THE PARABLE OF THE WEDDING BANQUET

Matthew 22:1–14

Key Verse: 22:14

“For many are invited, but few are chosen.”

Have you ever seen the TV show “What Not to Wear”? People with really bad fashion first show their ugly wardrobe. Only by looking in the mirror at it can they start to see what they should wear. Today’s passage is similar. By looking at a bad example Jesus helps us see how to respond to God’s invitation. May God open our hearts and speak to us through his living word today.

Look at verse 1. To whom is Jesus speaking? It’s the chief priests and Pharisees in Jerusalem (21:45). Since Jesus arrived on Sunday, entering as a king, and on Monday cleared the temple, they had a serious problem with his claims to authority (21:23). So Jesus taught them two parables, the parable of the two sons, and the parable of the tenants. In the parable of the two sons he taught that God’s kingdom is for people humble enough to repent (21:31b). In the parable of the tenants he taught that God is looking for those who produce the fruit in keeping with repentance (21:43; cf. 3:8). Based on both these parables, these religious leaders are about to be “out.”

Look at verse 2. In this third parable Jesus again introduces an authority figure: first it was a father, then, a landowner, and now it’s a king. In each case there are also people under authority: the two sons, the tenants, and now the king’s subjects. In each parable people don’t respond well to the authority figure. And in each parable we see that Jesus mentions “the kingdom” (21:31b,43; 22:2). In this third parable Jesus stresses how wrong the negative response is.

Read verse 2. We can just imagine how a king would prepare for his son’s wedding. What a happy event for him and for the whole kingdom! As with all wedding preparations, first would be the sending out of invitations. A king would hire the royal calligraphers to hand-write each one in a most beautiful way. He would hire researchers to get everyone’s correct name and address. He would probably construct a wedding hall especially large enough to fit everyone, and grand enough for a king's son. He would start ordering the wedding clothes not only for the royal family, but also for all the guests who couldn’t afford it. And he would prepare for the banquet by selecting the best cattle, produce, bakers and wines. It would be a huge operation and a huge expense, but it was all for the crowned prince, the future heir of the kingdom.

The Bible repeatedly tells us that heaven is like a wedding banquet (e.g. Isa25:6–8; Ps23:5; Lk14:15; Rev21:2). There’s going to be a feast in heaven, called “the wedding supper of the Lamb”; wedding clothes, bright and clean, will be given for guests to wear (Rev19:7,8). Throughout the Bible God has been longing to bring people to this glorious kingdom, where there will be no more crying or mourning or death or pain, where people’s souls can be truly satisfied (Rev21:4). Even more than an earthly wedding feast, heaven will be the place of utmost joy. It also will be the place where God our King and his Son will receive the honor they are due.

Throughout this parable Jesus uses the words “invite” or “invited” (3,4,8, 9,14). Mainly he’s referring to people called “the invited guests.” Who are they? They represent the Jews. God became their King through his gracious work in their history. After working among them with great patience, God longed to introduce them to their Messiah Jesus and welcome them at last into his eternal kingdom.

Can you imagine getting an invitation to a royal wedding? British Prince Harry and American actress Meghan Markle are getting married in May. Most people would be astonished to receive an invitation to their wedding in the mail. We’d be wondering, “Me? Why would they want *me* to come? How do they even *know* me?” At first we might be burdened about not having the proper clothes to wear. But in this case, wedding clothes are provided. It means, “Just come as you are, and let’s celebrate.” If that were the case, most of us would be overjoyed to go. In those days weddings would last an entire week, but people shouldn’t hesitate to take time off to be at this one. Why? It’s because it’s no ordinary wedding; it’s the wedding of the king’s son. It’s the most important event for the entire kingdom, and participating in it is the way to honor the king. It’s the best wedding in all of history. So Revelation 19:9 tells us, “Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!”

But how do the invited guests respond? Read verse 3. What a shock! They’d already received a heads up about it with “save-the-date notices,” and now they’re told it’s time to show up, but they still refuse?! It’s hard to understand. Many a king would have been greatly offended. Some might have thought, “Fine, let’s keep it an intimate celebration of close family and friends.” But not this king. Read verse 4. He sends more servants, this time to advertise the dinner menu. Jesus is showing us that our God is slow to anger, compassionate, gracious and abounding in love and faithfulness (Ex34:6). He understands that we’re burdened and oppressed living in this hard world. He doesn’t mind humbling himself and appealing to us on our level. And we should remember that these are his people; he’s been working among them for a long time and really wants them to come. His invitation reminds us of Isaiah’s prophecy: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy? Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare” (Isa55:1,2). God wants to satisfy our souls with his heavenly wedding banquet.

