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The Parable of the Wedding Feast

Over the past couple of years, after Presbytery, we have been looking at the parables that the Lord taught to His disciples. These parables confront us with many challenging messages. For example in the parable of the talents we were exhorted to watch and pray¹ and in the parable of the hidden treasure and the parable of great price we were shown that the kingdom of God is worth losing everything for in order to gain.² In the parable of the unjust judge we were encouraged to persevere for God loves us.³ The parable of the Good Samaritan teaches us that we need to love all men.⁴ The parable of the ten virgins exhorted us to make sure that we truly are believers.⁵ The parable of the wheat and tares⁶ is perhaps the most threatening of these parables because it teaches that the visible body of Christ is comprised of both genuine believers and those who are sham Christians. It taught us to test ourselves to see if we are in the faith.⁷ Self-examination when it comes to our salvation is very important lest we hear on the last day those frightening words of Christ, "depart from Me."⁸

¹ Matthew 25:14-30

² Matthew 13:44-46

³ Luke 18:1-8

⁴ Luke 10:30-37

⁵ Matthew 25:1-13

⁶ Matthew 13:24-30

⁷ 2 Corinthians 13:5

⁸ Matthew 7:23.

How do we examine ourselves? Is our salvation based upon sinless living? If it is not, then how do we know if we are saved? Is our salvation based upon our faith? If it is, what happens when our faith is weak? What is it that determines one's salvation in Christ? The parable of the wedding feast answers these questions.

For three years Christ had been preaching and teaching the gospel of the kingdom, which included proclaiming Himself as the Messiah. Yet, during this time few Jews—few of the people who called themselves children of God—had accepted Him. In fact, the religious leaders of Christ's day were so hardened that in Matthew 21:23, 46 they maliciously challenged Christ's authority. In response, Christ told this parable to warn these religious leaders of their impending judgment if they continued in their rebellious unbelief.⁹

The Invitation to the Wedding Is Rejected. Matthew 22:1-7

Matthew 22:1-4, "And Jesus answered and spake unto them again by parables, and said, The kingdom of heaven is like unto a certain king, which made a marriage for his son."

In the parable of the ten virgins the elements of a Jewish wedding were given.¹⁰ The wedding was the most celebrated occasion in Christ's day. It included three parts: the engagement period, the betrothal period, and the wedding feast. It is the last part of the wedding tradition that Christ has in mind here: the wedding feast. Here Christ narrates a story of the wedding feast of the son of a king. This story would have aroused the expectation on the part of those listening for this would have been the feast of all feasts. Dr. John MacArthur wrote this about this feast:

"For a royal wedding such as the one Jesus mentions here, the celebration often lasted for several weeks. Guests were invited to stay at the house of the groom's parents for the entire occasion, and the father would make as elaborate provisions as he could afford. A royal wedding, of course, would be held in the palace, and a king would be able to afford whatever he desired."¹¹

Matthew 22:3, "And sent forth his servants to call them that were bidden to the wedding: and they would not come."

The word *bidden* implies that the guests were invited earlier and already knew that they were expected to attend. This constitutes a second invitation. To be a pre-invited guest to a king's wedding would have been one of the highest honors possible. There is no doubt that those who received such an invitation would have shared this news with their friends, neighbors, and relatives. Truly, the wedding feast would have provided the finest of foods and the most prestigious fellowship in the land.

The phrase *and they would not come* at first glance should shock us. In the Midrash, it is expressly mentioned that a distinction among the Jews in Jerusalem was that an invitation to a feast would not be heeded unless it was accompanied by a second invitation.¹² On the other hand, we are not dealing here with an ordinary invitation—this is the invitation of a king. And thus, the listeners of this parable most likely would have thought, "Who would do such a thing? The very idea is preposterous."

⁹ Matthew 21:45

¹⁰ See Volume 2 Issue 21, May 25, 1997

¹¹ Dr. John MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, page 305

¹² Lament. iv.2 (Editor Warsh. page 73b). This is quoted in Edersheim's *The Life and Times of Jesus the Messiah*, Book II, page 427

Matthew 22:4, "Again, he sent forth other servants, saying, Tell them which are bidden, Behold, I have prepared my dinner: my oxen and my fatlings are killed, and all things are ready: come unto the marriage."

