

Scripture: Matthew 22:1-14

Message: Dressed for the Occasion

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Brothers and Sisters in the Lord Jesus Christ:

The Kingdom of God Is a Party. That is the title of a book by Tony Campolo. Today we read of Jesus describing the party of the kingdom of God. It is like a marriage feast that a king puts on for his son. Life with God is a celebration. This is not just the heavenly feast. Living with God already in this life is a joyful, fun occasion, like a wedding banquet of a king.

It was the custom in the Middle East culture to send two invitations to the guests. The first invitation would inform them of the banquet, the occasion for the banquet and request the honour of their presence. Those receiving this first invitation would indicate their intention to accept and come or to decline and not attend.

Then, as the banquet was ready, the king would send another invitation to let them know that this was the date of their expected arrival. "Come, for the feast is ready."

In the parable, those who had been invited and accepted the initial invitation now refused to come. The king sent more servants, a third invitation. Their message is one of greater urgency. Everything is ready. The oxen and fattened calf have been butchered. This is an occasion of great honour. Come to the wedding banquet.

Why would the king beg the guests to come? If they didn't realize the honour of the first invitation, why ask them again? But isn't that just like God?! The story of Scripture is a story of God seeking his rebellious people. After Adam and Eve sinned in the garden, he went out to find them, calling out "Where are you?" Even when Israel rebelled, God sent judges to lead them back to him. He even brought them back from exile after they had continually rejected him. "Come to my banquet," says the king.

These invited guests still refused. They snubbed the king's invitation and went about their ordinary business. It's not that they were terrible people who rejected the invitation to pursue something evil. They went about doing good things. Verse 5 says, "they paid no attention," or they were not interested. Their fields and business became more important than honouring the king's invitation. Their occupations became their *preoccupations*.

Some went beyond the nonchalant response to express active opposition. They mistreated and killed the servants. The king's response of punishment is the first message of judgment in this parable toward those who reject him.

Even so, the king turned in grace to invite others to his banquet. There is a fourth invitation. In the kingdom of God, we can know the depth of the love of the King. He desires people to come to him and continually extends his invitation. "Go to the street corners to find anyone who was there and invite them." The word "Go" is the same word Matthew uses in the

last chapter of his book, in what we call The Great Commission. "Go into all the world, to all the street corners, to the ends of the earth, and make disciples." Anyone can come to the kingdom banquet.

The servants gathered all the people they could find, both good and bad. That little detail is important to note in this parable. We find it in other parables of the kingdom stated in different ways. The Sower sows seed on different soils which brings good and bad results. The wheat grows together with the weeds. In the parable of the Net, both good and bad fish are caught. Being bad is not a problem for the kingdom. God invites outcasts, failures, problem people, the unimpressive.

The only thing that can possibly be a problem for the kingdom is a faithless rejection of God's invitation to life with him. God does not invite the good and snub the bad. He invites us all, while we are yet sinners. He simply asks us to trust and accept that invitation.

And a whole bunch of people did. They did not have to meet special standards to be welcome at the banquet. A person only had to accept the king's invitation and they could enter the wedding hall.

Now let's make one assumption here, one that we can quite safely make because of the events that are to follow. The types who have been brought into the festivities right off the streets could not possibly have owned fine clothing fit for a king's feast. Let us assume that the king, in order to give the royal wedding a properly royal ambience, supplied his last-minute guests with suitable clothes on the way in. He opened the royal wardrobe and had his gentlemen- and ladies-in-waiting carry its entire contents down to the front door of the palace. Then, as each one approached, he or she was given something splendid to wear.

All is ready. The feast is about to begin. The king enters to join the guests. And what does he see? He sees a perfectly spectacular gathering, strangely marred by one character totally out of place. Make this man's clothes any style you like: punk rockish, skidrow dingy, plain day-to-day wear. Whatever you call it, it stuck out like a sore thumb. The king goes over to him and questions: "Friend, how did you get in here without wedding clothes?" The man was speechless.

Consider the message in this picture. Everyone in this parable is outside the banquet hall until the king invites them to come in. Those who refuse the first invitation face the judgment of the king for their rejection. Those who are then invited from the streets have not in any way earned the favour of the king. They have not earned their place at the banquet. They are invited because the king wants them to come in. They come in because they accept the invitation.

All this is also true of the man without the wedding garment. He is just as welcome to come in to the banquet hall as the rest of them are.

