

You're Invited
Matthew 22:1-14
John Breon

Jesus addresses the religious authorities in Jerusalem through this parable. He's continuing ideas from the two stories that come right before this one. By rejecting Jesus, the leaders are rejecting God's plan for them and they are failing to bear the fruit of faithfulness that God expects. In this parable of the banquet, Jesus shows that they refuse the invitation God gives them in Jesus. There's also another little parable about the banquet that focuses on the wedding garment. It shows the need for righteousness in all who come in to God's kingdom.

Jesus says that the kingdom of heaven is like a king throwing a big wedding reception for his son. Nowadays, we sometimes get a "save the date" card to let us know when a special event, like a wedding, is coming up. The more formal invitation to the event follows the announcement card. The custom in Palestine in Jesus' day was to invite people without telling them the exact day and time of the party. Then, when everything was ready, those who were invited were summoned to come on. That's what this king does. But when his servants went to summon those who had been invited, they refused to come.

So the king sent more servants to tell the people. "Everything is ready. I've butchered cattle for a bar-b-q. Come on to the wedding feast." But they ignored this. They paid no attention. They made light of the invitation and they went off to do their own thing. Some people mistreated and killed the king's servants. This so enraged the king that he sent his army to destroy the murderers and burn that city.

Most commentators mention that this relates to the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70. The Roman army devastated the city and burned the temple.

Since the first invitation was refused, the king sent servants into the streets to bring in anyone they could find. "So the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad, and the wedding hall was filled with guests" (verse 10).

The religious leaders were refusing God's invitation in Jesus. They wouldn't come to the party so God opens the invitation to sinners and Gentiles. God is patient, but if we reject his invitation long enough, we'll no longer want to come.

In the last scene, the king mingles with his guests and finds one who is not dressed properly. He wasn't dressed for the occasion. He was enjoying the party, but he didn't respect the host. Though he sat at the feast, his heart was not there. Because of this insult and because the man had no excuse, the king had him thrown out into the darkness to mourn and weep.

This little parable shows that though everyone is invited, God has expectations of those who come. Coming into the kingdom means taking on the attitude and life of the kingdom. We can't go on living as we lived before we met Jesus.

It's significant that Jesus compares the kingdom of God to a wedding reception. Jesus wants his friends to celebrate with him as though he were the bridegroom. God's invites us to a celebration. This is an invitation to joy.

Tony Campolo wrote a book called *The Kingdom of God Is a Party*. He says that Jesus was and is the Lord of the party. Commenting on this parable, he mentions that Jewish weddings are like Italian weddings, which *Anthony Campolo* says he knows a lot about. He says that with Mediterranean types, wedding receptions are the ultimate blowout and he claims that we don't really know what partying is until we've been to one. Parents will mortgage their house and put every dollar they have on the line to make sure there's enough music and food and drink to keep everybody partying into the night. And Jesus says God's kingdom is like that (28-29)!

If you want more Scripture for this, notice how often in the Gospels Jesus is shown eating at someone's house. Remember his reputation for being a glutton and a drunkard (Matthew 11:19). In Matthew 25:10 he again compares God's kingdom to a wedding feast. And listen to Revelation 19:6b-9:

“Hallelujah! For our Lord God Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and be glad and give him glory! For the wedding of the Lamb has come, and his bride has made herself ready. Fine linen, bright and clean, was given her to wear.” (Fine linen stand for the righteous acts of God’s holy people.)

Then the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!” And he added, “These are the true words of God.”

In John’s vision, the church is both the bride of Christ and the guests who are invited to the wedding feast.

In both its present expression and its final fulfillment, the kingdom of God is a party, a celebration. It’s festive and joyful.

Still, some people reject the invitation to such joy. They make light of the kingdom and God’s invitation. At the same time, they make heavy their possessions and business. Those aren’t bad things in themselves, but the kingdom has to be more important. If we refuse or neglect God’s kingdom, we miss out on great joy. This calls us to consider not the punishment we’ll receive, but what we’ll miss if we don’t go Christ’s way (William Barclay, *Matthew*, volume 2).

In spite of refusals, God keeps on inviting people to his party. It’s an invitation of grace. The folks brought in from the streets had no claim on the king. They couldn’t have even imagined receiving an invitation to the wedding feast. They certainly didn’t earn it or deserve it. The invitation comes simply from the wide-armed, open-hearted, generous hospitality of the king. Grace offers the invitation and grace gathers people in. If the “good” religious people won’t bother to come to the party, the “rejects” are welcome.

Campolo tells about John Carlson, a pastor in Minnesota. He gained attention and praise when he came up with an innovative idea that there should be a special party the night of the senior prom for those who did not have dates. Carlson saw that many high school kids in his town experienced the night of the senior prom as a time of hurt feelings and deep depression. Not to have a date was to be publicly declared a reject, a

loser. The sense of rejection and inferiority symbolized by being dateless on prom night haunted these kids all through their school years.

