

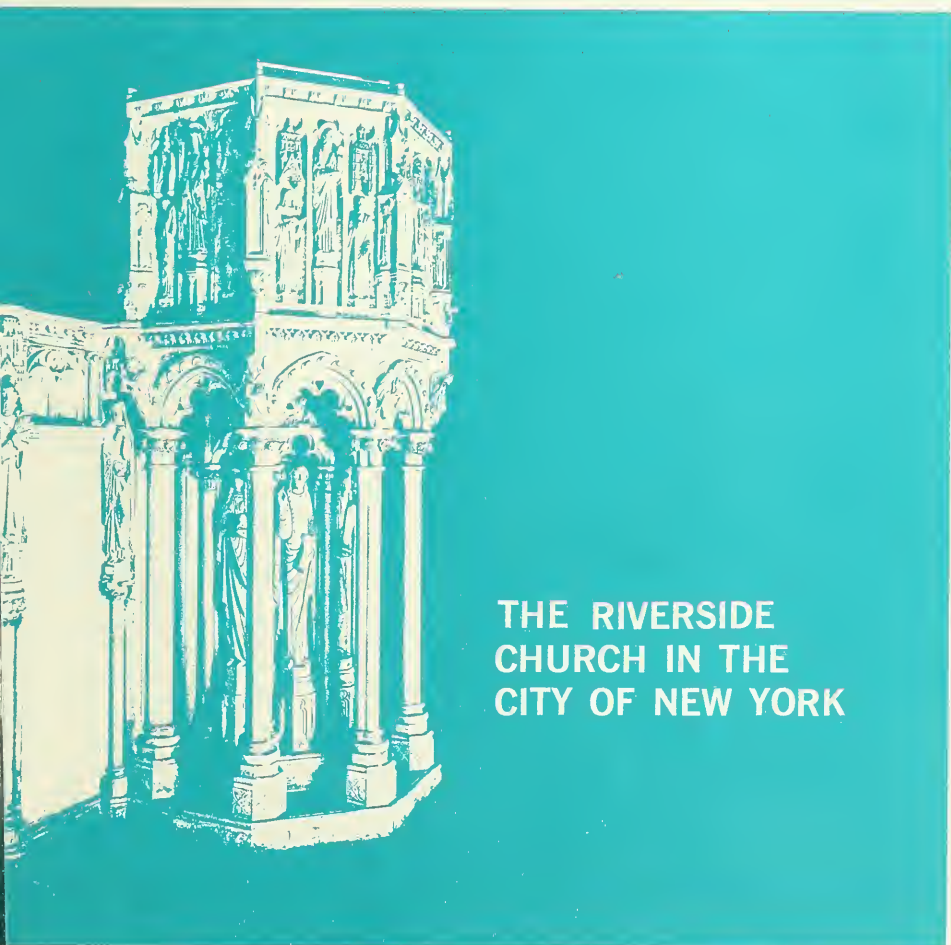
SERMONS

FROM RIVERSIDE

WAIT-LISTING GOD

*"But they all alike began to make excuses."
Luke 14:18*

Dr. Ernest T. Campbell



THE RIVERSIDE
CHURCH IN THE
CITY OF NEW YORK

MARCH 18, 1973



Digitized by the Internet Archive
in 2012 with funding from
Princeton Theological Seminary Library

WAIT-LISTING GOD

*"But they all alike began to make excuses."
Luke 14:18*

Did you ever find yourself wait-listed at an airport? You go to the boarding gate, ticket in hand, but without a confirmed reservation. The agent informs you tenderly that all space has been sold, but he offers to list you as a stand-by. If someone cancels a reservation or some would-be passenger becomes a "no show" you have a chance of getting on.

Desperate to get where you are going, you are grateful for this stand-by status. You sit off to one side hoping against hope that the gathering crowd will not fill all the seats. Wait-listed means just that! All that you can do has been done. It only remains to you to wait for your name to be called.

Wait-listing is the subject of Jesus' Parable of the Great Supper. But in that story the one who is forced to wait is God. And the one who makes God wait is man.

The story simply told is this: A man determines to give a feast for his friends. A preliminary announcement of the event is made up and down the land according to Eastern custom. At length the servants go out to extend specific invitations; "Come, the supper is ready." "But they all alike began to make excuses." One man said, "I have bought a field and must look it over." Another said, "I have purchased five yoke of oxen, and must test them." Another said, "I just got married and must spend some time with my wife."

There can be no doubt that in this parable the invitation to the feast represents man's invitation to participate in the kingdom of God. Likewise, there can be no doubt that those who sent their regrets represent the general human response to God's merciful provision for our needs. "Come, for all is now ready." This is

the gospel plea. "But they all alike began to make excuses." God can wait as far as we're concerned.

* * *

Jesus told this story to spike the pretensions of those who imagined that they had an inside track with God! The occasion was a lavish feast on the Sabbath day in the home of a ruler who happened to be a Pharisee. To the consternation of the assembled guests, Jesus healed a man of dropsy on their day of rest.

