

Come To The Feast

William Cwirla

Matthew 22:1–14

“The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast for his son.”

The parable of the king’s son’s wedding clearly takes place in an entirely different cultural context. In Jesus’ day, weddings were run by the men, not the women. The character at a wedding was not the bride but the groom. And you can tell that men were in charge because the most important thing about a wedding was lots of barbecued meat and wine to drink. “Rich food full of marrow and aged wine well refined.” The only thing missing is bacon, but remember the context is still Old Testament and Jesus’ hasn’t yet died to fulfill the law of Moses.

The story goes like this. A king throws a wedding party for his son. The kingdom’s A-list has received their invitations, but as the RSVPs come in, it becomes painfully clear that they have other plans. The king even sends his servants out to go door to door and say, “The steaks are on, the prime rib is smoking, the wine is poured, the feast is ready, come to the feast.” And you would think that the combination of an invitation and a personal reminder, not to mention lots of free food and drink would cause people to drop whatever they were doing and come running to the feast. But you would be wrong.

They paid no attention, either to the invitation or to the servants. One went off to his farm to work, another to his business. Some actually seized the servants and beat them up and even killed them. And these were the invited guests! Remember now, they had a place the feast. The king had invited them; he was expecting them, he had prepared for them. And the only reason they wind up in outer darkness grinding their molars is they would not come to the feast. They would not. It’s not that the king would not have them or didn’t want them or never invited them. They wouldn’t go.

I know how the king feels. I’m not much of a party person. My idea of a big party is having two other people over for dinner. My parents weren’t party people either. There were those kids in school who organized parties all the time. You remember them, don’t you? I do. They

thought nothing of inviting 50 kids over for a party. That would have been unheard of in my house. We didn't even have birthday parties. We got to call the shots for dinner and pick our favorite cake. That was it. Happy birthday. I didn't really mind, because I didn't like parties. I was always worried that if I threw a party and invited my friends, no one would show up. I go through the same anxiety every Sunday morning. I have dreams about that. You can analyze that all you wish, but it's why I don't like organizing events. I'm afraid no one will come.

Imagine how it is from God's perspective. This divine service is a party, prepared by the king. The feast is ready. The lamb is slain. The wine is poured. Come to the feast. And then all the invited guests have more important things to do: brunch, football, change the light bulbs, mow the lawn, wash the car. And when the king sends his servants out to track down the invited guests who are too busy and distracted to come, watch out. They can be a nasty bunch. And all of this of free food and drink, free forgiveness, life, salvation. You'd think this was a colonoscopy appointment or something.

Turns out you don't want to get on the bad side of the king. He's nice and generous when it comes to wedding feasts, but not so kind when you blow him off and beat up his servants. So the king sends out his troops and destroys them and their city. See what happens when men run a wedding? It turns into something resembling Braveheart. And who's fault is that, anyway?

You will notice a pattern in Jesus' parables. The unforgiving servant is condemned even though he is forgiven at first. The invited guests become enemies even though they have a place at the table. And it's all their own fault. They refused the king's goodness and so they get the king's wrath. Turn away from the Gospel, and all that's left is the Law with its attendant outer darkness and gnashing of teeth.

Now let's clear up a common misunderstanding. You don't earn your salvation by your perfect church attendance, but you do practice your being saved by coming to church to hear the Word of forgiveness and receive that foretaste of the feast to come. Similarly, you don't get condemned for your absence from church, but by your absence you are practicing for the day of your damnation. Even worse if you are holding an invitation, says the book of Hebrews. So be careful about saying "no" when the Lord's gifts are offered to you. Those nos to God's grace are little proleptic rejections that culminate in the big rejection on the Day of Judgment. Or to put it another way, what are you practicing for: salvation or damnation?

As Jesus tells the parable, the A-list, of course, is Israel and its religious leaders who were actively rejecting Jesus and in so doing forfeiting their seat at the feast. “He came to His own, but His own people did not receive Him.” “The stone the builders rejected has become the capstone and cornerstone.” Jesus, the rejected Messiah of Israel, the Savior of the world. In His rejection is our acceptance.

The king now has a bit of a dilemma. The A-list is not only not coming to the feast, they are quite dead. The feast is still ready. The only thing missing are guests. And so he sends out his servants again, this time out onto the roads and the alleyways, and he has them invite anyone and everyone, the good, the bad, the ugly, reputable and the disreputable. The least, the lost, the lowly, the good as dead. Two-bit hookers, tax collectors, zealots, you name it. The feast is ready, come to the feast. And the wedding hall is full of guests. Of course, this crowd represents the church, the Israel of the end times, a gathering of all sorts of the good, the bad, the ugly, sinners of every stripe.

Pause the movie for a second. At this point is there anyone who is not invited? Is there anyone who is left out? No. For all intents and purposes, the whole kingdom is invited. This king is no Calvinist. And do these guests “deserve” to be there? Not in the least! In fact, the A-listers, who are now quite dead, would probably have been mortified to be at the same party with this bunch of losers. It’s grace, gift, Gospel. Unearned, unmerited. The worthy are found unworthy, the unworthy are declared worthy. Remember that.

Back to our movie. The king looks over the crowd, and what a crowd it is! They’re eating and drinking and having a great time. And then he spies a man off in the corner who’s not wearing a wedding suit. Remember that these people were just rounded up off the streets with no time to change, so we have to assume that the king is handing out Armani suits at the door. He’s crazy good and gracious. But for some reason, this man isn’t wearing the wedding suit. The king confronts him. “Hey, buddy. (That’s what “friend” actually means.) How did you get in here without a suit?”

Now the translation we have says the man was “speechless.” But what it actually says is that the man was silent. Speechless implies he was stunned at getting caught, kind of like a wedding crasher. Silent suggests that he refuses to even acknowledge the king’s presence much less talk to him. As in most of these parables, what should the man have said? That’s right, “I’m sorry. Please forgive me.” That always works in this kingdom. But instead he refuses to speak to the king and insists on being at the feast on his own terms. Not a good idea.

He winds up bound and unceremoniously tossed into outer darkness where he can spend an eternity weeping and gnashing his teeth. And to this, Jesus adds the summary clincher: “For many are called, but few are chosen.” The called many are all who have heard the great good news: Christ has died, Christ has risen. The feast is ready. Come to the feast. The chosen few are those who in faith are gathered at the marriage Supper of the Lamb in His kingdom, who are clothed with the wedding garment of His righteousness in Holy Baptism.

To be included is by God’s grace, His gift to you. To be excluded is entirely your doing, your refusal, your turning away. He will compel you, lavish His gifts upon you, put the wedding suit on you, seat you at His table and feed you. But he won’t force you to stay. The guests at this table are free, they are not imprisoned. Luther once quipped that the doors of the church swing in both directions so that those who wish to come to feast may come, and those who wish to leave can leave. But be careful. The alternative to the wedding feast is outer darkness, and weeping, and gnashing of teeth. And it’s so entirely unnecessary.

You are invited. You are clothed. The feast is ready. Come.

In the name of Jesus,

Amen

SOURCE

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