

Grace and Discipleship.

Luke 14: 16-35.

W. W. Fereday

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The Spirit of God in this place has linked together two very important yet distinct principles. First, we get the fulness and freeness of divine grace set forth in the parable of the great supper, then we have truth for the conscience as to the pathway of discipleship. Our deceitful hearts are prone to disassociate these things, but they are divinely joined in the scriptures. The Lord was at meat in the house of a Pharisee on the sabbath day. He did not forget (how could He?) that He was the witness of God in this world, though for the moment, a guest in the house of another. His all-searching eye detected the selfishness that reigned there. As to the guests, poor self-assertive flesh in them all struggled for the chief place; and as to the host, he had gathered a company who were well able to recompense him again. The Lord rebuked all parties. The spirit of grace was lacking all round — self reigned in all their hearts.

He set before His host, that when making a feast, it were better far to fill the house with the poor, the maimed, the lame, and the blind, and to await reward at the resurrection of the just. There was no honey in the meat-offering of God. He was a guest, but merely natural courtesy and deference could not make Him withhold the rebuke that was due. He set forth in His remonstrance God's grace in contrast with man's selfishness. The word apparently charmed one, who said "Blessed is he that shall eat bread in the kingdom of God." This led to the well known parable. Alas! however men may like the *sound* of grace, when the heart is tested, it is found to have no real appreciation of what is in the heart of God. If God invites, excuses are made; if He wishes a housefull, He must Himself seek them, yea, compel them to come in.

God's grace is attractively expressed. The Lord Jesus likens it to a great supper well furnished. Nothing is lacking; all that is good is provided by bounteous hand. His principle ever is, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." In the interpretation of the parable, I suppose the first invited guests were the Jewish leaders. But their hearts were in the world, there was no taste for God and His Christ. The field, the oxen, and the wife furnished excuses ready to hand. If the world is in the heart, whatever form it may take (and the world has many forms), there is no room for Christ. We should remember that the things that were put forward in this way were really the temporal blessings pertaining to the Jewish calling. So treacherous is the natural heart that it is possible for the very blessings of God to supplant Him in the affections, indeed to shut Him out altogether.

But if the rich man had no desire and thus went empty away, He fills the hungry with good things: to the poor the gospel is preached (Luke 1: 53. 4: 18). It was the common people who heard Jesus gladly. The publicans and the harlots went into the kingdom of heaven before the scribes and pharisees. The streets and the lanes of the city were scoured, and all the despised of men were gathered together, "the poor, the maimed, and the halt, and the blind." This did not exhaust divine grace. "The servant said, Lord, it is done as thou hast commanded, and yet there is room." Consequently the highways and hedges must be searched, that the wanderers and outcasts might be brought in to share also. Here we come in. We were highway and hedge folk. Do we object? As Gentiles we were completely outside. We were uncircumcised men — dogs — sinners of the Gentiles.

The picture is charming. A divine hand has drawn it. It is grace full and free. The branches run

over the wall. The well is deep. Nothing is sought for from the guests, all is according to the riches of God's grace. Let us deeply enjoy this. There can be no discipleship until this is thoroughly understood. Any attempt to follow Christ before grace is fully known is mere legalism and displeasing to Him. He must be blessedly known as a giver ere we can speak of surrendering aught for His sake. He gives all, no payment is required, we are not asked to give anything up. This is grace. Let it have full place in all our hearts.

Flesh likes the sound of this, "and there went great multitudes with Him." We can understand it, for we know something of our own hearts. This must be tested. Did they know who they were following? Did they apprehend the path that He was treading in this scene? He was not yet the Reigning One, surrounded by all the pomp and glory of the kingdom (all of which will be seen in its day), but He was despised and rejected of men. Israel had no heart for such a Messiah. Their thoughts were carnal. A mere temporal deliverer like Saul would have satisfied them; a lowly man full of patient grace (yet withal God manifest in the flesh) was repugnant.

Do we sufficiently realize in this day, that we are called to follow a rejected Christ? He has been here, but is not here now. How is this? Men cast Him out. Yes, the creatures of His hand rose up against Him and slew Him. The heavens have received Him, and He is at the Father's right hand. But, as far as earth is concerned, He is the rejected One. Such a Christ we have been called to know and follow. What manner of men ought we to be? The Lord turned upon the multitude and said unto them, "If any man come to me, and hate not his father and mother and wife and children and brethren and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple. And whosoever doth not bear his cross, and come after me, cannot be my disciple." Does the Lord despise natural relationships? By no means. They are of God. It is one of the features of the last days to be "without natural affection" (2 Tim. 3: 3). He knew how and when to render obedience Himself in the days of His flesh.

