

# Covenant Word

## ***The Kingdom's Dress Code***

Exodus 32:1-14; Philippians 4:4-9; Matthew 22:1-15

from Eden, to the animal skins of John the Baptist, to the white robes in the New Jerusalem of Revelation, what to wear and when is a matter of concern. It is especially true in today's scripture. (Kenneth E. Bailey's *Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes*, "The Parable of the Great Banquet")

In the verses preceding the parable, Jesus engages the Scribes and Pharisees by telling parables. These are not the easy to hear stories that comfort and open us up to grace. No, these are stories that point fingers and indict. After each one, the Scribes and Pharisees huddle to consider their options about how to muzzle Jesus. His blatant finger pointing consistently condemns them to the outer darkness and they, in response, keep looking for ways to silence him.

Jesus begins today's parable with a familiar image to the Scribes and Pharisees. The prophet, Isaiah, in chapter 25, dreams of a great banquet to be held at the end of history in which "the Lord of hosts" will serve a banquet fit

*A Message by  
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Sunday  
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Having a fashionista in the family can be a challenge. It isn't just that our closets experience a vetting when David comes into town, but he, himself, is often out of control when it comes to clothes. You may be aware that New York City apartments are not known for their spacious closets. When he moved recently, Joe told him that he would have to make a choice...either David could move in or David's clothes could move in. There would not be room for both!

A cousin recently married in New Orleans. For Lloyd and Dan, the decision was easy: pick up their black tuxes from the cleaners and they were good to go. But David? Did he want to wear seersucker or a black on black print? Would he wear patent leather or black suede shoes? And what about the accompanying tie and cummerbund? What speaks of spring for an evening wedding in Audubon Park?

We do not espouse a dress code here at Baptist Church of the Covenant, but when Jake Baker was alive, she checked, most every Sunday, to be sure that I had on hose! And while we might put robes on our children when their choirs sing, I do love it when tennis shoes peep out from underneath.

I appreciate invitations that include a hint about the attire. It takes away the guess work, and assures me that I won't show up in shorts when everyone else is in their Sunday best. What is of interest to me, however, is that proper attire is a concern of holy writ. One of the first things Adam and Eve do, after they realize that they are naked, is to adorn strategically placed fig leaves. So all the way

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for a king. It is to be held on the holy mountain of the Lord, and the guests will include all persons, even Gentiles. Death will be no more. Tears will be wiped away. It will be a glorious day of salvation.

With time, however, the understanding of this banquet began to change. Other ideas were attached to it. One theory suggested that the meal would be a place of shame, rather than honor, and that inescapable plagues would overtake the guests. Another said that while the Gentiles would be included, they were only present in order to meet the Angel of Death and be destroyed by his sword. Yet another voice insisted that no Gentiles would be allowed, and, in addition, neither would those with physical challenges like paralysis of the hands or feet, the lame, blind, deaf or dumb. Isaiah's beautiful vision...yea, the very invitation of God... became, therefore, warped from its original intent. Realizing these vast interpretations, the local clergy often gathered for debate on just how each thought the great banquet might occur.

**Dear Friends,  
Thank you for  
wanting to read and  
study these thoughts  
more carefully.  
Please know that I do  
not take full credit for  
anything that may be  
contained within,  
because I may have  
read or heard  
something at some  
point during my  
pilgrimage and do not  
remember its source  
and thus, cannot give  
the rightful author  
his/her credit. I pray  
that you will find  
inspiration and  
encouragement.**



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Worship with us each Sunday  
morning at 9 a.m. and for Bible  
study at 10:30 a.m.

While no one asks, Jesus apparently wants to tell his version of the great banquet. Not only does Jesus have something new to say about the anticipated feast, He informs us that the event will be full of surprises. He sets the stage by beginning with, "A man once gave a great banquet, and invited many."

It was customary for the host to invite his friends, and based on the number of acceptances, the host then decides on the type of meat and how much of it to prepare. Not until the day of the banquet are the animals butchered and cooked. When everything is ready, a servant makes the rounds again to tell the guests that all is ready. It is time for them to come. The expectation was that if you accept the original invitation, then you are committing to come once the food is ready. If at the last minute, a guest could not attend, then a plausible excuse must be given or the host will feel deliberately and publicly insulted.

