

“THE INVITATION”

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Scripture: Isaiah 25:1-9; Mt 22:1-14



There are some passages in scripture that just don't fit into the "let me tell you a story" mode. Today's passage from Matthew, a story in itself, is one of them. I haven't figured out any way to deal with it without simply explaining it, almost line by line. So you may want to get your Bibles out and follow along.

But first, I must tell you one important thing. It's all about context. The very harsh words of the last 2 verses, where the king sends the guest into the outer darkness is scary . . . and we mustn't ignore it. But throughout this passage, be aware that Matthew has placed this story in the midst of a series of stories in which Jesus is confronting the Pharisees and other Temple leaders. This parable, and the ones surrounding it do not have the poor and the mourners and the widows as their audience. This is strikingly different from the Beatitudes.

The four stories that immediately precede this one include Jesus overturning the tables in the temple, cursing a barren fruit tree, responding to a challenge to his authority, and the question of the two sons - one who says "sure, Dad" and then ignores the request, and the other who strikes the adolescent pose, says, "no way!" and then has a change of heart and does the parent's bidding. The final story before this one is about taking the

vineyard away from unproductive opportunistic tenants, and giving it to entirely new ones. It includes Jesus' reference to the scripture "the stone that the builders rejected has become the cornerstone." And it ends with, "When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard his parables, they realized that he was speaking about them. They wanted to arrest him, but they feared the crowds, because they regarded him as a prophet." (21:45-46)

Immediately after today's passage, the narrative continues with these ominous statements: "Then the Pharisees went and plotted to entrap him in what he said. So they sent their disciples to him, along with the Herodians..." (22:15-16) Next we find Jesus challenging the Pharisees about paying taxes, and later he's questioned by the Sadducees about marrying in heaven. This extended set of stories ends with Jesus invoking the God of the Living (rather than giving a clear answer on marriage after death) and goes on to state the Great Commandment, in response to a Pharisaic lawyer's question:

"'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind.' This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."

So, as we go through this demanding passage, please remember two things. First, the audience and the culmination of this set of stories, and second, that taking any verse of scripture out of context is dangerous.

So now let's dive into this parable. As a parable, it relies on cultural norms and expectations, but exaggerates them to make a point. In Matthew's time, it was very bad form to turn down an invitation from a king, as you might imagine! Even worse, to renege after having responded in the positive. As one writer puts it, "the custom is to send and accept invitations well in advance. The host then prepares food for the people who accepted. The extension of an invitation, then, obligates the host to prepare, and the acceptance obligates the guest to appear. Once the banquet is ready, the host sends a second notice — rather like our custom of making medical appointments in advance and receiving a reminder call a day ahead. We can assume that the first invitation was issued earlier, and this is the second invitation. The time has come."¹

That hasn't changed much today, except the part about the host being a king. If you plan a party and 30 people say they will come, and at the last minute, 15 don't show up . . . or, in this case, NO ONE . . . there is food that will spoil, there is energy and time that has been wasted, and that's all without even looking at the emotional dynamic of being rejected. And please note - their reasons were home and business. They weren't hanging out at a bar or a casino; they weren't dallying with the nanny. They were going about their daily business, and simply didn't have - or take - time to give the king the honor he was due. And "in the Middle East it is considered a rude affront to the host".² So the king, in turn, dealt harshly with the rude guests who had fended him off to the point of provoking war.

In addition to relying on cultural norms, this is one of the parables that may be seen as a true allegory, where each of the elements has a symbolic meaning. In our reading from Isaiah, and elsewhere in scripture, God's messianic rule is often compared with a great banquet, drawing on the practice of ancient kings who gave banquets for their subjects, and on the image of God as the king who feeds God's people.³ As Jesus seeks to describe the Kingdom of Heaven, we recognize the king as God; the son as Jesus; the invited guests as Israel, or as the same Pharisee hooligans of the previous story;⁴ the first slaves are the Hebrew prophets; the destruction of the city most likely refers to the destruction of Jerusalem in 70 CE; and the servants who bring in the surprised and surprising guests are Christian evangelists and missionaries. To bring it into the 21st century, those servants are you and I. We are the ones who are supposed to extend God's invitation to everyone, not just to some select group — but to everyone — so that the wedding hall will be filled with guests.

There's an anonymous poem that speaks to our tendency to invite only those with whom we are comfortable — those who are like us in status, or race, or politics.

*I dreamt death came, the other night,
And heaven's gate swung wide.
An angel with a halo bright
Ushered me inside.
And there, to my astonishment
Stood folks I'd judged and labeled
As quite unfit, of little worth
And spiritually disabled.
Indignant words rose to my lips
But never were set free,
For every face showed stunned surprise.
No one expected me.⁵*

That's rule number one with Jesus: the Lord will take anybody who shows up!⁶

Now we come to some more difficult words. First of all, verses 11-14 are different from the same parable as Luke and Thomas tell it. These uncomfortable verses have been added by Matthew, and we have to guess at his reasons, which we will get to a little later.

