

Matthew 22:1-14 **The King's Reception (What Are You Wearing to the Wedding?)**

I read a story of a family that moved into a neighborhood of a small town. The little country church decided to reach out to the family. When they arrived at the doorstep the members of the church were surprised to find that the family had 12 kids & were for the most part poor. They invited the family to services & said goodbye. Later that week the church responded to their need. They delivered a package to the family & said, "We want you to know that you & your entire family are welcome at our church anytime. We have bought you these gifts & we want you to feel comfortable & at ease in our congregation. We hope you can use these," & they left. The family opened the package to find 14 suits of clothing, beautiful clothes for every member of the family. Sunday came and the congregation waited for the family, & they waited. The family never showed. Wondering what could have possibly happened, after lunch the members of the church returned to the home & found the family just getting back, all dressed in their new clothes. "We don't mean to be nosy but we would like to know what happened. We had hoped to see you this morning in church," the leader of the church inquired. The father spoke up. He said, "Well, we got up this morning intending to come. And we sure do appreciate your invitation. But after we showered, shaved, and dressed, why we looked so proper we went to the Episcopal Church!" That's a funny way of talking about a serious problem. Invitations are sent to many to come to church but so few people respond. It's frustrating. Many of you have reached out to neighbors or friends and asked them to come to church & you know all too well the disappointment, how few respond.

Maybe that is why we find this morning's parable so familiar. We are told that Jesus spoke to the Pharisees and the chief priests in a parable. He said, the kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who was giving a wedding banquet for his son. The reception that was given was immense. You've all been to wedding receptions, so we can imagine one thrown by a king for his son. Invitations are sent to all the friends of the family but they all turn down the invitation, they are too busy to attend. The king then invites everyone out on the streets and in the marketplaces. The dining hall is filled with guests but there is a problem. It just so happens that as the king is mixing & mingling with the guests, he sees a man who is not wearing the appropriate wedding attire. He is wearing an old, perhaps tattered robe, obviously the garb that he wore in everyday life, his street clothes. "Friend, how did you get in here without a wedding robe," the king asks. The man was speechless, so the king had him bound & tossed into a place called outer darkness. Jesus concludes the parable with these solemn words: "Many are called, but few are chosen." On the face of it the story sounds rather harsh, and it is. But if we peer a little closer we will understand that in God's Kingdom--

First, at the King's reception everyone is invited. The ending of this story pronounces tough judgment on the young man who shows up without the proper wedding attire. If that troubles you let me point out the beginning of the story. In the beginning everyone is invited to the king's reception. Let's look at this. This is a parable about a king who sends out invitations to his son's wedding. At first it is an exclusive party, only the king's friends & associates are invited. The bluebloods of society & they turn down the invitation. They snubbed the king. Oddly enough, not only do they snub the king but they kill the king's servants who were sent to deliver the invitation. The point is that Jesus here is speaking about the Jewish religious authorities, God's chosen elite. Israel had a checkered history of rejecting God's messengers and stoning it's prophets.

So the king now opens up the guest list. Go out to the highways and byways and tell everyone to come. Here is where Jesus so often infuriated the Jewish leadership. He openly invited everyone. Jesus was, in effect saying, the nation of Israel, God's chosen people, and therefore the Jewish leadership, no longer has exclusive rights to the Kingdom of God. The sign above the door no longer reads, "Members Only." And it is here that we reach the good news of the story: You are invited to the reception. Your name is on the guest list. Everybody here this morning is going to get in.

The first message of this parable is everyone is invited to the king's reception. But, secondly, we are to be aware that not everyone will respond to the king's invitation. We've all made excuses why we cannot attend an event. Luke records the excuses to this story. In that story it's not a king's reception but a local banquet. But they all began to make excuses. I have just bought a field, & I must go and see it. Please excuse me. Another said, I have just bought five yoke of oxen, & I'm on my way to try them out. Please excuse me. The last one said, I just got married, so I can't come. What was it that kept these men from the feast? Well, not any antagonistic feeling toward the host. Apparently it had nothing to do with him. He had their best wishes & they hoped that others would come & take their places. They were sorry, but they were busy.

These men in the Matthew story & the Luke story were kept away by business & family ties, & who could fault them for that? What is wrong with purchasing land? What is wrong with checking out a business investment? What, indeed, is wrong with getting married? You see, our Lord's use of the relationship of business & marriage reveals his penetrating insight. These are explanations, which most people would readily have accepted. No one would be inclined to blame a person for staying away for either of these two counts. Whereas, if Jesus had used some trivial pastime, the force of the story would have been lost. Everybody recognizes that business & family ties are important, and when anyone puts forth either of these reasons, debate seems out of order.

