

“All Is Ready”
Matthew 22:1-14
May 19, 2019

INTRODUCTION:

The parable in today’s passage is the third of three judgment parables Jesus delivered during the final week of his life. He is in Jerusalem, where the Jewish leaders have rejected his authority. What could explain such a rejection? Isn’t Jesus the Messiah of the Jews? Why would the leaders reject him? This parable answers that question by describing a wedding feast a king arranges to honor his son on the occasion of his wedding. But a curious, unthinkable thing happens. No one attends this feast. Invitations go out three times from the king, declaring that “all is ready.” Yet after the first two invitations, the king’s banquet hall remains empty. It is only after the third invitation that it is filled up.

Ultimately, this parable is about something far more important than a wedding banquet. It is about the kingdom of heaven. Jesus introduced the parable with these words: **“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son”** (v. 2). The most important question you will ever answer is the one posed by this parable: will you accept God’s invitation to come to the heavenly banquet? All has been made ready for this great banquet, and the only remaining question is that of who will accept the invitation.

I. The Feast Made Ready

Every culture recognizes that a wedding is one of those major life events worth celebrating. Even in cultures characterized by poverty and need, all the stops are pulled for a wedding celebration. When the host is wealthy or important, it is even a grander event. The recent wedding of British royalty, when Prince Harry married Meghan Markle, is a case in point. The wedding cake cost \$65,000. The florist bill came to \$143,000. It is estimated that the total cost of this royal wedding was \$41,600,000. So when Jesus says that heaven is like a king celebrating his son’s wedding with a feast, we are to think of this kind of extravagance. That’s why we read in the parable that the invitation comes in two stages. Stage one is the invitation to attend the wedding. But since the preparations are so extensive and it is uncertain how long they will take, this first invitation doesn’t come with a designated time for the wedding and its accompanying feast. That comes in the second stage of the invitation. When everything is made ready, the servants are sent out again to say, “All is ready, you can come now.”

Let's take just a moment to consider this idea of heaven as a great wedding banquet. The point is made in the text that there will be an abundance of food there. **"See, I have prepared my dinner, my oxen and my fat calves have been slaughtered, and everything is ready"** (v. 4). In the impoverished economy of Jesus' day, such a feast would be quite desirable. The fear of famine was never far from people's minds. All it took for a food shortage was a year or two of drought or pestilence. Only the wealthiest among them would have been free from the unwanted experience of hunger accompanied by uncertainty as to when the next meal would come. So the idea of such a feast with a seemingly unlimited supply of meat would have been incredibly attractive. Jesus says this is what heaven is like.

In our culture, overeating is a bigger threat than under-eating. Most of us have never experienced the uncertainty of not knowing when a future meal might come. But there are famines that involve more than food. What is your famine in this broken world? For many, it is the sad experience of relational famine. Professor Jon Gunnemann has described our nation as a society of relative strangers, full of "millions of people minimally attached to home and community, highly mobile, independently pursuing our own projects, contentedly leaving one another alone to pursue our own tasks." This famine of relationships is bringing great damage to people and to our society. There are other famines as well. Some of you live with a famine of health, or with a famine of sleep or of discretionary time or income. There is also a famine of peace and contentment for many whose lives are dominated by fear and anxiety. The heavenly banquet puts an end to all such famines. There is abundance there, provided by the generosity of our heavenly Father. There is such an abundance that no amount of partaking of it will seem to diminish it at all. This is the abundance our heavenly Father has made ready for us.

II. The Feast Refused

In light of this, it is surprising that this invitation to come and feast with the king and the prince should be refused. This is, after all, an invitation to a feast, not to a funeral. The excuses given in verse 5 are intended to be ironic. Upon hearing the messenger invite them to the feast, one decides to return to the duties of his farm while another to his business (v. 5). No one in their right mind would do such a thing. The invitation to the wedding feast of the king's son would be a much sought after invitation. Imagine receiving an invitation from Queen Elizabeth to be her special guest at the wedding of Prince Harry. Further, imagine that she offers to send a private jet to pick you up and take you to London for the wedding. You respond, "Let me check my calendar... Oh, I see that I will need to wash my hair that day, so I guess I won't be coming." No one in their right mind would respond like that, and that's the point. Who in their right mind would refuse God's invitation to the heavenly banquet? Yet

many do precisely that, which invites us to explore this point further. Why do people refuse the invitation to feast with God?

We get some insight into this in the idea of the double invitation to the feast. It would seem that the invited guests accepted the first invitation, while rejecting the second. There is an important difference between these invitations. The first one required nothing more than a verbal agreement to come, while the second would require the action of actually coming. Arrangements would have to be made to cover necessary tasks while away. Travel would be required, and that always involves some work. It's the difference between saying, "Let's do lunch sometime" and saying, "Let's get together for lunch. Can we get out our calendars and commit to a time and place?"

Similarly, there are many people who deceive themselves with the cheap words that they are favorable toward God and want to be with him. But when actions are required that become inconvenient, things change. It is easy for us to use words to deceive ourselves. We think that if we can say verbally that we believe in Jesus, then all will be well. The Bible is clear, though, in saying that the truthfulness of our words is revealed by our actions, just as the insincerity of these invited guests in accepting the first invitation was revealed by their actions when they elected not to come. Didn't John write, **"If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth"** (1 John 1:6)?