Do you hear the invitation? Come to me all who are weary. Come to the party. Don't try to earn your way to heaven. Don't try to get all dressed up in your own finest good deeds and best behaviour *before* you think you are welcome in my banquet hall. Come as you are, sinful, dirty, uncouth; come, because I want you here. You don't have to make yourself worthy. I will do that for you. I will wash you up and give you new clothes. I will make your life new by the Holy Spirit. You will be born again and will never be the same. All you have to do is come and surrender yourself to me. Put your life in my hands.

This one man accepted the invitation but refused the new clothes that were offered to him. He decided that he could come with his own good clothes and merits. He decided that he didn't want what the King offered.

God offers the free gift of salvation, of belonging to his family, to whomever will take it, no down payment, no interest, no payments, ever. It makes no sense. But you weren't asked to make sense out of God's grace. You are only asked to believe. Trust him. Accept the invitation.

And get dressed for the occasion. This is where we need to be clear in understanding this parable. The invitation is free and is for everyone. But salvation is not merely a passive welcome into the kingdom, as if "I'm in. That's it." There is the active surrender to the work of God in changing our lives to become more and more like Christ. The clothes of being right before God must be accepted and put on. "Put off the old self with its sinful ways and put on the new self, created to be like God in righteousness and holiness" (Ephesians 4:22-24).

Faith leads to right living. No, this is not our own being right through our own efforts. God makes us right. Then we have to live it. We have to show that we have put on the wedding clothes. Putting on the garment provided by God signifies that you are forgiven, your sins are covered. Refusing God's garment is to tell God that you don't need the sacrificial death and atoning blood of Jesus to enter heaven. But then you will be thrown out of God's presence.

Putting on the garment is part of accepting the invitation. We move from an accepting faith to a life of discipleship. We bear fruit to the glory of God's name. We live in obedience and service. True faith in God's gift of being right and forgiven moves believers to want to *live* right. This is not to *earn* God's favour, but as evidence of honouring the Father, our King, who was gracious enough to invite us into his presence.

The Heidelberg Catechism says it in this way in Lord's Day 24: But doesn't this teaching of free grace make people indifferent and wicked? The answer is: No. It is impossible for those grafted into Christ by true faith not to produce fruits of gratitude."

We do not make ourselves good before we come in. We become good, more like Christ, in response to the invitation. Accepting the invitation includes an active, living

response. Accepting the invitation brings us into the banquet hall. We must also respond by a life that show obedient surrender and honour to the King. A life of casual disregard to the King's expectations puts us at risk of judgment.

That brings us to that difficult last line of this parable: "Many are invited, but few are chosen." It's important to understand this in the context of Matthew's gospel and not the writings of Paul. In Paul, the word chosen speaks to an assurance of salvation. In Matthew, the word chosen speaks to the goal of living out the faith of one's calling. In this verse, Matthew cautions against the false security which thinks God's salvation is "in the bag" and there's nothing else to do.

In this parable, both in the beginning with the guests who refused the invitation and at the end with the inappropriately dressed guest, it is the *guests* who, by their own decision, exclude themselves. This is not a predestination parable, but a *personal responsibility* parable. No one is kept out of God's kingdom but those who exclude themselves.

John Calvin wrote about this parable, "Indeed, although many are gathered into the Church, yet only a small portion of them prove their faith by a newness of life. This is not about eternal election. Christ's words merely mean that an outward profession of faith is not enough." That profession must be evident in one's life.

It's not enough to come to church and say you are a Christian. Your whole life must be lived in obedient service and surrender to God. Not just Sunday, but everyday. Not just your songs and prayers, but your emails and conversations. Not just your giving to the church, but your priorities for all your money must reflect your intention to serve God. How are you using the gifts that God has given you for his service? It's nice to see a church full of people, but how many are expressing complete surrender to honour the Lord in their whole lives? For how many is it a show to look good?

As one pastor comments on this text: When faith becomes a compartment of life instead of life's vibrant centre, when you're just stopping off to put in your time or pay your respects, squeezing God in between everything else that you clearly value much more highly, then you reveal yourself as an ill-clad imposter.

This is not just a warning of God's judgment on hypocrisy or rejection of God's life-changing Spirit. This is an invitation to join the party and enjoy it to the fullest. This is an invitation to celebrate the newness of life that God offers, to take on that new life and live it to the fullest joy for the Lord. The kingdom of God is a party. Let's celebrate, with the King, with our whole lives!

Amen.