

A CEO has taken on a new job, and the outgoing CEO says to him, "Sometimes you'll make wrong choices. You will. You'll mess up. When that happens, I have prepared three envelopes for you. I left them in the top drawer of the desk. The first time it happens, open #1. The second time you mess up, open #2. The third time, open #3."

For the first few months, everything goes fine. Then the CEO makes his first mistake, goes to the drawer, opens up envelope #1, and the message reads, "Blame me." So he does: "This is the old CEO's fault. He made these mistakes. I inherited these problems." Everybody says, "Okay." It works out pretty well.

Things go fine for a while, and then he makes his second mistake. So, he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #2. This time he reads, "Blame the board." And he does: "It's the board's fault. The board has been a mess. I inherited them. They're the problem." Everybody says, "Okay, that makes sense."

Things go fine for a while, and then he makes his third mistake. So, he goes to the drawer and opens up envelope #3. The message reads: "Prepare three envelopes."

Today... our passage of Scripture deals with excuses. ... All too often we try to protect ourselves... to maintain our sense of security and significance... the wrong way... by making excuses. ... And the more we rely on a particular excuse... the more we tell it... the greater the chance is that we start to **believe** that it is true.

The authors of the book *Mistakes Were Made (but not by me)* argue that our tendency to justify our actions... is more powerful and deceptive... than an explicit lie. They write:

[Self-justification] allows people to convince themselves that what they did was the best thing they could have done. In fact, come to think of it, it was the right thing. "*There was nothing else I could have done.*" ... "*Actually, it was a brilliant solution to the problem.*" ... "*I was doing the best for the nation.*" ... "*Those [jerks] deserved what they got.*" ... "*I'm entitled.*"

[For example], when researchers ask husbands and wives what percentage of the housework they do, the wives say, "*Are you kidding? I do almost everything, at least 90 percent.*" And the husbands say, "*I do a lot, about 40 percent.*" ... Although the specific numbers differ from couple to couple... the total always exceeds 100 percent by a **significant** margin. ... It's tempting to conclude that one spouse is lying... but it is more likely that each is remembering in a way that enhances his or her contribution.

Over time, as the self-serving distortions of memory kick in ... we come to believe our own lies... little by little. ... We know we did something wrong... but we gradually begin to think that it wasn't our fault... and after all... the situation was "complex". ... We start underestimating our own responsibility... whittling away at it until it is a mere shadow of its former hulking self.

Are you pretty good at underestimating your own responsibility... coming up with noble-sounding excuses... which you eventually believe is the truth... so that you can protect your sense of security and significance? ... Sometimes when we THINK we are being crafty... we're really not...

One Sunday morning, two men are out in a boat, fishing. After several hours on the lake without catching a single fish... one of the men says to his friend, "*You know, we probably should have stayed home and gone to church this morning.*"

The other man says, "*Well, I could have stayed home, but I couldn't have gone to church.*"

"*Why's that?*" asks his friend.

"*My wife is sick,*" the fisherman answers.

We use a lot of lame excuses... don't we...? And one of the **most** lame... but most **widely used** excuses... that people use today for not becoming a Christian... is this excuse: "*I just cannot worship a God Who would send people to hell... simply because they will not believe in Jesus... I mean... what kind of a loving God is that...?*"

The reason I told the story a few minutes ago to the kids about Moses and the Israelites with the fiery snakes... was to show... as our text this morning will also do... that (a loving God would never send anyone to Hell) it is a poor excuse for anyone to refuse Christ. ... A loving God does not force anyone who doesn't want to go to Heaven... to be there. He beckons us to come... but those who don't want it... will not be forced against their

own will. The story of Moses and the Israelites illustrates this very well. God would not **force** the Children of Israel to be healed. They had to decide it was what they wanted... and then look at the bronze snake on the pole – **IF** - they wanted to be healed. But if not... then they had to live with the severe consequences... God does not **force** His love onto anybody... That would not be love.

In our passage of study today in the Gospel of Luke... Jesus tells a parable of how God **invites**... and it highlights the terrible consequences of making spiritual excuses. ... We might have used some common spiritual excuses often enough that we actually believe them to be true.

In today's passage... Jesus is still at the dinner party... where we found Him in last week's study. ... You will remember that... Jesus was in the midst of a Sabbath dinner party... which had grown quite **intense**. ...The party became tension-filled... from the **moment** Jesus stepped through the door... because... (as Luke 14:1 expresses it)... "He was being carefully watched" by the religious leaders... who had been invited to the dinner... to spring a trap on Jesus.

Well... the tension **did** escalate... the trap **was** sprung... ... Jesus healed a man of dropsy (edema in modern medical terminology)... who they placed in front of Jesus... knowing that Jesus would be compassionate toward him. ... But Jesus then convicted His would-be critics to silence... with a skillful question... and a reference to their own skewed practice of rescuing mere **animals** (but not **people**)... on the Sabbath.

