

I heard 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 at Peter Pipers with a few dozen people, Teddy got to celebrate with thousands at a Sun's game!

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 was not just a birthday party for a six-year-old, this was a wedding feast for his son. It was a really big deal. And what happened?

The King Invites the Religious Elites to His Son's Banquet, and They Refuse

Jesus spoke to them again in parables, saying: "The kingdom of heaven is like a king who prepared a wedding banquet for his son." v. 2

Matthew loves to use the phrase Kingdom of heaven instead of Kingdom of God, but Matthew is referring to the same thing. Jesus was saying the Kingdom of God is like a wedding party. I don't think most of us, when we think of what the Kingdom of God is like, land on party, or wedding feast, or the mother of all banquets to which many are invited. Maybe this description is a surprise to you. Maybe you see the Kingdom of God as a giant army where the powers of light obliterate the powers of darkness and evil. Or maybe you see the kingdom of God as

some kind of courtroom where the innocent are acquitted, and the guilty are sentenced to life in prison. But Jesus is saying to us, "Actually the Kingdom of God more like a wedding banquet." Remember John the Baptist? He 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 (Mt. 8:11)

And John in the book of Revelation is told in a vision from God to write this:

"Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb!" (Rev. 19:9)

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 the guest of honor at this feast. Don't you love this picture? It tells us that in heaven, we aren't floating and playing harps while sitting on clouds. We are eating real food, and drinking real wine, all with real people that we know and love.

But here is the problem.

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)

Who are these servants? They are those who serve God. They include the prophets of the Old Testament, John the Baptist, the Apostles of the New Testament, and I would include any Christians throughout history who took the command of God seriously to invite others to come to Jesus the Son.

What if a king invited you to a royal wedding feast, would you even think about refusing that? It's important to know that there were always two invitations given to a big party like this. The first invitation went out months before and was kind of like a save-the-date. People would RSVP to this first invitation.

But then there would be a second invitation to go out when the feast was actually ready. This second RSVP is where the story picks up from. The King sent his servants to "those who had been invited to the banquet." These were folks who had already agreed to come, then got their second invitation through these servants of the king and refused to come. As we can imagine, it was a massive insult to the king by refusing. You would think the king would have torn into his subjects, but look at what he did next.

"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 Jesus is telling us that our Heavenly Father is incredibly patient and persistent. He sent servants who then begged the people to come. There was a sense of urgency, everything was ready, saddle up your donkeys, and come to the party. Look at how the servants sold it. Oxen, fattened cattle, all the marbled beef you could want, come let's eat, drink, and be merry, and celebrate my son. Who could reject this? Look at what happened. There were actually two responses, and both were rejections.

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

So, this first group was basically indifferent to the invitation. They couldn't process that they would be missing out on the most beautiful, grand, and honoring wedding. They cared more about their busy lives. They had businesses to run, bills to pay, chores to do, and classes to take. The servants continued to call out to these people to stop work and attend so they could honor the king. It's right for us to understand our culture, to know we live in a world that is so busy people find no time to stop and listen to the generous invitation. It's our job to help people see the importance of stopping and listening and see the banquet God has set before them.

The second group who received the invitation was downright hostile.

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. vv. 6-7

It's hard to imagine how anyone could martyr a messenger who's only guilty of inviting them to a wedding feast. Think of the treatment of Peter, Paul, the beheading of James, and the stoning of Steven. This group was brutal. They were arrogant. They were people who waved the banner "chosen people of God" and then turned their back on the blessing of God and followed some other kind of false religion. Their hearts had to be far from the one true God to murder these servants of the one true God.

So, what's going on here? It's important we know that right here in chapter 22 of Matthew, Jesus is in the midst of a massive confrontation with the religious leaders of his day. In chapter 21, Matthew gives us two other parables indicting these elitist religious leaders and the type of Judaism they represent.

