16:13; Matthew 6:24).

This concern in Jesus’s listing stands as the first of three main challenges to becoming a consecrated follower—family worries, lack of commitment, and troubles over property and goods (Luke 14:26, 27, 33). Resolution does not come easily. And Luke’s notations about the mental calculations of the landowner and king—“sitteth not down first, and counteth the cost” and “sitteth not down first, and consulteth” (14:28, 31)—point sharply in this direction. Remarkably, the Joseph Smith Translation adds an expression from Jesus that undergirds this notion of mental and emotional weighing: “Wherefore, settle this in your hearts, that ye will do the things which I shall teach and command you” (Joseph Smith Translation, Luke 14:28). Plainly, Jesus knows that He is asking a lot from followers and conveys His sensitivity to their dilemmas: “Whosoever . . . forsaketh not all . . . cannot be my disciple” (Luke 14:33). On one level, Jesus’s words expect that many will declare themselves as His disciples and then will abandon their commitment or covenant because of the high cost. Such persons are therefore as “salt [that] have lost his savour” and are, in His parlance, “neither fit for the land, nor yet for the dunghill” (14:34–35).

But His words find compelling continuity with what He discusses at the Sabbath meal with His host and the other guests. For there He requires that they change how they see themselves relative to others, not seeking honors but seeking humility (14:7–11). In addition, He demands that they turn their minds and hearts in a totally different direction, seeking out “the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind” and forgetting their old friends and associates who can do favors for them in recompense (14:12–14).

However, would-be disciples do not possess the luxury of taking a long time to make up their minds. The fact that Jesus is moving, is passing through towns and villages, means that a person cannot dally. The choice cannot wait long. More to the point, the story about the king confronting an enemy army that far outnumbers his own and the almost immediate need to resolve the conflict brings forward the necessity of making a decision about discipleship in proper time (14:31–32).

Notes

- 1 Luke 7:36–50; see the comments on Luke 5:27–32.
- 2 See the comments on Luke 11:14–28.
- 3 See the comments on Luke 11:14–28; 12:35–40.
- 4 See the comments on Luke 4:1–13; 9:10–17.
- 5 Leviticus 2:13; Numbers 18:19; Ezekiel 43:24; 2 Chronicles 13:5.
- 6 See the comments on Luke 14:7–11 and 14:15–24.
- 7 See the comments on Luke 9:23–27.

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