Now... as if that were not enough... Jesus went on to criticize both the guests and the host — the guests... for seeking the seats of honor... and the host... for inviting only those who could return the favor. ... Everyone in the room had been *deliberately* **insulted** by Jesus.

It is reasonable to imagine that everyone was perfectly still and silent... as Jesus taught such harsh lessons of truth. ... Probably no one was eating the sumptuous meal... This party had become a **disaster!** ... The host and his friends were quietly seething... they were silently enduring a theological meltdown. ...They had to have been completely mortified.

Just then... breaking the awkward silence... a quick-witted (but... don't get me wrong... an *insincere*) guest... attempted to save the day... with a pious exclamation. "*Blessed is everyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God*".

The man's words... no doubt... had an artificial sincerity to them. The exclamation sounded good — but it was disingenuous. ...Its pious language evoked everyone's agreement... "*Amen to **that!***" ... and there was for a few seconds... a temporary reprieve from the onslaught of Jesus' insulting truth-lessons. In essence... the exchanged meant, "*Blessed are the likes of us who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God.*" "*Amen!* ... "*Well said!*" ... "*Now will someone please pass me the mint jelly...*"

But Jesus could **not** let the exclamation pass — for **their souls'** sake. ... Jesus fully knew that in their inmost being... there was little desire for God's kingdom... and each of them... in their own heart... ruminated cheap

excuses... They would make pious declarations... but they had no real **desire** for God... and they had begun to believe their own **excuses** for not wanting Him. Let's pick up our passage now and read...

Luke 14:15-24

The Jewish people pictured their future kingdom as a great feast with Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and the prophets as the honored guests. This was their view of the next life. In the previous chapter here in Luke... we saw Jesus utilize this expectation... as He taught a similar lesson that He teaches with today's parable. He said many of you will be excluded from that Great Feast... but you will see these great patriarchs inside the feast... eating with – GENTILES ! You will be on the outside... but Gentiles will be included... (Luke 13:28).

Using the symbol of a feast - for Heaven - is of immense spiritual significance... because it suggests eternal **satisfaction**. ...Even in this world... a banquet is much more than a means of satisfying physical hunger — it is more than eating. I have never attended a banquet that did not intend to celebrate *something*.

The "great banquet" ... in this parable that Christ told... is a lavish... sumptuous image of the kingdom of Heaven. It is going to celebrate a joyous **satisfaction**! ... And, of course, the ultimate convener and host will be Christ Himself.

... Now this anonymous guest at the pharisees' Sabbath party... was **confident** that he would one day be at the "kingdom feast" with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (the great patriarchs of Israel.) ... Apparently no one

texted... or emailed this guy about the lesson Jesus already taught about this Heavenly feast... CNN probably ignored the story of Christ's significant teaching... so this guy was still under the false impression that all Jews are automatically included. Jesus... then... addressed his false confidence with yet another parable.

In it... Christ used the imagery of His day... that when you invited guests to a dinner... you told them the **day**... but not the exact **hour** of the meal. ... A host had to know how many guests were coming... so he could butcher the right amount of animals... and prepare sufficient food. ...Just before the feast was to begin... the host sent his servants to each of the guests to tell them the banquet was ready... and they should come. ... The servant was sent out to re-invite the invited guests. To accept the first invitation but decline the second was an unconscionable insult. What is important for us to understand... is that... *each of the guests in this parable had already **agreed** to attend the banquet.* The host expected them to be there.

But instead of eagerly coming to the feast... all of the guests greatly **insulted** the host... by refusing to attend... and they all gave very pathetic and weak excuses... to defend their change in plans. ... Truly... it was inconceivable for them to behave by breaking their social etiquette in this manner. ... And it did **not** happen just **once** – but often enough that the servant had to first go out to the streets of the city and beckon... (or invite) others to come in... ... And **then** ... even still... he had to go outside of the city to invite more and more ... until the banquet was finally full. ... There must have been a **large** number of the original invitees... who said at first they would come... but at the final invitation – shockingly – refused to

participate. ... For **one** to behave this way is surprising – but in this case there were quite a few!

Jesus was... of course... foretelling what the Jews... in large part... have done by rejecting Christ... as the final invitation to the feast. ... Large numbers of them accepted the first part of the invitation... that God was inviting them through His interaction with them as His Own people. ... They accepted His working among them... they studied His revelation through the Old Testament Scriptures... and waited for the Messiah's banquet to be ready... and the call for them to come. ... But when it came... large numbers unexpectedly ignored it... God issued further invitation in the streets and lanes of the city... in other words... not the Nation's most prominent people... but to the ordinary and the down-trodden people in Nation of Israel... and then He invited those outside of the city – the Gentiles!

