

SIGN IV

*Pointing People to Jesus
as a COOK*

The Parable of the Banquet

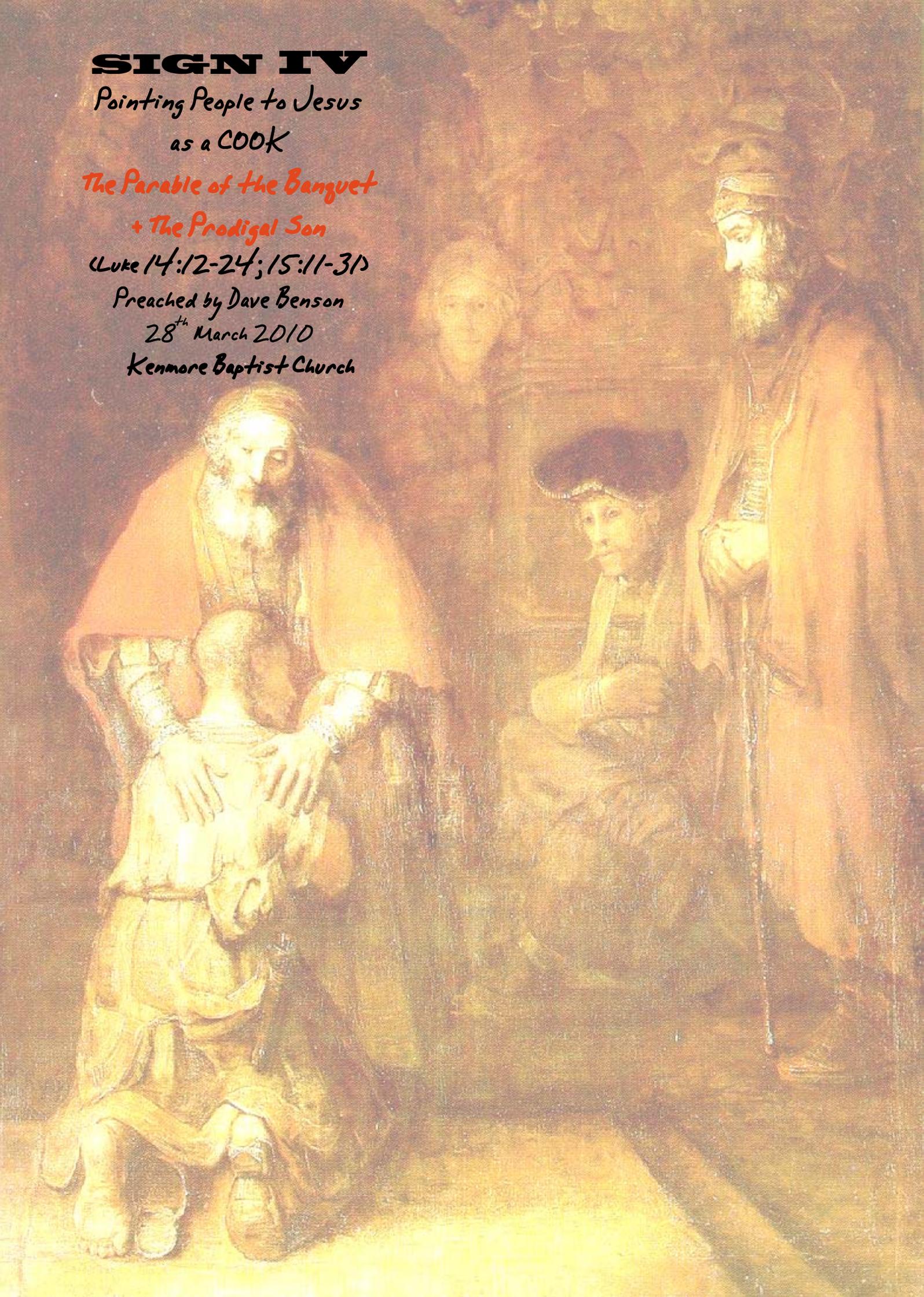
+ The Prodigal Son

(Luke 14:12-24; 15:11-31)

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SIGN IV: *Pointing People to Jesus as a COOK*

(Luke 14:12-24; 15:11-31; Revelation 22:1-5, 17)

Remember the master who prepared a great banquet and sent his messengers to deliver the invitations? Many were asked, but most were preoccupied; so the summons extended to take in anyone who had a grumbling stomach and wanted a feed. *Who are you inviting to God's feast? And what are you offering as an entrée?* Our Kingdom cooking offers a taste of the great banquet where Jesus Himself waits the table; all are invited, but only the hungry come home. Elder brothers resist as they're full on self-righteousness. Younger brothers resist as they're full on sin's pleasures for a season. But when our best efforts look like pig-slop, it's time to taste God's grace.

