

I read an article this week about an Arizona mother who threw a birthday party for her six-year-old son, Teddy. She sent out 32 invitations for a birthday bash at Peter Piper Pizza in Tucson, AZ. They prepared for 32 kids and their parents to join them at the restaurant. While a few told them beforehand they couldn't make it; most said they'd be there. That's why she was shocked and upset when absolutely no one showed up at the party. Her response was understandable: "I'm done with parties for a while," she proclaimed.

That's a heartbreaking story, but fortunately, the story didn't end there. Somehow a photo of her son sitting alone in front of several pizzas ended up on a Facebook page, which prompted dozens and dozens of birthday wishes from around the country. One woman wrote on Facebook, "I live near Tampa, Florida, and heard about you via my local news. I hope you have a wonderful year and I'm sending you a big hug."

It's always surprising who shows up for you at times like this. The biggest surprise gift for Teddy came from the Phoenix Suns, who invited him to watch an upcoming game against the Los Angeles Lakers and LeBron James at their arena. The team tweeted this: "How about we celebrate with thousands at our place! Tickets to Wednesday's #SunsVSLakers game are all yours Teddy! Talk soon!" So instead of pizza and Peter Pipers with a few dozen people, Teddy got to celebrate with thousands at a Sun's game!

### **The King's Gracious Invitation is refused**

It reminds me of a story Jesus told. It's found in Matthew's gospel, chapter 22, verses 1-14. It's about a King who prepared a party. And this is not just a birthday party for a six-year-old, this is a wedding banquet for his son. It's a huge deal!

Look what Jesus said,

**"The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." v. 2**

Matthew loved to use the phrase "the Kingdom of heaven" instead of "the Kingdom of God," but it's the same thing. Jesus said this is what the kingdom of God is like. Who'd ever dream that God's kingdom would be a party — a feast or a banquet to end all banquets — to which many are invited?

I don't think most people understand the Kingdom of God like that. In fact, maybe it comes as a surprise to you. There are some who think of God's kingdom as an army in a great military

confrontation where the powers of light obliterate the powers of darkness and evil. Others see the kingdom of God as a dreary courtroom where the innocent are acquitted, and the guilty are sentenced to life in prison. But Jesus said it's more like a wedding banquet — a party. To those who know their Bibles, this doesn't come as a surprise.

The prophet Isaiah looked forward to a time when,

**The Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine — the best of meats and the finest of wines. Isa. 25:6**

John the Baptist put it this way,

**I say to you that many will come from the east and the west, and will take their places at the feast with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob in the kingdom of heaven. Matt. 8:11**

In the book of Revelation, an angel told John,

**Write this: "Blessed are those who are invited to the wedding supper of the Lamb!" Rev. 19:9**

You see, this parable pictures God the Father as a King preparing a wedding feast for his Son, the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the bridegroom, and this banquet is the messianic banquet that will take place at the end of time. I love to think that in heaven we're not pictured as floating in the clouds with see-through bodies watching angels play harps, but rather eating real meat and drinking real wine — all with real people we know and love.

But there's a problem. Jesus tells us this King's invitation was rebuffed. Jesus goes on:

**He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet to tell them to come, but they refused to come. v. 3**

It's important to know there were always two invitations given to a big banquet like this. The first invitation went out months before the wedding, probably at the time of the betrothal. All these people would have RSVP'd to that first invitation. And of course, receiving an invitation to a banquet like this for the King's son was an honor no one in their right mind would refuse. But then there'd be a second invitation to go out when the feast was actually ready. That's what we see here. Notice it says, "He sent his servants to those who had been invited to the banquet..." So, these folks had already agreed to come. But when the banquet was ready and the second invitation came, they refused.

This would have been a massive insult to the King. To refuse such an invitation from a King wasn't just scandalously rude, but it was akin to treason. You'd think this King would be incensed, but look what he did,

**"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.' v. 4**

It seems to me this king is incredibly patient and persistent. Again, he's already been insulted. But, here, it's almost like the king's servants are begging these people to come. There's a sense of urgency in their words, "Everything is ready!" Not only that, they try to entice them with a description of the scrumptious food. It's like, "The corks are all popped. Entree number one includes a roast rib of oxen smothered with shiitake mushrooms, while entree number two includes filet of fatted calf covered with pomegranate chutney."

Who could refuse that? But look what happened next. There were actually two different responses, but both of them were rejections. Of the first group, it said,

**"But they paid no attention and went off—one to his field, another to his business." v. 5**

So, this group is basically too busy with their everyday lives. They've got businesses to run. They've got bills to pay. They've got to put food on the table. You can't blame them; these wedding banquets usually lasted seven days, and guests were expected to stay the whole time. It's like, "I just can't take that kind of time off."

But the second group wasn't quite so civil. Look at v. 6, "The rest seized his servants, mistreated them and killed them. The king was enraged. He sent his army and destroyed those murderers and burned their city." Wow! Now this is really getting serious! It's hard to imagine why someone would kill these servants who were just handing out invitations to a wedding banquet. It makes complete sense that this king would be enraged and take action against these people.

