

Entitlement

JRR#5

October 15, 2023

Matthew 22:1-10

¹ Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying: ²“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding banquet for his son. ³He sent his slaves to call those who had been invited to the wedding banquet, but they would not come. ⁴Again he sent other slaves, saying, ‘Tell those who have been invited: Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the wedding banquet.’ ⁵But they made light of it and went away, one to his farm, another to his business, ⁶while the rest seized his slaves, mistreated them, and killed them. ⁷The king was enraged. He sent his troops, destroyed those murderers, and burned their city. ⁸Then he said to his slaves, ‘The wedding is ready, but those invited were not worthy. ⁹Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet.’ ¹⁰Those slaves went out into the streets and gathered all whom they found, both good and bad; so the wedding hall was filled with guests.

¹¹“But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing a wedding robe, ¹²and he said to him, ‘Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?’ And he was speechless. ¹³Then the king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.’ ¹⁴For many are called, but few are chosen.”



Today's parable is set at a wedding banquet. This is a common theme in Jesus' teachings, and it usually connects to his vision for the coming kingdom of God. At this point in history, a wedding was one of the most significant social events in the life of a family.

A family's honor was put on full display as they hosted friends and family for days of feasting and celebration. One can only imagine the extravagance of the wedding for a king's son. The checkbook would be thrown out the window. A ticket – priceless. As the story begins to unfold, Jesus' audience would be imagining what it would be like to be at such an over-the-top event. Let this image be in our minds as we prepare to work through this parable of Jesus today. As we do so, let us pray...

Matthew doesn't give us a lot of context leading into this parable. He just says, "*Once more Jesus spoke to them in parables.*" As Jesus begins, he likens the kingdom of heaven to a party – a specific kind of party, a wedding banquet. In that culture that meant that there is commitment involved. Something was being asked of those who attended. A wedding might simply be a spectator sport in our culture, but not so in Jesus' day. Because the family reputation was on the line, there was an expectation that you would attend if you accepted the invitation. That was step one – to accept the invitation. Step two was to respond by attending when all was made ready. That is why the slaves are sent out – to notify the guests that the feast is all set.

The image of a banquet is not new – even as an image for the kingdom of God. In the Psalms and the prophets of the Hebrew Bible we read about tables prepared and cups



overflowing for individuals and for the nations, even for all the earth. These images are found in texts such as Psalm 23 and in the words of Samuel, Jeremiah, and Isaiah. The images are lavish and celebratory. But these banquet images were not always so generous. Between the time that the Old and New Testaments were written down, stories were told imagining God's chosen people eating and relaxing, while also laughing at the Gentile rulers who'd been ousted and punished.

In other stories, the pure and righteous – again, the chosen people – were imagined to be welcomed by God, while so-called “sinners” were excluded. This would include people with illnesses and physical disabilities as well as all people outside the Jewish faith. However, Jesus rejected such images in the stories he told and in the way that he lived. He was famous for sitting to eat with all kinds of people, including many who were considered impure, sinners, outcasts. In Jesus’ telling, God’s banquet is for everyone, especially those you would least expect.

Jesus talked often about God’s kingdom, and he often told parables that included a banquet to illustrate what God’s kingdom was really like. Over the course of his ministry Jesus probably told today’s parable many times – like anyone who tells a good story again and again. And depending on his context and mood and the point he was trying to make, Jesus likely told the story different ways at different times. What’s more, the folks who wrote Jesus’ life story down – people like Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John – recorded what they remembered or had heard about Jesus as they each wrote for their particular communities and contexts.

For example, when Luke tells his primarily Gentile audience about Christ’s banquet parable, the guests make elaborate excuses for being unable to come to the banquet. In Luke 14 they say, *“I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my regrets... I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my regrets... I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come.”* Well then, Luke says, the poor, the crippled, and the lame are welcomed instead. This version of the parable is consistent with Luke’s focus on Jesus calling his followers to a special concern for the poor rather than the rich, for the weak rather than the strong.

In addition, Luke was writing to a Gentile audience who struggled at times with the Jewish Christians' attitudes of entitlement and superiority. Telling it his way, Luke sought to level the playing field some.