To reject the invitation of a king in Christ's day carried with it the potential for great retribution.¹³ That this king gave his guests a third chance shows us humility and patience. He operated according to the tradition of the commoner in his day. He instructed his servants to tell those whom he invited that his banquet was prepared. This would have been the first of many meals eaten during the feast. As the description indicates, it was an elaborate banquet. Yet, notice the two responses that the king received from his wedding invitation.

He Received the Response of Indifference.

Matthew 22:5, "But they made light of it, and went their ways, one to his farm, another to his merchandise."

This represents the indifferent. These people acted as if the wedding was of no consequence; it was no big deal. The mentioning of the *farm* and *merchandise* conveys the idea that these people were preoccupied with concerns of profit. In other words, they willingly and purposely forfeited the beauty, grandeur, and honor of this wedding for the sake of their everyday, mundane, self-serving endeavors. They were not concerned about the king's honor, but only about what they perceived to be in their own best interests.

So also are some in the church. Many think that prayer, repentance, Bible study, the Sacraments, and service in God's name are boring. They feel that anything associated with the things of God is useless in this life. Rather their efforts are placed toward things, which serve themselves. They are seeking after the temporal things of this world—the lust of the flesh, the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life. Those in this camp are described in Revelation 2:4:

Revelation 2:4, "Nevertheless I have somewhat against thee, because thou hast left thy first love."

Some Responded with Hostility.

Matthew 22:6, "And the remnant took his servants, and entreated them spitefully, and slew them."

This is the second response—open hostility. The king's persistence was received with anger. In an act of unbelievably brutal arrogance, these people mistreated and killed some of the king's servants. The word *spitefully* indicates that these people were purposefully vindictive. They were consumed with their anger towards the king. They were working against the king in every detail.

Matthew 22:7, "But when the king heard thereof, he was wroth: and he sent forth his armies¹⁴, and destroyed those murderers, and burned up their city."

¹³ See R. T. France's commentary on *Matthew*, The New Testament Commentary, page 312

¹⁴ Literally this reads "his troops"—the king did not send his entire army, just a couple of troops perhaps we would liken these troops to the elite Delta Force.

Notice that according to the culture of Christ's day, the king would have been justified with this response at the FIRST refusal. Yet, just as we read about God in Genesis 6:3:

Genesis 6:3, "And the LORD said, **My spirit shall not always strive with man**, for that he also is flesh: yet his days shall be an hundred and twenty years."

So also this king's patience had a limit. After witnessing the brutality of these invited guests, the king sends his armies to destroy these murderers, and set their city on fire. This could possibly be a reference to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD when Titus conquered the city with fire, killing some 1.1 million Jews.¹⁵ However, based upon Matthew 21:45, this parable probably didn't need interpreting. Those listening would have understood that the king of this parable was God and the invited guests were the Jews! In fact, according to the Talmud, the Messiah's coming would be accompanied by a grand banquet given for God's chosen people. The parallels would have been unmistakably clear!

The Wedding Hall is filled.

Matthew 22:8, "Then saith he to his servants, The wedding is ready, but they which were bidden were not worthy."

Now, this is such an important verse. The worthiness of the recipients in this text was measured not by who they were, what they had done, or what they did for a living. (The parable goes on to make it very clear that both evil and good people were to be called.)¹⁶ Rather, the worthiness was based solely on the grace and mercy of the king and the people's response to his gracious invitation.

Matthew 22:9-10, "Go ye therefore into the highways, and as many as ye shall find, bid to the marriage. So those servants went out into the highways, and gathered together all as many as they found, both bad and good: and the wedding was furnished with guests."

So that this wedding feast would not go unattended, the king sent his slaves out to invite any and all who would come: both evil and good. Once again, the FOCUS here is NOT on the merit of those invited, BUT on the grace and mercy of the king. Josiah Conder wrote in 1836 these words:

"'Tis not that I did choose thee, for, Lord, that could not be; this heart would still refuse thee, hadst thou not chosen me. My heart owns none before thee, for thy rich grace I thirst; this knowing, if I love thee, thou must have loved me first."¹⁷

The wedding hall is filled to over-flowing and all seems fine. But then Christ tells of us of the missing robe.

The Wedding Robe is missing.

Matthew 22:11, "And when the king came in to see the guests, he saw there a man which had not on a wedding garment."

