

Matthew 22:1-14

Pentecost 20; October 15, 2023

When you receive a wedding invitation, how do you decide whether to accept or decline that invitation? I suppose there are a couple of things that people will weigh before they accept the invitation or not. You might consider your relationship with the couple who is getting married. You might lean to accept the invitation if the bride or groom is a close member of your family. Or, maybe, you might lean a bit towards the direction of declining the invitation if it is your third cousin removed that lives half way across the country. You may lean to accept the invitation if the bride or groom has been a close friend that you have known since you were a young kid. You might look at the calendar to see if you are even available on the date of the wedding. At first glance, you see that you have something else scheduled for that day. Yet, if something is important to you and valuable to you, you'll find a way to make time for it. Somehow, you will be able to adjust your plans so that you can accept the invitation. But if you perceive the plans that you already had to be more important than accepting the invitation, you may decline the invitation.

Yet, how could you possibly turn down a wedding of a royal prince? It could be the opportunity of a life-time. You know that cost is not an issue. You know that the food at the banquet is going to be absolutely amazing. The meal will not be anything less than the best. Imagine being able to eat whatever you want to eat. There will be more choices there that you could even imagine. This will be a fairy-tale wedding of a life-time. Your cost for attending this banquet is nothing. It will be completely free. You don't even need to bring a gift. This banquet is going to be completely free. The King simply wants you to come and enjoy his gracious hospitality. Why would you possibly refuse to accept the invitation? How foolish would it be to turn down a prince's wedding party to go eat hotdogs from a greasy old grill?

Today, in our lesson, we see Jesus telling a parable of a king inviting people to the marriage feast of his son. Jesus begins to describe the invitation. **"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son. He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come."** This parable continues the string of parables that we have been looking at in the past number of weeks. Jesus told the parable of the two sons who refused to do the will of their father, yet, one will have their mind change and follow his wishes. Jesus told the parable of the wicked tenants who killed even the vineyard owner's son. We see the incredible patience that God shows to people he wants to save. Today's parable also shows the lengths that God will do to get everyone into the wedding banquet of heaven. The parable is told on the Tuesday of Holy Week as he had done with the others.

As Jesus has done with the previous two parables, they are directed at the Jewish leaders of Jesus' day. Even though Jesus knows that they will put him to death in a couple of days, he still continues to invite. Yet, they hated the invitation because they hated Jesus. Just like so many leaders of the past that had lived before them, these leaders were rejecting the plan of God in favor of their own plans and priorities. They did not want to come when they were first invited.

So, what does the King do? **"Then he sent some more servants and said, 'Tell those who have been invited that I have prepared my dinner: My oxen and fattened cattle have been butchered, and everything is ready. Come to the wedding banquet.'"** He invites them to join him again. He even goes one step further than the first time. When he invited them the first time to come to the banquet, it was a date in the future. He was a date in the future when he would make the food for this incredible banquet. This time he makes the food. The banquet is all laid out before them. Then he makes the invitation again: Come! What an incredible gracious and patient King. But this time they react worse than the first time. Not only did they come up with excuses for not accepting the invitation, they beat and kill the servants that were sent by the King. **"But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business. The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them."** The time had now come that the King's patience had run out. **"The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city."**

When you look at this parable, this could easily have been the end of the story. God invited, they rejected. God invited again, they rejected, and the time had come for judgment. Yet, the parable doesn't stop there. **"Then he said to his servants, 'The wedding banquet is ready, but those I invited did not deserve to come. So go to the street corners and invite to the banquet anyone you find.' So, the servants went out into the streets and gathered all the people they could find, the bad as well as the good, and the wedding hall was filled with guests."** God was not done with the inviting.

It didn't matter who they were or what they had done. They invited the **"bad as well as the good."** All the King wanted to do was to share this banquet with everyone. The banquet hall was full.

Then comes those verses that sound kind of strange at the end of this parable. **"But when the king came in to see the guests, he noticed a man there who was not wearing wedding clothes. He asked, 'How did you get in here without wedding clothes, friend?' The man was speechless. 'Then the king told the attendants, 'Tie him hand and foot, and throw him outside, into the darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.' 'For many are invited, but few are chosen."** We might flinch when we read the treatment of the man in those verses. It seems so unfair that this man be punished for not have the proper wedding clothes on.

Though the actions seem harsh, they really are not when they are understood in the first century context. It was the custom at the weddings in Jesus' day, that the guests would wear a garment that symbolized their respect for the host of the banquet. Not wearing the wedding clothes would be considered a sign of disrespect for both the host and the occasion. But the host would also provide the clothes to wear. All he had to do was to wear the clothes the King had given him.

Jesus' point is simple. God would provide everything that is needed to enjoy the eternal banquet in heaven. This man didn't think he needed that. Yet, there was nothing that he could have done. All the dirty and sin-stained clothes were covered by the righteous garments of Jesus. As the Apostle Paul writes to the Colossians: **"Therefore, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness and patience. Bear with each other and forgive one another if any of you has a grievance against someone. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity."** (Col. 3:12-14) Hold on to the invitation your Lord has given you to celebrate the wedding banquet in heaven. May God grant it. Amen.