As for Matthew's gospel, he wanted on some level to help his early Christian community to understand who they were, and how God was saving them. Matthew was writing to those primarily from the Jewish community who were choosing to follow Jesus. That was his audience. Context also matters. Matthew had witnessed the fall of Jerusalem in the year 70 A.D., just prior to writing his gospel. There's reason to think he understood the fall of that city to be God's punishment for the way that Jerusalem had rejected Jesus Christ. Perhaps Matthew included the burning of the city in his version of this parable to underscore the devastating consequences of rejecting Jesus as the Messiah.

As our parable begins, the king sends out messengers saying, *"Look, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready; come to the*

wedding banquet." An immediate response was expected. I've gone to all this work to prepare this just for you – the time is now, come! But there is a twist. At the wedding of the century, the guests fail to come. This would have made absolutely no sense to Jesus' audience. A wedding thrown by the king? Everyone would come if invited. Yet the invited guests make light of the invitation and some even heap abuse upon the messengers – seizing some, mistreating some, killing others.



In the large scope of the scriptures – and even up to today – this invitation represents the invitation given by God. First it was given to the chosen people, to Israel. But they rejected the prophets, abusing some, killing others.

Then the invitation went out as God took on flesh, coming to earth. The Jews as a whole rejected John the Baptist and then Jesus, ultimately both men dying for their work on behalf of God. Today God continues to invite people to the banquet, to the place of love and grace and mercy and blessing. And people continue to reject the invitation.

During his ministry, Jesus certainly experienced this rejection time and time again. Over and over Jesus invited the religious leaders into this new kingdom of God. In our parable, the king's response was also Jesus' response. The king says, *"Go therefore into the main streets and invite everyone you find to the wedding banquet."* This was Jesus' practice. He went into the towns and villages, into the countryside, into all places to invite the people into a personal relationship with God. Jesus sat and ate with all these people, and with the tax collectors and prostitutes too. He touched the lepers and forgave the "sins" of those who lived on the margins because they were blind or lame or deaf or possessed. There was not one person unwelcome in Jesus' world. All were welcomed and were loved. All had a place at the table and all had sacred worth. As I wrote these words on Monday, I thought, has this command from the king changed any since Jesus spoke these words? I believe this is still the command and it is still our commission.



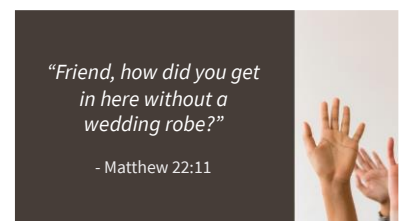
The messengers go out into the streets, and they invite all that they find – both the good and the bad – and the wedding hall is filled with guests. It is important to note that the hall is filled with both the good and the bad. You see, this parable is not just about the obvious – the Jews rejection of Jesus. They were comfortable in their place, in their position as the chosen people of God.

This radical Jesus, this prophet who called them to love those who were easier to reject and to keep outside the circle, he was challenging their place of comfort in their entitled relationship with God.



Jesus is also asking us to check our comfort level. We too can have an attitude of entitlement. We too can become pretty comfortable with our standing with the king. In that place we too can lose sight of the fact that the good news of Jesus Christ is intended for all people – for the hungry, for the poor, for the broken, for the lonely, for the marginalized, for those who are maybe a little different than most of us. And because we have a place at the banquet table, we can overlook those who do not. We become content with our place and then we do not see those who would drop everything to respond to an invitation to the banquet. And when we are a little too comfortable and self-content, we lose sight of the radical grace inherent in the invitation to the kingdom of God. When we lose sight of the radical grace found in the invitation, then we forget who and whose we are. We cannot let that happen.

Continuing on in verse 11, the king notices someone who is not wearing a wedding robe. The king asks the man, *“Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe?”* This may be a curious turn for us. Yes, earlier we learned that both the good and the bad were gathered into the banquet hall. And, yes, earlier we talked about how Jesus welcomed one and all. He did. That was step one. After welcoming one and all, the invitation into relationship was given. That was step two. Not everyone accepted that invitation. As it was with the guests of the king in the parable, not all were always willing to honor the commitment that they originally appeared to make.