There has also been debate for centuries over the meaning of the wedding garment. Some have suggested it is a symbol for “the righteous deeds of the saints” (Rev 19:8), and indeed this parable includes the demand for a response, an action. Others suggest it's the resurrection body that will “shine like the sun” (Mt 13:43), and still others refer to a tradition of donning new garments after baptism.⁷

My own leaning is toward those who draw our attention to passages in Romans and Galatians, where we read that we are to be clothed with Christ as a symbol of salvation through Him. (Rom 13:14, Gal 3:27) Christ's intercession saves us from judgement, and perhaps the ill-fated guest, who did not wear a wedding robe, had accepted the late invitation, but had not joined in recognizing the importance of the wedding, with Christ as the bridegroom. Perhaps this person represents those who seek what has become known as cheap grace . . . receiving, but never giving back, never responding in action.

I call to mind some of my favorite verses from the 3rd chapter of Colossians:

Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony.⁸ And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts [and] let the word of Christ dwell in you richly...” (Col 3:14-15a, 16a)

This interpretation fits with the previous parables . . . without clothing ourselves in Christ, truly immersing ourselves in the new life we've been offered, we are not fruitful. The vineyard tenants were not fruitful; the fig tree was not fruitful; and worse yet, the High Priests and Pharisees refused to recognize the fulfillment of their prophets' words, and rather than follow the Great Commandment, they collaborated with Rome and inflicted suffering on the ones for whom they were to be shepherds.

So the question now arises, how does this apply today? Some suggest that the message was then and is today for the whole Church. And one author has even suggested that, like a coach benching players who have lost

their energy or focus, God has benched the North American and European churches, and instead we see the Latin American, Asian, and African churches in ascendency.⁹ And I think you could make that point without stretching the scripture too much.

But especially in this season when we look at our stewardship, not only of money and skill, but of time, I think these words from a seminary professor in Ohio are things we can all – unfortunately – relate to. He writes:

“Within the Christian community there are those members like the ones in the parable who refuse the invitation from God in one way or another. They want the safe, soft side of discipleship, but they shy away from the more difficult work of outreach and social justice. They want blessings from God, but they cannot be found when it is time to share in the work of ministry. They can always be counted on to share in a free dinner at the church, but they are not willing to serve a meal in the hunger center or hand out a bag of groceries at the food pantry. They want peace on earth, but they do not want to work toward that end. They want to end world hunger, but they do not want to miss a meal themselves or make a contribution to work toward that end.”¹⁰

The prophet Isaiah wrote:

On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples
a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,
of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.

And he will destroy on this mountain
the shroud that is cast over all peoples,
the sheet that is spread over all nations;

He will swallow up death forever.

Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,
and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,
for the LORD has spoken.

It will be said on that day,

Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us.

This is the LORD for whom we have waited;

let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation. (Isaiah 25:6-9)

Friends, I believe that is the lesson of Matthew 22:1-14 . . . Let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation, and let us not refuse the invitation nor deny to anyone “the free gift of God [which] is eternal life.” (Rom. 6:23)

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ENDNOTES

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1. Dick Donovan, *SermonWriter* for October 9, 2011, Mt 22:1-14.
 2. Bailey, Kenneth E., *Through Peasant Eyes: A Literal-Cultural Approach to the Parables of Jesus* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1976), 95, as quoted by Donovan.
 3. Susan Grove Eastman, “Exegetical Perspective” on Matthew 22:1-14, *Feasting on the Word*, A, 4, 167.

4. Dick Donovan addresses the tendency toward Christian arrogance and the issue of anti-Jewish sentiment being superimposed on this and other passages inappropriately:

"Everyone" includes Gentiles. There have been intimations in this Gospel from the beginning that the invitation would be extended beyond Israel. The genealogy of Jesus included Rahab, a Canaanite — and Ruth, a Moabite. Matthew then told about the visit of the Magi from the east (2:1-12). This Gospel will close with Jesus' commission, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations" (28:19). In between, Matthew includes this series of parables — the Two Sons (21:28-32) — the Wicked Tenants (21:33-41) — and the Wedding Banquet and the Wedding Garment (22:1-14) — that give veiled reference to the unfaithfulness of Israel and the extension of the invitation to Gentiles.

However, "Matthew does not consider the Christian community...to be automatically replacing Israel as God's people — for both Israel and the Jewish-Christian community the criteria for authentic discipleship remains the same" (Senior, 246). Paul makes that point when he asks, "Has God rejected his people?" — and answers, "By no means!" (Romans 11:1). He says of Jewish people: "As regards election they are beloved, for the sake of their ancestors; for the gifts and the calling of God are irrevocable" (Romans 11:28-29).

5. Author unknown, from Ralph Milton's *Rumors*, forwarded by Phil Gilman, date unknown.
6. Marvin A. McMickle, "Homiletical Perspective" on Matthew 22:1-14, *Feasting on the Word*, A, 4, 169.
7. Eastman, 167.
8. Fr. Paul Bresnahan says it best, "The Banquet Hall shall be full of those who clothe themselves with The Love of Christ! This is the wedding garment God is looking for!" (Facebook, 10/8/11)
9. McMickle, 167.
10. *Ibid.*