Business is highly important. One has to earn a living for himself & for those dependent upon him. Let's be realistic about it. Marriage is important. Does not the Bible say that it is not good for man to live alone & that God has put his blessing on the family? Yes, these are important and Jesus did not condemn them. He was once in business himself as he operated a carpenter shop in the city of Nazareth, earning a livelihood for himself, his widowed mother, & his younger brothers and sisters. While Jesus never married, he said that marriage was ordained by God & he attended weddings & joined the festivities.

The point that our Lord is making in this parable is that even good things can and often are the enemy of the best. Even things that are right and wholesome and necessary can stand between a person's soul and the Kingdom of God. One does not have to do wrong things or even shallow things to miss the Kingdom. They need only be preoccupied with good things—things like business and family. When these good and necessary things keep a person's mind off the Kingdom, they become a stumbling block and a snare. This is why Jesus so often warned people against material possessions and family ties. He saw how absorbing they can be. He saw how completely they can use up one's thoughts and affections, so that nothing is left over for the higher things in life.

And it is a mistaken notion to think that one must renounce business and family to follow God. Vows of poverty and celibacy for everyone is nowhere enjoined by Christ. All that is required is that we keep the claims of His Kingdom first in our lives. What is needed here is a right sense of value and a wise discernment. It was excessive preoccupation with business and family ties that kept these people out of the Kingdom. It was not the performance of necessary duties.

Let's look at their responses. One man said: I have bought property and I must go see it. But hadn't he already seen it? Surely he was not so naïve as to purchase acreage without having even seen it. The second man said: I have just purchased five yoke of oxen and I must go examine them. But hadn't he already examined them? And now that the deal had been consummated, what possible bearing could one more inspection have upon the transaction. The third man's excuse was equally as ridiculous. He said I have just gotten married and therefore I cannot come. But that was no excuse, for, in that day and time a Palestinian bride would not dare have objected if her husband had wanted to attend an important banquet without her.

The fact of the matter was that these three men did not want to attend the banquet. They had no real desire to go. They were indifferent and they were looking for excuses. If they had wanted to go badly enough they could have managed. It is really amazing to me how quickly people can clear their calendars to do the things that they want to do. But these three men had no real desire to go, so they let other things keep them away.

Well, this parable is being reenacted everyday in the lives of people and in the life of the church. The great enemy of faith and salvation even to this day is preoccupation. God is simply crowded out. We do not disbelieve in him. Nor do we despise Him. Not really. We simply have no time for Him. We are not irreligious. We're just too busy. & we are tired. We sometimes think, other matters are pressing and heaven can always wait.

So all are invited but secondly few will respond, but here is Jesus' sobering word: In the end the king chooses who can stay. That's our Lord's third and final point. If the Pharisees and Sadducees had taken a moment to understand what Jesus said at the end, I believe their reaction would have been less antagonistic. We are told they went from there and laid plans to trap him in his words.

If they had listened to the story closely they would have heard the part about the guy who came to the reception without the proper attire & was consequently thrown out. The doors are open to all, but the king reserves the right to choose who can stay. I believe Jesus was warning us that we must be properly prepared.

You see this story was not unfamiliar to Jesus' listeners. There was a story during Jesus' day that was told by Rabbis and it went like this: There was king who invited his guest to a feast, without telling them the exact date and time; but he did tell them that they must wash, anoint, & clothe themselves that they might be ready when the summons came. The wise prepared themselves at once, & took their places waiting at the palace door, for they believed that in a palace a feast could be prepared so quickly that there would be no long warning. The foolish believed that it would take a long time to make the necessary preparations and that they would have plenty of time. So they went, the mason to his lime, the potter to his clay, the smith to his furnace, the fuller to his bleaching-ground, and they went on with their work. Then, suddenly, the summons to the feast came without any warning. The wise were ready to sit down, and the king rejoiced over his guest, and they ate and drank. But those who had not arrayed themselves in their wedding garments had to stand outside, sad and hungry. They could only look on at the joy they had lost.

This Rabbinic parable, like Jesus', tells of the duty of preparedness for the summons of God, and the garments stand for the preparation that must be made. Let me ask, what will you be wearing to the king's reception? The invitation has gone out. The time has come. Let me suggest, in the words of the Apostle Paul, that you clothe yourself with Christ. Upon the King's greeting, you will be let in. Amen.