

What's My Purpose?

Luke 14:1-24

Good morning New Song!

I want to talk to you for these next five weeks about the three chapters in the Bible that most changed my life. If these three chapters were not in the Bible, there might not be a New Song Church today. So this weekend, I want to talk you through Luke 14, and then for the next two weeks we'll take apart Luke 15, which is my personal favorite chapter in the Bible, and then for the final two weeks leading up to our Anniversary, we'll be talking about Luke 16. If you show up for this entire series, I guarantee, you will understand the heart of New Song Church – AND, you will understand God's intentions for your life as well.

Luke 14-16 are the deepest roots of New Song Community Church. It all started one morning with a surprise experience I had while reading Luke 14 in the N.T. If you'd turn there now, I want to read a passage with you that has marked me for life. ***Turn to Luke 14.***

Many of you know that it is my custom to read a portion of the Bible every morning. Usually I try to pick a book of the Bible and read it straight through a chapter or two each day until I've read the whole thing, and then I'll move on to another book.

Well, 13 years ago, I was reading through the NT book of Luke. And one morning, while sitting at my desk in my office in a church in Colorado, I opened up to chapter, Luke 14.

Here's what I read there. (Read Luke 14:1-6)

Jesus looks at all the fellahs, looks down at this guy in need and says, "Okay, I get it. You brought me here as a test. You all believe that it's wrong to do any kind of work on the Sabbath, including healing." He's mad, because these guys obviously don't care one whit about the dropsy guy or his condition. They don't care that he's dying, or that his family will soon be without a father. They don't care about the pain he's in, or the embarrassment he's now suffering as he stands in front of them all. He's just an object to be used to get at Jesus.

So Jesus says, "Listen, I know what you're all thinking. You all believe that it's a sin to do good on the Sabbath. But you do good on the Sabbath if it suits your purposes. If your son falls in a well, you don't say, "Oh, sorry son, hope you can tread water down there until tomorrow! I can't pull you out today because that would be work, and you know, God doesn't like it when we do work on the Sabbath!"

"Come on, guys, if your ox stumbles into a hole on a Sabbath day, you all go get your pulleys and wenches and you call all the neighbors to come heft him out, because you don't want it to suffer and because your economic prosperity is at stake. So don't tell me

that I should keep from healing this guy on a day like today. God is far more interesting in loving people than keeping rules.”

I was thinking to myself, “Go get ‘em Jesus!” When God’s Holy Spirit said to me, “Hal, find yourself in this story.”

So I mentally imagined the scene: one Sabbath day, Jesus gets invited to a party. As He strolls up the front walk, He notices that all the other guests have arrived early – kind of like at a surprise party, where all the normal guests are told to arrive at 6:00, and the guest of honor is told to arrive at 6:30, so they can arrange everything before he gets there.

Only instead of everybody being huddled inside the house to surprise him, all these guests are waiting for him out on the front lawn. I pictured them arrayed in a semi-circle, with their arms folded in front of them, and dead-center of the semi-circle is a guy who’s out of costume with the rest of them. He’s not dressed as nice, so he’s probably not from the same social class as the rest of them. And upon closer inspection, Jesus notices that his legs and arms and neck and cheeks are all swollen. The man has edema – or “dropsy,” as the text says. His body’s tissues have been absorbing excess fluids, probably because of kidney damage, so he’s all puffy. He’s obviously in pain, and he’s obviously going to die in the next few months or weeks if he doesn’t get some help.

Can you see the scene?: It’s like a football huddle. All the religious leaders are arranged in a half-circle, with one sick guy upfront, and way upfront is Jesus.

God said to me, “Hal, find yourself in this picture.”

Well, instantly I said, “I’m certainly not Jesus.” He was perfect, and I am far from that.

I wondered for a second if I was the sick guy. But I quickly reasoned that I wasn’t that guy either. I was in good health, great shape, and even better looking, winsome and charming than I am today.

And since there were only three kinds of people in the picture, I had to take a careful look at the ring of robed-guys rimming the back.

These guys were Pharisees. They were highly-educated, devoutly-spiritual types who held possessions of responsibility within the religious community. They had each spent years reading the OT, the Bible of their day and knew all of its rules and regulations mostly by heart. They tried their best to live their lives by those laws. And they thought little of people who didn’t do the same.