**So if you want to point people to Jesus, then be a COOK...
Call the hungry to get the party started.**



<<READING/DRAMA: PARABLE OF GREAT BANQUET (LUKE 14:12-24)>>

INTRODUCTION: DINNER'S READY—WHY RESIST THE BANQUET

- Welcome to Church in the Park—introduce self, vision, and banquet

Welcome to Church in the Park. My name is Dave Benson, and I'm one of the Pastors at Kenmore Baptist Church. Today is a great reminder that the church isn't a building; it's not a time of the week, or some religious club ... instead, church is a diverse bunch of people connected by Jesus, working together to spread the love around. And as we meet, we've got genuinely good news to share with those hungry for something more in life.

So it's only right that today is centred on a banquet.

Now, like a lot of Aussie males, I'm no flash cook. Rhys in the story we just heard leaves me for dead in the kitchen. *But have you noticed on TV lately how we've gone all culinary?* Think of all the shows about cooking: Master Chef; Naked Chef; Iron Chef; Hughie's Kitchen; Hell's Kitchen; My Kitchen Rules; Ready Steady Cook; The Occasional Cook ... there's even a cooking channel on Foxtel. It's like we in the west have just discovered the glories of cooking. But in most other cultures, they've known about this for years. Take the East, for instance. Just like Biblical times, to share a meal goes beyond filling your stomach. A meal means friendship, inclusion, love, and acceptance.

Share a meal, and you're as good as family.

I'm not sure if you've read the Bible, *but it's a story centred around food*. It starts in a garden with a choice between two fruits. It celebrates Israel's escape from Egypt with a Passover Meal. Jesus leads his disciples in the last supper. And the whole story ends with Jesus waiting the table for his guests at the Marriage Banquet, celebrating on a restored and fruitful earth.

The most common image for salvation is a full on feast.

Turning to Jesus' teaching, it's no different. Almost every time you flick the page you *find Jesus at another party*, justifying the good times. And this isn't stain-glass-window Jesus – proper, and politely laughing with his best etiquette amidst the uptight snobs of the world. The Jesus we find in the Bible would be more at home with the riff raff from Underbelly, or at a backyard BBQ, settling down for a snag and a beer after hitting a six in social cricket. You've got to remember that his first miracle was designed for Australians ... he turned 600 litres of water into the finest wine so the wedding party could party on.

So here's the scene. Jesus is at yet another party – seeking and saving the lost – and the religious leaders are offended. “Why are you celebrating with these people ... don't you know who they are?” they challenge.

And as Jesus was in the habit of doing, he responds with a story.

- **Unpacking the passage ... double invite, grand banquet, poor excuses**

The parable can be found in the book of Luke, chapter 14. The drama you just watched updates the details, but it's the same story. It's like Master Chef on steroids. The host prepares a banquet to end all banquets. Now, in their day, they'd give a double invite. The first invite secured your expression of interest. *And everyone said they wanted to come*. Who wouldn't? It's no different to how we think today ... if there is a God and He's gonna' party hard at the end of time, then, sure, count me in. So God cooks up a feast. But when the food's all ready, and the second invitation comes, *everyone starts making excuses*.

“Just bought some land, need a site inspection.” “Purchased a car – need a test-drive.” “Just married, thanks.” The last guy doesn't even apologize. ... *Guys, these excuses are paper thin. Can you see it?* Any decent business person would check the land and test-drive the transport *before* signing the contract. And who does these things in the late afternoon, just before a party. And do you seriously think the banquet host double-booked with a friend's wedding. Hardly! The guy's been back from his Honeymoon for weeks, and lives around the corner. *So it looks like this feast is going to falter.*

Are we any different? I guess in this picture, *Dishpan Doug is us – the church.* We've been sent out with a great invite to a cosmic party, a feast to celebrate the reunion of all people with their Creator – *but everyone's too busy.* We want the beer, and the party, but we'll pass on hanging with the banquet host.