After the servants tell them about the dinner menu, how do they respond? Read verse 5. They put their personal business interests ahead of the king’s invitation. They don’t want to lose anything. Their hearts are weighed down by the anxieties of life, too narrow even to think about what this event means for their king. Some are even worse. Read verse 6. Just like in the parable of the tenants, the servants represent the prophets, whom God sent to his people to call them to come back to him. Their way of treating the king’s servants shows they were in outright rebellion against the king himself. Rebellion against God may feel great at the moment, but it always brings terrible consequences in the end. Read verse 7. Here Jesus is predicting the destruction of Jerusalem, which was fulfilled in AD70. He knew these people would reject him and bring themselves under God’s severe judgment.

But then the story changes. Read verses 8,9. It’s interesting that it says the invited guests “did not deserve to come.” They didn’t deserve it not because they didn’t do enough good things, but because of their poor attitude toward the king and his gracious invitation. Also, we see here how the king really wants to fill the banquet with people to celebrate the wedding of his son. He doesn’t mind inviting anyone, even people from the street. It shows how humble and gracious God is.

What do the king’s servants do? Read verse 10. These servants are amazing. They wholeheartedly obey the king’s instructions. They understand the king’s heart, and they do their best. Matthew emphasizes that they bring “the bad as well as the good.” These bad people are those who’d lived sinful lives. They in no way deserve to come to the wedding banquet of the king’s son. It’s only by his amazing grace. It tells us that God’s kingdom is filled with all kinds of people who actually don’t deserve to be there. We also notice that through these servants, the king’s will is accomplished. It tells us that in every place and every generation, God’s servants have the task of bringing all kinds of people to his kingdom. We shouldn’t discriminate based on what people look like to us, or calculate, but bring anyone willing to come.

Then what happens? Read verses 11,12. As already mentioned, wedding clothes for those who didn’t have any were handed out at the door. So this man’s not wearing any is disturbing. Why wouldn’t he put them on? Was he trying to be unique? Was he too self-centered? Or too rebellious? Did he just want the free food and didn’t want to be bothered? In any case, he didn’t understand that wearing these wedding clothes was all the king asked of those who came. Wearing wedding clothes is to show respect, honor and gratitude to the king.

What happened? Read verse 13. We may think going to weddings is optional. But in this case, there are only two options: the wedding banquet of the king’s son, or the utter darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. In other words, heaven, or hell. It’s a bit disturbing that this guy gets thrown out of heaven simply because of what he’s wearing. But it tells us that wearing the wedding clothes is a matter of life or death. What are they? Galatians 3:27 says, “…for all of you who were baptized into Christ have clothed yourself with Christ.” The wedding clothes are Jesus Christ himself. We put him on, meaning we’re baptized into him. We repent of our sins. We deeply accept that what he did on the cross, his painful rejection, suffering and death, were to take away the punishment for all my sins. We don’t hold onto our pride in any way, but humbly accept him. When we put our faith in Jesus in this way, no matter who we are, we’re clothed with his righteousness (Ro3:22). Before God, all our own righteous acts are like filthy rags (Isa64:6). The only people allowed into heaven are those who’ve clothed themselves with Christ. It’s not something we do just at the start of Christian life, but a lifestyle. Every day we clothe ourselves with Christ and don’t think about how to gratify the desires of our sinful nature (Ro13:14).

Read verse 14. Jesus says, “For many are invited.” It means God invites everyone to come to his kingdom—anyone, from any place, any background, any situation. Then Jesus says, “…but few are chosen.” It means in comparison to all those invited, relatively few really accept God’s way of righteousness. These few “chosen” people are those humble enough to sincerely repent and put all their trust in Jesus, not in themselves. We can’t make people “chosen.” Our job is just to invite them and give them the message of God’s grace in Jesus. Those who open their hearts and accept it turn out to be “chosen.” As our Lord Jesus wasn’t discouraged by all the rejection and poor attitudes he was dealing with, so we too shouldn’t be discouraged when people treat us with indifference, or worse. We should expect that in our time, too, many will be invited, but few will be chosen.

Today we thought about how amazing God’s grace is. He’s preparing heaven to be an amazing celebration of his grace to us through his Son. He’s inviting everyone, no matter if they’re bad or good, to come to his kingdom. He’s offering everyone the wedding clothes of the righteousness of Jesus. All we have to do is accept it personally, by faith. What a privilege! What amazing grace! We should always appreciate this grace. We also thought about the work of the king’s servants. May God help us to live as his servants and do our best to invite people to his kingdom.