So, what's all this about? What's going on here? Who are these people Jesus was talking about? It's important to know here in chapter 22 of Matthew, Jesus was in the midst of massive confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. He'd just told two parables in chapter 21 indicting them and the type of Judaism they represented.

In the first parable, he said they were like a son who agreed to fulfill his father's request to go to work in his father's vineyard, but never actually went. Hmm... Just like these people who agreed to come but then refused.

In the second parable, Jesus said the religious leaders and Israel were like wicked tenants of a vineyard who mistreated and even

killed the servants the landowner had sent them to collect fruit. Then the landowner sent his son and, guess what? They killed him. As a result, Jesus said, "the landowner will bring those wretches to a wretched end" (v. 41). Hmm... sounds familiar.

In both parables, Jesus was saying to the religious leaders, "That's you!" When he finished with those two parables Matthew wrote,

**When the chief priests and the Pharisees heard Jesus' parables, they knew he was talking about them. Matt. 21:45-46**

In fact, many believe what Jesus said here about how the king "destroyed those murderers and burned their city" was something of a prophecy because Jerusalem would soon be invaded and burned to the ground, Temple and all!

But where does this leave the king with regard to this wedding banquet for his son? I mean, again, the tables are set, the wine and the food are ready, the string quartet is starting to play. The King's son deserves for the place to be packed with people who are joyful, happy, and grateful to be there! What will he do?

### **The King invites the riffraff to come to the feast**

Jesus says,

**"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." vv. 8-10**

I love those words: "anyone you can find...the bad as well as the good." I mean, can you imagine? Some despised tax collector just gets done laundering some dirty money when one of the King's servants hand him an invitation to the bash of the year. Some prostitute just gets done turning a trick when another servant kindly invites her to the same banquet. A gentile, who lives a respectable life, but is despised simply because of his race, is invited the feast. The blind, the lame, the lepers all get a shocking invite. All of a sudden, the wedding hall is filled with an unlikely assortment of riffraff. It reminds me of what Jesus said in the previous parables. He said to the religious leaders,

**"Truly I tell you, the tax collectors and the prostitutes are entering the kingdom of God ahead of you." Matt. 21:31**

One thing is for sure; there'll be a lot of surprises in the Kingdom of heaven! A lot of, "Wow! I didn't expect to see YOU here!"

It reminds me of another story I heard. It's about a young woman named Katie Hosking, who was engaged to be married in the Sacramento area. All the arrangements for the wedding and reception had been made, but a few days before the wedding she decided to break up with her fiancé. She and her parents

had reserved a country club for the reception. With 150 invited guests, the cost was upwards to \$10,000. Everything was paid for.

You might think, "Well, no problem. They could just call the whole thing off and get a refund!" But, not so fast. Club policy required a 60-day notice for any cancellation, so they were still required to pay the full amount. They had this beautiful venue for 150 guests with all the food, a band, and the decorations, but the place would be completely empty. What do you do in that situation?

Well, the family decided to have a party anyway. In place of wedding guests, they invited the residents of the Interfaith Family Shelter to a country club banquet. So, a combination of close family friends and homeless people danced together and feasted on baron of beef, salmon, shrimp cocktail, fettuccine, and fruit. A strawberry shortcake replaced the wedding cake. People had a blast! Everyone was so grateful to be there. Afterward, they packed up the leftover food and sent it back to the shelter. It was enough to feed the homeless for several more days.

You see, nothing will get in the way of God filling his Son's wedding banquet, even when it means welcoming the least likely people imaginable. He wants the place filled. Lynn and I had over 300 people at our wedding. Here imagine 300 billion! It says, "The wedding hall was filled with guests." And that's what the Father wants. He wants joy and laughter. He wants people grateful to have received an invitation. He wants people there eager to honor God's Son.

You see, ultimately, nothing will dishonor God's Son. People may dishonor him and reject the good news he came to bring, but theirs isn't the last word. Their dishonor will be overcome by those who will honor him. As James Boice said, "The praise of the redeemed will drown out the cries of the impenitent." All you have to do is read the book of Revelation, where at the final judgment, we see the people who reject this invitation are judged, but the redeemed people of God from every tribe, tongue, and nation are engaged in joyful and heartfelt praise of the Son.

The King throws out one who is not dressed for the banquet

Now you'd think the parable might end there, like, "And they all lived happily ever after..." But it doesn't end there. In fact, the parable ends on a rather haunting, tragic note. Look what happens next.

**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. vv. 13-14**

Again, there will be a lot of surprises in the Kingdom of heaven! There may be people there you wouldn't expect to see, but there will also be people missing you'd thought would be there.