He further aroused their anger by chiding them for jockeying for the best seats: "Why not sit in the lowest places when you come to an event like this so that when your host comes he may say to you, 'Friend, come up higher,' for everyone who exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."
(Luke 14:11)

He then went on to give a lesson on etiquette that anticipated Emily Post by 2,000 years. He said, "When you give a feast don't invite the rich who can return in kind, rather when you throw a party invite the poor and the maimed and the lame and the blind. And you will be repaid at the resurrection of the just."
(Luke 14:12-14)

At this juncture one of the pious brothers stopped eating long enough to say, "Ah, when the feast comes and we sit down at Messiah's feet how happy we shall be!" One can imagine that others hearing that remark said to themselves, "My, I wish I had said that." But this affected rhetoric was more than Jesus could take. The assumption that when the Messiah's feast was held this man would surely be there, turned Jesus off. He responded by saying, in effect, "Are you sure you're going to make it?"

The truth is that many of those who take for granted that their hearts are with God and talk glibly about their identification with the will of God are

often strangers to His grace. This is the grim point of the Parable of the Great Feast.

* * *

Look at those excuses. Some one has said that an excuse is the skin of a reason stuffed with a lie. "I bought some land and I must go and look at it." "I bought some oxen and I must test them out." "I just got married so I'm understandably tied up for awhile."

It is urgent that we notice that each of these activities can be classified as good and lawful in itself. It is good that some people have land and oxen. Society needs food and clothing that come to us from the farm. It is good that a man marry. The family is the basic unit of society. In fact, I discovered just this week that in the law of Deuteronomy provision is made for a man who marries to have a whole year to himself with his wife. According to the law, "When a man hath taken a new wife, he shall not go out to war, neither shall he be charged with any business; but he shall be free at home one year, and shall cheer up his wife which he hath taken." (Dt. 24:5) One year! We seem to be satisfied with a week at Niagara Falls.

I am not altogether sure that a man who is under foot that long is really aiding and abetting his marriage. When George Weiss, the former General Manager of the New York Yankees, retired, his wife found him about the house more than she liked. She was heard to quip one day, "I married George for better or for worse, but not for lunch."

These are all, in the main, legitimate functions of life - buying a field, purchasing oxen, marrying a wife. But this is precisely the point -- the claims of the Kingdom of God are of such an ultimate character that even the good in our life should not prevent our saying yes!

Those self-righteous dinner guests would have

been relieved had Jesus spoken of bad excuses. If one invitee had said, "I'm planning to rob a bank and I cannot come." Or if another had said, "I'm running a black market in olive oil and I cannot come." Or if another had said, "I have been in my cups for two weeks and I'm too drunk to come." Such responses would have relieved the Pharisees. They could then have said, "These people were up to nothing good to begin with."

Similarly, those guests at the feast would have been relieved had the excuse-makers been obsessed by their activities. If, for example, the man who bought the field had "land lust" and was driven by a passion to acquire vast holdings. If the man who bought the oxen had been propelled by a desire to own the most productive farm in the whole province. If the man who had finally married had been an idler most of his life and interested only in women. If he had been something of a ne'er-do-well socialite, chronically out to lunch when duty called, perhaps married several times before -- this would have been more bearable.

But the point of the parable is that these desires and experiences were very ordinary. They were not in the least inordinate. They were neither criminal nor fanatical. These were just average people so preoccupied with the dailiness of life that even God could wait.

* * *

This ancient story still finds us vulnerable to its searchings. Commentators are generally agreed that the primary meaning of this story was to explain why the gospel which had first been given to the Jews was subsequently offered to the whole world.

When the host found that those who were first invited, the holy people, would not come, he commanded his servants to recruit guests from the broad streets and narrow lanes, i.e., the general masses of Judaism. When still more room remained, he asked his servants

to go out again, this time into the highways and hedges. The Gentiles were now to be included.

But surely no less important is the continuing meaning that this story holds for us down to the present time. I see this meaning as at least three-fold.

First, we human beings keep missing out on God's best for our lives because we are too engrossed in what our wealth and technology and families can give us without God. Between God's "Seek ye first," and man's "Let me first," the destiny of our souls is written. Each generation has a different way of being "unready" for the invitation. The excuses may change their focus, but the set of the heart remains very much the same. We have a way of indulging in those harmless preoccupations which eventually take precedence for us over the very claims of God himself.

I am much interested in the way in which newspaper editors decide which news items will be printed side by side. This is called juxtaposition. Some items that are innocent enough in themselves can be severely damaged by incriminating juxtaposition. For example, a story about an actress in court who is concerned about the loss of \$500,000 in jewelry and furs, and irate that the police have not caught the bandits, suffers when placed beside a column telling about hunger in India and tens of thousands dying for want of bread. Juxtaposition is a placing close together or side by side especially for comparison or contrast.

What I'm getting at is this: What you are doing with your life may be innocent enough in itself, except when it leads you to neglect something more important. There is surely nothing wrong with playing a violin -- assuming you can play it well. But Nero has gone down negatively in history because he played his violin at the wrong time. There was a fire going on!

