

Reading the Parable of the Great Banquet in prison

"Why you even invite us to any of this," asked Richard, "if you're just gonna humiliate us and throw us out?"

by [Chris Hoke](#) in the [February 4, 2015](#) issue



Photo of Richard Mejia courtesy of the author

Someone called the cops on Richard Mejia as soon as he was born. As soon as his 15-year-old mother had finished ridding him from her system, she slipped out of the Skagit Valley Hospital and left him there. When the nurse saw the squirming infant she picked up the phone.

Richard could remember sitting in court when the state tried to force his mother to claim him. Many children suffer through watching their parents fight, and many others endure the anxiety of knowing those fights are the result of custody battles.

Seated on a wooden bench behind the lawyers, his small feet not yet reaching the floor, Richard looked on as representatives of the state fought with his mother for the opposite reason: neither party wanted him.

Sometimes the state won, and he felt her begrudging hand leading him out the courtroom door. Or he'd be left at other relatives' houses, where no one seemed to notice or care that a child sat in the corner taking it all in. But just as often, the small boy watched his mother walk out of court without him, her eyes avoiding his.

So, years later, Richard could hardly contain his delight when a helicopter and multiple squad cars chased him at high speeds through neighborhoods and down farm roads: the thrill of so many people laboring to keep him in their sights, sparing no cost to get their hands on him. As he swung the stolen sedan around corners of potato fields and long rows of beets, Richard shot his twitching, open-jawed gaze past one young woman in the front seat and another in the back and saw, through the rear window, how the squad cars would not give up on him.

Richard had been burglarizing a house with these new partners when the police spotted them, and the hunt began. He managed to prolong this waking dream—search parties in hot pursuit of him—for three days, disappearing each evening.

“I gotta hand it to you, Mr. Mejia,” Richard remembered one of the officers admitting after they'd caught him. “You've got a lot of respect out there on the streets.”

This made Richard smile, but it did not surprise him. Unlike most thieves and addicts, whenever Richard scored some drugs, he called everyone he knew to share the cache with them. Richard liked being surrounded. He often threw the only kind of feast he knew in order to gather a willing fellowship. Those who accepted his invitation were, of course, other unhealthy, drug-addicted souls in the criminal shadows. While the motives in these affairs are as mixed and deceptive as the baggies of various white powders and rocks they exchange, an addict goes with what's available. As with cut drugs, there is in these desperate relationships enough of the pure stuff to get one through the night.

I met Richard in jail one night when I was leading a Bible study. I was losing the attention of the men who sat in the circle. “Hey guys, check this out.” I tried to pull us together. Richard, new to our group, sat just to my left. He spun on me from his laughter with two other inmates and pointed his finger right at my face, his head

cocked. “No, bro,” he said. “How ‘bout you check this out.”

What he then began to aggressively throw at me—from his life, his opinions—was so good, I started taking notes. He monologued about the streets, about being slave to a needle, about misery, betrayal, being hated, being tasered on the ground while multiple officers stood around him with dogs. When he saw me taking notes, Richard smiled.

At other times, Richard would lean back, cross his rubber-slipped feet out in front of him, fold his arms across his chest, and just listen. He liked the stories in which Jesus walked among the kinds of characters he could relate to: thieves, prostitutes, people with problems like the untouchable sick who had to announce their presence when entering a neighborhood, old widows bleeding between their legs, madmen in graveyards cutting themselves and breaking their chains. Richard started to pay attention to this protagonist who spent much of his time among lives gathered in the cracks of towns and all around the edges, the outside, like trash. Jesus enjoyed them, it seemed. Even loved them, valued them. He touched them, restored them, and spoke of a kingdom where they belonged, a kingdom that was both here and hidden. He talked as if God were like this as well.

“That’s sick,” Richard said once, like an Amen, after another inmate finished reading the gospel selection. He’d been listening with his eyes closed. On the streets, sick means good. Out there, as in the Gospels, many words and their values are turned on their heads.

“Hella gangster,” Richard added, and turned to smile at his fellow inmates.

On a one-on-one visit late one evening in the jail, Richard asked me: “You wanna know why I was so good at robbing houses? “I’d just pretend it was my house. Other shady-ass thieves sneak around, keep their heads low, move around the back. Me, I just pretend I’m coming home. Middle of the day. I walk right up the front steps, open the door. If it’s locked, I go to the next house. No one notices. That’s why I like doing this so much, not just for the stuff, really. Honestly, my favorite part is just sitting down in the living room, looking around, and telling myself: All this is mine. This is my home.