This doesn't seem like a very nice way to end a story, but we have to take it for what it is. I mean if this guy was brought in from off the street, how was he supposed to change his clothes anyway? Remember, this is a parable, and everything doesn't have to make perfect sense. Jesus is trying to make a point. You don't want to come to the banquet unprepared. Just because you're called, just because you're invited and show up, doesn't mean you're chosen; doesn't mean you belong there. To be "chosen" is simply to be one who is dressed properly. You see, it's not a "come-as-you-are affair." We may not like that, but that's what Jesus is saying. We want to hear everyone is all right just as they are; God accepts us and loves us, and we don't need to change.

But is that really true? When the blind and the lame came to Jesus, he didn't say, "You're all right as you are." No! He healed them. They wouldn't have wanted anything less. When Matthew the tax collector became a disciple of Jesus, he didn't say, "Stay at your tax booth and keep ripping people off." No! He said, "Come follow me." Nor did he say to the woman caught in adultery, "You go, Girl! Keep doing what you're doing." No! He said, "Go and sin no more."

You see, there are those who want to come to the banquet on their own terms, "I don't have to change. Jesus will forgive me of all my sins. It doesn't matter how I live." But that isn't the whole Gospel. The Bible talks about "the obedience of faith" (Romans 16:26). Genuine faith results in obedience. Yes, the Gospel is all about God's love and forgiveness. Yes, his love reaches us right where we're at, but it doesn't leave us right where we're at. His love changes us. His love wants the best for us. His love wants our lives transformed, healed, and whole. God loves serial killers and child molesters; he loves ruthless and arrogant businessman; he loves abusive fathers and manipulative mothers. But the point of God's love is to bring about repentance and change. He hates the sin, and how it damages us. But, ultimately, if he's a good and holy God, he can't turn a blind eye to it. He'll bring change.

Jesus isn't saying we have to earn our way into heaven. God's forgiveness and grace are infinite. None of us deserve anything but judgment. He's not saying we can somehow boast in our own righteousness, like, "I'm sure glad I am properly dressed here. Why has that slob over there been allowed into the party?" Jesus despised that sort of thing. You see, those who are properly dressed are so filled with gratitude and joy that they've been invited to the feast, all they want to do is honor the Son. So, let me close this morning by asking two questions.

**First, what are you doing with the King's invitation to come to the party?**

I'm afraid to say I can identify with the people who are so caught up in the affairs of daily life that they have no time to go to a party. Their problem wasn't having lots to do, but that they were so preoccupied, they refused to tear themselves away from business as usual to experience the opportunity of a lifetime. The demands of business, the cares of the home, the concerns of the family, the lure of wealth — those things cause us to say, "Well, Lord, maybe someday; but for now, I'll have to take a rain check."

The warning in this parable is there's nothing inherently evil about our errands and appointments, sprinting from meeting to meeting, shuttling children, working out, making deals, meeting friends, and all the rest, but we need to beware. Beware of the almost imperceptible shift your life takes when you stop running it, and it starts running you. Beware of the way busyness puts a stranglehold on your interior life. Beware of running so hard you ignore that still small voice saying, "There's more."

Here's some good news though — God is incredibly patient and persistent. You can refuse him, but he comes knocking at your door again, and again, and again. However, don't take his patience for granted. The more you ignore him; the more you refuse him, the harder it becomes to respond.

There is no life more miserable than one so caught up in itself that there's no room for God to break in. Look at the irony of this story. The people were so caught up in their private struggle for fulfillment in life, that when the answer to that struggle came knocking on their door, they were unable to recognize it. One fellow put a piece of dirt ahead of the salvation of his soul; another the demands of his business. So, it goes even today.

### **Second, are you properly dressed?**

You can sit in church and not be properly dressed. You can lead a ministry and not be properly dressed. You can look very much on the outside like a good Christian and not be properly dressed. Being properly dressed starts with putting your faith in Jesus as your Savior. But for all of us who put our faith in Jesus, he calls us to a life of active following - a life of obedience.

N.T. Wright put it this way,

**"The point of the story is that Jesus is telling the truth... the truth that God's kingdom is a kingdom in which love and justice and truth and mercy and holiness reign unhindered. They are the clothes you need to wear for the wedding. And if you refuse to put them on, you're saying you don't want to stay at the party. That is the reality. If we don't**

**have the courage to say so, we're deceiving ourselves, and everyone who listens to us."**

Right here in Matthew Jesus put it this way,

**Not everyone who calls out to me, 'Lord! Lord!' will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. Matt. 7:22**

Later, James, the brother of Jesus, said this,

**"What good is it, dear brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith but don't show it by your actions? Can that kind of faith save anyone? Suppose you see a brother or sister who has no food or clothing, and you say, "Good-bye and have a good day; stay warm and eat well"—but then you don't give that person any food or clothing. What good does that do? So you see, faith by itself isn't enough. Unless it produces good deeds, it is dead and useless." Ja. 2:14-17 NLT**

There will be a lot of surprises in the kingdom of heaven. There'll be people there you wouldn't expect, and there will be people missing you were sure would be there.