

“You’re Invited”
Matthew 22:1-14
May 26, 2024

INTRODUCTION:

If you were a first century Jew and someone asked you to describe the most joyous occasion you could think of, you would likely have replied, “A wedding.” Family and friends would gather, work would pause, and food and wine would have been present in uncharacteristic abundance. If the host were a king, and the groom his son, the feast would be even more abundant and joyful. In the parable we are looking at today, the kingdom of heaven is likened to the joyous event of a royal wedding feast. Curiously, though, the focus of this parable is not on the abundant joy of the wedding but on those who miss the party. Why would anyone refuse the invitation to such a joyful event? Though it makes no sense, many do precisely that.

In my final sermon series, I have been preaching on various Scripture passages that express something of my heart’s desire for AVPC. The first sermon on Psalm 1 expressed my desire that everyone be happy, and the second that everyone know and experience the love of God through Jesus. Today’s passage expresses my desire that none of you miss the party. The party I mean is the great wedding feast of heaven. While God’s children enjoy present joy, the best is yet to come. The future joy of God’s children is expressed, for example, in Psalm 16:11. **“In your presence there is fullness of joy; at your right hand are pleasures forevermore.”** My heart’s desire for every one of you is that I experience these joys and eternal pleasures with you. That is Jesus’ desire, too, a desire that can be seen in the parable of the wedding feast. Jesus’ desire in this parable is expressed primarily through warnings. No one wants to miss the party, but in fact many will. How is it missed? That’s the question answered by this parable.

I. Those Who Miss the Party (part 1) – v. 1-7

Every culture recognizes that a wedding is one of those major life events worth celebrating. Even in circumstances of poverty, special efforts are made to mark the joy of a wedding. In Jesus’ parable, the kingdom of heaven is likened to a wedding feast in the richest of circumstances. It is not the wedding feast of an impoverished family, but that of a king. His son is getting married, and all the stops are pulled out to make it a grand event. In May of 2018, Prince Harry married Meghan Markle, and it was not a cheap wedding. The wedding cake cost \$65,000, and the florist bill came to \$143,000. It is estimated that the total cost of this royal wedding was \$41,600,000. So when Jesus says that heaven is like a king celebrating his son’s wedding with a feast, we are to think

of this kind of extravagance. That's why we read in the parable that the invitation comes in two stages. Stage one is the invitation to attend the wedding. But since the preparations are so extensive and it is uncertain how long they will take, this first invitation doesn't come with a designated time for the wedding and its accompanying feast. That detail comes in the second stage of the invitation. When everything is made ready, the servants are sent out again to say, "All is ready; you can come now."

But they don't come, even though they had indicated their intention to come when the first invitation went out. This points up one of the primary reasons many will miss the party, and it's the deception of good intentions. It is easy to think that since we intend to do something, that it is the same as doing it. To intend to be faithful to God is not the same as being faithful to God. When crunch time came for these invited guests and they had to turn their intention into action, they faltered. Why did they falter and fail to enter into this great feast? The text says simply at the end of verse 3, **"but they would not come."** The tense of the verb here yields a literal but awkward translation, "but they were not wanting to come." When all is said and done, it is our desires that tend to reign supreme in our lives. Woody Allen was perhaps more right than he knew when he said, "The heart wants what the heart wants." At the end of the day, the reason people miss the great heavenly feast is that they don't want God. It is striking how often wanting and believing are joined together in Matthew's Gospel. What we want reveals what we really believe.

It is surprising that those invited to the wedding feast of the king refuse to come. When the wealthiest and most powerful person in the land invites you to the most joyous event in the land, a refusal to come is unexpected. It is even more surprising to read what happens next. A second invitation is extended, an invitation that even sounds close to begging. **"Again, he sent other servants, saying, 'Tell those who are invited, 'See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.'"** What remarkable patience and kindness this king has! This king, of course, is God, and he is a God of great patience as he invites repeatedly into a life of joy, and as he endures rejection time and time again.

Though the invitation comes this second time with more passion from the king, it is refused once again. The refusal this time reveals even greater hostility toward the king. **"But they paid no attention and went off, one to his farm, another to his business, while the rest seized his servants, treated them shamefully, and killed them"** (v. 6). This is curious behavior. Why would anyone prefer the mundane duties of farm and business to such an extravagant and joyful feast? When given a choice between laboring in the hot sun to weed the garden, or enjoying an abundance of fine food and wine, they say, "I'd prefer to weed my garden." The response of the rest is even more

puzzling. Why the violence? If you really don't want to go to the royal wedding feast, just don't go.

Why is there opposition to the joy God offers? Is there opposition to God's joy in your heart? Someone asked me this week if I have been able to enjoy the affirming and encouraging words that have been pouring forth from so many over the past few weeks, and which will undoubtedly continue. Or, this person asked, have you responded with some form of deflection? For example, to respond to an affirming word with a statement like, "Just doing my job," would be to deflect. I told this person that I hadn't deflected outwardly, but had done so inwardly, thinking to myself, "If they only knew the deep parts of my heart..." There is something in all of us that is reluctant to receive the joy offered by God. Some people, like the first group of those refusing the invitation to the feast, have their own ideas about how joy can be found. It's in getting busy with their own plans for the farm or business. Others see God as an obstacle to their joy, and they respond angrily and violently. At root, both types of refusals are simply a refusal to trust that God invites us into joy.