“See, I never had shit growing up. I mean *nothing*. So, just standing in that living room, for a few minutes, with the TV, couches, lamps, chairs, books, just pretending—that’s what hooked me. The feeling, even for a few minutes, that I was

in my own home. Sure, I'd steal all that shit when I had to bounce. Load it into a truck I'd have pulled up the driveway.

"Yeah, a lot of times, though, I wouldn't need anything, and I'd still go into houses, on my own. I wouldn't steal anything, only sit in the living room. Just to pretend."

As a loud and charismatic leader, Richard easily became the de facto shot caller of the entire pod. He had a sense for what needed to be done, who needed to be put in check, and how to keep everyone getting along in a small space filled with men facing years in prison, drug withdrawal, losing their wives, girlfriends, children, all the while doing everything in their power not to show any weakness.

Richard knew how to handle the variety of cultures as well. He was, after all, a biological and cultural mix: white people saw him as white, Mexicans as Mexican, gangsters as gangster, Natives as part Native. He contained multitudes. He was all things to all people.

One Sunday afternoon the door to the multipurpose room clanged open and more than 20 men filed in from the pod and greeted me one by one, shaking my hand, reaching for the now familiar hug, and taking a seat in the small circle. Some needed to sit against the wall, on the table, or on the stack of extra nylon bedding mats stored in this space. Richard stood by the door with his arms crossed, pleased, as the last straggler hurried in.

"I brought the whole upper tier for ya, Chris. Except one guy who wouldn't come out of his cell. I did my best, really. I went to his bunk and got in his face. I said, I'm not gonna tell you again, old man—get your ass in there! But he wouldn't listen.

"Don't worry, though," Richard wanted to assure me, as he took the last seat left open beside me. "I'll kick his ass later."

I told him it was all right, that wasn't necessary.

How do you show instructive disapproval when someone is giving you a gift? Gang leaders have a gift for recruitment. They excel at gathering the unwanted and unreachable. Reaching out to others in need has been a mark of spiritual maturity in most traditions, into which most of us, believers or not, seem reluctant to grow. So when the entire upper tier—minus the old guy who refused—now emptied into our Sunday circle, with eager interest, all responding to Richard's jailhouse means of

persuasion, I saw more than bullying, more than even his expression of gratitude toward me. I saw a raw dynamic of apostolic growth. Like the Samaritan woman Jesus met at the well, Richard was becoming an unexpected herald. He was telling even the guys he hated in his lockdown village to come and hear this shit for themselves.

Only a few minutes into our study, he piped up.

“It’s like this . . . Rascal, Bruno, you too, get your asses up. Stand over here.”

Richard was becoming my unsolicited assistant in making sure everyone in the now-growing Bible study understood exactly what Jesus was trying to say.

I hadn’t planned on having the guys act out the parable we were reading from Matthew’s Gospel, but Richard decided in the moment that it was necessary. It was, after all, a story to which he could relate: Jesus was comparing the kingdom of heaven to a wedding banquet, or a party, wanting everyone to come and celebrate with him. In the parable, which another inmate had volunteered to read aloud, the ones invited to the banquet either make excuses and are too busy to come—“they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business”—or they apprehend the king’s heralds—“the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them.”

“So, like, they tasered ’em and cuffed ’em?” Richard had asked, but looking to the group to see if they were getting this too. We all knew that was how Richard was arrested. He added: “I mean, more or less?”

We kept reading.

A dark-skinned and bony man from northern Mexico named Lorenzo was reading aloud for us in passable English, slowly, verse by verse. “The king was angry . . . he said to his servants, ‘The wedding feast is ready, but . . . but those invited were not worthy. Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast . . . as many as you find.’”

This is when Richard really sprang into action.

“So the king sends out more of his messengers to the streets. He’s lookin’ for more people, right?” Richard was now out of his chair with a New Testament open like a script in one hand, ready to block out this scene with the jail roster company of

players before him. In this way, the pages slowly came alive before us, words becoming flesh. “Those other motherfuckers missed their fucking chance, see, so the king is like, Go out into the streets, tell all the fuckups and bad people”—his inked fingers swept over the whole room at this—“like us, to come to the party!”