Well, one by one, the guests back out. Can you imagine receiving a personal invite to Prince Harry's royal nuptials and turning it down? We are told not only did they refuse to come, but the guests make light of the invitation. The first goes to his farm, another to his business and yet another seizes the messenger, treats him shamefully and then kills him.

So when it is reported to the Master about what has happened, he is understandably angry that these, his friends, the first chosen to share in his son's joyous wedding feast, refuse to come. So he sends his troops. He destroys his friends and burns their cities. Then, he chooses to turn their insults into grace by sending the servants back out into all the city streets to bring whoever happens to be out and about – the good and the bad – the poor, the maimed, the blind and the lame. They invite everyone from Jessie's Place, The Firehouse Shelter, The

Jimmy Hale Mission, and The Foundry. They stop at all the waiting rooms in St. Vincent's, UAB and Children's.

They break up bingo at Birmingham Aids Outreach and flush out the teens at the Magic City Acceptance Project. No one is left out. The king is determined to have a party, and if those A-listers will not get over themselves long enough to come, then the king will invite everyone else – regardless of who they are, or what they do, or even if their character is questionable. These are the very people that the Scribes and Pharisees would automatically exclude from any occasion. But these are also the common folk who sought after Jesus to gladly hear him. These guests never repay their host with a reciprocal

invitation, yet in the presence of Jesus, they are welcomed, wanted, sought after, and desired.

Do you remember what it feels like to be included? ...the date to the senior prom; a birthday party invitation; scoring at the

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soccer game so that everyone high fives you? All joy! All rejoicing! Unmerited! Outrageously extravagant! Unbelievably deep grace bestowed on you! And yet, this was not the only gift of the feast! For the King, by extending wedding robes for use, invites his guests to change literally and figuratively. He loves them too much to let them continue to be defined by the old habits and resentments that stain their shirts nor by the fear and anger that are eating holes in their pants. And so he gives them beautiful, custom-designed wedding robes that indicate new life defined by deep, generous discipleship.

This is where the highlighted guest gets into trouble. While he gladly accepts the invitation, he refuses a wedding garment. Tom Long describes it this way:

He is at the wedding feast for the royal son. He is the recipient of massive grace. Where is his awe? Where is his wonder? The other guests quietly trade in their street clothes for the festive wedding garments of worship and celebration, but there he is bellying up to the punchbowl, stuffing his mouth with fig preserves, and wiping his hands on his T-shirt. (Matthew)

Maybe this guest takes notice of who has been invited to the party when they so clearly do not deserve to be there! He thinks: "Isn't that the fellow who ran the scam that affected my retirement benefits? And over there, isn't that the woman who broke up my marriage? And this guy, didn't I hear that he did time? Oh, and no thank you, I do not care for you to serve me anything with that red ribbon pinned to your lapel. His skin color is too dark! Her accent is too thick!"

And while scripture does not record it, I imagine that this guest attempts to gather two or three around him to share his particular concerns which contributes to their anxiety. And so they say, "You are so right! They are not anything like us. We should be afraid. They must be trying to take something away from us. It is our duty to put a stop to it." And so the Muslims and the fundamentalists and the police and the undocumented and those on welfare receive their share of uncomfortable stares.

The host gets wind of this fellow and the malcontent he is spreading. He is easy to spot, after all, with his shirttail hanging out over his jeans. While he has had plenty to say, when his host calls him out, the guest is speechless. He offers no explanation to the King about why he refuses to complete his acceptance to the King's invitation by wearing proof of his baptism in attributes like love, joy, peace, patience, kindness. He is rude not only in his attire, but in his demeanor, exhibiting no evidence of an inward change of heart through his outer appearance. The other guests make light of the Kingdom with their flimsy excuses to stay away. He is making light by being there at all. (David Redding, "A Prince's Wedding Banquet") He is trying to attend the banquet on his own terms, not out of gratitude for a new

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life or respect for his host who loves him. And so the host calls for the ushers. "Take this one out," he says. "He doesn't have on the appropriate wedding garment..." or as commentators put it, "this guest of the Kingdom has forgotten to figuratively wear his baptismal robe as a reminder of the new life...the new opportunities for grace...that are to be worn by Kingdom guests always."