So far as John Carlson was concerned, the prom was not the kind of party that Jesus would have liked. It was too exclusive to be Christian, in his opinion. It seemed to be reserved for the beautiful and the popular. So John planned an alternative to the prom for those whom "the system" had deemed losers and rejects. He called it the Reject Prom. Those kids who did not have dates were especially invited—and the kids loved it. The Reject Prom was held the same night as the senior prom and it turned out to be a real blowout party that made the senior prom seem tame and dull by comparison.

Once the thing got started, there was no stopping it. Each year the number attending this party for rejects grew. The party began to get press coverage. Timex Corp. gave watches to the kids who attended. Other companies joined in, and those who came to the Reject Prom were overwhelmed with interesting gifts and souvenirs. It wasn't long before some of the kids who could get dates and go to the prom decided not to. They preferred to join in the good time that the "rejects" were having at their special party.

What a great sign that the Kingdom of God is among us. What John Carlson pulled off must have had the angels in heaven chuckling and our Lord smiling. It is just the kind of celebration that God ordered in Deuteronomy 14:22-28. In that Old Testament party there were special orders to make the widows, the orphans, the crippled, and the blind the guests of honor. The Passover celebration was a party for those who couldn't afford one. (*The Kingdom of God Is a Party* 39-40)

Everybody is invited to God's party. Could it be that we are the servants who are sent out to tell everyone we can find about the party and bring them in? Jorge Acevedo is pastor of Grace United Methodist Church, a multi-site church in Ft. Myers, FL. Grace church's commitment and prayer is, "Lord, send us the people nobody else wants or sees." I confess that that

prayer impresses me and also scares me. Do we dare to pray something like that? What if God does it?

At the end of this passage is another scene. This parable about the wedding garment tells us that you can't just show up at the party and act however you want to. We have to share the attitude of the host. We need to get into the spirit of the party. Grace is not just welcome; grace transforms. Grace doesn't just accept us; grace changes us. The change is not always dramatic and sudden. More often, the change is slow and probably subtle. But it does happen. It's like trying to get in shape physically. We don't see results all at once. But if we exercise consistently, over time we see improvement. A few years ago, I could barely do twenty pushups. The other day I almost did fifty. My goal is to do as many pushups as I am years old (52). God's grace helps us exercise spiritually. It brings transformation. If we're not being changed by God's grace, something's not right.

A pastor named Teddy Ray says a friend of his recently said he's not a Christian anymore. One of the main reasons he gave is: "There's this girl in my class at school who's really active in the church. But she's one of the rudest people I know. And then I have a lot of other classmates who are atheists, and they're much kinder people. In general, I don't see any real difference between people who are Christians and people who aren't. It doesn't seem like being a Christian changes them at all. They just go to church more. I guess I don't see the point if nothing changes."

Ray says his friend was asking how Christianity matters. Surely something this valuable would change lives. The people who have it would look different from the people who don't. And *surely* anyone who came across it would want it (<http://teddyray.com/the-gospel-is-always-latent-with-life-will-it-find-a-suitable-environment-for-growth/>, accessed 7/16/14).

John Wesley interpreted the story of the wedding clothes in light of Revelation 19:8, which mentions the white linen that is the "righteousness of the saints." Wesley said that the wedding garment in the parable is holiness, "without which no one will see the Lord" (Hebrews 12:14). He claimed that the righteousness of Christ *entitles* us to heaven and personal

holiness *qualifies* us for heaven. For Wesley, holiness is the new creation, the soul being renewed in God's image. It is faith working through love, loving God and our neighbor. It is having the mind of Christ and walking as Christ walked ("On the Wedding Garment," in *John Wesley's Sermons*, ed. Albert Outler, 562, 564).

Dallas Willard says that faith is not like the bar-code that a scanner at the grocery store reads. It doesn't matter what's in the can, the scanner reads the bar-code label. Faith in Christ doesn't just change our label. It changes who we are from the inside. Willard says that God will let into heaven anyone who can stand to be there (*The Divine Conspiracy* 336-37, 302). Grace clothes us in the righteousness of Christ and changes us. It transforms us into the kind of people who can be in God's glorious presence.

Different commentators point out the importance and seriousness of this parable and its conclusion. "Just as most of the Jewish leaders were unprepared at Jesus' first coming, some professing disciples of Jesus will be unprepared for his second" (Craig Keener). "The verses warn believers that without a changed life they will be rejected at the Last Judgment" (Robert Mounce). "The children of the Kingdom are known by the joy which radiates from them. If they do not participate in the feast, they will be only intruders" (Suzanne de Detrich). "God rejects those who try to enter the Kingdom without doing the will of the King" (Myron Augsburger).

But it doesn't have to be that way. We are, every one of us, invited to God's party. We are invited to share God's joy now and forever. Every pleasure, every happy moment, every good experience hints at the joy God has in store for us. They are foretastes of the great heavenly feast.

God's grace is glorious and indescribable joy—but not if we take it lightly or don't pay attention to God or are hypocritical. But we can strip away our sophisticated pride and come clothed in childlike trust. We lay aside the garment of our sin and come clothed in repentance. We put off our old worldly loyalties and put on the new robe of righteousness.

And God is sending us, his servants, out to invite and bring to God's joyful feast of grace all kinds of people from all kinds of places.