There is nothing wrong with a man jumping into a

private plane and wanting to take off. But Howard Hughes did that minutes after Minagua, Nicaragua was stricken by an earthquake. Howard Hughes couldn't wait to get out and Roberto Clemente couldn't wait to get in! Some actions by themselves are innocent until they are juxtaposed with the claim of a higher call. The good is frequently the enemy of the best.

Jesus said that as it was in the days of Noah so would it be in the days of the coming of the son of man. What were Noah's days like? They were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage. There is nothing wrong with eating and drinking and marrying and giving in marriage, but the point is that this was all that they were doing. The transcendent had been obliterated from their life.

The second meaning of the parable is that our hearts are usually less with God than we think. We make our excuses, but the plain truth is that in many cases we just don't have an appetite for the king's feast. Yet, we have enough of the fear of God in us not to want to relinquish the invitation altogether.

A.M. Hunter has suggested that instead of calling this the Parable of the Great Supper we should call it The Parable of the Contemptuous Guests. "Excuse me, but I've just bought some land." "Excuse me, but I've just bought some oxen." "Excuse me, but I've just been married." The besetting problem is not the surface "reason" but basic unbelief.

I mention this because I see the Christian Church, especially in America, playing out a long season of self-flagellation. We hold ourselves responsible that the world is not responding to the gospel, that our churches are not as crowded as they used to be, that religion presently lacks the bite and thrust of earlier days. We conclude that we are not packaging it right. So a host of people set out to make it more appealing. Others insist that we ought to change the content some. There must be something amiss with the

message if the world doesn't buy it. Consequently we set about the work of making vast alterations in theology, liturgy and mission.

Still others say that the problem is not in the packaging or the content, but in the distribution. They bestir us to become more energetic in the pursuit of modern ways of getting the message out. It would be foolish of me to object to any of these approaches. In fact, I have been part of some of them myself. But I think it is time for the church to recognize that there is such a thing as unbelief. Regardless of how the gospel is presented, defined or disseminated some people plainly want nothing to do with the feast.

Jesus turned to his generation and said, "We played funeral and you did not weep. We played wedding and you did not dance, what do you want? John came among you in his austerity and you rejected him. I came among you and went to your feasts and you called me a winebibber and a glutton, what do you want?"

And so we make our excuses. The weather isn't right. The church school isn't right. The ushers don't smile enough or they smile too much. The sermons are too long or too short. If our hunger were desperate enough we would not be so fussy or picky, we would be grateful that all things are ready and that there is still room for us.

An interesting fable comes to us from the Orient. A certain man went to his neighbor to borrow a rope. The neighbor replied, "I cannot lend it to you for I am using it myself to tie up a heap of sand." "But," said the first, "you cannot tie up sand with a rope." "Oh yes," returned the other, "you can do almost anything with a rope when you do not wish to lend it."

A third point that speaks, to me at least, in this story is that we must really want God with all our hearts or not at all. There is no discounting the terms. "You shall seek for me and ye shall find me,

saith the Lord, when you seek me with all your heart."
(Dt. 4:29)

You know how it is with motion pictures. They usually open up in the high price theaters. Those of us who nurse our pennies wait for the price to come down. At last the good word is released, "Now showing at neighborhood prices." Some of us may feel that by now the gospel must be available on easier terms than earlier Christians knew, that we can stick the invitation into our pockets and come when and as we will. But only those who are pure in heart, (that is, those whose purpose is single) have ever been able to see God. It was so in the beginning, is now and ever shall be.

A casual inquirer came up to a missionary requesting to be baptised. The missionary took him down to a nearby river, put his head under the water and held it there for a few seconds until the man began to struggle. The missionary let him up and said, "When you want God as much as you just wanted air, you'll find him."

The Kingdom of God is at hand. Jesus announced it to be so and it is so. Come, for all is now ready. There is no lack on God's side. The joyous function of the church is to go up and down the land and around the world saying to men and women who are hungry, "Still there is room."

Any unreadiness belongs to us not God. Unfortunately, our "sooner or later" often adds up to "never." One of the functions of Jesus in the midst of His church is to evoke decision for the banquet. In one way or another He keeps asking us if we intend to come. The deepest tragedy of life is not the foolish things we do, or the many wise and good things that we fail to do. The deepest tragedy of life is that we reject God's greatest gift. "But they all alike began to make excuses."

There is a line in "The Music Man," where the

blithe band director turns to a somewhat straitened librarian and says, "Keep putting off till tomorrow what can be done today, and you'll soon find that your life has been nothing other than a collection of empty yesterdays."

CLOSING PRAYER

*In the light of Thy word, O God
help us to look to our priorities
and affections.*

*If our religion be a matter of speech
and form alone -- and not of the
spirit and the heart,*

*Claim us by Thy love and make us forever
different from this day on.*

*Through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen.*

A subscription to the annual sermon series, SERMONS FROM RIVERSIDE, approximately 40 in number, may be made by sending a check for \$6.50 payable to The Riverside Church, to:

The Publications Office
The Riverside Church
490 Riverside Drive
New York, N.Y. 10027