



Thanksgiving Banquets and the Kingdom of Heaven

By Brad Jersak

I shall never forget my first Thanksgiving celebration in America. As a Canadian, I had already practiced our day of gratitude with a turkey dinner six weeks earlier.

North of the border, our “holy days” focus more on Easter and Christmas, while Thanksgiving is a relatively modest affair—held earlier so we can enjoy red and gold autumn leaves rather than howling blizzard winds.

But this time I was treated to a sunny San Diego Thanksgiving. Wearing shorts in November was the first novelty. Add to that the fervor of a classic American Thanksgiving family gathering and I’m sure I hit first-stage culture shock.

My impression is that this is the nation’s biggest event of the year. Several folks testified that had they not purchased flights to join in the annual reunion, their standing in the family would have been jeopardized.

The “turkey dinner” was more like the feeding of the five thousand. Added to the big bird were platters of chicken, beef, pork and fish along with three kinds of

potatoes, a wide variety of salads, colorful veggies and rich desserts.

The sheer volume of food, the endless table, the ornate decorations and the semi-formal dress code were overwhelming. It was all so BIG!

Not least of which was the family itself. Grandparents, parents and siblings, uncles, aunts and cousins—and swarms of children, nieces and nephews. And though I can “work a crowd,” as an introvert I found myself crowded and stuffed.

Still, I was grateful for the hospitality. Eden and I happened to be visiting the city, serving a ministry at their invitation, and one of my local mentees had enfolded us into his family’s festivities. We were special guests—outsiders included and adopted as family for the day.

My immediate takeaways remain a quarter-century later. First, following the Hebrew prophets, Christ envisions the kingdom of God as a sumptuous banquet. Isaiah the prophet had announced,

“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” (Isaiah 25:6, emphasis added).

Note also that the table has been set for *all peoples*. It is *radically inclusive*, even of the most unlikely. Jesus prophesied that Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and all the prophets would be there, but also “*people will come from east and west and north and south, and will recline at the table of the kingdom of God”* (Luke 13:28-29).

But Christ’s vision is not merely of a someday kingdom *in the sweet, by and by*. With his arrival, Christ inaugurated the new covenant and declared that God’s kingdom was in their midst.

The kingdom banquet takes on a “here and now” dimension. Even now, Jesus calls us to practice Thanksgiving gratitude by embodying his inclusion, turning strangers into neighbors and neighbors into brothers and sisters.

He says, “*When you hold a banquet, invite the poor, the crippled, the lame, the blind; blessed indeed will you be because of their inability to repay you. For you will be repaid at*

the resurrection of the righteous” (Luke 14:13-14).

Christ-followers anticipate the Great Banquet by enacting it today, even in this present evil age.

But the breadth of Jesus’ inclusive vision also comes with a ***dire warning***:

Those who presume to exclude others might find themselves outside—especially after rejecting the Master of the feast when he had invited them in person!

In Jesus’ day, these warnings were not directed at the stereotypical sinners. Those under the greatest threat of being locked out were the religious power-brokers.

Why would we imagine anything has changed in our day? Gratefully, the Scriptures suggest that even those who

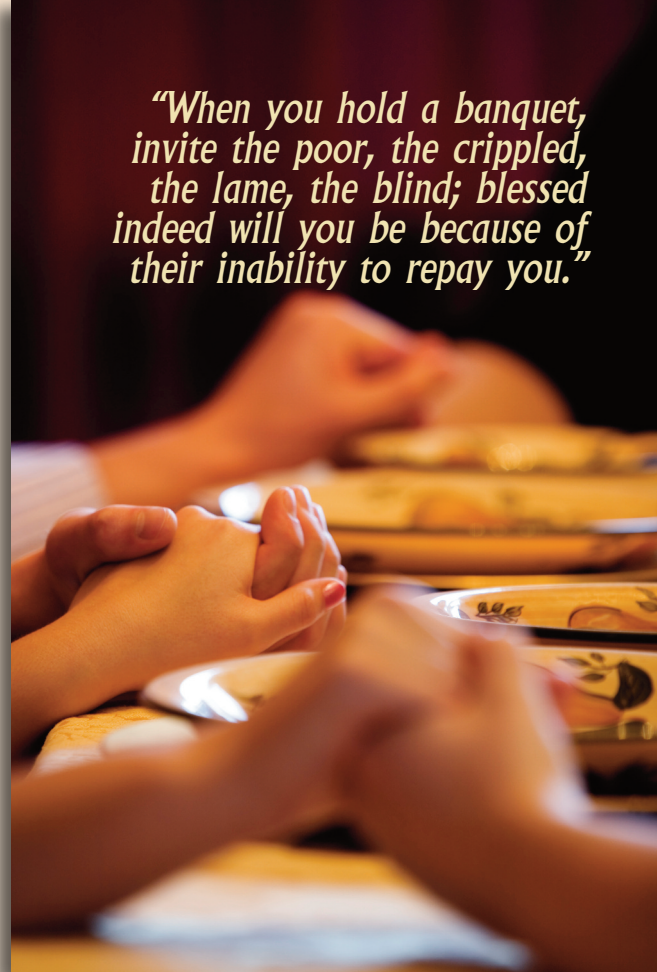
find themselves weeping in the darkness outside the New Jerusalem will, at the last, hear the Spirit and Bride calling:

“Come! Let the one who is thirsty come; and let the one who wishes take the free gift of the water of life” (Revelation 22:17).

During this Thanksgiving season, let’s practice gratitude for the Master of the feast, hold banquets in his name and invite those outliers on his guest list he’s asked us to include. By welcoming others, we’ll find ourselves welcoming him. □

Brad Jersak is the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Without the Religion* magazine (CWRm).

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