And as I looked at that picture, it was like God’s Spirit said to me, “Hal, you are a Pharisee.”

I had to admit He was right. (After all, He’s God and He knows me better than I know myself.) I was a religious leader. I studied the book, knew the rules, tried my best to

abide by them. I even knew the rules that weren't in the book – like you don't smoke, drink, dance, or chew, or go with girls that do.

I sat there in stunned silence and thought about that for a minute. And then read some more. (read Luke 14:7-11)

God had my full attention while I was reading this story, so I was thinking about what Pharisees typically do at public gatherings. In every line of work there is social posturing. You find it among Marines, who all know quite clearly who's the ranking officer, and who's the most junior in the company. You find it in companies, where everyone knows who the CEO is, who the Vice Presidents are, and who sweeps the grounds. You find it in hen houses, where all the chickens know who the head rooster is. They call it the "pecking order."

In my line of work, it's more subtle. Pastors are supposed to be more godly and demurring, so we don't blatantly stratify. But in every pastor's conference I attend, the question people always want answered is, "How big is your church?" And then, if you've written books, or you do a lot of outside speaking, you get some points for that too.

In Jesus' day, the pecking order was a lot more blatant. The more important you were, the closer to you sat to the host.

And Jesus, still worked up from the charade he'd just witnessed outdoors, decides that, while He's giving lessons on doing good, He's might as well teach them how to act at a party too. So He says, "Don't seek the best seat. Seek the place of humility, and then let God exalt you when it's appropriate."

With this part of the passage, God knocked the smugness out of me.

I was the associate pastor of a church of about 400 people. Our pastor has told us that that meant we were larger than 95% of all churches in America. I felt pretty good about that.

Whenever I got together with other associate pastors, my church was almost always bigger. I almost always got the best seat, so to speak.

And God just said, "Is that what you're living for?"

It hadn't started out to be the case. When I first got out of graduate school, I just wanted to serve God, and I loved His church. But it is so easy to let your purpose drift off course or get fuzzy. Over the few years I served at there in Colorado, I forgot to ask the question, "So what's really important? What really matters?"

God was rattling my chain, so I read on. (read vs. 12-14)

Jesus is thinking to Himself, "While I'm on a role, I might as well tell 'em not just where to sit at a party, but how to throw a party." So He says, "When you throw a party, don't

just invite all the nice, safe, beautify, clean-up people who are all already part of your social circle. Instead, whenever you throw a party, use the opportunity to invite some not-so-cleaned-up people who don't know how to throw parties. If you do that, God will be pleased, because that's the kind of party He throws. He's looking for people to bless who are willing to invite outsiders into His party."

As I was reading that at my desk there at that church in Colorado, I was thinking about the people who attended the party we threw at that church every weekend. You know who attended that party? Nice, safe, cleaned-up, already-convinced Christians.

In fact, all the visitors who showed up at that church were nice, safe, cleaned-up, already-convinced Christians. No seekers were even invited to the party.

I sat at my desk for several minutes, not knowing what to do.

I said, "God, I think I've become a Pharisee. I think my purpose in life has gotten out of alignment. And I think I'm involved in a church that doesn't know who the party's for."

And I didn't know what to do. So I just prayed a simple two-sentence prayer: "God, I'm sorry for living this way. I don't know what to do, but I want you to change me."

Friends, that prayer was the initial push that made me fall back in love with God and eventually move here to Oceanside.

In the initial Core-building stage of the church, before we ever went public, I shared this story with the little group that was gathering, and we all agreed that whatever happened to us,

we never wanted to become Pharisees,

we never wanted to be part of a church where status took precedence over humility,

and we never would be willing again to be part of a church that only invited the already-convinced to the party.

So when we opened the doors of this church, instead of surveying Christians about what kinds of music they enjoyed, we surveyed seekers. Instead of singing songs written by dead Germans, we sang songs with melodies that sprang from our surrounding culture. Instead of developing a predictable eulogy, we wanted to inject art and drama and dance, so that people who went to events-other-than-church-services would feel like they understood what was going on. Instead of asking every person to know where each passage was in the Bible, we would print the page number right on the wall, so that there would be no stratification of spirituality in our midst.

Can you see why we do things a little differently than many other churches?

[Lessons from Luke 14] I have learned from experience that ***A. God's Word is powerful.*** He speaks to me through it, if I'm willing to listen and consider the truth about myself.