The point is that He must have the very-first place in the hearts of His own. The time is straitened. Things here, whatever they might be, must be held with a loose hand. It cuts very close when we read "and his own life also." Paul knew the meaning of this better than any. He always carried the sentence of death in his person. How far on are we in such a path? This rises above, yea crosses, nature. Are we prepared for it?

It was trying for Aaron and his sons to be forbidden to uncover their heads and rend their clothes when Jehovah made a breach upon them (Lev. 10). It was equally trying for the Levites on the day of the golden calf. But they responded well to the summons, "Who is on the Lord's side?" "who said unto his father and to his mother, I have not seen him; neither did he acknowledge his brethren, nor knew his own children" (Exodus 32: 26, Deut. 33: 9).

The cross must be taken and a rejected Christ followed out into the way, or the path of discipleship is not known. But here the Lord guards against the flippancy to which we are prone. The cost must be counted. A man intending to build a tower must count whether he have sufficient to finish it. A king going to war must consult "whether he be able to meet him that cometh against him." It is easy to say, "I am ready to go with thee into prison and to death." A breakdown is humbling. The Lord is dishonoured. It is tantamount to saying that He has called the soul out into a path in which He is not able to sustain it. Such is the appearance to those who observe. And the failing one is mocked — "This man began to build and was not able to finish."

How heart-searching and strange must all this have been to a Jew! Perhaps some said, as in John 6, "This is a hard saying, who can hear it?" Perhaps, too, many went back and walked no more with Him. The Jew was filled with thoughts of earthly kingdom glory, and to be told to bear a cross!

Many misunderstand in this day also. The professing church has allied itself with the world, dwelling in honour where Satan's throne is. Flesh is sanctioned and worldly glory is sought all round. Therefore how strange the gross must sound to some, and how perplexing to be called upon to go forth to Christ without the camp bearing His reproach (Heb. 13: 13)! But this is the true place of the Christian today. He who would do the will of the Lord in all things must step into this pathway of reproach and loss.

Alas! how many we have known who have essayed to tread the path and who have turned back with confusion of face! They once abandoned the abominations of Christendom, and took their place with Christ outside and professed considerable devotion to His name and to His word. They boasted of heavenly light and spoke glibly of the advanced things of the truth of God. We thought them firm and true. We believed they apprehended the seriousness of the position and pathway. But some cold north wind blew, some test came, and they failed. Their name was Lot, not Abraham. They now build again the things they destroyed. Thus is the Lord put to shame, and His truth exposed to ridicule. Better far never to have ventured forth than turn back thus. But it is a warning to us all, "Let him that thinketh he standeth beware lest he fall" (1 Cor. 10: 12). Let us look matters straight in the face and weigh them up in the sanctuary of His presence.

The closing word in Luke 14 is very solemn, "Salt is good, but if the salt have lost its savour, wherewith shall it be seasoned? It is fit neither for the land, nor yet for the dunghill; but men cast it out. He that hath ears to hear let him hear." To lose one's savour is a different thing from turning back and giving up the path. The outward position may be maintained, yet the true character gone. Salt expresses that spiritual energy which preserves the soul from the corruption around and enables it to bear a true testimony for Christ. If this declines, where are we as witnesses? Of what use are we in this scene? Of how many is this sadly true! They did run well, their sound was clear, their walk was unequivocal; but they are not the men they used to be. Not that they have abandoned the path, nor surrendered the truths formerly professed. These are held still, but the world has got in, the tone has become lowered, the heavenly ring is scarcely discernible now. How sorrowful that this should be true of any! Our devotedness should be deepened as time proceeds, and our faith strengthened as difficulties increase, and we are east more and more on God.

Discipleship is an individual thing. "If any man." "He that hath ears to hear." Each must look to Christ for himself, each must follow in his own appointed path. There is ever a tendency to look at our brethren to see what they intend doing. It is easy to walk with a crowd. Faith is but little exercised in such circumstances. He who cannot follow Christ for himself is not fit to follow with others. Many have been hindered in this way. Others have been looked to or waited for. Satan has taken advantage of it, and has got in, and chilled the desire to follow Christ in all things.

I dare not despise the fellowship of my brethren, but must seek it, and cultivate it in every possible way; but they must not be allowed to take the place of the Lord. He must be looked to and followed, or the testimony cannot be good, nor discipleship true and real. The Lord give us understanding in all things. W. W. F.