Two other insights about their refusal to join the feast emerge in the two different reasons given. One group simply has other priorities, the duties of farm and business. A second group is more hostile, seizing the king's servants, treating them shamefully and killing them. This suggests two common ways people keep God away from their lives. Some get busy while others get angry. Let's look at these more carefully.

Let's start with the "get busy" group. I was listening to an interview with the author and political columnist David Brooks recently. He spoke about his divorce and his admittedly unhealthy response to that, saying that he attempted to deal with his pain through hard work. Not surprisingly, that strategy turned out to be a failure. He was attempting to comfort himself through his own efforts instead of through God. Even though this never works, it is surprising how often we attempt this. William Barkley said, "A man can be so busy making a living that he fails to make a life." The main verb in this person's life is "achieve" when it should be "receive."

The second group is the "get angry" group. Just as many keep God away by getting busy, many others do so by getting angry at God. Their anger is seen in their strong, hostile response here. They can't get at the king himself, so they take out their anger on his servants, treating them shamefully and killing

them. It is widely acknowledged that this first group of invited guests represents the nation of Israel. This is exactly how they had treated God's servants, the prophets, and how they are now treating Jesus. Why are they so angry, and why do people today get angry at God? They were angry at Jesus because he refused to cooperate with their agenda. Their agenda was to overthrow the Romans and establish their power. Jesus' agenda, on the other hand, was to address their real problem of sin, dying as a substitutionary sacrifice. I have seen this too many times in my life. People get angry at God because they want to control him and get him to embrace their agenda. God's agenda for you is dominated by the thing you most need—salvation. He is not preoccupied with your health and wealth, but with your sanctification.

Both of these strategies for avoiding God, getting busy or getting angry, have something in common. At their root, both are energized by human pride. It is human pride that elevates our achievements over what God wants to give us. It is human pride that gets angry at God when he doesn't do what we want him to do. Pride is the obstacle to our enjoyment of the heavenly banquet, and humility is the path into that banquet.

If pride is our enemy and humility our friend, then the dominant attitude that should characterize us is that of gratitude. The proud get busy or get angry, the humble get grateful. Imagine your response if you did get that personal invitation from Queen Elizabeth to attend the royal wedding. I'll be honest with you, my initial response would be, "There must be some mistake, another Brad Allison who was supposed to receive this." But what if she persisted and said, "No, there is no mistake. I want the Brad Allison who lives in Birmingham, Alabama, who is married to Wendy and who is pastor of AVPC." Then my attitude would be that of gratitude.

III. The Feast Filled and Cleansed

I marvel at the persistent grace of God in evidence in this parable. Imagine the pain involved in hosting this great wedding banquet and having no one show up. When Wendy and I were planting a church in Maryland, we once hosted a Christmas party to which we invited the whole church. One couple showed up. It was a bit awkward. But imagine how much greater the pain would be if it was something as important as a wedding feast to honor a beloved son. But this king tries again, sending out a second invitation, one that is met not only with indifference, but even hostility. Still he doesn't give up, sending his servants into the roads and public spaces, inviting any they come across.

I understand this third invitation to be describing the Gentile mission of the church. If the first guests stand for the Jewish nation, these guests clearly represent Gentiles. As Paul taught in Romans 11, it is through the trespass of

the Jews in refusing Jesus that **“salvation has come to the Gentiles”** (Romans 11:11). Gentiles are those who were far off, the last ones to be expected to be invited to this feast. But invited we are, and many have come, resulting in the filling of the wedding hall. This describes the evangelistic work of the church today. The command of verse 9 begins as does the Great Commission: “Go therefore.” We are inviting people to the heavenly banquet. Any can come.

But what of this man who was cast out for having no wedding garment? His lack of the proper garment has the most severe consequences. **“The king said to the attendants, ‘Bind him hand and foot and cast him into the outer darkness. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth’”** (v. 13). What is the wedding garment he lacks? Some have said that it represents the imputed righteousness of Christ. This interpretation points to the fact that in heaven, God’s people are said to be dressed in white robes that became white when washed in the blood of the lamb (Rev. 7:9-14). Others say that this wedding garment refers to the righteous deeds of God’s people. Those who understand it in that way point to another passage in Revelation in which it is said that God’s people are dressed in fine linen, which is the righteous deeds of the saints (19:8). I believe it is both because these two really cannot be separated. Those who have received the imputed righteousness of Christ as his free gift will be changed by that. There will be within them a heart to love and obey God.

So this man who is thrown out of the feast is a hypocrite. He has professed faith in Christ but does not possess it. He too has missed the feast. Many are called to the feast, Jesus concludes. Pretty much everyone is invited. But not all enter. Only those God has chosen do so, Jesus says.

CONCLUSION:

Jesus is telling you today, through this parable, that the feast is ready. He invites you to come and enjoy it with him. There is a place for you at God’s banqueting table. If it is pride that misses the feast, it is humility that leads us to accept this invitation. It is the humility that acknowledges our sin and receives God’s gracious gift of forgiveness through Jesus. Will you receive it?

We are going to sing in a few minutes Isaac Watts great hymn based on this parable. I often thought that this would be a good hymn to sing at my funeral, because it describes exactly what I’m going to be feeling. “While all our hearts and all our songs join to admire the feast, each of us cries, with thankful tongue, ‘Lord, why was I a guest?’” It goes on to give an answer to that question. It was the same love that spread the feast that sweetly drew us in. Is God drawing you in now?