Making Excuses

Vienna Presbyterian Church
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Luke 14:15-24

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Today’s sermon is about *Making Excuses*. Everybody in the parable Jesus tells offers some excuse why they cannot come to a great banquet.

The Internal Revenue Service is inundated with elaborate excuses at this time every year from people who miss the April 15 tax deadline. “My dog ate my tax return” is the most common excuse. Whether it’s the same dog that ate their homework years ago, I can’t say for sure.

The worst excuse for failing to meet the April 15 deadline goes out to Robert O’Byrne, an aide who worked for the governor of New York some years ago. He failed to file his taxes for five consecutive years because he suffered from LFS (Late Filing Syndrome). This condition rendered him unable to complete his tax return. For some curious reason, his condition only surfaced during tax time five consecutive years. The I.R.S. turned down his request for an extension, citing the American Psychiatric Association does not recognize LFS as a legitimate psychological disability.

The most unbelievable but true excuse for not filing on time goes to Jack Swigert. Jack was a last minute addition to the Apollo 13 lunar mission. He took over only three days before the scheduled launch, when a member of the Apollo 13 crew was exposed to measles. On April 15, 1970, Jack and his crewmates were on a voyage to the moon. It suddenly
dawned on Jack that in his haste to get ready for the mission, he had forgotten to pay his taxes. He asked Mission Control, “How do I apply for an extension?” Everybody at Mission Control had a good laugh. His Flight Director reassured him that he could file for an extension since he was out of the country. His application for an extension was certainly novel. “I am requesting an extension on my taxes. I am currently travelling out of the country. I am on a space shuttle flying to the moon.”

Today’s story is about “A man who was preparing a great banquet” (14:15). Circle the words “great banquet.” The banquet that Jesus portrays in his parable is an elaborate dinner party. In those days, it was customary for well-to-do people to invite other well-to-do people to fancy dinner parties. These banquets preserved clearly demarcated class distinctions. A wealthy landowner would never extend an invitation to someone living on the margins. The whole deal was predicated on reciprocity. If I invite you to my dinner party, you invite me to your dinner party.

Seating arrangements were also a big deal. The rich and famous clamored for the choice seats next to the host.
Let’s rewind to the beginning of chapter 14. A prominent Pharisee hosts a dinner party including Jesus among his list of honored guests. Jesus provides the entertainment by healing a man seated at the table. His healing creates quite a scene, since it takes place on the Sabbath, a no-no in Jewish society.

Jesus seizes the moment to offer advice to his fellow dinner guests, as well as the host. He tells his dinner guests not to jockey for the choice seats. Instead, he implores them to take the cheap seats. Next, he challenges the host to throw a dinner party for people who cannot possibly reciprocate, namely “the poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind who cannot repay you” (14:13). Although you will gain nothing by inviting them, God will repay you.

One man seated at the banquet raises a toast to people who will sit at the table in the coming kingdom of God: “Blessed is the one who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God” (14:15). I take his words as pure gush. He is as mystified as everyone else is at the idea of throwing a lavish party for losers and have-nots.

Jesus then launches into his great banquet parable. It was common practice to send out two invitations to a party back in the day. In the first invitation, the host sends his servants out to invite honored guests to the banquet. It is comparable to our “Save the Date” notifications. The only stipulation is that it comes with the understanding that those who RSVP in
the affirmative are obliged to show up on the day and time the party commences. The second invitation comes when the banquet is ready to be served. “Come,” his servants announce, “everything is now ready” (14:17).

Three people who originally said yes to coming now beg off when the second invitation arrives. Each offers an excuse why he cannot come. The first man has recently bought a field and has decided to check it out at the same time as the banquet. It may be a flimsy excuse, but let’s give him the benefit of the doubt. He could have agreed to the sale of the land contingent on his inspection. Just the same, it is a cheesy thing to do to pull out at the last moment.