If you were here last week, we learned Jesus compared these religious leaders to a son who agreed to fulfill his father's request to go work in his father's vineyard, but never actually went. Interestingly, our parable this morning also describes religious leaders who say they will come to the banquet and then end up refusing.

We also learned last week that Jesus compared these religious leaders to wicked tenants who rented space in a vineyard from a landowner. These wicked tenants mistreated and even killed the servants of the landowner who had been sent to collect fruit as rent. After killing his servants, the landowner sent his son and guess what? They killed him too!

"The landowner will bring those wretched tenants to a wretched end." Matthew 21:41

Sounds similar to our parable today, doesn't it? In both parables of chapter 21, Jesus said to the religious leaders, "I'm talking about you!" And the religious leaders knew Jesus was talking about them.

Did you catch the last phrase? "The king destroyed those murderers and burned the city." 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.

So, what was the king going to do now? The tables were beautifully set, the meat was roasted to perfection, the best wine was uncorked, the band was tuned and starting to play. The servants stood ready for the king's guests. The king's son deserved for the place to be packed with people who were joyful, happy, and grateful to be there. What would he do?

The King Invites the Riffraff, and They Accept

"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 take comfort personally in Jesus words, "anyone you can find... the bad as well as the good." Think about it. Some despised tax collector, thief, prostitute, or some gentile who maybe lived a respectable life, but who was despised because of his race, were all invited to the banquet. The blind, the lame, the lepers all received an invite. All of a sudden, the wedding hall was filled with every assortment of riffraff.

Remember earlier in Matthew,

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

One thing is for sure; there will be a lot of surprises in the Kingdom of heaven. A lot of, "Wow, you are here too?"

It reminds me of another story I heard 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 club policy required 60 days notice for any cancellation, so they were still required to pay the full amount. It's like 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. A combination of close family friends and homeless people danced together and feasted on baron of beef, salmon, shrimp cocktail, fettuccine, and fruit. Strawberry shortcake replaced the wedding cake, and the 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.

Here is the point. 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. Julie and I had over about 250 people at our wedding almost 33 years ago. Here imagine 250 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 with our worship.

It's right we understand that ultimately nothing will dishonor God's Son. People may dishonor him and reject the good news he came to bring, but that isn't the last word. Their dishonor will be overcome by those who will honor him. If you take a glance at the book of Revelation, where at the final judgment we see people who reject the invitation are judged. But the redeemed people of God from every tribe, tongue, and nation, with every kind of background and experience are engaged in joyful and heartfelt praise. They are praising the Son for who he is and what he has done.

Now you would think Jesus would end his parable on this high note. Kind of like they all lived happily ever after, but it doesn't end there. It ends on a tragic note. Look at what happened next.

The King Expels the Wedding Crasher Who is Not Properly Dressed

"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 11-14

This guy was brought in from off the street, how was he supposed to change into wedding clothes anyway? But we should remember this is a parable, and everything about a parable doesn't have to make perfect and logical sense. Jesus was trying to make a point. He is telling us, we don't want to come to the wedding feast unprepared.

Just because many are invited and show up, doesn't mean many are chosen. This man wasn't a legitimate guest. He was a wedding crasher. He was invited, and he made a decision to come to the party, but he didn't honor the Son because he didn't wear appropriate wedding garments to the party.

The point is we can't come into the Kingdom of God on our own terms. We aren't the chosen if we try to come to the wedding party wearing a garment sewn together by our own righteousness. We aren't the chosen if we try to come to the wedding party, but we really don't want to change and follow the guest of honor.

Think about it. When the blind and the lame came to Jesus, he didn't say, "You're alright just as you are." No, he healed them. They wouldn't have wanted anything less than healing. When Matthew, the tax collector, became a disciple of Jesus, He didn't say, "Stay at your tax booth and keep stealing from innocent people." No, He said, "Come and follow me." And he didn't say to the woman caught in adultery, "You go girl! Keep doing what you are doing." No, He said, "Go and sin no more."