I note both the sweetness and severity of God in this parable. His patient, repeated invitations are a mark of his goodness and grace. But that is not all there is to say about God. After these repeated and increasingly hostile refusals, judgment comes. **"The king was angry, and he sent his troops and destroyed those murderers and burned their city"** (v. 7).

II. Those Who Enjoy the Party – v. 8-10

The king wants to share the joy of his son's wedding feast, and he will not be denied. So he sends his servants out once more. He tells them, **"Go therefore to the main roads and invite to the wedding feast as many as you find"** (v. 9). We are correct to understand this invitation to be more indiscriminate than the previous one. There is no targeting of invitations to only a select group of a few people. The servants now go out to the public places where the common people are. They invite all they come across. The word used, however, is a stronger word than inviting. It says they "gathered" all whom they found. Apparently, they were not all upstanding citizens, for it says that the servants gathered **"both bad and good"** (v. 10). Note the mention of the bad first. I think that indicates the surprising composition of guests at the king's feast. A royal feast would be similar to something like a White House state dinner in our context. It would be expected that such a gathering would include a very exclusive guest list, filled with high-ranking diplomats and important political figures, all dressed in formal attire. But you would not expect to find among the guests at a state dinner the teller at the bank down the street from the White House, or members of the sanitation crew, or the

homeless man sleeping under the bridge. Yet such a list of guests is exactly what we find in this parable.

It is clear that this third invitation is speaking of the Gentile mission of the church. If the first guests stand for the Jewish nation, these guests clearly represent Gentiles. As Paul taught in Romans 11, it is through the trespass of the Jews in refusing Jesus that **“salvation has come to the Gentiles”** (Romans 11:11). Gentiles are those who were far off, the last ones to be expected to be invited to this feast. But invited they are, and many have come, resulting in the filling of the wedding hall. This describes the evangelistic work of the church today. The command of verse 9 begins as does the Great Commission: “Go therefore.” We are inviting people to the heavenly banquet.

Our closing hymn today, one of my favorites, is based on this parable. This Isaac Watts hymn imagines our joyful and thankful attitude as we participate in this feast. “While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries, with thankful tongue, ‘Lord, why was I a guest? Why was I made to hear your voice, and enter while there’s room, when thousands make a wretched choice, and rather starve than come?’” The next stanza answers the question. “Twas the same love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in; else we had still refused to taste, and perished in our sin.” The hymn is talking about the same thing Jesus states at the end of the parable. **“For many are called, but few are chosen”** (v. 14). No one present at this heavenly feast will be boasting about their merits that have landed them in this happy place. We will all be keenly aware that had God not drawn us in by his electing grace, we would not have come. So our hearts will be filled with gratitude.

III. Those Who Miss the Party (part 2) – v. 11-14

The parable ends on another note of warning. The feast has begun, and the king enters the great hall to look at the guests. He sees a man with no wedding garment. The lack of a wedding garment indicates clearly that he doesn’t belong there, and the king asks him how he managed to get in. The man has no answer, and the king orders him to be cast out.

Two parts of this concluding section are clear, while two are not. Let’s begin with what is clear. First, it is clear that the result of no wedding garment is eternal punishment. Jesus spoke more about eternal punishment than all the rest of the Bible combined. He speaks of it here as a place of darkness, which is a metaphor for isolation and utter solitude. He then adds that **“in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.”**

A second part of this that is clear is that this man who gets cast out is for a time part of the feast. Though for a time he is rubbing shoulders with those

who will feast with God forever, it eventually becomes clear that he doesn't belong among them because he is missing the critical wedding garment. This should remind us that we don't get to heaven by being around other Christians. I want to say to the children and young people among us that you will not be allowed to stay among us just because your parents believe in Jesus and faithfully bring you to church every Sunday. You must have the wedding garment.

What is this wedding garment, which is the first thing that is not so clear. Some have said that it represents the imputed righteousness of Christ. This interpretation points to the fact that in heaven, God's people are said to be dressed in white robes that became white when washed in the blood of the lamb (Rev. 7:9-14). Others say that this wedding garment refers to the righteous deeds of God's people. Those who understand it in that way point to another passage in Revelation in which it is said that God's people are dressed in fine linen, which is the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8). I believe both are right because they can't really be separated. Those who have received the imputed righteousness of Christ as his free gift will be changed by that. There will be within them a heart to love and obey God.

The last question may be the most important because it reveals the difference between those who have the wedding garment and those who do not. Why was the man speechless when the king asked him how he got in without a wedding garment? This is speaking of the last judgment, and on that day all will be exposed. Our normal instinct when our sin is exposed is to defend ourselves. We multiply words of explanation, defensiveness, and blame shifting to try to escape the shame of sin in our lives. But when we stand before the Judge of all the earth, the one who sees all, our well-practiced strategy of defensiveness will betray us. There is no defense that can be mustered on that day that will allow us to escape. Actually, there is one. Jesus has lived for me, died for me, and been raised again for me. The blood of Jesus, by the promise of the Judge himself, will cleanse from all sin. This man was speechless because he had never come to the place of trusting the blood of Jesus for his salvation. He had always relied on himself, and now such reliance proves completely inadequate.

CONCLUSION:

Several times in the parable, we read the words "All is ready." The feast is ready, and I want to enjoy it with all of my friends here. Have you entered into the joy of Jesus' salvation through faith in him? My door is always open to any who might want to explore this more carefully, as is the case with all of our pastors and elders.