So does this mean at the King's banquet table, there is no tolerance for elitism, judgment, or indifference? Does this mean at the King's banquet table, there is no tolerance for stereotypes, cultural biases or prejudice of any sort? Does this mean at the King's banquet table, there is no tolerance for grudge holding, anger seething and the massaging of our long litanies of hurts? Does this mean at the King's banquet table, there is no tolerance for petty bickering, name calling, finger pointing, and taking sides? Bind him hand and foot," the King says. "Cast him into the outer darkness; where men and women weep and gnash their teeth."

As your pastor, I worry when I read parables like today's. My inclination is to fix it, pretty it up, leave off the judgment part and just emphasize how there is room for everyone at the welcome table! It seems to me that Jesus is not just offending the scribes and Pharisees, he is shocking us all. He is trying to bring about the realization that it is not enough anymore to claim to be a follower of Christ only to sleep through the Sermon on the Mount. It is not enough to claim church membership if we do not also claim a life and life style that distinctively belongs to Jesus. It is not

enough to say, "I am a Christian," and then remain silent when others do not get enough to eat each day. (Caroline Lewis, "What not to Wear," Working Preacher) Our faith demands a change of heart. Our faith demands responsibility.

N.T. Wright says: "We want to hear that everyone is all right exactly as they are, that God loves us as we are and doesn't want us to change. But the argument does not work...Jesus' love reached people where they were, but his loved refused to let them stay as they were. Love wants the best of the beloved. Their lives were transformed, healed and changed." (Matthew for Everyone: Part 2)

Oh my friends, our entire existence, not just in worship, not just in Bible study, not just when we serve as deacons or sing in the choir, but at all times everything about us as believers is to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and forgiveness. We are to bear with one another in love. We are to clothe ourselves with love and let the peace of Christ rule in our hearts. (Colossians 3:12-17) In Galatians, Paul puts it this way: our outer appearance will give evidence

that we are Kingdom people because we think about the things that are true, honorable, just, pure, lovely, gracious, of excellence and praise worthy. And if we think on these things, we won't be anxious. Our prayers will fill us with a peace that is beyond understanding and that keeps us from that tacky tendency to keep score among our friends. And if we cannot... if we will not...the host will have us escorted out into the darkness where there is weeping and gnashing of teeth!

This alarming image reminds us that the Bible, and the God found on its pages, is so much more than lambs and good shepherds, doves and rainbows. The action of this Host immediately gets our attention and begins to pry our fingers away from our own ideas about who we think God should be and how we think God should act. (Barbara Brown Taylor, "Tales of Terror, Times of Wonder," [theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr00](http://theotherside.org/archive/mar-apr00)) The truth of the matter is that God is free to act in any way God chooses. Our invitation is to obey God without the least idea of how things will turn out in the end, without the least idea of who will

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sit with us at the table, and without the least idea of how we will be gifted to do the tasks put before us. Our task is to rejoice in all things, living with extreme gratitude that we are included at all – ever aware that we do not deserve to be there. We know that things will turn out according to God's will and in faith, we confess belief that no matter how out of character the host's actions may appear, we believe that God is present in them, working redemption in ways we cannot discern.

I recently purchased a new pair of shoes. On the inside of the box was this quote: "These shoes will not change the world, but the woman who wears them will!" The same is true of those attending the wedding feast. The wedding attire in and of itself will not change the world, but the people wearing it will. We are living in a world whose center cannot hold. We feel as if we are on the brink of falling apart. Our best hope, as guests at the wedding feast, is to wear the host's attributes of honor, love, purity, and graciousness so that the host is honored and his reign may come with peace. May we live this confidence, Amen.