Why is that? Granted, the church hardly embodies the kind of parties Jesus likes to throw. We've scared away the guests. *And for that, I'm truly sorry.* Honestly, if what we believe is true – that God invites the down-and-outs and writes off all our debts to throw a party for us – then the church should be known for its big bashes and even bigger banquets. Hopefully you'll get a taste of this today in the international food fare. But I think the problem goes far deeper. *The problem is to do with how we perceive the host.*

- **Problems with the host ... why resist God's banquet, and who is God?**

Our poor excuses reveal the real issue: *we don't like the host.* Now, we've all got reasons to reject God's invite. *But at the heart of it all, we're just not into the Big Guy in the Sky.* We picture him up there stroking his uber-long grey beard, tallying his ledger for every wrong thing we do. We suspect the "great banquet" is just a few crackers on sliced cheese – a trick to get the guilty in, and give them a lecture. And who wants to eat a meal with someone like that?

So, we turn down the invite, and expect God's party to flop. The shock news in this story is that *no-one will rain on God's parade.* He's cooked up a storm and He *will* fill the banquet hall with *anyone* who'll come ... it's not the preoccupied, or the religious who get in. *All you need is empty hands and a hungry stomach, and a place at the table is yours. All are included, but proud guests exclude themselves.*

So Jesus tells this subversive story. God is into parties. And the last will be first. *But he knows they still haven't got it.* You see, when they hear of the Kingdom banquet, they think the host is a controlling and punishing King. They'd rather a quiet drink with friends. *But is **this** who the host is?* In Luke 15, Jesus tells another story. Perhaps his most famous parable, often called "The Prodigal Son." Have you heard it? It goes something like this:

THE PRODIGAL GOD—A RECKLESSLY EXTRAVAGANT HOST

A man had two sons. The younger son told his father, 'I want my share of your estate now.' So his father agreed to divide his wealth between his sons.

A few days later the younger son packed all his belongings and moved to a distant land, and there he wasted all his money in wild living. About the time his money ran out, a great famine swept over the land, and he began to starve. He persuaded a local farmer to hire him, and the man sent him into his field to feed the pigs. The young man became so hungry that even the pods he was feeding the pigs looked good to him. But no one gave him anything.

When he finally came to his senses, he said to himself, 'At home even the hired servants have food enough to spare, and here I am dying of hunger! I will go home to my father and say, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son. Please take me on as a hired servant.'

So he returned home to his father. And while he was still a long way off, his father saw him coming. Filled with love and compassion, he ran to his son, embraced him, and kissed him. His son said to him, 'Father, I have sinned against both heaven and you, and I am no longer worthy of being called your son.'

But his father said to the servants, 'Quick! Bring the finest robe in the house and put it on him. Get a ring for his finger and sandals for his feet. And kill the calf we have been fattening. We must celebrate with a feast, for this son of mine was dead and now has returned to life. He was lost, but now he is found.' *So the party began.*

Meanwhile, the older son was in the fields working. When he returned home, he heard music and dancing in the house, and he asked one of the servants what was going on. 'Your brother is back,' he was told, 'and your father has killed the fattened calf. We are celebrating because of his safe return.'

The older brother was angry and wouldn't go in. His father came out and begged him, but he replied, 'All these years I've slaved for you and never once refused to do a single thing you told me to. And in all that time you never gave me even one young goat for a feast with my friends. Yet when this son of yours comes back after squandering your money on prostitutes, you celebrate by killing the fattened calf!'

His father said to him, 'Look, dear son, you have always stayed by me, and everything I have is yours. We had to celebrate this happy day. For your brother was dead and has come back to life! He was lost, but now he is found!'

- Misnamed parable. Instead, “The two sons” or “The prodigal God”

Have you heard this story before? Time is too short to do this story justice, but I want to make a few observations, first about the brothers, and then about the Father – the true host of the banquet.

First, let’s dispatch with the title, “The Prodigal Son.” Really, it’s a story about *two brothers*. So let’s give these guys names.

The younger brother is Rob. And like most younger brothers, he’s adventurous and doesn’t want to be tied down. Rules are for losers, and Rob will make his own way come hell or high water. And in this, Rob represents most Aussies ... underdogs always resist authority.

