

Sermon for Sunday, August 11, 1974 by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
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EXCUSES GOD WON'T ACCEPT

St. Luke 14:15-24

Text: "But they all alike began to make excuses." St. Luke 14:18a

In the parable that is our Scripture for this morning, Jesus tells us some exciting news. He tells us that God invites all of us to sit at the banquet table in heaven. Whoever you are this morning, Jesus tells us that God extends an invitation to you. No one is excluded. He wants you to be a part of his family, to sit with him at his table in Heaven. It doesn't matter what you may have done or how you have lived, God still loves you and wants you to be a part of his family.

But Jesus was a realist. He understood people and human nature. So in this parable he goes on to tell us that in spite of the gracious invitation, there will be many who will not accept. They will make excuses. In the parable, when the banquet is ready, the host sends out his messengers as was the custom of the day to tell the guests. But the parable tells us, "But they all alike began to make excuses." One has bought some new property and must inspect it. Another has purchased a team of oxen and must see how they do in the yoke. Still another has just gotten married and --well. I suppose they had other things on their minds!

As we listen to the excuses of the men of the parable, we recognize that each excuse has a certain validity, a certain ring of authenticity, about it. These are not fabricated excuses that are obviously false. In each case the thing involved is worthy of time and attention. Yet, in each case the men are condemned. Why? What makes an excuse false? After all, if the kingdom of God is desirable, and if God is inviting us to enter it, and if we are making excuses that run the risk of making us lose that kingdom and miss heaven, we need to know what excuses God won't accept and why.

Notice in the first place that God won't accept our excuses when they substitute a lower good for a higher good. When Matthew records this same story, he tells us that the host of the dinner is the king. A man's highest loyalty is to his king. It is said that General Lee once sent a message to Stonewall Jackson that he wished to see him at General Jackson's convenience. Immediately Jackson rode to Lee's tent and when the Commander of the Southern forces asked him why he came immediately, Jackson replied, "My General's wish is my command." When the men of the parable excused themselves, they were in fact substituting a lower good for a higher good. The wish of their king should have been their command, but they said a piece of land, or a team of oxen, or a new bride were more important than honor and respect to their king.

Are we guilty of that sort of thing? Take for example your family. I don't know many responsibilities more solemn than a man's duty to his family. One of the Ten Commandments specifically deals with a man's obligation to his father and mother. Yet, when a man makes his family the goal and end of his existence, he is substituting a lower good for a higher one. Immediately after the Scripture we read this morning, St. Luke records that Jesus turned to the crowd and said, "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters, even his own life, he cannot be a disciple of mine." That's strong language! However, the Greek word used that is translated "hate" does not mean hate as we commonly use the term. Rather, it means "to love less". He is not saying we are not to love our most precious family members, but he is saying that we must love them less than we do God.

To do otherwise is to substitute a lower for a higher good.

And there is another side to this business of substituting, too. To substitute something less for something better does a disservice to all of life. For example, to substitute an inferior player for a better player does damage to the whole team. In the same sense, to substitute family love in the place of first loyalty and love to God is to do a disservice to the family. Of what value is it to growing children or to the relationship of husband and wife when we do not love God above all else? Doesn't the right sort of love for God determine whether our other loves are of the right sort?

Statistics show that 3 out of 5 marriages today end in the divorce court. Yet, when a couple are active together in the church--when the priority of their love is in proper order--the divorce rate drops to one out of twenty. When I was a small child, someone once gave me a colored chicken for Easter. I was so enamoured of that baby chick! I held it so tightly in my hands I literally smothered it to death with love. This sometimes happens to the things we love if our love is out of proportion. It follows that our love for God must be in proper alignment or all of our love is out of kilter. So, God won't accept our excuse if it substitutes a lower good for a higher good.

Notice in the second place that God won't accept our excuse when it obscures the facts. In our day we have learned a lot about ourselves through the contributions of psychology. One of the things we have learned is that we believe what we want to believe. This rationalization is described as the "process of concocting plausible reasons to account for one's practices or beliefs." Thus, we are guilty of obscuring real facts with reasons unconnected with our true motivations. We shut out awareness of an unpleasant or shameful or anxiety-arousing fact. Now, the facts in the parable are plain and simple. The King has issued an invitation. An invitation from the King is in fact a royal command. The invited guests belonged at the banquet.

Yet, in spite of this, each rationalized his case. Each concocted plausible reasons to account for not attending. They shut out awareness of their duty by obscuring the facts. George Buttrick, commenting on their excuses, writes, "Are these excuses more foolish than ours? Excuse: 'I got too much religion when I was a boy.' Answer: He may mean that he wishes to run away from the religion that was given to him. Or he may have had too much false religion: the cure for poor religion is not no religion, but a true faith. Excuse: 'I am too tired when Sunday comes.' Answer: Because of the very lack of religion. Every man gets tired when he tries to live life in his own strength. Excuse: 'I must use the time to help my family. Answer: Can any man help his family if he lives a godless life? Excuse: 'There are too many hypocrites in church.' Answer: If a hypocrite must live somewhere, would you not rather see him in church? There the light of reality may strike him. Besides, can a man go anywhere in this world if he would avoid hypocrites? Not to business, certainly. Besides, are we not all hypocrites--people of strangely mixed motives? Have we the right to make the charge? Besides, is that the real reason the man does not go to church?"