The other guys were not as excited as Richard. But he was intent on sharing his newfound wealth of enthusiasm, not keeping it all for himself.

“I’m not making this up. Look here, it says: ‘And those servants went out into the roads and gathered all whom they found, both bad and good.’ The roads? That’s the streets, dawg. And who do you find in the streets?”

This is when Richard dragged Rascal and Bruno across the room from the circle and left them there. Then he came back to continue his instruction.

“So Jesus, I mean the king or whatever, is throwing this gangster-ass party, but he’s all rejected an’ shit by the people with money, who I guess have better things to do. But he doesn’t wanna have a party and nobody come—’cuz that fucking sucks—so he invites street people.” He said this as he walked with an exaggerated street strut over to the confused homies he’d left in the corner, grabbing them by the arms, acting it out. “Ey, check this out,” he explained to the outsiders. “We’re gonna roll to this party. It’s a classy kinda thing, but motherfuckers like us can come.”

The two sheepish criminals played along, followed Richard to our circle around the table, and took a seat among us. Richard remained standing. “See, people like me, we know where all the bad people are at! So we gotta be the ones to go and invite them, right? I’m your messenger, right here!” He had both a smile and intensity at this point, tapping his chest. It was as though Richard was suddenly sensing an alignment between the desire of heaven and his own frustrated story so far.

“Both bad and good, it says it right there.” He repeated the words with his finger pointing back into the recycled paper pages, like someone standing at the entrance to a ball, holding up their personal invitation to the security staff at the door.

Maybe he imagined me as such a bouncer.

“Motherfuckers like us are bad. Thieves, drug addicts, crack heads, crack babies, gangsters, lawbreakers, bad people. There’s hella-a us out there. I mean if the king really wants his house to be full—shit, I’ll help him find them. I mean it makes sense,

doesn't it? If we're here at the party, having a good time with the king, there'd be less of us jackin' car stereos an' shit on the streets, right?"

He turned back to Rascal and knocked a knuckle against his chest. "It'd be like, 'Ey Rascal, now you call all your homies and bitches, and tell them to tell their homies—family, everyone—good and bad, don't make no difference."

The old white guys, the tattooed homies, the Natives, even the Oaxacan guys who'd gotten no translation through any of that, all smiled at each other. Richard was leading one of the best Bible studies I'd seen in this jail.

"And just like it says here," their new preacher concluded, "the wedding hall was filled with guests!"

Richard finally sat down next to me with a loud, exhausted sigh and a smile, as if he'd just finished his appointed role, delegated others, and could now enjoy the party.

What would it be like, I wondered, to work with Richard out on the streets with me, recruiting for such a kingdom through the alleys and projects?

Just then the narrow vertical window in the multipurpose room door squeaked open and an unhappy set of eyes scanned our loud gathering. They'd be coming to take everyone back to their cells in just a minute.

I thought our reading of the wedding banquet parable could end right there, where Richard had brought us: with the hall happily filled with guests. We didn't have time to take on the rather difficult verses that followed.

It was too late: Lorenzo had humbly plodded on in his reading of verse 11 while I was distracted with the guard's signals. We were always getting cold stares from the officers when they'd loudly pop the doors open and have to wait in the open door frame in their stiff uniform because we had not heeded their "Do your prayer and wrap things up" warning. It is an uncomfortable experience to pray aloud when a waiting correctional officer is staring at you only feet away—an experience I was trying to avoid.

"No, it's OK, Lorenzo, you can stop there," I interrupted our soft-spoken reader. "We'll read the rest next week."

That's when Richard, just like the first time I met him, cut me off.

"Naw, hold up, Chris! Fuck that, we're not done. Keep reading . . ."

He didn't like the worry he saw in the eyes of Lorenzo, who had already begun to read ahead. Richard smelled foul play; I was covering something up. His elation at the story was now already turning to pain, like he'd been lied to.

"Keep reading," he ordered Lorenzo, and he crossed his arms while leaning forward to listen to the rest of the story.

"But when the king came in to look at the guests, he saw there a man who had no wedding garment. And . . . and he said to him, 'Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding garment?' And he was speechless. Then the king said to the attendants, 'Bind him hand and foot and cast him . . . into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' For many are called, but few are chosen." Lorenzo looked up at me from the reading.