So, Rob is a rebel. But *his older brother is Reg.* And Reg is responsible. He knows how things work, and like most elder brothers, he is hard working and disciplined. He likes order, predictability, and is always making plans for how he will get ahead in life. He knows how the game works, and has set himself up financially for a pretty good deal, until his immature younger brother jumped the gun. So, Rob is a rebel. But Reg, *he’s religious.*

By “religious,” don’t think I necessarily mean he’s into God. I just mean that he’s serious about life, and reads rule books in his free time to make sure he gets what he deserves.

Which are you? Free-spirited Rob, or rule-bound Reg? Either way, Jesus’ story is a parable of two brothers. And it speaks to us today.

So, what does this story say? Basically this: *there are two ways to starve, and only one way to satisfaction; two ways to fast, and one way to feast.*

- Rob’s Way: self-discovery, rebel, immorality // parallels (malnourish)

Let’s start with Rob’s way. Rob’s sick of living at home, and he wants to be free to do his own thing. Time to split. *Just one problem:* he’s broke.

“Simple, I’ll ask dad for my share of the inheritance.”

No! Not simple at all! As best as you can, imagine you’re living in a middle-eastern patriarchal society two millennia ago. Quite the stretch, I know!

When do you get the inheritance? ... *When dad's dead.* So in asking for his share of the inheritance *now*, Rob's saying "Dad, drop dead, or give me my money – either way, you're dead to me." If your teenager has stolen your money and run away from home, you're only getting a taste of this dad's grief.

But worse still, dad doesn't have the money in a short-term account. Everything's tied up in the land. There are many words that Jesus could have used to say that dad divided his "property," but instead, he chose "bios," from which we get *biology*. *The dad divided his "life."* Rob's request tore the family in two. So Rob has to settle accounts quickly, liquidate the goods, and get out of town before the community lynched him for disrespect.

You see, the first way to starve is the way of self-discovery. Everything revolves around you and what you want. And if God gets in the way of having some fun and exploring the world, then you're outta' here. *This way is self-centred.* And as we turn inward, we leave a wake of destruction behind us.

For when we've used the life and gifts that God our Father has given us – the beauty, the relationships, the tastes, pleasures, and the excitement – then *we discover that over time it becomes empty. We go bankrupt.* And we find ourselves somewhere as a kid we never dreamed we'd be. In a string of superficial relationships. Needing chemical assistance just to make it through. Alone, in a pig pen, and really hungry for something more substantial. *The beauty is that we don't need to bottom out before we can come to our senses and head home. But it might take some eating of pig pods or humble pie before we're willing to enter God's banquet.* ... God gave you that spirit of adventure, but your hunger is only satisfied when you find relationship with the Father.

- [Reg's Way: self-righteousness, religious, angry obedience // parallels](#)

What about Reg's way? We can tell from the start that something's not right in his relationship with dad. When little bro' rebelled, Reg should have stepped in as mediator. His dad is dishonoured, but Reg stays quiet. *Why?*

Reg figured his dad would write Rob out of the will, and everything would be his. So he shuts up. But when his dad divides the estate, the bitterness sets in. ... Time passes, and Reg slaves away, unaware that dad has given him the farm. He keeps all the rules, but cares nothing for his father.

So when his brother comes home, *Reg also starves:* "Rob gets the fatted calf? Wasn't that part of *my* estate? I kept the rules, so where's my reward."

Elder brother hunger is hardest to identify. It's not so much their sin that keeps them from God. Instead, it's their perceived goodness. The Reg's of this world believe they've earned a ticket to the banquet by keeping all the rules. *This is the way of self-righteousness.* Reg is too full on his own goodness to consider entering the feast his dad put on. He insults his father and makes him leave the party just when it gets going. I can picture the dad thinking,

"So, you want the party, and you want the fatted calf ... just without me there."

- Starvation's common thread: Want dad's stuff, but not dad

Seen this way, the two brothers really aren't that different after all. Both force their dad's hand – one with rebellion, the other with rule-keeping. Both want their dad's stuff, but they reject dad. *There are two ways to be alienated from God. There are two ways to starve.* You see it's not about getting God's stuff, and it's not about keeping God's rules. *But it is about relationship with our Father,* the wellspring of life. ... But who of us really understands starvation?