The second man offers the excuse that he has recently bought five oxen and has decided to try them out, which conflicts with the banquet. A farmer would ordinarily own an ox or two, so five oxen would qualify this man to be a wealthy landowner. You mean to tell me he can’t find another time to try out his new farm animals? Any way you cut it, it qualifies as another flimsy excuse.

The third man declines the second invitation, citing that he has recently married. Unlike the other two, he does not even venture an excuse. He simply refuses to come on the grounds he must spend more time with his wife. Score another one in the lame excuse category.

The host does not take kindly to their feeble excuses. He directs his servants to take to the streets and alleys to invite
people to his banquet. Streets and alleys are code words for people living in the margins; no doubt homeless people. The new invitees to the party, “The poor, the crippled, the lame and the blind” (14:21) are the same ones Jesus told the host to invite to a future dinner party.

The host sends his servant a third time to “compel people to come to the banquet.” Notice the progression from *invite* in verse 16 to *bring* in verse 21 to *compel* in verse 23. The lame and blind must be brought, even compelled to come since they already know themselves to be socially ostracized and cannot possibly reciprocate with a dinner party of their own.

The last words in Jesus’ parable hit hard: “I tell you, not one of those invited will get a taste of my banquet” (14:24). Do not miss the irony in this parable. The religious insiders who have been properly invited decline the master’s invitation while the outsiders, who are last minute additions to the guest list, accept the offer.

So what difference does this sermon on making excuses have to do with my life?

Excuses—we all make them. We make excuses to avoid taking responsibility for things we don’t want to do. We make allowances for our mistakes. We rationalize behaviors that violate the ethical standards we set for ourselves.
If I am eating or drinking to excess, it is because I am under so much stress. If my child is acting-out at school, it is because my child has a teacher that cannot control the classroom. If I fail to complete a school assignment or meet a work deadline, it is because I have so many demands on my time. We are good at finding some external justification for our failure or underperformance.

Some of us have become so proficient at making excuses that we have turned it into an elaborate art form. We are so good at making excuses that we don’t even recognize when we are making them.

After reflecting on this parable all week, I have come to the realization that I make far too many excuses. I am good at making excuses for things I don’t want to do. I contrive reasons why I cannot accept responsibility for my behavior. I have heard it said, you can make excuses or you can make progress, but you can’t make both. Ben Franklin had this to say about making excuses, “He that is good at making excuses is seldom good for anything else.”

Alexander Kuzmin, mayor of a city in western Russia, was so frustrated at the excuses offered by city employees that he compiled a list of 27 excuses that were no longer tolerated on the job. He put a ban on excuses like “I don’t know” or “It’s not my job.” He announced that people who continually
disregard the ban would jeopardize their job. He said that city officials should solve problems, not make excuses.

We make excuses for not following Christ. Those of you in confirmation class may be tempted to put off following Christ until you are older. Those of you who are older may use your senior status to justify coasting in the service of Christ. You may put off following Christ because you don’t know enough. You may say, I don’t have time or I’m too busy. Busyness may be the granddaddy of all excuses. Maybe we are busy with the wrong things. Perhaps we need a different “To Do” list.

Stop making excuses. Stop making allowances for poor choices. Stop putting off following Christ. No more ifs, ands or buts about it. You can make excuses or you can make progress.

Earlier in Luke’s gospel, a man expresses interest in following Jesus but asks to first go and bury his father. Jesus sees through his flimsy excuse, so he tells the man abruptly, “Let the dead bury the dead.” A second man displays similar willingness to follow Jesus but puts it off by telling Jesus he must go and make elaborate goodbyes to his family. Jesus tells him, “No one who puts his hand to the plow and looks back is fit for service in the kingdom of God” (Luke 9:59-62). If you want to plow a straight furrow, don’t look back. If you want to follow Christ, don’t look back and don’t make excuses.

No more excuses. Come to Jesus. In 2nd Corinthians, Paul writes, “I tell you, now is the time of God’s favor. Now is the day of salvation” (2 Corinthians 6:2).

No more excuses for writing off worship or failing to cultivate spiritual friends. No more excuses for not reading Scripture or engaging in prayer. Either we make excuses or we make progress.