I can't help but think that there is **another** parallel of this story. ... I think that it also speaks to those in the church today... who have responded to the initial invitation of Christ... when He extended an invitation to them to participate in His Kingdom. ... Now remember... Christ's Kingdom is **NOT** just the future – when we go to Heaven. The Kingdom of God is our allowing Him to rule over us RIGHT NOW in this life. ... Many respond to His gracious invitation for eternal life and sit back and just wait to go to Heaven. ... Christ comes with the second part of the invitation by asking them to participate in His Kingdom... saying “the Kingdom is now here... and this is what I would like for you to do...” ... But many believers respond with their pathetic and ineffective excuses... ... Even though they THINK everything is just fine... they believe they have a ticket to Heaven... but by

their excuses... they demonstrate that they really are not Kingdom participants.

Look at the excuses in the parable.

The first excuse involves the need to go check out a recently bought field. Some first-century purchases did require a post-purchase inspection. The excuse is a culturally legitimate one. ... However... since feasts were held in the late part of the day... it would have been close to sunset when the re-invitation would have come... and beyond the time to investigate a field. At the very least... it showed that something else was more important. It revealed the man's priorities.

The second excuse involves another purchase. This time it is five oxen. Unlike the purchase of land... there is no evidence... from first-century days... that a post-purchase inspection was required. ... Would you buy a car without first test-driving it...? It is unlikely that he really needed to inspect these animals – after he already purchased them. This excuse seems more shaky. But certainly... once again... it reflects priorities.

The third excuse is the most shaky of the three. It involves a recent marriage and the desire to spend time with his new bride. Old Testament law commands a newly married man to take one year off from going to war... but there is nothing about not attending banquets. Besides... why did he say “yes” to the first invitation...? Why not bring his new wife along and enjoy the first part of the evening at the banquet...? ... Again... he is choosing other priorities.

Notice how the first two excuses had to do with material **possessions**... and the third... with **affections**. ... Possessions and affections cover virtually every reason... by which men and women give their regrets to the Kingdom of God today.

It is obvious that their refusal to come to the feast was... plain and simply... contrary to sound reason. ... The decision to forgo a sumptuous feast prepared for you and your friends... to forgo the joy and laughter and satisfactions offered... in order to visit your recent purchases... or even to be with your new wife... does not make good sense. ... They will all be there when you return.

Jesus offers the kingdom... a satisfying **feast** of peace...wisdom... friendship...and rest.... A satisfying **feast** of joy... eternal life... Heaven opened... immeasurable hope—*salvation*. Yet, people turn their backs on this feast... preferring a visit with their possessions and affections.

We certainly ought to check out our land... try our oxen... give pleasure to our loved ones. ... In fact... the more we participate right now in God's Kingdom here on earth... the more we will enjoy these earthly blessings! Our fields (whatever you own) will be better tended... our oxen (our tools and resources) will be put to better use... and our spouses will more tenderly and sacredly be loved. ... But if our possessions and affections are **so preferred**... that they become excuses to turn down Christ's feast... our behavior is an unconscionable insult to God... and our souls in danger.

The real reason the three invitees offered their lame excuses... was that they really did not want to go to the feast. The real reason people turn away from the eternal feast is that they do not want to be there. They have no appetite for God and His ways.

This parable is not only about the Jews... who in large part have rejected Christ. ... It is also talking about us and our preferences. ... We need to ask ourselves whether we like our car more than we like God. ... Do we value our only day off to go fishing... be with the family... use our new travel trailer... see the BIG game on TV... more than we like God...? Are we more concerned about our reputation... afraid of looking foolish... so we don't use our gifts in the church...? I speak to those who have initially said "yes" to Christ's invitation... and who regularly hang out around the church ! ... What about those who have not initially said yes to the invitation?

Why is it that when Christ offers forgiveness... peace... eternal life... and an eternal feast... so few respond? ... Why is it that people do not want the kingdom? ... (ANSWER) It is because their thinking is skewed. They do not think rightly about the eternal. They prioritize the temporal... things that do not last. And in the depths of their hearts they do not want God.

The bottom line is: Do YOU want Him? He beckons (invites) you... He won't force you... He beckons you. He does not want anyone in His kingdom – who does not want Him. He wants us to want Him more than all the temporal attractions that we are surrounded by.

There is so much pretending to want Him. All the religious posturing that we see in the parable... and is seen in the sanctimonious actions of so many today... are so empty. ... When the guest at the feast blurted out - "Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God" – it was nothing but pious jargon... very much like what is often heard today. "Praise the Lord... halleluiah... amen... Lord... Lord... Jesus... Jesus... Now let's get to the restaurant before all the other churches let out..."

Kingdom longing by many... who fill churches today ... is bogus. ... Their **true** longing is for things that are far more temporary.

The question for Jesus' hearers and us... is... "Do we really want to attend the feast?" ... Or are other things more important? ... Our hobbies...? Our portfolios? ... Our cars? ... Our homes? ... Our looking good in the eyes of others?

It has cost Jesus everything to prepare the feast — His Own painful death... His Own torment... tears... flesh... and blood. ... Now He invites us to come and participate in it with Him for all eternity. Come... before the doors are shut... or live the consequences for believing your flimsy excuse is legitimate.