Some of us receive our invitation to the banquet, but we want to come to the banquet on our own terms. Some of us my think, "I don't have to change. Jesus will forgive all my sins. It doesn't matter how I live." But that kind of thinking isn't the whole gospel. Genuine faith in the Son leads to joyful obedience to the Son.

The Bible from front to back tells us about God's love. His love reaches us right where we are at, but it doesn't leave us there. His love has the power to change us. His love wants the best for us. His love wants our lives transformed, healed, and whole. God's love brings repentance to the bad and good alike.

What actually is this wedding garment Jesus was talking about here? Jesus wasn't specific in his parable. I read this week in the book of Revelation God's people put on garments that have been washed white by the blood of the Lamb, who is Jesus. When we put our trust in Jesus to save us from our sins, it means we put on the garment of his righteousness. We stand before the Son at his banquet clothed in his righteousness, and not in garments stained by our prideful works.

For all of us who have put our faith in Jesus Christ it means we put on the garment of a life of active following; a life of obedience. Paul tells us as chosen ones to "put on" compassionate

hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience and above all else put on love.

Two questions to consider

What are you doing with the King's Invitation to the Wedding Feast?

I think a lot of us identify with these people who are so caught up in the affairs of daily life that they make no time to go to a party. People we know and love are so preoccupied they refuse to tear themselves away from business as usual in order to experience the opportunity of a lifetime.

What do we do with this challenge? We need to make sure our busy lives don't put a stranglehold on our inner life. We need to make sure our busy lives don't put a stranglehold on our engagement with others who seem so indifferent to the invitation. There isn't anything inherently evil about being busy. But we need to beware of the subtle shift that happens when our life takes a turn, and we are no longer running it, and it starts running us. If you are miserable, open up and let God break into your life.

Are you properly dressed for the Wedding Feast?

We can sit in church and not be properly dressed. We can lead a ministry and not be properly dressed. We can look like a good Christian on the outside and not be properly dressed. Being properly dressed begins by putting our faith in Jesus as our Savior. But for all of us who put their faith in Jesus, He calls us to a life of active following; a life of obedience. He calls us to an exciting and inspiring life of taking time to be alone in the presence of God. He calls us to take time to join a smaller spiritual community, a smaller group to share life and share the challenges of following Jesus. An exciting and inspiring life of taking time to serve God by serving our fellow followers of Christ who are part of this local church and within the Kingdom of God. An exciting and inspiring life taking time to love our neighbors who have yet to respond to the invitation in God's terms. An exciting and inspiring life taking time to live generously by giving to the Kingdom work being done on the peninsula through CPC and globally through our mission partners.

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's the reality. If we don't

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

Matthew 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." Mt. 7: 21 NLT

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

I have this picture in my mind of when I stand before Jesus someday, and Jesus will be looking at my wedding clothes. The most beautiful wedding clothes you could imagine. They are white and bright as possible. And they are as white and bright as possible because they have been cleansed and bleached by the shed blood of Christ.

But if you look closely, there is other colorful stitching on my wedding clothes. The colorful stitching seems perfectly arranged and displays artistic beauty that only God could create for his pleasure.

Then there is that moment when Jesus my Savior is looking at me. His face is beautiful. His eyes are kind. And it's obvious to me that he knows everything about me. There is nothing I can hide from him.

He takes out a mirror and says, "Take a look, Are you properly dressed?" "Make sure you are wearing my righteous wedding clothes and not your own."

And then the Son will ask me to take a second look. And he will say, "On those beautiful wedding clothes that you are wearing, show me the beautiful stitching of your faith. Did you trust me? Now show me the beautiful stitching of your love. Did you love me? Did you love your neighbor? Now show me the beautiful stitching of your works. Did you serve me by serving your church family? Did you serve me by serving your neighbor?"

Show me you decided to follow me. Show me you had no intention of turning back. Show me you decided to follow me on my terms.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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