I have learned that ***B. Prayer is powerful.*** A little two-sentence prayer changed my heart, my career, my location, my fulfillment factor, and my sense of God's closeness.

And I have learned that ***C. It's easy to become a Pharisee*** – to get to the place in your life where you think you know what the rules are, and then start living as if the rules matter more than people do.

I've learned that ***D. It's easy to get fuzzy on the purpose of life.***

And I've learned that ***E. God always wants outsiders invited to His party.***

As we get ready for verse 2 of our church's history, I hope you'll embrace those lessons with me.

Will you?

Will you let God's Word into your life? Will you set aside a time each day to read it and listen for what God might be saying to you in it?

Will you pray? Would you be willing to pray this prayer if your life isn't perfectly aligned with God's purposes?

“God, I'm sorry for living this way. I don't know what to do, but I want you to change me.”

It's a powerful prayer. Maybe some of you'd want to pray it sort of under your breath right now.

And will you invite outsiders to the party here on weekends?

The rest of Jesus' experience at the Sabbath dinner is contained in a story He told just before the meal was over. Follow this (read v.15)

For 1st century Jews, just the mention of a banquet (like Jesus mentioned a few minutes earlier in v. 13), brought on thoughts of heaven. Because in a prophecy in the OT the Bible describes a banquet that will take place in heaven, and all Jewish people anticipated this. It says,

On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples,

A banquet of aged wine – the best of meats and the finest of wines.

On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples,

The sheet that covers all nations;

He will swallow up death forever.

The Sovereign Lord will wipe away the tears from all faces;

He will remove the disgrace of his people from all the earth. – Isaiah 25:7-

So when Jesus talks about who to invite to a banquet, one of the guys at the table thinks about this prophecy, and blurts out, “Blessed is the man who will eat at the feast in the kingdom of God!”

Translated, “I want to be at that banquet. I want to be at that party!”

Well again, Jesus is a little agitated at these guys, so He tells this story: (read v. 16-24)

Kind of a colorful story. But it takes on a whole lot more color if you know just a few things about 1 century banquets.

One of which is that only great people put on great banquets. Commoners might have a friend over now and then, but only important people, only noblemen invited large groups of people. So the person who put this banquet on must have been a great person. Everyone around that table who heard Jesus tell this story would think so, at least.

Another thing to know is that RSVPs were very important in that day. Because the process of butchering and then roasting meat was so time-consuming, and because there was no refrigeration, a party-giver would only cook as much meat as could be eaten by his guests that evening. So the type of meat served at a banquet was actually chosen after the number of guests were known.

Here’s the formula, according to the ancient version of Julia Childs:

Number of guests:

2-4 = chicken

5-8 = duck

10-15 = goat

15-35 = lamb

35-75 = beef

I’m glad I wasn’t alive then. Because if they had a party and only 15 accepted the invitation, you’d have to eat goat.

But you can see from this how important the invitation was. If you accepted the invitation, you were coming. You’d given your word.

So that invitation would come several days before the banquet, the host would total up the number of attendees and order up the appropriate meat. And then, just before the meal was actually served, the host would send out a second invitation. As the meat was being cooked, he’d send his servant around to your home to say, “Dinner’s almost ready, time to come.”

Jesus is very careful in the words He chooses in this story. The servant says, “Come, for everything is *now* ready.” - Every person around the table the day Jesus told this story,

knew that what He was describing there was the second invitation. And that everyone who was invited had already given their word that they would be there.

So then Jesus described the people who renege on the invitation. The first is a guy who says, ***“I have just bought a field and I must to go and see it. Please excuse me.”- Luke 14:18***

One scholar commenting on this text says this, ***The statement is a bold-faced lie and everyone knows it. No one buys a field in the Middle East without knowing every square foot of it like the palm of his hand. The springs, wells, stone walls, trees, paths, and anticipated rainfall are all well-known before a discussion of the purchase is even begun***

The purchaser will also know the human history of the field. He will be able to tell you who has owned it for generations and to recite the profits of that field for an amazing number of past years. The few plots of agricultural land are so crucial to life that in Arab Palestine these plots had proper names.

(Bailey, p. 96)

They named the fields like we name our pets.