From the context, this person was not a party crasher. He obviously was one of the many who heeded the invitation, and came. However, he did not dress appropriately—he was not wearing the right clothes!

¹⁵ Compare Josephus' *Jewish War IV-VI*

¹⁶ Matthew 22:10

¹⁷ Trinity Hymnal #96

At first reading, we wonder how any of those who accepted the king's invitation could have been expected to come properly attired. They had been rounded up from every part of the land. No doubt, many would have come from the streets. As such, they would not have had the clothes befitting such an occasion. However, because the rest of the dinner guests were dressed in the right clothes we conclude that either that the king had made provision for such clothes or that this means that they were to have clean clothes

In Christ's day it was not unheard of that to enter into the presence of a king, you had to wear the clothes that the king himself supplied.¹⁸ The wedding attire was within every man's reach. This being the case, the appropriate clothes most likely would have been a clean body and washed garments. And yet, however we interpret this, we must conclude that being dressed appropriately for this wedding party was within the reach of every man.

Since this man was improperly clothed leads to the further assumption that HE was fully accountable.

Matthew 22:12, "And he saith unto him, Friend, how camest thou in hither not having a wedding garment? And he was speechless."

In other words, the king gave the man the opportunity to respond, and yet he was speechless. This implies that he had not even the feeblest excuse. And so at the wedding feast, even among those who accepted the King's invitation, there was a person who did not belong because he chose to be improperly clothed (whether it was that he rejected the robe or refused to wash). Either way THIS MAN CONSIDERED THAT WHAT HE HIMSELF HAD ON WAS *GOOD ENOUGH* for the occasion. And, so often, isn't that the case with us?

In 1 Chronicles 13 we read of Uzza and his self-styled worship.¹⁹ Uzza's mistake was that he considered the ground to be dirtier than himself. He chose to carry the ark on a cart rather than the way God instructed. So when he touched the ark to steady it, God killed him.

Matthew 22:13-14, "Then said the king to the servants, Bind him hand and foot, and take him away, and cast him into outer darkness; there shall be weeping and gnashing of teeth. For many are called, but few are chosen."

Here we see Christ transitioning into the application. He tells us that the improperly clothed guest is cast into outer darkness. This is a description of hell.²⁰ We are further told that in hell there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. This is a Hebraism for anger and rebellion.²¹ And thus, the place for those associated with the body of Christ who do not know Christ is a place of misery and grief. It is hell itself!

What message is Christ conveying? The message is a simple one.

Matthew 22:14, "For many are called, but few are chosen."

Many hear the call to turn from their sin unto Christ, but few are enabled by God to effect such repentance. The kingdom of God belongs to the chosen—not the called. The kingdom of God belongs to the saved—not

¹⁸ Compare W. M. Taylor, *The Parables of our Savior*, 1886, pages 155-156

¹⁹ 1 Chronicles 13:9-10

²⁰ Compare Matthew 8:12; 25:30

²¹ Compare Matthew 8:12; 13:42; 24:51; Luke 13:28; Acts 7:54

to those who show up. The kingdom of God is those whom the King Himself clothes in the appropriate wedding clothes.

Just what is meant by the wedding robe, apart from which salvation is impossible? The wedding robe is the righteousness of Christ! Had one of Jesus hearers interrupted and asked, "How can I be clothed in the proper garment? What can I do to keep from being cast into outer darkness like that man?" No doubt Christ would have said this:

Matthew 11:28, "Come unto me, all ye that labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest."

See the wedding garment that God demands is the garment of none other than Christ Himself.

2 Corinthians 5:21, "For he hath made him to be sin for us, who knew no sin; that we might be made the righteousness of God in him."

Romans 13:14, "But put ye on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make not provision for the flesh, to fulfil the lusts thereof."

Zechariah tells the story of the man named Joshua.²² (A man whose name was the Old Testament equivalent of Jesus.) But this is a different Jesus and yet very similar to our Lord. He was the high priest of Israel and thus a descendant of Aaron. He had been consecrated and set apart to the sacred ministry of God. He comes now to minister before the Lord and the Angel of the Lord is there. Suddenly the Accuser and Slanderer comes—Satan—to accuse Joshua! He stands at the right hand of Joshua and opposes him. And yet, listen to what the Lord said to Satan.