"Just what I fucking thought!" Richard stood up and his chair grated uncomfortably and loudly across the floor behind him, like a needle across a playing record. The party was over. "What the fuck, Chris? What do you expect from people like us? We don't have all the right clothes. We never look right! You should know that!" Though these were Jesus' words, and ancient, he nevertheless held me responsible. As a gang member, he knew what it meant to represent something bigger than yourself with full responsibility. "Why you even invite us to any of this if you're just gonna humiliate us and throw us out anyway? It'd be better not to come than have you break our fucking hearts!"

The guards were going to open the doors any second. This is what I was trying to avoid and handle with proper time—and exegetical nuance—the following week.

"You get our hopes up!" he pointed at me. "And it's beautiful what you tell us—that God is different, that he wants everyone. Even the bad people like me. And I'm like fucking excited and wanting to tell everyone—"

"OK, hang on," I interrupted him now, looking at my watch. I hoped this would be one of the weeks when the guards would have to handle a medical emergency and so would leave us in here a while longer.

I explained quickly that in first-century Palestine, some scholars say it was the custom for the host of the wedding feast—and especially a king—to provide these overgarments for the guests, right at the door, before they got into the banqueting hall. “Like those little birthday hats parents give to each kid who comes to the party.”

It was the first comparison that came to mind. “It’s not about who comes dressed up nice or not; everyone is given the celebration attire. So if this guy’s not wearing it, it’s not about poverty. There’s some other reason he’s choosing not to wear it. It’s an insult, a direct disrespect to the host, in front of everyone in his own home.” I thought this would register with a guy who lives by the streets’ code of respect, familiar with the pain of having his fragile joy mocked in front of others. “It’s like this garmentless guy’s refusing to celebrate for some reason.”

The guys around the table sat silent, their heads moving back and forth between Richard and me, sensing something very important was at stake here.

Richard then countered with the kind of insight no seminary could teach me.

“Even if they are given little birthday hats like you say, sorry—if you’re gonna invite motherfuckers like us from the streets to your party or church or house or heaven or whatever, you should know we might not wanna wear that shit on our heads. We’re not gonna right away play by all the little games and rules how you do! So you didn’t really want us at all! Or did you? But just so you can throw us back out into the darkness? What’s it say?—‘Chains and gnashing teeth’? Hell fucking yes, I’d be gnashing my teeth. ‘Cuz that hurts so deep, Chris.” His eyes confirmed this. “Better to stay in the streets with the bad people than be told you’re wanted and then find out you’re really not!”

I didn’t know whether I wanted to stand with Richard or with the text. I loved both. And, like watching my parents fight as a boy, I desperately wanted them to love each other. I wanted to clear up the misunderstanding.

The unresolved question underneath all of this remained, and time was running out: Why would such a lavish host throw this guest out in the darkness?

“What if it’s the other way around, Richard?” I challenged.

“You’re just assuming,” I said, “the one not wearing the garment is one of the ‘bad’ people who were invited off the streets. But it doesn’t say that. What if it’s one of the ‘good’ people who feels suddenly uncomfortable around all these ‘bad’ folks pouring in from the streets and sitting next to him? Or her. Someone who’s too good to look just like the trash seated around the table? Someone who needs to set himself apart, not putting on the same robe—putting himself on the same level—as all the undeserving fuckups?”

Richard’s shoulders relaxed, but I was just getting started.

“How do you think the host would feel, watching his new flood of guests that he invited from the streets to share his joy, now all feeling judged by this one guy, who’s totally killing the party?” I had never thought of this before, but I was suddenly choked with fury at this faceless character in the story who was making the mixed wedding guests in my mind as suddenly unsure of themselves as the guys around the jail table before me now.

“He’d throw that guy outside and tie him up,” I almost shouted at Richard, as if it were a declaration of how I personally would defend him and his place at the table if I could, “. . . let him get it out of his system, grumble all he wants—grind his teeth, I don’t care—until he was ready to come back in and share the joy of the king who wants everyone. Even people like you!”

The doors clanged open with the same violent noise as ever. Richard was afraid to trust what I’d said now. It seemed too good—to be true, at least.

“Back your shit up, Chris,” he said on his way out the door with a finger pointed at me. “Send me a copy of whatever scholar you’re talking about. I wanna see that in print!”

Editor’s note: Richard Mejia was in prison on a murder charge. He died in prison at age 26 during a medical operation.

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