So what Jesus is describing in this story is that when the servant comes to say, “Supper’s on!” Instead of saying, “We’ll be right there!” The land owner sends back an insult by saying, “What? Are you kidding? I have some dirt that is more important to me than you are!”

The servant goes to a second home. And at this home, the guy says, “Oh! I can’t come either.” His response is, ***“I have just bought five yoke of oxen, and I’m on my way to try them out. Please excuse me.” - Luke 14:19***

Again, a blatant lie.

A “yoke” of oxen refers to 2 oxes, who were matched up and trained to work together. So the guy is saying that he’s just bought 10 oxen and he needs to go check them out to see how well they work together.

Teams of oxen were sold two ways in the Middle East. In some places, the team was taken to the marketplace. In which case, at the edge of the marketplace there would be a small field where prospective buyers could test the oxen. If they couldn’t pull together, they were a worthless team. (Today we measure in horsepower, back then, it was ox-power.)

The other method of sale was to announce to your friends that you had a team of oxen to sell and that you would be out plowing your field at such and such a time, if they wanted to stop over for a test drive.

In either case, a prospective buyer would always try out the oxen before bargaining on a price ever started.

In effect, this guy was saying to the party-thrower, “I know I said I’d come, but I just bought five used cars, site unseen and I have to take them all for test-drives.”

This insult is even worse than the first, because land was considered precious, whereas oxen are unclean animals. The guy is saying, “Unclean animals are more important to me than you are!”

The third excuse-giver says this, “***I just got married, so I can’t come.***”- ***Luke 14:20***

Where the first two pretend to be gracious by saying, “Please excuse me.” This one doesn’t even offer an apology. He just says, “I can’t come.”

Again, everyone at the dinner table with Jesus would know that this is a lie. Marriages were announced a year in advance, and no one would schedule a party for the same time as a wedding, because weddings involved the whole village. If you scheduled a party during a wedding, no one would come.

So in Jesus’ story, the great man who is in charge of the party says, “Fine, insult me if you want to, but I’m still holding my party.” And he sends his servant to find hurting and needy people to come to eat what he’s prepare.

So the servant rounds up all the street people and still there’s room for more.

“Sir, what you have ordered has been done, but there is still more room.” – Luke 14:22

So the master opens up the party to people outside the city – on country roads and such.

When Jesus describes this part of the story, what his hearers heard was, “God rounded up the riffraff of Israel to invite to His party and there was still more room. And He also invited people outside of Israel – Gentiles, into His party. ”

What Jesus was saying to those religious leaders was, “Some of you are going to reject God’s offer of a banquet in heaven. You can do that if you want to. But know that it’s going to be very hurtful to Him, because He will see through every excuse you offer.

And God will fill heaven with or with you. - He is on mission to fill heaven. and He is going to do it

So the final lesson I learned from Luke 14 was:

F. God’s purpose is to fill heaven with people from all walks of life.

And I didn't know what to do. I had a very safe, comfortable existence in a safe, comfortable church. But from what I just read, I knew God wanted there to be more for me.

And later, as I heard more from Him on this whole subject of the purpose of life, I began to believe that God has and wants more for all of His children in terms of their commitment to Him, and the effort they put into knowing Him and following Him and advancing His kingdom.

I didn't know it that day, months later I found myself in a rented house on Rancho Del Oro Blvd., and I was feeling the smile of God on me like I had never felt it before.

Here's the prayer I prayed that day: ***"God, I'm sorry for living this way. I don't know what to do, but I want you to change me."*** I didn't really know where I was going with that. I just knew that I didn't want to spend the rest of my life on lesser things than God's best for me.

And what I have found since then is that I have never felt free except when I have been doing God's will with all my heart.

So with all that I have of the rest of my life, I want to live it in pursuit of God's will.

And I want to invite you to join me in doing that. Over the past 10 years, lives have been changed, marriages have been saved, children have been helped, people fed, and an eternity with Christ in heaven has been written into the record books of over 1000 people's lives.

And it started with 14 people who prayed some bold prayers and lived some bold lives. Can you imagine what the next verse could be like if we start it with 1000 people praying bold prayers and living bold lives?

Because friends, you were created for significance. And according to Jesus, that significance is tied into the very plan and heart of God.

So let's all play our parts, can we do that? Let's play them boldly and sincerely and intensely. Not like Pharisees, and not for the purpose of winning the best seats. But for the purpose of honoring God and advancing His cause together.