In Australia, our problem is not malnourishment, but malnutrition. We've snacked out on appetizers and left no room for the main meal. We're fat on all the wrong foods, while our cells are starving for sustenance. To be human is to be dependent. We're all running on something, but God made us for Himself, and our hearts are restless until they find their home in Him. You see, the real feast is found in relationship with God. And if you want to enter this banquet, there's only one way. Which brings us to the parable's key character: *The Prodigal God.*

THE PRODIGAL GOD—A RECKLESSLY EXTRAVAGANT HOST

- What we never expected—*compassion*

"Prodigal" means reckless and extravagant. And what this father does *is* crazy and wasteful. *He breaks all the rules and gives us what we never expected.*

When Rob told dad to drop dead, he expected a backhand to the face and expulsion, empty handed. *But not this father.* He tears apart his life and waits on the balcony for any sign of a changed heart.

When Reg publicly embarrassed dad, pulling him out of a banquet for a lecture, he expected to be cut out of the will with a ruined reputation. *But not this father.* We reject God, but he returns with compassion. *This is banquet host.*

- What we never expected—**humility** (Jesus running after us)

We never expected compassion. And nor did we expect humility.

When Rob returned to town, the father should have let the lynch mob deal with him. Instead, he leaps off the balcony and runs to protect him. No one of authority runs in such an undignified way. ... *And how does God run after us?*

In Jesus, God humbled himself to run across the cosmos, born in a crap-filled manger, despised and rejected, and crucified for our sakes, bearing our shame.

Can God be *that* humble? ***This*** is the banquet host.

- What we never expected—**grace**

Compassion and humility were unexpected. But there's one more shock to come. Both Rob and Reg were expected to repay their shame and take the initiative in restoring a broken relationship. *But not this dad.* He *always* takes the first step, and he *always* absorbs the cost. He dresses us with his righteousness in place of our shabby clothes, he puts shoes on the feet of slaves like us to pronounce us free, and he gives us the sign of his authority as a ring on our finger, to know we are unconditionally accepted. *Who is the banquet host?*

It's our Heavenly dad! This is the banquet host.

What we never expected was grace. God pays! He sacrifices his Angus beef, and invites the whole community. And all kinds of people came together—none of them deserving of the dad's generosity, but all of them glad to be at the banquet. *So they partied hard on dad's credit.*

And like Dishpan Doug, or the servant at the Master's banquet, *we're announcing that **God has put on a feast.** There is no bigger party in town.*

God includes everyone; but perhaps we've excluded ourselves. Like Rob, maybe we're full on the pleasures of sin for a season, self-centred and caught up in self-discovery. Or maybe like Reg, we're full on self-righteousness, fixed on rules when God calls us to relationship, but we're too proud to enter the party.

But if you're in touch with your poverty and brokenness, then come on in!

For at God's party, only the hungry come home.

Like the food fare today, God's offering us a free lunch!

Yet *someone always pays; someone always sacrifices.*

The true banquet host, God, offers us life to the full.

We can't earn it, and we didn't cook it. *Grace is something we just don't get.*

But if we want to be satisfied, grace is just what we need.

God has laid out a banquet, for us, for you. If you're hungry, come; if you're thirsty, come. *It's free!* Don't fatten up on finger food. Feast with your dad on the best home-cooked meal you'll ever taste. *Taste and see that God is good.*

Do you hear what I'm saying? This banquet is at God's expense. *The host isn't stingy – instead, He's our dad, and this feast is the best food.* And at this party, there are two ways to starve, but only one way to satisfaction. If you're into saving yourself you'll miss out. *But if you're humble and hungry, then come on in and let's get the party started!* If that's you, then would you join me in prayer, and come and talk with me later – *for entering the feast is just the beginning.*

Let's pray:

*“Father in Heaven, you made us for yourself, but I've built life around me.
I've used you to get your gifts.*

And in the process I've rejected you, hurt others, and made a mess of this world.

Without you, I'm empty. Forgive me. Draw me back into your family.

Thank you Jesus for coming out to invite me in,

paying for my errors and fixing our relationship by dying on the cross.

And just as you rose again, would you restore my life for better to feast with you.

Give me strength so I can help feed others who are hungry too.

In Jesus' name, Amen.”

This is grace. And grace transforms. God bless as you taste His goodness.



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