Now, back to context. Matthew and his contemporary audience certainly understood that people who entered a saving relationship with Jesus were then baptized into a new identity in Christ. That process and that new identity was commonly described in many early Christian letters as being like a garment. In baptism, there was and is a symbolism of dying to the old self and being born anew into Christ. Then and now, we are meant to clothe ourselves with Christ - with compassion, kindness, patience, love, mercy, grace, forgiveness. Does that sound familiar? Matthew knew it would sound familiar to his community. As Pastor Carla Pratt-Keyes wrote, these early Christians would say or think: “That man not wearing wedding clothes? He wasn’t attired in the baptismal garments of Christ – he wasn’t acting as a Christian should.” In this context, what happens next makes a lot more sense.

“That man not wearing wedding clothes? He wasn’t attired in the baptismal garments of Christ – he wasn’t acting as a Christian should.”
- Pastor Carla Pratt-Keyes



Before we turn to that, though, Jesus is also speaking of something deeper and more profound, asking something of us too. Just as he was implying this for the crowd that was listening to him teach then, Jesus is implying that if we are to remain at our place at the banquet table, then we are called to put on the garment of Christ. We are meant and expected to be living examples of compassion, kindness, patience, love, mercy, grace, forgiveness. We are meant and expected to extend the invitation to others by living as a Christian, modeling the things that drew others to Christ and into a relationship with him and their Lord and Savior.

The response of the king to the one who is not following through on expectations perhaps feels harsh and punitive. The king gives these orders: *“Bind him hand and foot, and throw him into the outer darkness,*

where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.” Yes, this does sound harsh and punitive. But it is the reality. We only have two eternal destinations: heaven or hell. In the end it will come down to whether or not we were clothed in Christ, down to whether or not we lived our lives as his representative here on earth.

Earlier in the parable, that is why those who make light of the invitation, who choose to abuse and mistreat the messengers, who chose not to attend after all – that is why they are dealt with harshly. And that guy who showed up in the wrong clothes, well, he too comes to a messy end. From our place of belonging, from our place within the family of God, dare I say from our place of entitlement, we can smugly think that they deserved to be treated as such. When we start down that line of thinking, though, we need to really check ourselves. The reality is that none of us deserves to be at the table. None of us deserves to be loved and forgiven and included. Again, we are all sinners saved by grace. We all have times when we do not act as we should, as a Christian should.

So when we see others who are acting poorly or even sinfully, we can quietly hope that the bouncers will come and toss those who are unworthy out on their ears too. Admit it, sometimes you hope so. Sometimes I do. At least we hope that those people over there get what is coming to them. We hope that those who sneer at us who are striving to follow Christ will suffer for their snubs, ridicule, and abuse. From there, it is a short step to assuming the role of judge and jury. What we don’t hope is that the real judge doesn’t look too closely at us. After all, we stand in those sinful shoes at times too. It is good to remember that. It counters our sense of entitlement.

It counters our tendency to impose our idea of who is welcome at the banquet or not. It reminds us that the king can and will invite any and all to the banquet of grace.



In closing, our role in the parable is that of the messengers. We are to go and tell the good news of Jesus Christ. We are to invite one and all into the kingdom of God. We are to engage the world around us, letting all people know of the love, compassion, kindness, patience, mercy, grace, and forgiveness found in a relationship with God. We are commissioned to go out into the streets, to put on Christ, to be Christ to the world.

Putting on Christ, we will be reminded that we have received something that we did not deserve; we will remember that we have been loved and forgiven even though we were once totally unworthy. Even though we may wonder how we were ever put on that guest list, we will remember our response that we had to the invitation – how we ran breathless to the table of grace, grateful for our place in the family of God.

Remembering all of this, we will joyfully enter the mission field, eager to help others hear the invitation, eager to help others to know the Savior and Redeemer, Jesus Christ. May it be so for you and for me. Alleluia and amen.

GPS – Grow, Pray, Study

- 1) *Grow*. When have or do you struggle with a sense of entitlement? What about today's passage or message can help in these situations?
- 2) *Pray*. When have or are you dealing with someone else's sense of entitlement? How can you seek guidance, direction, or help in prayer?
- 3) *Study*. Read Luke 14:15-24. What is different or "missing" in this account of the parable? How does this change your understanding of its meaning?