Zechariah 3:2, "And the LORD said unto Satan, The LORD rebuke thee, O Satan; even the LORD that hath chosen Jerusalem rebuke thee: is not this a brand²³ plucked out of the fire?"

The picture here is of a branch (brand) covered with soot and ashes and yet not wholly consumed by the fire. To touch it is to dirty your fingers with the black ash that always covers things that have been burnt. WE ARE BRANDS PLUCKED FROM A FIRE. We are dirty and filthy and covered with our sin. To touch us is to be defiled by us. And yet, we are the objects of God's unmerited love and thus we read these words:

Zechariah 3:3-5, "Now Joshua was clothed with filthy garments, and stood before the angel. And he answered and spake unto those that stood before him, saying, Take away the filthy garments from him. And unto him he said, Behold, I have caused thine iniquity to pass from thee, and I will clothe thee with change of raiment. And I said, Let them set a fair mitre upon his head. So they set a fair mitre upon his head, and clothed him with garments. And the angel of the LORD stood by."

That is what God has done for us in Christ. Lest the ones He loves defile him God cleanses us and purifies us and robes us in His own righteousness THAT WE MIGHT STAND BEFORE HIM!

Isaiah 61:10, "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; **for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels.**"

²² Zechariah 3:1-5

²³ A brand is defined as a stick that is burned or partially burned.

What will your response be to this good news today? Will you respond like those mentioned in this parable with indifference? Are you going to seek after the riches and influences of this world? Is your time consumed with the things that please yourself? If you do, it will be to your detriment. Ryle commented on this passage:

“There are thousands of hearers of the Gospel who derive from it no benefit whatever. They listen to it Sunday after Sunday and year after year, and do not believe so that their souls are saved. They feel no special need of the Gospel; they see no special beauty in it; they do not perhaps hate it, or oppose it, or scoff at it, but they do not receive it unto their hearts. They like other things far better. Their money, their land, their business, or their pleasures, are all far more interesting subjects to them than their souls. It is an awful state of mind to be in, but awfully common... Open sin may kill its thousands; but indifference and neglect of the Gospel kill their tens of thousands.”²⁴

Will you respond with hostility? If you do, like the prophecy of Christ in this parable of the destruction of the CITY of Jerusalem²⁵ you likewise will perish.

Romans 1:18, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against all ungodliness and unrighteousness of men, who hold the truth in unrighteousness.”

Will you respond with self-confidence? Will you be like the man in this parable who refused the appropriate dress in favor of his own? Is your worship self-appointed? That only will lead to death. Dr. MacArthur wrote these words:

“Since Cain's first attempt to please God by offering his self-appointed sacrifice, men have been trying to come to the Lord on their own terms. They may fellowship with believers, join the church, become active in the leadership, give generously to its support, and speak of devotion to God. Like the tares among the wheat, they freely coexist for a while with God's people. But in the Day of Judgment their falsehood will become obvious and their removal certain.”²⁶

Or will you receive the garment of righteousness provided by your Savior through His death and resurrection? Let no one be deceived, there will not be any attending the wedding feast of the Lamb without the appropriate clothes.²⁷ While there is still time, let us go to the cross of Christ and there affirm or reaffirm our need of His cleansing blood. Let us repent of all forms of self-righteousness by which we reject the blood of Christ in favor of our effort, good intentions, or works. Let us by faith embrace Christ as our Lord and Savior!

Now to us all I say, we are among those to whom the word was spoken, “Everything is ready. Come to the wedding feast.” How will you respond?

²⁴ J. C. Ryle, (Commentary on *Matthew*, pages 204, 205

²⁵ Matthew 22:7

²⁶ Dr. John MacArthur, *Matthew 16-23*, pages 311-312

²⁷ Revelation 19:8

About Bethel Presbyterian Church

The Bethel Presbyterian Church Ministry of the Word is published regularly.

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Feel free to visit Bethel Presbyterian Church when in Broomfield, Colorado. Bethel Presbyterian Church meets at Broomfield High School, Eagle (10th Street) and Main, Broomfield, Colorado. The telephone number of the church is 303-469-6912. The worship services are at 9:30 a.m. and 6:00 p.m. each Sunday. Bethel Presbyterian Church is a member of the Orthodox Presbyterian Church.

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About the Preacher

Greg Thurston preached this sermon on April 6, 2008. Greg is the preacher at Bethel Presbyterian Church