Now, the fact is, a man may reject his king. He may not wish to sit down with him at the banquet table. He may despise him and ridicule him and think lowly of him. But to rationalize his refusal of the king's invitation is to obscure the facts. A man may not think much of the church and he may actually reject God. But to rationalize why he is not a church member or a Christian is to obscure the facts. Such excuses are obviously false and God won't accept them.

But notice thirdly that God won't accept our excuses when they substitute the expedient for the eternal, the temporary for the permanent. Each of the men in the parable could have delayed for a few hours what they wanted to do. Yet, they did the expedient thing. Are we ever guilty of this? Are we ever guilty of taking the easy way out, the expedient way? Our great figures of history are men who would not take the expedient way out. Look for example at Martin Luther. He stood in trial before the Ruler of the Land and the Head of the Church. His life hung precariously in the balance. They demanded that he recant--that he take back his writing and his teaching and say that he was wrong. That would have been the easy thing to do--how simple it would have been for him to say, "I recant." But there comes a point when a man must take a stand and Luther replied, "I cannot and will not recant. Here I stand; I can do no other."

What do we stand for today? When Judas betrayed the Lord he took the easy way out. When Peter denied Jesus, he did the expedient thing. One poet puts it this way:

Three workmen fashioning a cross
on which the fourth must die!
Yet none of any other asked,
"And why? And why? And why?"

Said they, "This is our business
Our living we must earn;
What happens to the other man
is none of our concern."

But an excuse is false when a man does what is easiest. An excuse is false when a temporary is substituted for a permanent, an expedient for an eternal. Charlotte Gilman in her poem, "A Man Must Live" expresses it in this manner:

"A man must live!" we justify
low shift and trick, to treas on high;
A little vote for a little gold
Or a whole Senate bought and sold,
With this self-evident reply,
"A man must live!"

But is it so? Pray tell me why
Life at such cost you have to buy?
In what religion were you told
A man must live?
There are times when a man must die.

No, God won't accept our excuse when it substitutes something expedient for the thing of eternal significance. That's why the Bible says, "And they took him to the place called Calvary, and there they crucified him." You see, there are times when a man must die.

Notice in the fourth place that God won't accept our excuses when they substitute indifference for concern. St. Matthew, when he records our parable, writes, "When he sent his servants to summon the guests he had invited, they would not come. He sent others again, telling them to say to the guests, "See now! I have prepared this feast for you. I have had my bullocks and fatted beasts slaughtered; everything is ready; come to the wedding at once! But they took no notice; one went off to his

business, and the others seized the servants, attacked them brutally, and killed them." There was no concern here for their duty and relationship to their king, for they substituted indifference for concern and they took no notice.

Their sin was not so much that they opposed their king, but that they were indifferent to him. Their excuses sound much like our affluent society today, concerned about investments (a farm), possessions (a team of oxen), and sex (a new bride). Our society is not opposed to Christianity. The church does not have to fight opposition to keep its doors open. No, our battle today is with indifference. In the story that Jesus told about the Good Samaritan, wasn't this the sin of the priest and Levite who passed the wounded man by? When a fellow human being lay beaten and bleeding in the ditch, they indifferently passed by on the other side.

Studdert-Kennedy, in a little poem entitled "Indifference" tells how Jesus was hated and crucified by the Jews, He writes:

When Jesus came to Golgotha they hanged Him on a tree,
They drove great nails through hands and feet, and made a Calvary;
They crowned Him with a crown of thorns, red were his wounds and deep,
For those were crude and cruel days, and human flesh was cheap.

Then the scene shifts to modern Birmingham, England, and he writes,

When Jesus came to Birmingham, they simply passed Him by;
They never hurt a hair of Him, they only let Him die;
For men had grown more tender, and they would not give him pain,
They only just passed down the street, and left Him in the rain.

But are the indifferent any better than those who crucified him? The next verse answers:

Still Jesus cried, "forgive them, for they know not what they do,"
And still it rained the winter rain that drenched Him through and through;
The crowds went home and left the streets without a soul to see,
And Jesus crouched against a wall and cried for Calvary.

Yes, an excuse is false when it substitutes indifference for concern, when it covers the ashes of a love grown cold.

Are you concerned about your soul this morning? Are you concerned like the people at Pentecost who were pricked in their hearts and cried out, "What must we do to be saved?" Are you concerned like the Psalmist who wrote, "Against thee, thee only, have I sinned?" Are you concerned like Charlotte Elliott who wrote, "Just as I am without one plea, but that thy blood was shed for me?" Are you concerned like John Newton who wrote, "Amazing Grace--how sweet the sound--that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see?"

Do you belong to Jesus Christ this morning? Is your life committed to him? Are you responding to the invitation of God with the cry, "O Lamb of God, I come, I come?" If not, let me ask you one question: what is your excuse?